

## CHAPTER 2

### BEGINNINGS OF SDS

*Come out Lyndon with your hands held high. Drop your guns, baby, and reach for the sky. I've got you surrounded and you ain't got a chance. Send you back to Texas, make you work on your ranch.*

-Country Joe and the Fish

#### NATIONAL WHITE STUDENT MOVEMENT FORMED

The Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) formed a chapter at UT in the early spring of 1964. From 1964-7, the UT chapter of SDS began to build the local white, radical student movement. Although they were unable to attract much support from their fellow students prior to the free speech movement of 1967, their activities during this period helped lay the groundwork for the post-1967 period.

SDS was a national organization founded in 1960, but its roots date back to 1905. Formerly the Student League for Industrial Democracy (SLID), the group had been funded and supported by its parent organization the League for Industrial Democracy (LID).<sup>12</sup> In January 1960, SLID members expressed a desire to break from its LID elders; they changed their organization's name to Students for a Democratic Society but continued to receive financial support and office space from LID (Sale).

The first SDS conference occurred at the University of Michigan in May of 1960 during the nascent southern student sit-in movement. Several civil rights activists attended, as did mid-western and northeastern students. After the conference the organization received a grant from a Detroit union which enabled the creation of a permanent staff (ibid.).

Al Haber served as the first SDS president from 1960-2. During the early 1960's, much of SDS work was in supporting the civil rights movement. Haber commented on student activity around the country during that first year:

We have spoken at last, with vigor, idealism and urgency, supporting our words with picket lines, demonstrations, money and even our own bodies.... We have taken the initiative from the adult spokesmen and leadership, setting the pace and policy as our actions evolve their own dynamic. Pessimism and cynicism have given way to direct action (ibid.).

Until 1962, SDS remained very dependent on LID and fairly disorganized. The political views of the participants evolved rapidly during this time. In 1961, SDS field secretary Tom Hayden wrote an essay called *A Letter to the New (Young) Left* in which he called for a "radicalism drawing on what remains of the adult labor, academic and political communities, not just revolting in despair against them," (Sale, 1973, p.37).

Sale cited the reasons for the resurgence of the student left as follows: 1) the social fabric of the nation was tattered (i.e. dissolution of the family, increase in drug and alcohol use, higher crime rates), 2) the artificially supported economy began to show signs of deterioration like high unemployment and inflation and the increased monopolization of industries, 3) the nation was seen as politically corrupt and the

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<sup>12</sup> See introduction for information regarding SLID. Other sources include Sale text and Brax cited in bibliography.

bureaucracy was seen as impersonal, 4) a crisis of belief in traditional politics led to the delegitimization of authority, 5) the large size of the student population during the 1960's (the first Baby-Boomers turned 18 in 1964), 6) most students were children of parents who lived through the Depression and World War II; the students had rejected their parents' concept that money buys happiness, and 7) the increased reliance of the government on universities as management training centers and providers of military and economic research enhanced the power of students.

In June of 1962, about 60 students from northern colleges and various student organizations met at an SDS convention in Port Huron, Michigan to draft a founding document. The 66-page *Port Huron Statement* established the organization SDS and its principle of participatory democracy (in which they saw politics as a public, positive and collective decision-making process). The preamble to the document read:

Students for a Democratic Society is an association of young people on the left. It seeks to create a sustained community of educational and political concern: one bringing together liberals and radicals, activists and scholars, students and faculty.

It maintains a vision of a democratic society, where at all levels the people have control of the decisions which affect them and the resources on which they are dependent. It seeks a relevance through the continual focus on realities and on the programs necessary to effect change at the most basic levels of economic, political and social organization. It feels the urgency to put forth a radical, democratic program counterposed to authoritarian movements both of communism and the domestic right. (Cohen and Hale, Appendix).

Following the conference, LID called in the two executive SDS officers for a "hearing" in which LID threatened to cut off all support for SDS because it perceived SDS to be a pro-Soviet, popular-fronting, Communist-infiltrated organization. The clash between the Old and New Left organizations continued but LID finally agreed to maintain its financial support of an autonomous SDS (Sale).

