From the Campus to the Underground: The Formation of the Weathermen

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April 12, 2010
Introduction

In June 1962, a few dozen activists gathered in Port Huron, Michigan to write the mission statement of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). The Port Huron Statement declared its opposition to racial bigotry and America’s Cold War and nuclear policies and these became the issues around which SDS built its base.\(^1\) Although SDS remained a small organization, in 1965, it helped to organize the first national demonstration against the Vietnam War. By 1968, SDS was the largest student anti-war organization in the country, with around 100,000 active members and perhaps another three hundred thousand students who sympathized with the aims of SDS.\(^2\) Two years later in 1970, three hundred American campuses shut down following the Kent State massacre and news of the American escalation of the Vietnam War into Cambodia. But by then, SDS no longer led the national student movement; rather, it had dissolved itself leaving only a couple hundred adherents to the radical Weatherman Underground Organization (WUO). At the moment when anti-war activity was peaking, SDS chapters across the country became splintered or dissolved by the Weatherman faction.

The sudden disintegration of SDS into self-imposed marginalization can be explained by a perceived impasse in which the leadership saw traditional means of protest as inadequate. The upheavals of 1968, particularly the Columbia University building occupations and the Democratic National Convention protests in Chicago, convinced many higher-ups in the organization that non-violence, the traditional strategy

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of the New Left, should be abandoned. The participants in these protests, particularly Columbia SDS’ Action Faction and Ann Arbor SDS’ Jesse James Gang came to lead the Weatherman faction (often referred to by members simply as Weather). The Weathermen misread turmoil elsewhere in the world as part of a global bipolar struggle between U.S. imperialism and the oppressed masses, which provided the group with the logic for violent action. SDS, which once insisted, “We regard men as infinitely precious,” morphed into the Weather Underground, which argued in favor of a “(clandestine) organization of revolutionaries” to fight for the “international communist revolution.”³ As historian Ron Jacobs wrote in 1997, “The events of 1968 were to change this [passive resistance], as SDS began to see itself as a revolutionary movement. No longer would the New Left merely react to America’s exploitative and racist system, but, instead, it would provide an alternative vision.”⁴

Relying heavily on memoirs and personal interviews, this thesis will explain how some in Students for a Democratic Society increasingly accepted violence as a political tactic. Because of the Weather Underground’s small size, with only about three hundred members at its height, personal histories reveal much about a broader process.⁵ The opening section is a brief discussion of SDS from its founding until 1968, which will serve as a counterpoint to later sections. Although the seeds of Weather were planted during this period as Black Power became a major force in the Civil Rights movement and anti-war protests grew more disruptive, SDS generally adhered to its traditional non-violent strategy. The Port Huron Statement of 1962, the Mississippi Freedom Summer of

1964 and the Pentagon protest of October 1967 are emblematic of SDS’ non-violence. The second section will discuss the Columbia building occupations, which were an indispensable event in the eventual triumph of the Weatherman faction. The third section will discuss the period from 1968 to 1970, focusing on the protests at the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago and the split in SDS following the emergence of the Weatherman faction in 1969. This era is defined by increasing militancy and resultant isolation from the bulk of the anti-war movement until the Weathermen went underground to foment revolution. Section four is an assessment of the group whose only accomplishments were negative, that is the dissolution of the largest student anti-war organization and playing into the hands of political conservatives. Former president of SDS and opponent of the Weatherman faction Todd Gitlin wrote in 1987, “The movement collaborated in its own demise.”

Up to this point, only two secondary sources have been written specifically about the Weather Underground Organization. Most of the writing about the group has been done either by the participants themselves, or by historians who sympathize with their aims. Ron Jacobs wrote in the introduction to his book, *The Way the Wind Blew*, “I found its [Weatherman’s] politics difficult to understand but always admired its style and its ability to hit targets which in my view deserved to be hit.” The historian goes on to credit the group with influencing his own political development. Jacobs’ book is written in a straightforward, journalistic style but it lacks an adequate conclusion. He successfully shows the inner workings of the underground but never attempts a critical assessment. A more recent secondary source, *Outlaws of America* is written by Dan

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Berger, a self-described activist who dedicated his book to former Weatherman David Gilbert. Berger contends that the Weather Underground grew out of “the very real and logical belief that revolution was not only feasible but likely.”\(^8\) Berger’s account draws heavily on interviews, particularly with David Gilbert, and Berger tends to accept these rationalizations. Berger gives undue political importance to the Weather Underground and he does not try to hide his admiration for the group. Jeremy Varon’s \textit{Bringing the War Home} is a fair account that compares the Weather Underground and the German Red Army Faction. He successfully situates the Weathermen in a larger context of misguided revolutionary fervor.

There are a few works that cover the Weathermen peripherally in a broader history of SDS, including Todd Gitlin’s \textit{The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage}, and Kirkpatrick Sale’s \textit{SDS}. Historians have criticized these books for creating a divide between “The Good Sixties” and “The Bad Sixties”. The “good” part of the decade includes the Civil Rights movement and non-violent protest against the Vietnam War, which is contrasted with the later part of the decade when the Weathermen took control of SDS. This argument unwittingly buys into the myth of Weatherman by suggesting that the group was powerful enough to destroy the anti-war movement, when in fact the mainstream student movement continued to grow despite the Weatherman faction’s dissolution of SDS. There are many reasons for the New Left’s ultimate failure, in which the Weather Underground played only a small part.

The 2003 Academy Award nominated documentary, \textit{Weather Underground} by Sam Green and Bill Siegel, enabled the group, “to emerge from the shadows of history

\(^8\) Berger, Dan. \textit{Outlaws of America}. Page 8.
into the light of popular culture and public memory,” according to one historian. But this documentary glorifies the Weathermen without providing a balanced counter-
perspective. For example, Weatherwoman Naomi Jaffe describes the worldwide
“revolution” in the late 1960s and the film shows images of upheavals in unrelated places
such as Portuguese Angola, Tokyo, and China as if to prove her point that these struggles
were all part of the same fight against U.S. imperialism.

Former members of the Weatherman faction, including Bill Ayers, Cathy
Wilkerson, Jane Alpert, and David Gilbert have written memoirs, which often fail to
undertake a critical evaluation. In these memoirs and in public statements, former
Weathermen stress the idea that violent resistance to the “imperialist system” was
reasonable because it appeared that a revolution was already taking place and the state
was responding with repression. For example, in Bill Ayers’ *Fugitive Days*, the author
writes that he scratched the name “Diana” in chalk under the Vietnam Memorial in
Washington, DC to commemorate Diana Oughton, a Weatherwoman who was killed with
two other comrades in the 1970 Greenwich Village townhouse explosion as she built a
bomb intended for a non-commissioned officers’ dance at Fort Dix in Jersey. Ayers
wonders when the three would-be terrorists killed in the explosion will be “remembered”
by their country, presumably because they were casualties of U.S. imperialism.10 But in
2009, Mark Rudd released his autobiography *Underground*, which is a valuable source
for historians because of his honesty in treating the group’s misguided tactics. He says,

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“The whole experience cries out, ‘Don’t do this!’” 11 For this paper, four personal interviews were also conducted with former members of Columbia SDS, three of whom joined Weatherman. When viewed critically, these primary sources can contribute to a historically grounded reinterpretation.

