



The New York Times

April 28, 2008

Columbia's Radicals of 1968 Hold a Bittersweet Reunion

By JOHN KIFNER

Spring, with the trees and flowers in blossom, is a time when colleges hold their reunions. So over the weekend a very specific group of Columbia University alumni gathered in Morningside Heights to recall their campus days.

The beatings. The arrests. The building takeovers. The heady communal life in the occupied college buildings. And, most vividly, “the bust,” the early morning of April 30, 1968, when the police stormed the campus, pounding them bloody with nightsticks and dragging some to police vans by their hair.

Sipping white wine and hugging old friends at the opening reception Thursday evening, it looked like any Ivy League reunion — the men’s hair gone gray or white or just gone — but Robert Friedman, then the editor of *The Spectator*, the student daily newspaper, and an organizer of the event, grew increasingly frustrated as he tried to get them to take their seats for a panel discussion.

“Boy, this is an unruly crowd,” he said.

“Wooooooo,” came the cry from the wrinkled radicals, breaking into applause, proud they were as rambunctious as they had been 40 years ago.

In 1968, students at Columbia and Barnard seized five campus buildings, resulting in 712 arrests during the big police raid and scores more in subsequent demonstrations. They mobilized a strike that shut down the university. They ultimately won their goals of stopping the building of a gym on public land in Morningside Park, severing ties with a Pentagon institute doing research for the Vietnam War, and gaining amnesty for demonstrators and, not incidentally, the early resignations of their enemies, Columbia’s president, Grayson L. Kirk; and its provost, David B. Truman.

It was an intensely emotional time, and those emotions were recalled during a series of earnest and well-attended panel discussions on the legacy of the student movement, feminism, race, political action and, inevitably, “From Vietnam to Iraq.” Indeed, “wooooooo” was without a doubt the most frequently used word as people cheered a political point or an often hilarious recollection.

But the most stunning moments came Friday night during an elaborately planned reconstruction of the events of April 1968 as black students — who had ordered the white radical members of Students for a Democratic Society out of the building they had occupied, Hamilton Hall — poured out bitter recollections of their experiences at Columbia.

“The worst racism I’ve seen is here at Morningside Heights,” said Al Dempsey, who grew up in a still segregated South and who is now a judge in Georgia.

Listening to the criticisms, some white radicals realized that they had not only been holding separate demonstrations, but living separate lives back then — and in large part now.

At a literary reading on Saturday night by ’68-era Columbia alumni who became writers — there are many — Paul Spike was so affected that he abandoned any reading of his work to speak emotionally.

“Last night was an astonishing experience to learn the black experience at Columbia,” he said. “At best I was indifferent, at worst complicit. On a personal level I think I was a good German.”

As the conference ended on Sunday morning, Tom Hurwitz, now a film maker, then an S.D.S. member occupying the math building, said there had been a reconciliation.

“After we left Hamilton Hall, we went our separate ways,” he said. “After 40 years, we’ve forgiven one another, we’ve reached out to one another.”

Of the roughly 1,100 students who took part in the occupation of the five campus buildings, about 500 attended the reunion, said Nancy Biberman, one of the organizers. At the time, the campus was divided, with a conservative group, calling itself the Majority Coalition and composed partly of athletes, opposing the strike and building takeovers. They were not represented.

This time around, the aging strikers were even welcomed back by the current Columbia president, Lee C. Bollinger, who participated on a panel on official responses to political activism.

“I thought about making my office available to you all night,” he said jokingly.

“Do you have cigars,” came a shout from the back, a reference to the famed smoking of President Kirk’s White Owls by students occupying his office.

“Welcome back,” Mr. Bollinger went on. “I’m really proud to have you here.”

Nevertheless, there was muttering among some participants over his presence because of Columbia’s plans to greatly expand its campus north into Manhattanville. The university’s poor relations with its largely black neighbors have long been an issue. In the case of the scrapped gym in 1968, the plan was seen as racist in part because it was to

feature a backdoor entrance for Harlem residents and because many in the community opposed building on scarce parkland.

Among those who showed up, from as far away as the campuses of Stanford and the University of California at Berkeley, were a large number of professors and other educators, as well as poets, writers, musicians, lawyers and a couple of judges, who all had tried to stick to the early idealism of the 1968 strike.

“It defined you,” Susan Kahn, a writer and researcher, said of the strike. “You became a person who tried to be true to it for 40 years, who in one way or another tried to make the world better.”

But less than a year later, S.D.S. would fragment, with some of the Columbia activists moving into the much more radical Weatherman organization. This, too, was evident Sunday morning at a more somber ceremony to honor those who had died in the intervening years. The dead were not only former students, but those who had touched their lives, like the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Mayor John V. Lindsay, Margaret Mead, Abbie Hoffman, the folk singer Phil Ochs and even Dr. Truman, the provost.

Among the names read out to the striking of a Buddhist gong was Ted Gold, killed in March 1970 in the explosion of a Weatherman bomb he was making in the basement of a Greenwich Village town house; and John Jacobs, known as J. J., a founder of the Weathermen, who died of cancer while living under an assumed name in Vancouver, British Columbia.

Edward J. Hyman, a professor of psychology at Berkeley, recalled how Mr. Gold had recruited him to join S.D.S.

“For many decades, I’ve avoided Columbia because of the death of Ted Gold,” he told the crowd. “It’s been wonderful to spend time with you, and I love you all.”

Brian Flanagan, another member of S.D.S., said: “J. J. embodied the spirit of resistance of those times. May J. J.’s spirit live on in ours.” He added that his ashes had been spread on Che Guevara’s memorial in Cuba.

But most of the weekend was spent remembering the heady days of the strike, the nearly constant gathering at the Sundial on College Walk for rallies and demonstrations, throwing food over the heads of counterdemonstrators to the second-story windows of Low Library, the endless debates and splitting into factions. Each person identified himself by the “commune” he or she had occupied: Low, Fayerweather, Avery or Math.

“It’s kind of an impressionistic mush,” said Ms. Biberman, who now runs a low-income housing agency in the Bronx. “I don’t remember a whole lot about class.”

Much of the reminiscing took place at the Friday-night gathering, which sought to reconstruct the events through a narrative of the many participants. There was a 22-page script consisting mostly of just names, but the stories ran on so long that they had to cut about a third and proceed directly to the arrests. Nevertheless, after nearly four hours, many lingered in the hallway, talking excitedly.

It was at this meeting that the bitterness of the tiny black minority surfaced. Former star football players were kept on the bench because the coach had a “stacking system” that put all the black players in the same position. Blacks constantly had their ID’s checked while whites did not. The men formed their own fraternity, Omega Psi Phi, for solidarity. At Barnard, black women roomed together and were advised they should not take certain difficult courses.

Judge Dempsey said the only thing that had kept him from leaving Columbia was the draft: “Thirty days later you’re at Fort Benning and on the way to Nam.”

Indeed, Thulani Davis, a black poet and writer on the reunion’s organizing committee, said she had to make a major effort over the eight months of planning to persuade the blacks to come.

“They were angry, they were reluctant,” she said. “They didn’t want to come back to the university.”

After tearing down the construction fence for the gym on April 23, 1968, both the black and the white demonstrators occupied Hamilton Hall. But near dawn the whites were told to leave and take their own building. The reason, said Ray Brown, one of the black leaders and now a lawyer, was that the more tightly disciplined blacks did not want to deal with “the 72 other tendencies of the New Left.”

Laura Pinsky said: “Taking another building seemed perfectly all right with me. Even though we were kids, there was a sense of dignity and purpose as we walked across that campus.”