

"The Riot That Did Not Happen - The Defused SDS National Conference  
(Austin Texas, 1969)

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The April 1969 meetings of the National Council of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), originally scheduled for the University of Texas (UT) at Austin campus, promised violence between the 1500 expected SDS National Council attendees and either law enforcement or representatives of ultraconservative political groups or both, violence which never occurred.

This study proposed an intergroup depolarization model to analyze this case history of violence prevention; such depolarization resulted from cooperation between law enforcement and a community group of university faculty and clergy as well as other interested citizens. The lack of violence at these meetings may have portended the national demise of SDS. Some SDS leaders admitted hoping that a violent police confrontation in Austin would regenerate the organization's lagging national solidarity as well as external support from middle-of-the-road students, faculty, and intellectuals. Lewinian modeling explains the subsequent accelerated decline of SDS as a decline in minority group cohesion resulting from reduction of external threat.

## II. HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

### A. Historical and psychological context.

The student protest movement which began earlier in the decade impacted many issues facing the SDS National Council in Austin. That spring there were protests at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, Georgetown University, the University of Houston, the State University of New York at Stony Brook, Chicago State College and high schools in Orlando, Florida to name a few. Protests, rallies, and campus violence throughout the nation for two years preceding the Austin meetings established negative interaction patterns between Left wing students and authorities, which in the natural course of events would have been repeated there also.

Some of the conflict between student groups and societal institutions went beyond the stated issues to a collective dimension of child-parent conflict. These activities no doubt related in some part to each protestor's intrapsychic struggle with his/her own parents. This concept can be expressed in Carl Jung's schema of a collective unconscious; these youths as a group are striking out against a symbolic parent.

Episodes of violence within SDS appeared to be as frequent and notable as those directed externally. These included the throwing of a live hand grenade, which failed to explode, in a Columbia University SDS meeting. The perpetrator was a member of an anti-Castro, Cuban-exile group who had infiltrated the meeting (Scully, p 2).

Personal observation of SDS on the University of Wisconsin, Madison campus in 1969 revealed organizational problems including a paucity of reliable permanent workers. Students joined and dropped out as the spirit moved them often just to please or pursue a beau or potential beau who was a member. SDS meetings were a boring hodgepodge of lectures on anarchist political philosophy and tactical sessions on upcoming rallies or leaflet distribution efforts.

Previous, peaceful, SDS conventions in Colorado and Kentucky led some to believe that the Austin convention would also be peaceful (Larsen, p4).

#### B. Student protest in Texas

Because of the political conservatism in Texas and the large amount of right wing money pumped into its colleges and universities, Texas did not present an inviting climate for student protest. In April 1967, however, the Texas Intercollegiate Student Association passed a "Bill of Rights for Texas Students" at their annual meeting in McAllen (The Texas Observer, p 1). Also in 1967, the University Freedom Movement was established with broad-based, left wing student support (The Texas Observer, p 3). In response, given university and community attitudes toward student protestors, Texas SB 162 was also passed in 1967 to "...permit campus police to be armed and ... provide a basis for non-students to be kept off campus if school officials wished." (The Texas Observer, p 3).

### III. AUSTIN, 1969

#### A. Precipitating Conflict:

The University and SDS disputed the proposed use of the Texas Union (the student union building) for National Council meetings, a dispute which was appealed through the University hierarchy to the Board of Regents. Neither side appeared completely honest as 1) the National SDS did not appropriately identify itself and the reason for its request for meeting space initially, and 2) the Texas Union officials cancelled the reservation because of a commitment to do "heavy cleaning" of the Union during that time (UT Faculty Minutes, 3/25/69, p 9713-4). That is, cancelling a meeting of 1500 people because of a cleaning schedule does not seem reasonable. Possibly the Union staff were tipped off about the nature of the meetings, and this triggered the cancellation; even if that was not the case, it may have appeared to be so. The issue was resolved in court in the University's favor; an SDS appeal to the Fifth Circuit Court in New Orleans prior to the meeting date was unsuccessful.