The existing sources contribute to an inflated legacy of the Weathermen. Both romanticizing historians and demonizing opponents ascribe to the group an unjustified importance. On the one hand, the Weathermen were not powerful enough to destroy the mainstream anti-war movement as adversaries might suggest. On the other hand, the Weather Underground’s meager bombing campaign against the U.S. government contributed nothing to the goal of ending the War in Vietnam, despite the arguments of apologists. In the end, the WUO consisted of a couple of hundred individuals who came to the dubious conclusion that the United States was in the midst of a revolution in the late sixties. This thesis will explain the series of events that made that conclusion possible; however, the fact that the logic of Weatherman is explicable does not imply that it was an effective response to the conditions of the era.

A Third Way: SDS 1962-68

“SDS is not the band of crazed young rowdies you probably think it is: high on some dreadful potion of ingratitude and power-lust, rampaging around the campuses and in city streets, flailing away at a society that’s been too charitable with such clowns. Neither is it the underground network of arrogant bombers and arsonists whose acts of terror have been in the news so much.”

- Alan Adelson, historian of SDS, in 1971

The eventual triumph of the Weatherman faction was not a spontaneous phenomenon; rather, it grew gradually out of the change in the Black movement and increasingly disruptive protests against Vietnam. But although the seeds of the Weatherman philosophy are visible in the earlier period leading up to 1968, violent protest remained a rare aberration. An episodic overview of the history of SDS shows that violence had a precedent earlier in the decade, but that the Weatherman faction perverted the original and most effective strategy of both SDS and the civil rights movement, that of non-violent resistance.

Students for a Democratic Society’s roots can be traced back to the 1905 founding of the Intercollegiate Socialist Society, the nation’s first student political organization. The immediate precursor to SDS was the Student League for Industrial Democracy (SLID), a sleepy organization whose parent, the League for Industrial Democracy was a social democratic holdover from the 1930s. At the dawn of the tumultuous decade that would make SDS famous, in January 1960, a small group in SLID’s national office in New York decided that a name change would be appropriate for a “new college mood,” and they decided on Students for a Democratic Society. SDS initially sought to overcome the sectarian leftist in-fighting of the past and respond to contemporary issues,

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namely the Civil Rights movement and Cold War foreign policy. A student group could influence these issues because of the changing demographic reality in the United States. Never before had there been so many young people in the country, and never before had a greater proportion of those young people had access to higher education. During the course of the decade, the number of people in institutions of higher education more than doubled to nearly eight million.15

Robert Alan Haber, vice-president of SDS in 1960, articulated the purpose of the new organization. The group should form alliances with existing campus institutions that responded to local needs. SDS should try to coordinate these groups at a national level. Third, it should not limit itself to strictly educational work, as it had in SLID days; rather, SDS should take “direct social action” by participating in freedom rides, sit-ins, and demonstrations. Finally, SDS should abandon the ideological struggles that characterized SLID.16 Stuart Gedal, an SDSer who began college in the late sixties, sees the organization this way: “SDS people instinctively knew who the rebels were and sided with them.”17

SDS languished in obscurity until the publication of the Port Huron Statement in 1962. The most noteworthy events during this period were the February 1960 Greensboro sit-ins by black students to protest segregated facilities in North Carolina. The cause was taken up by other groups of black students throughout the south, and in April, Martin Luther King’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference granted black student leaders $800 to found the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).

15 Sale, Kirkpatrick. SDS. Page 21.
16 Sale, Kirkpatrick. SDS. Page 25.
SNCC’s policy of direct but non-violent action had a profound effect on the nascent SDS, whose few members worked with SNCC. Ann Arbor SDS member Tom Hayden, who would go on to write the Port Huron Statement, said that his reaction to a SNCC strategy meeting “was akin to a religious conversion.”\(^\text{18}\) SNCC’s example pushed Hayden to try to transform SDS, which was “little more than a mailing list” into a national organization that could act as “a counterpart to SNCC in the rest of the country.”\(^\text{19}\)

To this end, SDS had a national conference in Port Huron, Michigan in June 1962. Hayden’s Port Huron Statement (PHS) maps out the goals of early SDS, and it provides a useful counter-point to the Weatherman philosophy, which developed seven years later. The first line of the PHS distances the organization from the Old Left: “We are people of this generation, bred in at least modest comfort, now housed in universities, looking uncomfortably at the world we inherit.”\(^\text{20}\) Although in 1969 the Weathermen would claim to be the true inheritors of the SDS tradition, the section entitled Values directly contradicts the Weatherman acceptance of violence: “In social change or interchange, we find violence to be abhorrent because it requires generally the transformation of the target, be it a human being or a community of people, into a depersonalized object of hate.”\(^\text{21}\)

Moreover, the Weathermen considered itself an anti-liberal communist organization, but early SDS sought a third way between American liberalism and Marxism. Todd Gitlin, who would become president of SDS in 1964 summed up the Old New Left position, “So my friends and I grew steadily more estranged from Kennedy

\(^{19}\) Hayden, Tom. Rebel. Page 67.
\(^{21}\) Hayden, Tom. The Port Huron Statement. Page 55
liberalism, and yet without sidling up to the Soviet Union.”22 In its early days, SDS inherited the anti-communism of its parent organization, the League for Industrial Democracy and the PHS argues, “As democrats, we are in basic opposition to the communist system.”23 The Port Huron Statement did not gain much attention when it was first written; however, as the mission statement for SDS, it grew in notoriety with the organization. Its straightforward, generational message helped bring students into the organization and many SDSers used the work as a guide for their activism. The PHS’ major theme involves the expansion of “participatory democracy” throughout society. As such, the work opposes the hierarchical nature of the university, as well as racial injustice.

Vietnam became a major issue for SDS in 1964-65 after the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, when President Johnson began to send American ground troops to Southeast Asia. Although Johnson’s policy was an incremental escalation from President Kennedy’s strategy of sending advisers to South Vietnam, many came to view Johnson’s policy as a departure from that of his predecessor.24 In April 1965, SDS helped organize the first national demonstration against the Vietnam War, with 25,000 participants in Washington, D.C. The War in Vietnam endowed SDS’ general opposition to America’s Cold War and nuclear policy with a new immediacy.

SDS had worked closely with SNCC throughout the decade. A key moment for both organizations occurred in 1964, when SNCC proclaimed the Freedom Summer in Mississippi, which was widely considered the most oppressive and backward state in the

22 Gitlin, Todd. The Sixties. Page 90.
south. (In 1962, only 6.7% of eligible black voters were registered to vote.) SNCC spearheaded the project, whose goal was to register black voters and set up freedom schools, with only reluctant approval from King’s SCLC. The Freedom Summer is important to the history of SDS for three reasons.

Firstly, the Freedom Summer began SNCC’s disassociation from King’s non-violent rhetoric. The SCLC’s tepid approval of the Freedom Summer convinced younger civil rights activists in SNCC that King’s organization was too conservative. Moreover, because the Freedom Summer failed to significantly increase the registration of black voters, some in SNCC concluded that white oppression could only be countered by black militancy. Tom Hayden wrote that after Mississippi, “No longer was it possible in SNCC or related organizations to argue for strategies appealing to the ‘conscience’ of national leaders. The seeds of a strategy based on power, black power… were planted.”

Secondly, Freedom Summer introduced many white SDSers to violent repression. White supremacists resented the presence of northern white agitators and they began a policy of intimidation to drive them from Mississippi. The most visible incident was the Ku Klux Klan’s murder of two Jewish New Yorkers, Andrew Goodman and James Schwerner and their black comrade, James Chaney. Exposure to violence had a profound effect on the northern whites who went to Mississippi. For example, Mario Savio led the

Berkeley Free Speech Movement immediately after his return from the Freedom Summer, two movements that he believed were related.