The *Port Huron Statement* was widely distributed among students that year. Over the next few years, SDSers supported the SNCC movement, began discussing university reform, and established a leftist peace and foreign policy research clearinghouse (the Peace Research and Education Project). In 1963, a large number of the predominantly white middle class students began to leave the universities and to denounce their privileged backgrounds. Some registered black voters in the Mississippi Delta while others did such things as organizing unemployed workers in the decaying inner cities. They attempted to model themselves after SNCC by leaving school to organize the poor and the unemployed. To carry this out, they founded the Economic Research and Action Project (ERAP) in September of 1963.

At the SDS summer 1964 conference at Pine Hill, New York several factions emerged. The strongest was the ERAP group which supported the notion that bourgeois students leave school and work for the poor. The campus-organizing group wanted more focus on radicalizing middle class students. The realignment faction supported working in electoral politics. The factions compromised with each other, deciding to continue doing as they had; SDS remained intact. At this time, it had grown to include 29 chapters, one of which was the newly formed UT chapter.

## **UT STUDENTS FOUND SDS**

Alice Embree, one of the early participants in SDS at UT, said that when she went through registration at the beginning of the Spring 1964 semester, there was an SDS information table. She conjectured that four or five people started the group (Embree interview - March 1988).

The early focus of the group was participation with black student activists in the sit-ins at downtown Austin restaurants. Also SDS worked with CIC activists on campus to get the university-approved housing to include only integrated housing. In the spring of 1965, SDSers supported the Student Interracial Committee's picket of a "whites-only" restaurant - Roy's Lounge - on the Drag (Embree interview).

## **FIRST ANTI-VIETNAM WAR PROTESTS AT UT**

In mid October 1965, SDS held a death march protesting U.S. policy toward Vietnam. This protest, which coincided with the international days of protest, was apparently the first antiwar demonstration on the campus during the 1960's.<sup>13</sup> About 70 students participated in the march and rally. A surprise speaker Dr. William Sloane Coffin, a chaplain at Yale University, spoke to the demonstrators about the economic reasons for the war. SDS had attempted to get a parade permit to march in the streets during the rally but the permit had been refused by the City Council; this spurred SDS on to file a lawsuit in the Texas Criminal Court of Appeals for the right to assemble freely. The Student Assembly narrowly deplored the City Council's permit denial to SDS by a vote of 14-13 (Vertical File - SDS, Barker Texas History Center).

The counter-cultural orientation of some of the SDSers was apparent at the protest. A *Dallas Morning News* article described the antiwar protesters as "shaggy maned" and "homegrown leftists," and referred to their "shoulder-length hair," "T-shirts, sandals, leotards and dirty jeans." The article noted that most of the UT participants in SDS were white and of upper middle class backgrounds. In the same article, SDSer Scott Pittman responded to a question about the group's funding, "armchair liberal professors get rid of their conscience steam by slipping us \$10 occasionally." He also commented that the group had trouble "scraping up professors to speak at our rallies," (*Dallas Morning News*, October 24, 1965).

Reaction to the antiwar march was quick, the Young Republicans formed a Committee to Support U.S. Policy in Vietnam to show that the SDS position was not representative of the student body. The group was able to collect 3700 signatures on its petition (ibid.). Also that month, Regent Frank Erwin threatened to abolish the editorial page of the *Daily Texan* after it printed an editorial criticizing the killing of Vietnamese children.

## **STUDENT CONSTITUTIONAL RIGHTS DENIED**

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<sup>13</sup> However, several campus activists earlier that year had held an antiwar demonstration at President LBJ's ranch in Texas.

In February 1966, the Texas Student Publications (TSP) Board of Directors censored a *Ranger* cover<sup>14</sup> because as Dean Jack Holland explained, its caricature of Lyndon Johnson would put the President in a "ridiculous situation." Another member of the board supported Holland saying, "after all, this is the President's University."