Persons concerned in this crisis included law enforcement; the Governor and other state and federal officials; the courts; the Legislature; the Board of Regents; University faculty, staff, and clergy; local elected officials; SDS members and their families; other students and their families; and the general public. About 1200 of an expected 1500 SDS members actually attended (Dallas Times Herald, Sunday, 3/30/69).

#### B. Organizational Milieus

SDS general operations were a study in contradiction and hypocrisy (Ritter, p 4) as verified by events at Austin. The SDS leadership clearly denounced the American government and many American social institutions blatantly planning their destruction; yet SDS members used "the system" including its courts to their utmost advantage (New Left Notes, Spring 1969). This stance was obvious from a statement by Fred Jordan, SDS Educational

Secretary, who, after spending the week-end using the facilities of all the religious centers at UT-Austin, "characterized the modern university as 'an enemy of the people'" (Dallas Times Herald, Sunday, 3/30/69).

Government response to this strategy must not deny constitutional rights but simultaneously not support the anarchist goals of SDS. Officials can not always walk this tight rope successfully. One Austin observer stated:

"When those who want to destroy a system launch their attacks from within the system, claiming their rights under it, they shoot from ambush. There is no constitutional way to resist them, because the only effective way to retaliate is to violate the letter of the Constitution by arbitrarily denying the 'rights' of its attackers." (Wheelock, p 4)

The UT Administration often had difficulty walking the tight rope and usually leaned to the right as evidenced in a statement by Frank Erwin, Chairman of their Board of Regents during the crisis:

"While we believe in freedom of speech and expression, we are not about to let the university be used by subversives and revolutionaries." (New Left Notes, Spring 1969).

Mr Erwin had a history of conflict with the academic community on policy matters (UT Faculty Minutes, 10/28/69, p 9886). He appeared to ignore the issues of violence avoidance and democratic process at stake here; he represented a view common to many politically powerful Texans at the time. Such powerful ultraconservatives knew that SDS was denied use of UT facilities and would be denied a park meeting permit leaving them nowhere to legally meet. These ultraconservatives expected law enforcement to enact the bloody confrontation with SDS that they wanted. Under such circumstances the city would have been obliged to call out law enforcement and give them free reign so as not to invite defeat in the next week's municipal elections (Segalman, 1969).

The open, unreasoning conflict between such ultra-conservative groups and the New Left laid the groundwork for bloodshed at Austin. Many faculty thought that such bloodshed with national TV coverage in a small town like Austin could destroy the atmosphere for education for years to come (Segalman, 1969).

#### IV. METHODOLOGY

##### A. Hypothesis

Social-psychologist, Kurt Lewin, postulated in the 1930's that minority group cohesion may derive from negative external forces, and that decreasing the potential of such forces may decrease group cohesion. This research tested Lewin's hypothesis by examining the effect of the Austin experience on the organizational strength and destiny of SDS. The current application is unique because SDS was a minority group defined by the politics and age of its membership, while previous Lewinian research focused on involuntary minority groups such as those defined by religion or race (Segalman, 1966).

##### B. Data Sources

Information used in this research came from newspaper articles, letters to the editor, correspondence, minutes of faculty meetings, instructions to volunteers, and personal diaries.

## V. FINDINGS

### A. Factionalism

There were three factions within SDS represented at Austin. The "Regulars" (also called "Centralists" and "New Leftists") controlled the SDS National Office in Chicago. They were a "self-styled Marxist-Leninist movement." (Yemma, p 10). Their anarchist position was made clear by their National Secretary, Mike Clonsky, who said: "a revolution requires a highly centralized, well-disciplined, Marxist-Leninist Party." (Scully, p 2). The Regulars were opposed by the Worker Student Alliance led by the pro-Mao Progressive Labor Party. The Decentralists comprised the third faction which included the UT Chapter.