Thirdly, Mississippi exposed the irreparable cleavages in the Democratic Party’s Roosevelt coalition. The entirely white Mississippi Democratic Party sent delegates to the National Convention in 1964 in Atlantic City to nominate incumbent President Lyndon Johnson. But newly registered black voters from the state also sent delegates under the banner of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP). Walter Mondale orchestrated a compromise that was unsatisfying to both sides and the MFDP left the convention disillusioned. Whites in SDS felt the same sentiment: “For SNCC and its supporters, including SDS, Atlantic City flashed the testament: Moment of Truth. The very name became synonymous with liberal betrayal.”

SDS began to lose faith in party politics, a process that was concluded four years later at the next Democratic National Convention in Chicago. Many in SDS and SNCC concluded that, because the Democratic Party relied on southern whites, it could never whole-heartedly embrace Civil Rights.

As U.S. involvement in Vietnam deepened, so too did the anti-war movement.

SDS helped to organize biannual protests in Washington, which became increasingly visible and disruptive, but protestors generally remained non-violent. During the fall 1967 Pentagon Protest, for example, 100,000 gathered around the reflecting pool of the Lincoln Memorial. Some then marched across the Potomac to the Pentagon, which they tried to storm before being repulsed by Military Police. “The near-violent turmoil of a moment earlier was transformed into a disciplined sit-down strike.”

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violence but actively resisted the war by burning draft cards. This strategy of active but non-violent opposition is emblematic of SDS’ strategy for most of its history. The Weathermen perverted the strategy two years later by proclaiming a revolutionary war against the U.S. government.

Although this period was generally non-violent, the first stirrings of political violence appeared in 1967. The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense (BPP) was founded in Oakland in late 1966 and it quickly gained national attention when, the following year, BPP members marched into the California State Capitol with guns to protest a state weapons ban. The strategy of the well-armed Panthers was based on the threat of violence, an idea that came to influence many in the white radical movement. Major riots also erupted in black ghettos in Watts (1965), Newark (1967), and Detroit (1967). Violence also began to appear in some anti-war protests as frustration mounted that U.S. involvement in Vietnam seemed unaffected by the growing anti-war movement. October 1967 witnessed the Oakland Stop the Draft Week demonstration in which protestors constructed barricades and fought the police by throwing rocks and bottles. But these early manifestations of violence within the white movement were random acts. It would take the Weatherman faction to institutionalize violent resistance as part of a coordinated strategy.
Children of the New Age: Columbia 68

“No, the formation of the Weather Underground could not have happened without the 1968 Columbia strike. A huge number of Weather cadres came from Columbia. Columbia also provided the model for the "action faction" mentality. It was the great victory that Weather pointed to.”

Mark Rudd, personal interview via e-mail, February 15, 2010

The events at Columbia University in the spring of 1968 proved to be an integral step in the formation of the Weatherman faction at the 1969 SDS national conference. Firstly, the shakeup within the Columbia SDS chapter prefigured a similar change in leadership at the national level the following year. The more confrontational “Action Faction” replaced the “Praxis Axis,” which was seen as too cautious in its approach. Secondly, the success of the Columbia protests proved the efficacy of the “Action Faction” philosophy of direct confrontation to many SDS members. Finally, veterans of the Columbia protest were heavily represented in Weatherman. Estimates would suggest that of the two to three hundred Weathermen who went underground, perhaps four dozen were somehow involved in the Columbia protest of 1968.

The experience of Columbia was SDS’ greatest success, but it also sewed the seeds for its downfall. The protests worked for a variety of reasons, including a well-organized campus anti-war movement, the timing (Tet Offensive, the abdication of President Johnson, and the assassination of Martin Luther King), the incompetence of the university administration, and the local context of the gym construction. The Action Faction ignored this myriad of causes that created the successful strike, which they attributed to their own leadership and confrontational tactics. By giving too much credence to the Action Faction philosophy, the leadership that founded the Weathermen

ensured that a similar success would never be replicated. At the moment when SDS became a household name, it drove itself underground.

Columbia University’s SDS chapter had been steadily growing in size and visibility since its founding in 1965. Many of school’s SDSers had a background in the local chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the Citizenship Council program in which Columbia students tutored local children. Moreover, Columbia’s location near Harlem made American racial tension apparent to many white middle class students. Columbia SDS founder David Gilbert, for example, was moved to activism by tutoring a student in Harlem and by hearing Malcolm X speak at Barnard in 1965, three days before his assassination.29 Fellow SDSer Stuart Gedal became troubled after a black child chanted “whitey” at his Columbia gym class in Morningside Park.30

In the year before the building occupations in April 1968, members of the Columbia SDS took part in two protests that pushed them toward more confrontational tactics. In April 1967, SDS entered the lobby of John Jay Hall to protest the US Marines who were recruiting there. A brief melee broke out between the vanguard of SDS protestors and the more conservative students (referred to as “jocks” because many were athletes) in the lobby until an administrator stopped the fracas and announced that there would be no more recruiting for the day. The following day, nearly eight hundred students marched against the recruiters in the quadrangle in front of the building in what was the largest campus anti-war demonstration to that point. Columbia SDS had seen the first benefits of confrontational tactics; Future Columbia SDS chairman Mark Rudd wrote, “We’d forced people to choose sides and take a stand against the war. It was a

lesson we wouldn’t forget.” SDS members had their first brush with the NYPD in November 1967 when many were arrested in midtown Manhattan for an unruly protest against Secretary of State Dean Rusk. David Gilbert, Mark Rudd and chapter vice-chairman Ted Gold were arrested in that protest and taken to the Tombs at 100 Centre Street. These increasingly confrontational tactics helped create a split within the Columbia chapter. The “Praxis Axis,” led by Ted Gold and Ted Kaptchuk argued in favor of educational techniques while the Action Faction under Rudd sought direct confrontation with the administration, which they saw as complicit in the Vietnam War and racism. Although Columbia SDS was made up almost entirely of undergraduates, a divide between the older and younger students began to appear during the 1967-68 school year. Rudd and a few juniors teamed up with the “Sophomore Caucus” of Stuart Gedal, Robbie Roth and Juan Gonzalez to take power in the chapter.32

Mark Rudd, the president of the Columbia SDS during the 1968 protests became the leader of the Action Faction. He wrote of SDS internal politics, “I feared that a new leadership would be elected that would continue the tactical conservatism of the previous two years… The huge confrontational demonstrations at the Pentagon and in Oakland that fall had moved us ‘from protest to resistance.’”33 Like the national split in SDS in June 1969, the triumph of Rudd’s Action Faction was directed against the perceived threat of Maoists within the organization. These Maoists represented the Progressive

33 Rudd, Mark. Underground. Page 43.
Labor faction in SDS, which was criticized for its dogmatic Marxist beliefs. For example, PL believed that Black Nationalism was reactionary and that workers were the revolutionary class. The victory over PL at Columbia was replicated in June 1969 when PL was expelled from SDS at the organization’s national convention.

After taking power, the first act of the Action Faction was to throw a lemon-meringue pie at Colonel Paul Akst while he spoke on behalf of the Selective Service System on the Columbia Campus. The Praxis Axis dismissed the Rudd-led pie attack as “unserious and terroristic.”

Within two years, the same principles in the hands of the same participants would turn pie plots into bomb plots.