Following these incidents, students became increasingly concerned over their lack of over their newspaper but the *Texan* staff members were intimidated to such an extent that they did not advocate autonomy in their editorials. At one point the *Texan's* faculty censor was actually ordered by the TSP Board to stop any editorial criticism of the Board of Regents. In March of 1966, quickly sprung into and out of existence free. The Texas Student League for Responsible Sexual Freedom had formed to lobby for an amendment to Texas' sex laws. The League first obtained notoriety when it passed out a handbill outlining its goals and calling for membership (*Daily Texan*, April 30, 1967).

University rules then stipulated that the Dean of Students Office had to approve all leaflets; the Dean declared the particular leaflet in bad taste and withheld it. The League had extra copies and distributed it anyway. The following day Chancellor Harry Ransom banned the League from campus citing the League as an unofficial lobbying group and in violation of its probationary period for distributing unapproved literature (*ibid.*).

That evening an off-campus meeting of students was held. A large group of people joined the League transforming it into a free speech movement. The group questioned the universities' policies, in particular its right to review literature before distribution. The group decided to question the existence of free speech at UT and set up a panel discussion for 10 days later; they chose Ransom as one of the panelists. Three days before the forum, Ransom cancelled claiming that he had another engagement. The new free speech movement cancelled the forum and did not mention the incident again. Though a large number of people were initially attracted to this short-lived free speech movement, a lack of direction, political experience and leadership apparently led to its quick demise.<sup>15</sup>

## **STUDENTS CHALLENGE AUTHORITY**

SDS held its first fall 1966 meeting in late October. Although the group got started late in the semester, it was becoming more organized and productive. At the meeting, several committees were formed: a national student strike against the war committee, a speakers bureau, a conscientious objectors bureau, a Gentle Thursday Committee (Gentle Thursday was being planned as a day for gentleness and friendship) and a General Booth Committee (which planned to set up a booth to recruit for peace and love next to the military recruiters' booth).

At the same time, students organized an underground newspaper called *The Rag*. The paper was the sixth underground newspaper to be formed in the country; it was

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<sup>14</sup> *The Ranger* was a magazine published by students, similar to the magazine currently published - *UTMost*.

<sup>15</sup> No records indicate that SDS was or was not involved in this fiasco. However, increased activity and the founding of *The Rag* in the fall would indicate a desire on radical activists' part to be more organized in the event of a recurrence of a broad student movement.

perhaps the first to embody the new ideals of participatory democracy and a combination of culture and politics. Most of the staffers were SDSers who created the paper not only to publicize issues of importance to the movement but also in reaction to the corporate controlled mainstream media. The weekly paper was structured as a collective with no editor; it was highly imaginative, graphic and counter-cultural. Its news coverage concentrated on university issues as did its political analysis. *The Rag* would become an important medium and organizing tool as more students became involved in the student movement.

The threat of a 100% tuition hike at the beginning of the spring 1967 semester served to unite the forces of such disparate groups as the Young Republicans, the Young Democrats, the Student Religious Liberals, and SDS. The coalition sent information packets to students' parents about the tuition increases, lobbied politicians and circulated petitions. Their opposition to the tuition increase was based both on self interest and on a belief that public higher education should be affordable. Radical students declared that students shouldn't have to pay tuition at all, pointing to examples in several foreign countries.

During the fall ten SDS and *Rag* women had held a sit-in protesting the draft at the Selective Service office in Austin.<sup>16</sup> In January of 1967 several demonstrations were held against Secretary of State Dean Rusk while he was in town. The first protest was held at the Capitol where Rusk was speaking to the state legislators; one protester was arrested for bringing anti-war leaflets into the Capitol building and charged with disorderly conduct.<sup>17</sup> Over 200 came to the second protest which succeeded in cancelling Rusk's dinner at the UT Alumni Center. Thorne Dreyer wrote an article about the protest in *The Rag*:

[Rusk's] mission...was to brick up the Credibility Gap, to lay it on the line why we'uns is over there protecting freedom and the American Way. In true bureaucratic form, he spoke not to those who have to fight in his war, not to the protesting students or the confused populace, but to the glib, fat-assed yes-men of the Texas legislature and the board of regents...(*Rag*, Jan. 30, 1967: p. 1).