The factions were separated by several diffuse ideological issues, issues which varied from day to day depending upon who was consulted. The Regulars, of course, endorsed a strong centralized national organization in opposition to the other two factions. Another major concern was whether or not to endorse the Black Panther Party as leader of black revolution. This issue was related to the debate over the place of Nationalism and self-determination of minority groups in class struggles. (Scully, p 1)

### B. Chronology of Events

2/3 (week of) An "unidentified member of SDS" reserved two Texas Union ballrooms for 3/28-3/30, and paid a \$1,000 check as a deposit without indicating that the rooms would be used for the SDS National Council Meetings (UT Faculty Minutes, 3/25).

Later in the week the same or another unidentified SDS member reserved the remaining seven Texas Union meeting rooms for 3/28-3/30, again without indicating that they would be used for SDS National Council Meetings (UT Faculty Minutes, 3/25).

2/10 (week of) The Texas Union's Director announced its closing for heavy cleaning from Noon 3/29 through 3/30 thus canceling SDS's reservations. The SDS check was returned, and SDS subsequently appealed this decision.

In other years, the Union closed the week-end before spring vacation and campus groups relinquished reservations (UT Faculty Minutes, 3/25). That year visitors to the Union following this period noticed no evidence of such scheduled cleaning and redecorating (Segalman, 1969).

2/26 At a Union Board meeting to consider their appeal, SDS indicated for the first time that unbeknownst to Texas Union and UT personnel 1500 persons were expected to attend their National Council meetings in Austin. The Union Board then overruled its director and approved the SDS meeting space request (UT Faculty Minutes, 3/25).

This action triggered regulations requiring a mandatory review of the matter by the Regents (UT Faculty Minutes, 3/25).

3/11 The UT Vice-President for Student Affairs recommended to the President that the Union Board be overruled (UT Faculty Minutes, 3/25).

3/15 The UT Administration banned SDS from using university facilities for these meetings (Yemma, p 10).

One reason for this ban was clearly political. With UT budget discussions taking place in the Texas Legislature, UT Administrators were reluctant to displease this conservative body which was currently under fiscal pressure from all sides (Segalman, 1969).

Undated- SDS retained counsel and filed suit to obtain use of the Texas Union. In response, the general faculty passed a resolution of the Committee of Counsel on Academic Freedom and Responsibility and selected faculty to commend SDS for referring their conflict with the University to the courts.

The resolution mandated that both the University and SDS comply with whatever court decisions were reached. This plea for peace and reason put the faculty at odds with those SDS leaders and local right wing political activists and law enforcement officials who wanted bloodshed at the Austin SDS meetings.

3/21 Five faculty members scheduled a general faculty meeting for 3/25 to discuss denial.

Education Professor Wolfe circulated a memo urging all faculty members to attend, questioning both the short notice before the meeting date and the lack of an agenda and specific proposals (Wolfe memo).

3/23 Austin Federal District Judge Jack Roberts upheld the UT denial.

A Wilson Nolle of the Austin AAUP, in a letter to the Regents published in The Daily Texan, urged the Regents to reconsider their denial in the name of freedom of expression. Nolle's letter was in response to a request from Rostain M. Kavoussi of the UT Student Association for such intervention (Nolle, p 4).

3/25 At this meeting the faculty upheld the denial set forth by UT Administration and Board of Regents.

Attendance at the meeting was light both because the meeting was scheduled for the day before Spring break and because a recent memo circulated by someone in the School of Education stated the circumstances of the original SDS request (see 3/21 note above). Many faculty thought that SDS was receiving "their just deserts". On the contrary, other faculty thought that SDS was set up for defeat at this meeting, and that this denial established a selective free speech precedent which was at odds with University ideals. (Segalman, 1969).

3/27 Thursday - The United States Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals upheld Judge Roberts' ruling.

National Council members began to arrive in Austin on this day (Brischetto, p 5).

Many SDS members saw the UT denial and other such actions against them as verification of the evil of established society. Some concerned faculty were disturbed by what they saw as inevitable bloodshed between SDS and the reported assembling police forces (university police, city police, and Texas Rangers). Many faculty tried unsuccessfully to reach SDS delegates to tell them not to come, but most delegates were by then in transit and were not traveling in groups but were coming individually by hitch-hiking.