In late April 1968, the upheaval at Columbia University proved to be SDS’ most visible triumph since its inception. Columbia SDS leaders like Mark Rudd attributed the success of Columbia ‘68 to their “Action Faction” mentality and ignored the specific reasons for Columbia’s success. The week-long building occupation that shut down the university began as a noon meeting on April 23 at the sundial to protest three local issues. Firstly, protestors called for the university’s immediate withdrawal from Pentagon supported think-tank known as the Institute for Defense Analysis, or IDA, an affiliation that was seen as making the University complicit in the War in Vietnam. Secondly, the protests were directed against disciplinary action taken by the university against six members of SDS including Mark Rudd for a violation of a ban against indoor protests. The six offending students had been placed on probation, a sentence that the sundial protest sought to overturn. Finally, the crucial issue at hand was the imminent

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construction of a university gymnasium on a bluff in Morningside Park. Because the gym was to be constructed in a public park with separate entrances for the largely white student body and for the largely black Harlem community, critics began to deride the project as “Gym Crow.” A first-year law student named Eleanor Raskin (nee Stein) joined the protest because it “combined the two central issues of the day-- Vietnam and racism.”\(^{36}\)

During the course of the April 23 rally, protestors entered Hamilton Hall, which housed the Dean of Columbia College to present him with their demands. The situation quickly degenerated into a hostage situation, with protestors settling in for a prolonged occupation of the building. One fact that observers did not initially perceive was the racial division within the protest movement. The all-black Student Afro Society (SAS) told the white protestors to leave Hamilton Hall because they regarded them as undisciplined.\(^{37}\) Older SDSers like Rudd had had little contact with black students, but the sophomore caucus was familiar with the aims of the blacks because the university had begun to accept larger numbers of black students beginning with the class of 1970.\(^{38}\) The eviction of the white students was indicative of the relationship between the white New Left and Black Power. Blacks and whites worked towards the same goals in separate organizations.

Unsure where to go after their eviction from Hamilton, SDSers seized the university president’s office in Low Library. Eventually, students from various political factions occupied three other buildings-- Avery, Fayerweather, and Mathematics--


protest university policies. The action was not dominated by SDS, but was rather supported by a broad coalition, within which SDS represented a single faction. The Strike Coordinating Committee included three students from SDS, three from SAS, two from the College Citizenship Council and one “unattached liberal.” 39 Although the media and many in SDS believed that SDS was the driving force behind the Columbia action, most students in the occupied buildings had no affiliation with the organization. At the fortieth anniversary of Columbia ’68, SDSers conceded that the strike could not have taken place but for the militancy of the black students in SAS. The building occupations had substantial but minority support within the student body. Some students participated in the building occupations for reasons unrelated to the three issues, simply “because they hated the place.” 40

Many veterans of the events at Columbia saw the building occupation as a defining moment in their lives. The campus upheaval began as a response to essentially local issues, but the participants came to view the building occupations as part of a struggle with broad societal implications. When two protestors were married in an impromptu ceremony in occupied Fayerweather Hall, the chaplain officiating pronounced the couple “children of the new age.” 41

The violent end of the Columbia building occupation taught SDS leaders a lesson that would drive them to the underground, namely that the authorities were reactionary and would use their monopoly of violence to stifle legitimate protest. “The only effective protest action was one not permitted by those in power” and state violence should be

countered with violent resistance.⁴² After clearing the buildings at Columbia, New York Police officers were accused of engaging in a “police riot” when they beat demonstrators and bystanders alike.⁴³ The Strike Coordinating Committee expected and even hoped for police action because it would radicalize the more moderate students. Rudd writes about the hatred of the police, “Unfortunately, we believe that as agents of the enemy (the ruling class), they [the police] had become the enemy. It’s a good thing the Black Panther slogan ‘Off the Pig!’ hadn’t reached New York yet, or some of us might have been murdered that night.”⁴⁴

Because of its location in the American media capital, the Columbia protests received massive coverage beginning with the first building takeover. Despite student charges of unfair reporting, particularly by the New York Times (whose editor Punch Sulzberger was a Columbia trustee), SDS basked in the media glow. “Beginning with sensational coverage of the Columbia strike of April-May 1968, SDS became big national news-- and remained so, as a public bugaboo, symbolizing campus protest and uproar, throughout that fall and the following spring.”⁴⁵ The media found it easiest to focus on individuals to explain Columbia, rather than the operative issues and student organizations. As a result, Mark Rudd became a media sensation, even appearing on the cover of Newsweek later in the year. Rudd was one of several Columbia veterans who used his notoriety to push the Action Faction agenda onto the national SDS apparatus.

Columbia helped create a precedent whereby, “hystericized, the media salivating over the few violent demonstrations and ignoring the peaceful, somehow picturing the

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beaten and bloodied students as the aggressors.\textsuperscript{46} The more radical fringe of SDS turned to spectacular protest after Columbia in part because such protests were guaranteed to get media coverage. Independent scholar and author Kirkpatrick Sale has argued that the Weathermen continued this tendency toward spectacle, thereby aiding President Nixon who portrayed himself as a force for order in a world of young revolutionary movements.\textsuperscript{47}

The international context added significance to the events at Columbia. People within the movement perceived a worldwide struggle, but disparate protests and revolts were never linked in any tangible way. Student unrest in France in the spring of 1968 led to a general strike of ten million French workers, which almost brought down the De Gaulle government. Cooperation between American and French students was limited to symbolic displays of solidarity, as when a French student was photographed holding a sign that read, “COLUMBIA, PARIS.”\textsuperscript{48} That spring also witnessed the “Valle Giulia” student upheaval in Rome and in October, the Mexican government slaughtered perhaps 1,000 protesting students in the Tlatelolco Massacre. The Prague Spring, in which the Dubcek government of Czechoslovakia sought to loosen the Soviet yoke by advocating for “socialism with a human face,” was also a source of inspiration to protest movements around the world. These various movements operated with knowledge of one another but they responded largely to local stimuli. The students of Prague who resisted Soviet tanks fought a different battle than those at Columbia who prevented the construction of a

\textsuperscript{47} Sale, Kirkpatrick. SDS. Page 652.
\textsuperscript{48} Rudd, Mark. Underground. Page 113.
perceived racist gym in Harlem. To contemporary observers, however, these movements often appeared as part of a worldwide generational and anti-imperialist struggle.

Columbia students tried to replicate the tactics of their French counterparts. During a second round of protests in May 1968, Columbians built barricades at the entrances to the campus on 116th street to deter a police bust, in imitation of French students in the Latin Quarter of Paris. Despite this “conscious internationalism,” SDS failed to coordinate with European student groups. Stuart Gedal recalls a meeting with leftist European students that took place at Columbia in the summer of 1968. Known as the International Assembly of Revolutionary Students (IARS), the meeting amounted to little more than a “symbolic gesture.”