In another *Rag* article about the Rusk demonstration, Sara Clark called for circulating the struggle against the war into the larger Austin community. She wrote:

Perhaps we [the protesters] have been captivated by the idea of being the valiant minority, the downtrodden...Perhaps we have come to feel that we have failed unless we are opposed on every side, attacked, vilified. If this is so, if we consciously court defeat, then we are going nowhere, while the war is headed everywhere...you and I and a fistful of signs and a runic rhyme cannot end the war. We can work toward its end, but only when massive numbers of the American people disagree with the government policy will the war end... (*ibid.*, p. 10).

The vision and creativity of these early anti-war protesters is striking. Their rebellious language and willingness to experiment were characteristic of the New Left's

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<sup>16</sup> 1966 was the first year when students were drafted to make war in Vietnam.

<sup>17</sup> I believe that this was the first time criminal charges were brought against student political protesters.

open-mindedness. The honest self criticism revealed in Clark's article became a hallmark of Maoist oriented students several years later.

Criticism of the university at this time included the rumblings of the emerging student power movement. A *Rag* article orienting new students to UT warned:

Welcome to the ranks of the disenchanteds. Later on you may discover that your professors are dull, your classes too large, and the omnipresent grading system simply stupid, and far from an exciting and challenging adventure, college is mainly just a drag...[in addition is] the university's failure to instill a sense of creative purpose and community (*Rag*, Jan. 30, 1967).

The writer went on to encourage students to challenge their professors' views, to dress as they wished, to work in radical politics and to make love on the steps of the Main Building.

In March, some faculty members began to oppose the more brutal goings-on of the Vietnam War. Twenty percent of the UT faculty signed a letter to President Johnson urging an end to the bombing of North Vietnam. Although this was a clear minority, it was the first time that UT faculty members had taken a collective public stance on this issue.

## **PROTEST AND COUNTER CULTURE**

The first conflict between SDS and the university occurred later in the spring of 1967 during Flipped-Out Week. This week (April 10-16) coincided with the national Spring Mobilization against the War in Viet Nam as well as Roundup Week - a raucous Texas tradition of spring celebration sponsored by the fraternities and sororities. SDS had planned a week of activities including a speech by the prominent black student activist Stokely Carmichael, poetry reading, a picnic, an anti-war march to the Capitol, and Gentle Thursday, a day when friendship and love were encouraged along with balloons, kissing, gentleness and mellow yellow (banana peels which were smoked for a mild hallucinogenic effect).

Gentle Thursday came under fire from the administration. UT coordinator for Student Activities Edwin Price claimed that the events were too ambiguous and that the university could not condone kissing, balloons, mellow yellow and en masse love. UT's hard-line position on the innocent Gentle Thursday activities earned the administration quite a bit of ridicule. SDS' Flipped Out Week proved to be a success in combining counter-cultural activities with politics; the activities attracted several thousands and would remain a major annual campus event for the remainder of the decade. Gary Thiher wrote in a *Rag* article about the university's reaction to Gentle Thursday:

It is important to note that the administration was so frightened by the prospect of Gentle Thursday that they wanted to be able to punish sds for anything that might occur on that day.... Bureaucrats warp the supple flesh of human beings into the processable form of 'student' in order to control them. Anything outside the 'proper channels and procedures' is outside the bureaucrat's control. (*Rag*, April 24, 1967: p. 10).

A few days after Stokely Carmichael's speech, the UT administration again came down on SDS - this time for collecting money at the speech to cover the speaker's travel costs. The alleged violation was sent to a committee for consideration.

In early April, *The Rag* announced that a radical slate of candidates was running for the Student Assembly (SA); the elections were scheduled for early May. Gary Thiher was running for president, Alice Embree for Vice President, Dick Reavis for an at large position, along with three other SDS affiliates. Thiher described their ticket as "an attempt to offer a real alternative to the usual student politicians who accept the powerlessness of the SA. The student officials must be prepared to go outside administrative channels and rally the student body to unite independently of the administration in order to gain bargaining power," (*Rag*, April 15, 1967). Perhaps the administration's harassment of SDS stemmed from a fear that growing discontent on the campus would lead to the election of the radical slate of SA candidates.