To avoid violence, the Ad Hoc Committee of Faculty and Religious workers was formed 3/26 and offered SDS alternate meeting space in Campus Religious Centers

(The Austin American, 3/28). This newspaper account did not clarify that two groups were making peace efforts; the semi-organized Ad Hoc Faculty Committee differed from the even less structured group of Campus Religious Center clergy and staff.

Unfortunately, most Campus Religious Centers could not accommodate large group meetings, and such centers were, therefore, unacceptable to SDS. The Ad Hoc Faculty Committee informed SDS of a 3/27 offer to use the Newman Center, a large Catholic Campus Religious Center run by Paulist Fathers.

3/28 Friday - The United States Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals denied a restraining order sought by SDS which would have permitted them to meet in campus buildings (Dallas Times Herald, 3/30).

The SDS accepted the Ad Hoc Faculty Committee's offer less than 24-hours before the meetings were scheduled to begin (The Austin American, 3/28). Ironically, the SDS, an organization devoted to the violent overthrow of the government, met in the peaceful sanctuary of religious institutions; but again, this action was consistent with the SDS practice of utilizing all available resources of the society it wished to destroy.

#### C. Factors which kept the meetings peaceful.

Meeting space was assigned to assure the peaceful assembly of participants. Meetings were held inside, with the large assemblies in the Newman Center, away from the police and the press, removing much of the psychological threat which had reenforced group cohesion within SDS. Had meetings been outside in open space or parks (forbidden by the City of Austin) - "... the presence of more than one thousand delegates meeting under the public eye would have led to considerable friction ..." (from Ad Hoc Faculty Committee memo). Special arrangements were made on order of the mayor (and at the request of the Ad Hoc Faculty Committee Chair) to keep uniformed police away from the Newman Center but to have non-uniformed police available at the call of the Ad Hoc Faculty Committee.

Adding to the potential for peaceful assembly was a tenor of quiet on campus as few regular students and faculty were present during Spring break. Most campus religious facilities were small and scattered; SDS members attending different meetings were separated. These small isolated groups did not have the potential for disorder of a single huge group, yet this physical separation may have reduced group cohesion and fostered factionalism within SDS. There were, however, regular day-long meetings in the Newman Center which had a seating capacity of 500.

SDS internal central committee members and the Ad Hoc Faculty Committee prevented disorder, violence, and confrontation between SDS and local law enforcement. The Ad Hoc Faculty Committee met with SDS initially, and both groups agreed to SDS's responsibilities for internal security and member control as well as the responsibilities of the Ad Hoc Faculty Committee members. Ad Hoc Faculty Committee members attended all conference meetings to "handle" any problems that arose. They and specific SDS delegates kept order and discouraged illegal drug use and other illegal acts. Throughout the conference communication between Ad Hoc Faculty Committee and SDS leadership was maintained. Everyone connected with the conference was instructed to report all incidents and rumors to one Ad Hoc Faculty Committee member around the clock. He checked all facts and took necessary action.

The passive cooperation of law enforcement was essential to the peace of the conference. Ad Hoc Faculty Committee representatives met with law enforcement administrators initially to explain the committee's purpose and to obtain law enforcement's cooperation (Segalman, 1969). Law enforcement was not openly present at the conference. The Ad Hoc Faculty Committee members on duty handled problems themselves instead of calling police (Brischetto, p 5). Sociologist Brischetto states that often the presence of police and their show of force can trigger violence. The only incident which caused a stir during the conference came when two male hippies took a nude swim in a campus fountain facing the Newman Center. Ad Hoc Faculty Committee members and SDS Committee people had the offenders clothed before police arrived (Yemma p 10).

In addition, selected persons in the UT Administration secretly agreed before hand to cooperate with the Committee's plan to handle the assemblage peacefully, as an open policy would have drawn the Regents' wrath. To minimize conflict between SDS and the media, media representatives were only admitted to meetings if their cameras and tape-recorders were left in their cars (Instruction Sheet to Ad Hoc Faculty Committee).