The third world hot wars of 1968, particularly in Vietnam, further perpetuated the misconception of a unified global struggle. The Tet Offensive in late January 1968 made it apparent to the American public that there was a disparity between Defense Department reports touting American victories and Vietnamese body counts and the reality of an organized and emboldened enemy. Columbia SDS’ strategy was to expose the university’s complicity in the Vietnam War and racism. The fact that the Columbia protest combined these two issues created the sense of a singular struggle between the third world, including the Vietnamese, Cubans, and American blacks on the one hand, and the U.S. imperialism on the other. Many in the student movement who would form the Weatherman Organization saw the North Vietnamese, Cubans, and colonial independence freedom fighters as all being part of the same struggle against U.S. imperialism. SAS leader Bill Sales said:

There’s one oppressor- in the White House, in Low Library, in Albany, New York. You strike a blow at the gym, you strike a blow for the Vietnamese people. You strike a blow at the gym and you strike a blow against the assassin of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. You strike a blow at Low Library and you strike a blow for the freedom fighters in Angola, Mozambique, Portuguese Guinea, Zimbabwe, [and] South Africa.\textsuperscript{51}

Columbia University’s own policies indirectly contributed to the logic of the Weatherman faction. University President Grayson Kirk and other administrators did not act quickly to resolve the sit-ins. Instead of immediately evicting the building occupiers, the administration allowed students to hold the buildings for nearly a week, during which time the number of occupiers grew substantially and a mass police presence was needed to dislodge them. When the administration called on the police, it left the university in the hands of the two groups least concerned with its well-being, the protesting students and the NYPD.\textsuperscript{52} This administrative ineptitude encouraged a feeling in SDS that universities would not punish combative tactics.

After the bust, the Columbia administration took a harsher stance towards the protests. During the second sit-in in Hamilton Hall, this time to protest disciplinary action taken against student leaders, Low Library announced that any student arrested in the building would be immediately suspended. The disastrous first bust had convinced the Columbia administration that more stringent deterrents were needed to discourage future sit-ins. The policy forced students to decide whether to be “full-time students or full-time radicals” because they could not pursue revolution and their studies simultaneously. Spurred by the success of the strike, many Columbia students chose radicalism. Juan Gonzalez, a Columbia SDSer said, “If our goals went beyond the

\textsuperscript{51} Quoted in Berger, Dan. \textit{Outlaws of America}. Page 50.
university, then we should have been willing to leave it if necessary.”

The following year, Columbia junior Stuart Gedal also suffered from the Columbia administration’s new tactics--he served thirty days in civil jail for leading a sit-in. He wrote his term papers in jail and finished his third year before leaving the university to join a collective in Boston. Leaders who had been expelled or suspended, including Mark Rudd, worked full time for “The Movement.”

The Columbia sit-ins radicalized many students who would eventually join the Weather Underground. Jane Alpert, for example, was pursuing her graduate studies in comparative literature in the spring of 1968. She had leftist political sympathies but was uninvolved in the protest. Initially, she was impressed by the scale of the student unrest, “Two weeks later, on April 23, I walked through the Columbia campus in a daze. What I saw looked like a dress rehearsal for war.” The police bust further attracted her to the cause of the student protestors, in large part because her conservative friend, who was only an onlooker, had his skull fractured by a policeman’s club and spent a month in the hospital. Alpert’s first political act came in the wake of the occupation when she showed her support to the student strike by observing a picket line in front of Butler Library.

Eleanor Raskin, a Jewish “red-diaper baby” was finishing her first year at Columbia Law School that spring. She participated in the initial protest at the gym site and eventually occupied Fayerweather Hall. At first she skirted total commitment by wearing a patch marked “legal observer.” At some point during the week she removed

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her patch and joined the other students. When the police arrived, Raskin passively resisted arrest by letting her body go limp. She was handled roughly and recalled, “I got mad, unwisely, and struggled-- they dragged me down a gravel path and threw me into a heap of bloody brothers, to be put into the paddy wagons.”59 She joined SDS after the bust and traveled to Cuba the following summer with other members of the organization.60 Raskin went on to join the Weather Underground in 1970 and did not resurface until her arrest in October 1981.

The Columbia building occupations were also an essential moment in the political understanding of future Weathermen who had no affiliation with the university. It is significant that the Columbia strike took place in New York City because New York was one of the centers of New Left activity. During the week of building occupations, radicals from all over the city began to enter the campus and sit-in along with students. Jeff Jones, a southern Californian, worked in the SDS regional office in lower Manhattan. At the beginning of the protest, he joined the commune in Mathematics Hall, which was considered the most radical of all the buildings because it included members of the anarchist Lower East Side street-gang known as the “Motherfuckers.”61 The contact between SDSers like Jones and the Motherfuckers during and after the Columbia strike helped introduce a glorification appeal of violence for its own sake into SDS. Jeff Jones later helped author the foundational document of the Weatherman faction.

Sam Melville is emblematic of the “drop-outs” in the New York area who were unaffiliated with the University but gravitated to Columbia because they relished the confrontation with police. Melville claimed to have brought two steel garbage cans to the

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61 The New York Times referred to the Motherfuckers as “The Gang whose name cannot be printed.”
top of the dome of Low Library during the second bust with the intent of raining them down on the police below. Two NYPD officers stopped him just as he reached the catwalk around the dome.\textsuperscript{62} He eventually formed a collective affiliated with the Weathermen that spearheaded a bombing spree in 1969. After his 1970 conspiracy conviction, he was sent to Attica State Prison where he helped organize the 1971 riots in which he was killed.

Columbia’s status as a \textit{cause celebre} in the New Left is evident in the legal aftermath of the police bust. 712 students were arrested, and the left-leaning National Lawyers’ Guild helped defend the offending students. Bernadine Dohrn, who would later sign the Weatherman paper, defended the Columbia students as a member of the Guild along with Eleanor Raskin. Dohrn said, “Everyone was inspired by Columbia. Everyone wanted to seize their administration building.”\textsuperscript{63} By the time of the second round of protests on May 21, Dohrn manned the barricades at the entrance to the Columbia campus.

The triumph of the Weatherman faction in June of 1969 could not have happened without the Columbia Strike the previous year. As SDS-chronicler Kirkpatrick Sale noted about Columbia ‘68, “It became clear to many SDSers in a very direct way that it was not the reform of the university that they really wanted… but something much vaster, more significant, more, well, revolutionary… The seeds of Weatherman are planted here.”\textsuperscript{64} Columbia SDSer Bob Feldman argues that the “media publicity generated for National SDS as a result of the 1968 Columbia strike” was necessary for

\textsuperscript{62} Alpert, Jane. \textit{Growing Up Underground}. Page 125
\textsuperscript{63} Berger, Dan. \textit{Outlaws of America}. Page 50.
\textsuperscript{64} Sale, Kirkpatrick. \textit{SDS}. Page 440-441.
the formation of the Weather Underground. He goes on to argue that Columbia veterans like Mark Rudd, Ted Gold, and John Jacobs (known as JJ) gained widespread influence in national SDS as a result of their success at Columbia. They used this notoriety to “persuade New Left student activists around the country in June 1969 that the Weatherman faction’s strategy for making an anti-imperialist revolution in the United States during the 1970s was a politically realistic strategy.”

In addition, the members of the Weather Underground, both at the leadership level and within the “regional cadre,” were drawn largely from Columbia SDS. Stuart Gedal describes a situation in which Columbia SDSers sided with the Weatherman faction because they felt loyalty to Rudd and other Columbia SDSers who became prominent in that group. Although Gedal and Eleanor Stein both caution that Weatherman was a national movement supported by SDSers all over the country, they acknowledge that New York City and Columbia figured prominently in Weatherman.

The strike even convinced some in the Praxis Axis, who had opposed violent confrontation, of the efficacy violence. Ironically, Praxis Axis members Ted Gold and David Gilbert went on to join the Weathermen and became two of the most vocal proponents of violence. Gold was killed while building a bomb in the 1970 townhouse explosion and Gilbert is currently serving life in New York State Prison for his role as the getaway driver in the 1981 Nyack, New York Brink’s Truck Robbery in which two policemen and a security guard were killed.

