Minutes before the Cornell judicial board decided to reprimand three of the six black students involved in an earlier protest, the first of eleven fire alarms in nine dorms and two halls awakened the campus. In between alarms, at around 2:00 a.m. on April 18, 1969, a frantic black student called the police to report a six-foot-high cross burning on her dorm’s front porch and the rock someone tossed through her front window. Black students were livid about the attacks on Wari, the black women’s cooperative. For the rest of the day, rumors swirled about what they were planning. Everyone knew the racial bubble, which had expanded with each new cohort of black students over the previous few years, was about to burst. They just did not know when or where.  

It happened early the next morning. Members of Cornell’s AAS seized Willard Straight Hall, the student hub of Cornell. By 7:00 a.m., AAS controlled the building, and white students in the Cornell SDS chapter were picketing the hall, chanting “the revolution has come... time to pick up the gun,” echoing the popular mantra of the Black Panther Party. Settling in, AAS members called their parents, studied for upcoming exams, slept after a night of planning and partying, and contacted friends and urged them to join the occupation. Calls were coming into the hall, too, primarily from Cornell’s vice provost, Keith Kennedy, who at around 9 a.m. made his way over to the hall along with Eugene Dymek, the head of campus security, and Cornell legal counsel Neal Stamp. They navigated through the SDS picket line. With a bullhorn, Dymek commanded the students to leave. During the exchange, black students heard a commotion from the rear of the hall. Everyone raced to the scene.

About ten white Delta Upsilon International Fraternity (DU) members had snuck into the Straight through unguarded rear windows to “liberate” the hall. As they reached the main lobby area and announced their intention to open the hall’s front doors, AAS members sprinted out of rooms and corridors and ambushed them. “We’re coming back! We’re going to burn it down next time!” screamed a DU brother, as his small army retreated through rear windows. “If you do, then we will fill y’all with lead,” replied a seething black student. During
the next few hours, while a stream of telephone reports about copycat invaders unnerved them, AAS members smuggled guns into the hall for protection. What was planned as a festive, peaceful, and brief building takeover became an extended, apprehensive, and vehement seizure. DU students pushed Cornell student opinion behind the AAS occupiers, who in the early afternoon issued four demands: nullify the three reprimands, reopen the question of housing, and conduct thorough investigations of the cross burning and the DU attack.

The next morning, April 20, the national media arrived and calls by reporters kept a constant tune in the information office. Everybody wanted to verify leaked reports of the guns. The minds of Cornell officials were elsewhere though. It was Sunday, and all they could think about was forcing those students out before classes resumed on Monday. AAS and Cornell officials reached an agreement that afternoon: amnesty, a faculty motion for nullification of the reprimands, twenty-four-hour protection of the occupiers and the AAS’s office, legal action against DU, a list of the invaders, and university assistance in securing legal help for AAS. During the final negotiations, students informed the administrators that they wanted to sign the agreement at their headquarters after a procession across campus. The administrators tried to disarm the black students. In the era of ostentatious self-defense, it proved impossible.

Eighty students lined up in military formation with women in the center, so they could be “guarded.” “Breeches open, no ammo!” AAS president Edward Whitfield shouted. When word sprinted through campus that they were coming out, reporters and photographers sprinted to the entrance. Within minutes, the two hundred outside became two thousand. The heavy, wooden, rambling doors flew open. SDS members safeguarding the entrance scattered to the sides. One
by one, at 4:10 p.m. on April 20, 1969, black students, brandishing their rifles, shotguns, knives, clubs, spears, and expressions of seriousness, victory, fear, and wonder, trotted out of the dark Gothic structure into a sea of bright cameras that latched onto their seventeen rifles and shotguns like leeches. “Oh, my God, look at those goddamned guns!” shouted Steve Starr, an Associated Press photographer, before snapping “The Picture,” a Pulitzer Prize winner in 1970.

When the procession crossed the large porch of the building, SDS members raised clenched fists and cheered, while hundreds of onlookers watched, stunned into silence. They marched across the rolling Arts Quadrangle, over a gorge, and across a bridge to 320 Wait Avenue—the home of black students. People in cars and on foot abruptly stopped as the marchers approached, intoxicated with shots of amazement, confusion, and anger. When they reached the house, most of the students congregated on the porch. Riflemen took strategic positions on the steep lawn and steps, staring viciously at onlookers and reporters.

After hammering out some final details, Whitfield read the signed agreement to the press. When he finished, it was Eric Evans’s turn. He pulled out a prepared statement, fixed his glasses, and faced the reporters. With his bandoliers crossing his chest and waist, his shotgun cradled in his left hand, and dozens of armed black students scattered on the lawn surrounding him, he proclaimed, “We only leave now with the understanding that the University will move fairly to carry out its part of the agreement that was reached. Failure on the part of the University to do so may force us to again confront the University in some manner.”