Finally, legal and medical resources were made available during the conference. Faculty and community physicians and lawyers were willing to assist but only within the scopes of their professions. They were reluctant to assist in the peace making process initiated by clergy and other faculty, and this posture may reflect the restrictive milieus of both professions.

#### D. Aftermath

The peaceful assembly of SDS provided law enforcement and other conservative groups with a view of SDS and other restive youth which did not fulfill their expectations. The techniques used at Austin may be helpful in law enforcement's interactions with other dissident groups. A report on the conference was requested by and furnished to the Office of the Vice-President of the United States.

Organizational problems within SDS following the conference verify the major hypothesis of this research. Such problems included a widening of the schism between the Regulars and the Progressive Labor Party followers. Several months later the Regulars announced that they had expelled the PLP from SDS describing them as holding "objectively racist and counterrevolutionary positions and actions." The PLP simultaneously announced that the Regulars had "split away". Both groups then claimed the name "SDS", but the Regulars continued to occupy and control the National Office in Chicago " ... with its files, funds and mailing lists." (Wentworth, p 4). This internal conflict which began at Austin may have had much to do with the eventual demise of SDS.

Some faculty and clergy encountered problems with their superiors and their congregations following the conference. A local Catholic Bishop was openly critical that church property was used for the conference even though he did not understand the goals of the Ad Hoc Faculty Committee. One local priest's tactful response was a simple "God Bless Him". The Bishop's own secretary disagreed with him in a letter to a local newspaper (Yemma, p 10). A third Catholic priest also reported concern about this Bishop's response (Letter, 4/7/69).

There was criticism from various religious hierarchies and threats by supporters to terminate funding of campus programs (Westbrook memo). Some church supporters confused this effort of the religious centers to provide

places to meet peacefully with actual support of the SDS cause. On April 1, the Ad Hoc Faculty Committee sent a letter to the Directors of participating religious centers and the University YMCA/YWCA commending them for their actions to help insure peace during the SDS Conference. The Ad Hoc Faculty Committee also asked its members to sign statements clarifying the situation, which would be distributed to churches.

University officials sent letters to at least one Ad Hoc Faculty Committee member commending him for his peace keeping efforts. Such actions contrast with the University's unwillingness to act to keep the peace themselves. To avoid further such incidents a resolution was proposed to the Faculty of the College of Arts and Sciences to establish a committee to design a proposal for improved peaceful use of campus facilities by politically controversial groups (See Proposed Resolution).

A local newspaper published a letter citing errors in a recently introduced state legislative resolution commending local "school and court officials" rather than the faculty and religious groups for keeping peace during the SDS Conference (Brischetto, p 5). Yemma cited the same resolution, also noting that it erroneously praised law enforcement as:

"There were no reported incidents involving SDS members and law officers during the meet." (p 10).

## VI. CONCLUSIONS

The zeal of the SDS to destroy many of this society's institutions may have been a transformation of the individual tendency for self-destruction during adolescence to the mission of the group. Similarly, the tendency of some SDS factions to "dare" the establishment to control them was based either on an adolescent desire for excitement or an adolescent challenge of and "test of the parent" as described by Freud (Bonaparte, et al). Such rebellion is an equally senseless activity at both the individual and the group level. Social organization is an inevitable component of people living in groups, and to advocate the destruction of a functioning schema of social organization without the availability of another organization more beneficial to that society and capable of being made functional in a reasonable time period without inflicting major damage on the social fabric of the society is not rational.

American democracy, while unequivocally denouncing such destruction, at the same time protects the constitutional rights of any individual or group advocating or supporting such destruction. Simultaneous, but unclear, administration of these two principles without prior agreement on what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable actions invites the miscommunication that can lead to confusion, chaos, and violence.

This research documented how clearly defined and administered procedures based on group motivational techniques from the Lewinian minority group leadership model can diffuse such potential violence.

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begin (The Austin American, 3/28). Ironically, the SDS, an organization devoted to the violent overthrow of the government.