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April 68 to Weatherman is a straight line for many of us, but it is a long one… The US is a big country - alas - something many veterans of 68 still fail to grasp. It took a lot of folks from several campuses and organizing projects around the country to interrupt our growth and momentum as a movement (one of the less positive things that Weatherman did for SDS). Pride goeth before a fall: we Columbia folks alone could not have achieved all that, as dedicated as we were. Hundreds of colleagues from other campuses replicated (or were our exemplars) for our good and not so good thinking and behavior.  

- Stuart Gedalin personal interview, March 1, 2010

Nearly two years elapsed between the Columbia rebellion and the Greenwich Village townhouse explosion, which signaled the violent intent of the Weather Underground to the world. A number of events during those years pushed some in the student left farther towards the acceptance of violence. The upheavals around the world in 1968-9 created a cult of violence in the Left that was the antithesis of the principles upon which SDS had been founded. This shift in SDS led to a split at the organization’s June 1969 National Convention when the Weatherman faction ousted Progressive Labor from the conference. Weatherman took its name from the Bob Dylan lyric, “You don’t need a Weatherman to know which way the wind blows,” by which they meant that anybody could see that the world was in the midst of a revolution.

On June 6, 1968, presidential candidate Bobby Kennedy was assassinated as he celebrated his victory in the California Democratic Primary. Having largely abandoned electoral politics, the New Left did not openly mourn the slain senator but his death profoundly affected their thinking. For many, it recalled President John Kennedy’s killing five years earlier and the resulting “tragedy of innocence.” The author of the Port Huron Statement, Tom Hayden, said the assassination made him realize that his

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71 Gitlin, Todd. The Sixties. Page 312.
“analysis of society did not go far enough and that our society was even worse in terms of the opportunities for peaceful change than I had thought.”

Stuart Gedal, who watched the assassination live at Columbia called the assassination the single most important event in the triumph of the Weatherman faction. At the time, he thought to himself, “If they’ll kill one of our own, what are they going to do to us?”

After Kennedy’s death, Eugene McCarthy, the other Democratic peace candidate, lost all his momentum and the Democratic delegates gathered in Chicago in late August to nominate sitting vice-president Hubert Humphrey for the presidency. The stage was set for a confrontation between protestors and Mayor Richard Daley’s police.

The Democratic National Convention is critical to the formation of the Weather Underground for two reasons-- it demonstrated that it was impossible to work within the system for reform and it changed the way that the New Left dealt with the media. In *Chicago ’68*, historian David Farber describes a situation in which Mayor Daley’s police felt disdain for “outside agitators” who they viewed as un-American communists while on the other hand, protestors were oblivious to the sensibilities of Chicago police and city administrators. The violence that resulted from these irreconcilable worldviews made it clear to radicals that they could not make their voice heard within the Democratic Party. After all, it was well-intentioned liberals who had given America the Vietnam War and the Party nominated Hubert Humphrey over peace candidate Eugene McCarthy at the convention. The old Roosevelt coalition disintegrated on live television, ushering in forty years of Republican dominance, and SDS felt no great sense of loss. Most of its members sat out the election of 1968, feeling that the two-party system was bankrupt.

This can be seen as a moment when Students for a Democratic Society ironically turned its back on democracy. The strategy had always been to shake the moral conscience of America, but a decade of protest culminated in the election of Richard Nixon. If SDS could not promote change with demonstrations, it would force change with revolution. This revolutionary elitism first became visible during the Columbia strike, when the Strike Coordinating Committee refused to abide by a vote of the entire student body on the issues. Knowing it would lose the vote; the protestors proceeded with the sit-ins anyway because the believed righteousness of their cause outweighed majority opinion. When David Gilbert was asked by the administration if the protesting students would adhere to the results of a vote, he stammered, “Well we would stand by a referendum, as long as the people in Harlem and the people in Vietnam, who are the ones most affected by this, can vote, because that’s really participatory democracy.” The Weatherman faction took this mentality to an extreme by pursuing revolution in solidarity with the third world but totally isolated from American public opinion.

Mark Rudd says of the violence at the convention, “It confirmed the view that party politics was a dead end for those few SDS'ers still drawn to it. Very few at Columbia SDS. It felt like being at war, especially after the violence of the police at Columbia.” Columbia SDSer Bob Feldman agrees: “I think the effect of the 1968 Democratic National Convention on my thinking was that it reinforced my political belief that the endless immoral Vietnam War could not be ended by U.S. electoral politics and that the U.S. political system was a rigged, totalitarian political system that relied on brute force and police brutality to suppress dissent and prevent radical democratic change

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in the United States.”77 Chicago was such a potent symbol that the Weathermen returned to the city they referred to as “Pig Town” in October 1969 for the Days of Rage Protest.

The Convention compounded the New Left’s belief in direct action because of the resulting media coverage. Television images of unarmed protestors being beaten by Chicago police created a sense of sympathy for the students and helped SDS grow enormously during the 1968-69 school year. SDS leaders believed that media coverage stimulated growth and they therefore tried to create theatrical protest. Bob Feldman states, “After the 1968 Democratic National Convention, I also felt, for awhile, that the U.S. mass media might become a possible ally in the struggle to create a participatory democracy in the United States.”78 Abbie Hoffman’s Youth Independent Party, or Yippies, helped organize the Convention protests. Their political strategy was based largely on getting media coverage by shocking American sensibilities with their protests and speeches, a tactic that would be mimicked by the Weathermen. In 1988, historian David Farber wrote critically of the Yippies at the Democratic Convention, “[The Yippies] played the game of fascism when they aestheticized politics. They played the game of fascism when they used facile slogans instead of careful explanation and caricatured images instead of potent critiques.”79 Todd Gitlin pointed out the similarity between the Yippies and the Weathermen, “Rudd was no Yippie, but the structure of the temptation [to resort to decontextualized images] was the same.”80

The Convention protests were a critical moment for the Jesse James Gang at the University of Michigan’s Ann Arbor SDS. The gang consisted of students who would all

79 Farber, David. Chicago ’68. Page 225.
80 Gitlin, Todd. The Whole World is Watching. Page 194.
be important players in the Weathermen, including Bill Ayers, Diana Oughton, Milton Taube and Terry Robbins. Ayers and Oughton had only been casual members of Ann Arbor SDS but by the end of the year found themselves in the front ranks of the national organization.\textsuperscript{81} Because this group seized power in the local chapter from moderates, it can be seen as the Ann Arbor analogue to the Action Faction. For Ayers, Chicago represented a departure from the normal choreography of an anti-war rally because protestors began to fight back against police harassment. Chicago “pushed the limits, changed the norms.”\textsuperscript{82} Thomas Powers, Diana Oughton’s biographer suggested that Chicago “proved the theory” offered by Mark Rudd and the Columbia Action Faction, that young people constituted a distinct class with revolutionary potential.

The members who would found the Weatherman faction in 1969 had diverse personal experiences leading up to the June 1969 SDS national convention. Stuart Gedal, Robbie Roth, and Eleanor Stein completed the 1968-69 school year. Afterwards, Gedal joined a collective in Boston where he did community organizing. He was well suited to organize Boston’s poor because of his working class upbringing and his previous organizing experience at Columbia.\textsuperscript{83} Future Weatherwoman Cathy Wilkerson spent the second half of 1968 recruiting high school students in Washington, D.C. to join the movement.\textsuperscript{84} These community organizing projects met with mixed success; SDS’ national membership increased enormously during the 1968-69 school year, but its

\textsuperscript{82} Ayers, Bill.  \textit{Fugitive Days}.  Page 130.
\textsuperscript{83} Gedal, Stuart.  Personal Interview.  March 1, 2010.
members were confined to university campuses. SDS never gained many adherents among the working class.