The next evening, still reeling over the spectacle of guns, the Cornell faculty refused to sanction the “coerced” agreement. Many students rallied around the AAS, who lashed out with incendiary threats toward the professors. Several campus groups were armed or arming. There was talk about taking another building. With excruciating pressure coming from students, and the specter of police and student violence, the faculty reversed its earlier decision two days later, while also giving students more power and establishing an autonomous Black Studies department.

The Monday morning after students exited the building, “The Picture” appeared on front pages around the nation. Although guns had been used by previous groups of black campus activists, it had never been displayed so publicly. State and federal politicians censured the AAS. Several Cornell professors resigned in protest, including Thomas Sowell, one of the college’s few black faculty, saying he could not be a part of a college that was so “interested in its image—anything to keep the black students happy.” The Chicago Defender characterized it as the most “frightful and damnable” demonstration of the year. Syracuse’s daily newspaper worried that Cornell “provided the green light for similar groups on other campuses.” The New York Times amazingly compared the AAS to the “jackbooted students” of Hitler’s Germany.

* * *

Black students at Cornell had to withstand opposition and repression seemingly coming from everywhere. The black and white press, African American
professors and leaders, white administrators, students, faculty, politicians, campus judiciary, and security personnel all clamped down at some point on black campus activism at Cornell in the spring of 1969. Opposition and repression generated the protest in April 1969, and opposition and repression doggedly stalked the protest.

Black campus activists around the nation also had to face criminal courts, arrests, suspensions, expulsions, and police brutality during their effort to racially reconstitute higher education. White, Latino/a, Chicano/a, Asian, and Native American supporters and spectators were sometimes arrested, expelled, and brutalized by police seeking to end a black student protest. The storm of student activism that forever racially transformed the ideals of the academy had to endure a storm of opposition and repression that forever politically and culturally transformed the activists and established the academy as a policed state. Tens of thousands of students were rebuked, derided, suspended, expelled, harassed, beaten, arrested, jailed, injured, or killed in their determined effort (or as bystanders of the struggle) to change the racial contours of higher education. Many put their collegiate lives on the line and lost or nearly lost them. Some put their actual lives on the line and lost or nearly lost them. At the same time, though, black campus activists fought stridently against the opposition and repression alongside their fight to modify the academy. Thus, their activism persisted on two fronts—offensive protests to erect novel measures to diversify higher education and defensive protests against the reaction their activism produced. No depiction of the movement is complete without a discussion of this all-important rearguard, and the trauma and brutality black campus activists suffered, the way they sacrificed, the way they gave their lives to the struggle.

* * *

Early in the movement, HBCU students faced the bulk of the repression and opposition. For instance, one of the first black campus protests to become national news was headlined by what would become a familiar occurrence during the movement—brutality by Mississippi state troopers, many of whom, like other troopers and policemen across the South, were suspected KKK members. Troopers threw heaps of tear gas at one thousand protesting students and community members at Alcorn State in April 1966, and clubbed them with nightsticks and rifle butts. “Brutality! Brutality! Brutality!” a woman shouted at one point. The shout would reign throughout the BCM.4

It was particularly deafening in 1967, when students, engaged by an act of police harassment or brutality, rioted or battled it out with the police on or near at least three HBCUs, including a four-day urban rebellion in Nashville, a skirmish at Jackson State (where community activist Benjamin Brown, a 21-year-old bystander was killed), and an hour-long clash at Central State. At Texas Southern, after a three-hour stalemate with student snipers that lasted into the early morning of May 17, the police fired more than two thousand shots into the dormitory with rifles and carbines. After forty minutes of gunfire, which wounded at least one student, the police officers stormed the dormitory. One officer was shot and
killed and two others were wounded during the swarm. The officers then ripped apart the dorm, hospitalized several students, and found three guns. With guns pointed at their backs, almost five hundred students were compelled to lie face down on the cold, wet ground before being arrested. In the morning, resentment resonated from the student body. “What can you expect?” one student told reporters. “To them we’re just apes.” Another indignantly said, “I’m sorry there wasn’t but one of them killed.” In June, the NAACP defended and got the charges dropped for the “TSU Five”—Trazawell Franklin Jr., 20, Floyd Nichols, 25, Charles Freeman, 18, Douglas Wayne Waller, 21, and John Parker, 20—who had been charged with first-degree murder and assault to murder, despite evidence of friendly fire. As it had throughout the LBSM, the NAACP came to the legal aid of black student activists, expelled or charged at schools such as Bluefield State (WV).5