## **THE FREE SPEECH MOVEMENT EMERGES**

The week after Flipped Out Week, SDS distributed flyers about a Sunday meeting on campus to plan a Monday protest against Vice President Hubert Humphrey who would be speaking at the Capitol. On Saturday, Chancellor Ransom declared that the handbills had been distributed without approval and warned SDS not to hold the protest. On Sunday, over 200 students met on the West Mall to discuss the rally the following day. On Monday, about 150 students protested at the Capitol against the war in Vietnam. Later that day, UT withdrew recognition of SDS as a campus organization for "holding a rally (the planning meeting) without authorization." Arrests and disciplinary proceedings against the leaders of the group ensued. The University Freedom Movement emerged from all this. SDS had (with the help of the administration's overreaction) finally mobilized a large number of outraged students into action.

On a national level, the counter-culture and SDS had begun to attract more support. White students had been very much effected by involvement in, or knowledge of, the black student movement led by SNCC. During the summer of 1964, over 700 white student volunteers from the North and from the West Coast had congregated throughout Mississippi for Freedom Summer, teaching freedom schools for black children, registering blacks to vote, seeking support for the Freedom Democratic Party and demonstrating for the rights of blacks. The experience was a toughening one; the white volunteers had suffered hunger, arson, bomb threats and even murder. Yale University student Bruce Payne participated in Freedom Summer. He wrote:

Police harassment is a constant factor in all Mississippi civil rights work, and I went to the state fully expecting to be arrested. Instead, I was beaten up and shot at.... The war in Mississippi is a quiet war, a war that has been fought so long that those who live it and those who observe it can no longer distinguish it from peace.... The weapons of the civil rights movement and of SNCC in particular are the weapons of peace and decency...[with which] it is possible to end the awful quiet that surrounds the war in Mississippi [and]...to call the attention of Americans to the conflict and combat,...the explosions and the screaming...(Bruce Payne, *The Quiet War: The Activist*, Vol. 4, 1964).

In the fall of 1964, students at the University of California at Berkeley had become outraged over the school's limits on student political activity. The students, who were veterans of civil rights sit-ins, soon formed the Free Speech Movement (FSM). Thousands participated, and over 800 were arrested in December during an occupation of

the administration building. At this time the teaching assistants went on strike, paralyzing the university. The administration finally conceded to the FSM demands. The Berkeley students saw themselves in a battle with the liberal university administration. Mario Savio, one of the leaders of the FSM, likened the Berkeley struggle to the Mississippi struggle, "the same rights are at stake in both places - the right to participate as citizens in democratic society and to struggle against the same enemy." Savio identified the problem as a depersonalized, unresponsive bureaucracy. He wrote:

This free speech fight points out that students are permitted to talk all they want so long as their speech has no consequences... Society provides no challenge... it is simply no longer exciting. The most exciting thing going on in America today are movements to change America.... an important minority of men and women coming to the front today have shown that they will die rather than be standardized, replaceable and irrelevant, (Savio, "An End to History," *Humanity* December 1964).

In April 1965, SDS organized the first sizeable anti-war demonstration in Washington, D.C. About 25,000 participated. Later that year, at the November March on Washington, Carl Oglesby of SDS made a speech to the marchers linking the bloody ghetto riots, the U.S. intervention in the throughout the Third World, the repression of civil rights demonstrators and the large American military budget. Oglesby defined the problem as corporate liberalism and the answer as humanism and revolution (Cohen and Hale).

The white middle class students formed the core of the draft resistance movement. "As early as June 1965, Richard Steinke, a West Point graduate refused to board an aircraft taking him to a remote Vietnamese village. 'The Vietnamese war,' he said, 'is not worth a single American life. Steinke was court-martialed and dismissed from the service," (Zinn, 1973, p. 227). Others followed suit. Students began burning their draft cards on some campuses in the fall of 1965. By mid-1968, the government had prosecuted 3308 draft resisters; and by 1970, perhaps half of the draftees did not respond when they were called to serve in Viet Nam (ibid.).