Others, like Mark Rudd, traveled the country preaching the Action Faction mentality, visiting seventy-five campuses in the fall of 1968 alone. In his speeches, he insisted that local SDS chapters could achieve successes similar to those of Columbia if SDS showed the university’s complicity in the war and racism. He argued in favor of the virtues of immediate action instead of organizing a base, which he dismissed as going slowly. But Cathy Wilkerson has criticized the Columbia leaders during this period: “Many of them [the Action Faction leadership] used this same aggressive confrontation to dominate their opponents in the movement, bullying them into silence or using humiliation to discredit them.”

SDS organized trips for its leaders to both Cuba and North Vietnam, where the Americans were reassured that their work helped the oppressed masses of the third world. Tom Hayden describes his trip to North Vietnam, which taught him “more than I could ever imagine about war and revolution.” These trips helped convince some in SDS that they were fighting the same struggle within the United States that the North Vietnamese were fighting in Asia. In 1969, SDS called for “an action not only to bring ‘peace to Vietnam,’ but beginning to establish another front against imperialism right here in America-- to ‘bring the war home.’” Eleanor Raskin and Jeff Jones took trips to communist countries. Stein states that her trip to Cuba in the summer of 1969 was one of

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86 Wilkerson, Cathy. *Flying Close to the Sun*. Page 205.  
the key moments that pushed her toward the Weatherman faction. In Cuba, she met Vietnamese representatives who stressed the importance of the American anti-war movement in their own national struggle. She met one National Liberation Front fighter who had been a soldier for twenty years—he fought against the French beginning in the late 1940s and his war continued against the Americans without an interruption.

Similarly, Mark Rudd says that it was after his trip to Cuba that he first began to consider himself a revolutionary. Jeff Jones, a co-author of the Weatherman paper, went to Cambodia on his way to Hanoi, but he never entered North Vietnam because the American bombing was too heavy for flights to land.

As SDS turned more radical during 1968-9, it also became more ideological. The Maoist Progressive Labor faction had become a powerful force in SDS and had introduced Marxist rhetoric into the organization’s position pieces. The PL faction was opposed to the Black Panther Party because it regarded Black Nationalism and all other types of nationalism as reactionary. Instead, PL believed that the vanguard of the revolution was the working class and thus they did not embrace the outward signs of the counterculture, like drug use and long hair, for fear of alienating the workers. On the other side stood the allies of the Black Panther Party, a group that came to be known as the Weatherman faction. Columbia veterans John Jacobs, Jeff Jones, Mark Rudd, and Bernadine Dohrn, as well as Jesse James Gang members Bill Ayers and Terry Robbins became part of a group known as the National Collective that was united in its opposition to PL. The Collective debated Marxist theory at its monthly meetings and it eventually authored the position paper.

The manifesto, published in New Left Notes at the opening of the SDS National Convention on June 18, 1969 argues, “The main struggle going on in the world today is between US imperialism and the national liberation struggles against it.” The paper elaborates on this premise for 12,000 more words, describing a Manichean world in which white youths must either fight for the oppressed people of the world or continue to benefit from US imperialism. “You don’t Need a Weatherman” quotes Karl Marx but has only “kindergarten ideas of communism” according to Todd Gitlin who opposed the Weather takeover. (Mark Rudd, for instance, was no political theoretician; he was once bragged that he had not read a book in a year). In particular, it has been criticized for downplaying the revolutionary potential of the working class, but Rudd counters that the paper actually postulates that the youth were a force that could radicalize the white working class. Forty years later, Rudd regrets that the paper gave the Weathermen an ideological basis from which to pursue a hopeless revolution; however, he believes in the continued relevance of the paper’s starting point, that the central contradiction in the world is between U.S. imperialism and national liberation movements.

At the SDS National Convention from June 18-22, 1969, PL and the Weatherman faction faced off in Chicago. Black Panthers entered the hall on two occasions to attack PL as “counterrevolutionary traitors,” effectively challenging SDS to oust PL. At one point, Bernadine Dohrn took the stage and led a walkout of the anti-PL delegates to a neighboring annex to discuss the possibility of purging the Progressive Labor faction. The following day, Dohrn led these anti-PL delegates back into the hall and read a
proclamation ousting PL from SDS. Weatherman Jeff Jones, newly elected as interorganizational secretary, called the expulsion of PL “Perhaps the most important thing in left history in thirty, maybe two hundred years.”97

Weather felt that it represented the true ideals of the SDS and it ousted PL from its ranks on the grounds that PL was overrepresented at the convention. Weatherman David Gilbert later insisted, “We expelled them [the PL faction] because they became a force destroying basic principles that SDS meant and had been organized around and had developed quite a following around.”98 PL was often dismissed as “racist” because of their opposition to the Black Panthers whom the Weather faction idolized as the vanguard of the revolution. As historian Milton Cantor argued, “Thus SDS’ers took a distinctly sectarian turn, repudiated their earlier mission of being a mass student body, and abandoned their natural constituency.”99

The new rump organization, still called SDS but dominated by Weather now had Mark Rudd as national secretary. Both Rudd and Bob Feldman argue that the split was probably “inevitable.”100 Rudd adds, “Yes, the split did destroy SDS’s strength, but it didn’t have to kill the organization. That happened after when Weatherman decided to push our anti-imperialism and militancy to the level of downplaying all existing independent SDS members and chapters.”101

Once Weatherman seized control of the national SDS organization in June 1969, the leadership, or Weatherbureau, put its followers on a course with disaster. The group

prepared for the October 1969 “Days of Rage” protest in Chicago, which was intended to signal the strength and style of the Weathermen. In the months preceding the Days of Rage, the Weathermen promoted the protest by trying to “radicalize” working-class youth. Strategies included preaching in high schools while the teachers were held captive and picking fights with lower-middle class kids to win them over with their militancy. By the time of the protest, the Weatherman regional cadre promised that several thousand would gather in Chicago, but only about three hundred actually appeared. Armed with clubs and football helmets, the Weathermen stormed through downtown Chicago in an orgy of “violence for violence’s sake.”  

Scores were arrested including leaders Mark Rudd, Jeff Jones, and Bernadine Dohrn. Brian Flanagan, a Columbia SDSer who had helped to seize the Mathematics Building was charged with attempted murder for his actions during the Days of Rage Protest but was acquitted after a month-long trial. According to Weather-chronicler Harold Jacobs, the Days of Rage protest began Weatherman’s isolation from the bulk of the New Left, which continued to organize around substantive issues, while the Weathermen merely sought to provoke a strong reaction with theatrics.  

Chicago Black Panther leader Fred Hampton denounced the Days of Rage as “custeristic,” although the Weathermen were supposed to be fighting in support of the Panthers. Relations between the two groups “were at once close and strained.”