Critics rebuked the student violence in 1967. The ACLU condemned activists for encroaching on the academic freedom of nonparticipants. The Pittsburg Courier editorialized in June 1967, “No amount of demonstration can take the place of good sound academic performance.” Meanwhile, black campus activists at HWCUs were not immune. The NAACP executive director Roy Wilkins began his sequence of criticism in May 1967 upon hearing about the organizing of BSUs, calling it self-segregation and “puzzling, indeed.”6

Throughout the movement, white students and faculty used similar language to censure BSUs as segregationist or isolationist and halted (or questioned) the founding of BSUs at numerous institutions, including Morningside-C (IA) and Boise State (ID). A campus newspaper editorial in May 1967 told the newly organized Trinity-C (CT) Association of Negroes to beware of “establishing an atmosphere of group separateness and confrontation.” After the Cornell AAS formed that spring, one professor said, “There are many people here…who felt they had been fighting for integration so long, and they just couldn’t turn themselves around that fast.” Often these nascent BSUs produced even more controversy when they barred whites from speeches by black power activists, such as when Muhammad Ali spoke to only black students at UPENN on October 31, 1967. The Daily Pennsylvania labeled the white bar “flagrantly totalitarian behavior” and compared the Society of African and Afro-American Students (SAAS) to Nazis. “Equating Black societies in America with Nazism is a poorly constructed analogy,” SAAS chairman pro tempore Billy Riley responded, “because the Nazis were oppressors, and we as Blacks are the oppressed.”7

More often, BSUs organized two events for speakers: a publicized, open, formal speech to an interracial audience, and a clandestine, closed, informal discussion with black students. Opponents rebuked these closed meetings too, as they did any affair that prohibited whites (or was open, but clearly designed for blacks). Sometimes white students and faculty forced their way into these meetings. In September 1968, two Tulane-U (New Orleans) professors and twenty students staged a “reverse sit-in” of a black first-year orientation facilitated by the Afro-American Congress.8

Black nationalism and black power faced critiques as well, even from black students. To rebut Primus J. Mootry’s piece at Chicago State declaring “we are
Afro-Americans,” Chuck Riley claimed “this recently popularized term is a clever but inaccurate substitute for Negro,” which “comes originally from Latin, a language used a couple thousand years ago.” To Riley, “soul brother” and “black” were also “mismomers.” Black and white students at HWCUs debated black power in newspapers in the early years of the movement. In November 1967, for instance, Madelyn Clark at Wilson, a women’s LAC in Pennsylvania, declared her support for “black unity, identity, pride, and growth.” Within a week, a “Wasp student” responded, “After having accepted the Negro as a ‘thinking, creative HUMAN,’ I have not been accepted by him.” Many HBCU presidents and professors tried to distance themselves from black power. Spelman president Albert E. Manley, who gave a series of anti-black-power lectures in the fall of 1966, reasoned that “radical exponents of black power” were attempting “to substitute one form of racism for another.”

In effect, the fists of reaction lodged at black campus activists initially stemmed from their ideology and organizing. Some blacks were “puzzled” by this rejoinder from white students who had isolated and alienated them. On quite a few campuses, when BSUs did not bar whites, they did not come. When BSUs barred whites, they were critiqued. Often, these detractors conflated segregation, an involuntary domineering relationship, with separation, a voluntary act of solidarity. Black campus activists sometimes erringly used this language, undercutting their nationalistic arguments.

* * *

1970s were seemingly conflated with HBCUs, having spent so much time on those campuses. In late October 1967, five hundred National Guardsmen descended onto a protest-ridden Grambling State (LA) campus, and twenty-nine students were dismissed—crippling the demonstrations and boycott. Guardsmen arrived in Orangeburg, South Carolina, after SC State students, embroiled in a battle to desegregate a nearby bowling alley, rioted and battled police on February 5, 1968. By February 8, roadblocks had been set up surrounding SC State, and students were urged not to leave. That night, students built a huge bonfire on campus, separating them and a massive line of hundreds of guardsmen, state troopers, and police officers. As Henry Smith, a tall sophomore, standing in front of the crowd attempted to put something into the fire, the officers began shooting for an unknown reason. Smith spun and crumbled to the ground. When the officers finally stopped shooting, three students—Smith and Samuel Hammond, both SC State students, and Delano Middleton, a local high school student—were dead and at least thirty-four were wounded, mostly in their backs. As when officers killed students at Jackson State in May 1970 and at Southern-U in November 1972, both covered in Chapter 5, upon hearing of the “Orangeburg Massacre,” African Americans were furious. The presidents of six HBCUs in Atlanta wrote a letter to President Johnson, Attorney General Ramsey Clark, state governors, and law enforcement agencies urging them “to stop these invasions of college and university campuses by the American version of storm
troopers.” It did not stop. Two weeks after the Orangeburg Massacre, Mississippi police wounded six students at Alcorn State during a protest. Even though hundreds of students were jailed for nonviolent activism, the “storm troopers” in Mississippi and South Carolina did not have to pay for the killing and wounding of the students in criminal or civil court.  