Two months later, in December 1969, Fred Hampton was dead, killed by the Chicago Police as he slept in his bed. This killing had a pronounced effect on Weather

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102 The Weather Underground. Green, Sam and Siegel, Bill.  
leaders, many of whom had been close to Hampton. The murder fostered the simultaneous desire for revenge and self-defense. David Gilbert later described the fallout, “In terms of my personal experience, it was the murder of Fred Hampton more than any other factor that compelled us to take up armed struggle.” Others were pushed to the underground fearing that the state would also kill them for their revolutionary activities.

Three weeks after Hampton’s murder, Weather leaders gathered in Flint, Michigan for a “War Council,” a moment that symbolized the group’s degeneracy into symbolism and rhetoric without serious political thought. Bernadine Dohrn articulated the group’s overarching philosophy, “That’s what we’re about, being crazy motherfuckers and scaring the shit out of Honky America.” To prove her point, Dohrn praised the recent Charles Manson-led murders and held up the four-fingered salute to symbolize the “fork shoved into pig-Tate’s stomach.” Weathermen adorned the wall of the convention hall with a poster of a rifle and the words “Piece Now,” thereby showing their disdain for the non-violent anti-war movement. After Flint, Weather released its last communication from the national office announcing that it would dissolve into small collectives and “affinity groups.” Two to three hundred Weathermen went underground to foment the revolution in a country of two hundred million. In February of 1970, the Weather leadership closed the SDS national office, thereby dissolving the largest student anti-war organization in the country.

Weatherman’s biggest statement occurred in March 1970 when a quarter-million dollar townhouse exploded on Manhattan’s West Eleventh Street. The New York Times prominently covered the explosion each day for the next week.\textsuperscript{109} It was first believed to be a gas main break, but when firemen discovered sticks of dynamite, authorities realized that the townhouse had been turned into a bomb factory. A rich radio station owner named James Wilkerson owned the house, which his Weatherwoman daughter was using while he was on vacation. The blast, which killed three people, signaled the violent intent of Weather to the FBI and local police forces. Columbia’s importance to the Weathermen is exemplified by the fact that some have speculated that the semi-autonomous townhouse collective intended to detonate the bomb at the university’s Low Library, although a non-commissioned officers’ dance at Fort Dix was the more likely target. Shortly before he was killed in the blast, former Columbia student Ted Gold told a friend at the West End Bar, “We need to turn New York into Saigon.”\textsuperscript{110}

\textsuperscript{110} Gitlin, Todd. \textit{The Sixties}, Page 400.
Section 4
Violence for Violence’s Sake: Assessing the Weather Underground

The Weathermen were traveling to the far reaches of loathing. Their immensely bad ideas and dreadful tactics must have had a root in some larger upheaval of the movement’s collective psyche… The best to be said for the Weathermen is that for all their rant and bombs, in eleven years underground they killed nobody but themselves.111

- Todd Gitlin, 1987

After the Townhouse explosion, the Weatherbureau met in northern California to discuss what had gone wrong. The leadership concluded that bombs should be used against property, not people. Afterwards, all Weather Underground actions took place in empty buildings that had been warned of an imminent attack. Nobody was ever killed by the Weathermen, although some bombings did cause injuries to bystanders.112 The attacks were meant to be symbolic, as in September 1971 when the New York Department of Corrections building in Albany, NY was bombed in retaliation for the killing of twenty-nine inmates during the Attica Prison Riot. Bombs generally consisted of only a few sticks of dynamite and produced damage confined to the thousands of dollars.

These bombings produced only a minor tactical result and they were often counterproductive. For example, the Weather Underground made national news on March 1, 1971 when it detonated a bomb in a toilet in the U.S. Capitol in Washington in retaliation for American escalation of the Vietnam War into Laos. President Nixon responded by denouncing “the shocking act of violence that will outrage all

112 The Brink’s Truck Robbery in Nyack, NY took place in 1981 after the WUO had disbanded. Former Weathermen including David Gilbert and Kathy Boudin aided the Black Liberation Army in the robbery that saw the death of two policemen and a security guard.
The commercial media ignored the fact that the bomb was a response to the Laos invasion but widely printed the President’s response. This instance shows that the Weathermen unwittingly allowed President Nixon to appear as a pillar of strength and even a victim at the moment that he was escalating the War.

Stuart Gedal was active in Weatherman for only a couple of months in 1969-70. He points out the perverse logic behind the WUO: Those who went underground had already been arrested, so the authorities had their fingerprints and other information on file. Gedal initially thought that Weather would be the armed fringe of a mass movement, not the movement itself. Part of the group’s failing was that it isolated itself from the mass anti-war movement by cutting off communication. Similarly, Mark Rudd speaks of the frustration he felt at being cut-off from mainstream political activity. He characterized his time underground as “anxiety filled boredom.”

Gedal believes that the psychology of a cult can be applied to the Weathermen and the group’s former members have overcome the cult mentality with varying degrees of success. In his view, Mark Rudd has been the most successful in coming to terms with his actions in the WUO. Examples of cultish practices include a policy known as “smash monogamy,” which banned monogamous relationships as too bourgeois. Mark Rudd describes the experience:

I could have almost any of these beautiful, strong revolutionary women I desired. It was a moment of extreme sexual experimentation. Group sex, homosexuality, casual sex hook-ups were all tried as we attempted to break out of the repression of the past into the revolutionary future.

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113 Sale, Kirkpatrick. SDS. Page 653.
The Weather collectives also engaged in “gut checks,” in which one person was singled out and psychologically broken down in an attempt to purge his “bourgeois hang-ups.”

As the 1970s wore on, the Weather Underground began to see its actions as largely symbolic and it constructed the idea that its bombing campaign was valuable as an example of an American revolutionary movement. This idea has been perpetuated in memoirs and apologist histories, which argue that the group accomplished something merely by existing. The “Example Theory” of Weatherman tends to excuse the fact that Weather was both criminal and a massive tactical failure. Even while still underground, the Weathermen began to publish a newspaper entitled Osawatomie in which the group attempted to situate itself in the history of the American left through comparisons to John Brown and the International Workers of the World union. In the newspaper, the WUO also proudly traces its roots to SDS, but fails to mention that it dissolved the organization. This self-conscious historical relevance ignores the fact that violence is an aberration in the history of the American left. In the few instances that violence has been used, as in the anarchist movement, it was disadvantageous because it elicited state responses disproportionate to the threat. These state responses often extended to other leftist groups that might otherwise have affected change through legitimate means.

Many find the sensational quality of Weatherman’s tactics and way of life appealing because it is a remarkable story. The almost unimaginable idea that active revolutionaries existed within the United States and avoided detection for up to a decade while carrying out a clandestine acts of violence has caused some, including historians, to glamorize the participants. The celebrity surrounding the big names of Weather, like

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Rudd, Dohrn, and Ayers, crippled the mainstream movement by “helping to reduce militants throughout the movement to cheering sections for —or against—‘the Revolution.’”¹¹⁸ Weathermen themselves have perpetuated the idea of the glamorous revolutionary in their memoirs and pronouncements.

But in truth, Weatherman became increasingly old news and the sporadic bombings started to move off the front pages. Instead of being the vanguard of a revolution, by the time the Weathermen started to disband in the mid-1970s, they were little more than a vestige from an earlier age; the bombings continued even after Watergate but history had passed them by. The Weatherman faction had gone underground at the end of the sixties when the New Left was at the height of its power. When they finally did surface between 1977 and 1981, they found a nation devoid of a radical left that was ready to embrace neo-conservatism. Their accomplishment, if anything, was to make some tiny contribution to that American political shift.

¹¹⁸ Gitlin, Todd. The Whole World is Watching. Page 165.