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On April 7, 1968, thirty-five members of Colgate’s ABC occupied the Sigma Nu fraternity house for seven hours after residents shot at a black student. Still mourning the death of King, they threatened to “burn” the house “down,” until the president agreed to close the fraternity house and investigate the shooting. It was just one of numerous occasions on which black campus activists faced harassment. A few nights after a black student protest at Bradley-U (IL), a DU member spit on Renee Grant as he drove by her in early May 1969. Not long after, all three hundred BSA members descended on the DU house “ready to burn it down.” The perpetrator hid for two days, until he mustered up enough courage and swallowed enough pride to apologize to Grant. In late April 1968, reports of an Ohio State bus driver’s mistreatment of two black women compelled seventy-five allegedly armed black students to hold various officials and secretaries in the administration building hostage for eight hours. Within a year, thirty-four protesters were each indicted on eleven felonies and one misdemeanor, including five counts of unlawful detention and conspiracy to unlawfully detain. It marked one of the most serious sets of charges ever filed against a group of student protesters—what Julian Bond called “an old Southern practice—lynching.” As in the BPM more generally, many male black campus activists thought their masculinity rested on whether they defended “their women” from white racism. Harrasing a black woman became one of the quickest ways to arouse black male campus activism.  

Some black leaders were particularly loud in their condemnation of the BCM in the summer of 1968. Benjamin E. Mays, for one, rebuked black dorms, Black Studies, and demands for more black faculty as “working against Negro colleges” because they “would take away the best professors” and students. “I hope black students will ponder this.” Black students did not have much time to ponder this. They were bombarded by the strengthening recoil from educators, newspapers, and politicians who were passing measures to curb their activism. As part of the now well-studied Counter-Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO), FBI director J. Edgar Hoover dispatched a message in 1970 to his staff. “Increased campus disorders involving black students pose a definite threat to the nation’s stability and security and indicate need for increase in both quality and quantity of intelligence information.” Active BSUs were investigated by the FBI, and the FBI kept a running list of prominent activists. Organizational, personal, and ideological conflicts within BSUs were exacerbated by the FBI. It sent forged letters to endanger BSU affairs and manipulated the press. The Bureau (as well as local and state police) recruited, employed, and deployed an army of spies (students and college employees) that collected data on student groups or thwarted their
activities. A mole at Widener-U (PA) reported to the FBI that BSU members were “not engaged in any militant type of activity on campus.” Administrators also had their spies and trackers. “Mary” reported on a black student dance attended by officers from area ABCs to the U-Missouri-St. Louis chancellor in September 1968. CSU Fresno officials apparently planted plainclothes officers on campus to follow black and Chicano activists in the spring of 1969.13

BSUs officers received hate mail and their dorm rooms were sometimes ransacked, which occurred at Luther, an Iowa LAC, in March 1969. Phillita Carney, after becoming the U-Utah’s first black homecoming queen in October 1971, was happy “to see the shock on those sorority bitches’ faces” and termed it an “opening for minorities.” The story (and Carney’s vulgar words) went national. “Better make that black bastard, bitch, take back what she said or she will be crowned, but not a QUEEN of any Homecoming event, we can assure you of that,” stammered a white Chicagoan in one of many nasty letters mailed to the university. A “loyal Tennessee fan” teased, “This evidently was a tree climbing contest. This is the only possible way it could win” (italics added).14

In a letter addressed “to the NIGGERS,” the “silent majority of Cal State Long Beach and the surrounding cities” expressed, “if this verbal harassment of white people does not stop, the B.S.U . . . will be exterminated.” Sometimes the foes of the BSUs acted on their violent declarations. Three white students attacked Gene Locke at U-Houston on the morning of March 17, 1969. In retaliation, several students rampaged through campus and were later charged for the property damage. With mass opposition, charges against the UH Fourteen were eventually dropped (or they pled out). In revenge of five white students jumping a black male student in the presence of university police, about 250 Northern Illinois students went on a rock-throwing, window-breaking charge through campus on March 22, 1969. All of DeKalb’s available policemen were brought in to restore order. In a statement, the black students declared, “The black student body wishes to serve notice . . . it will not tolerate or let go unnoticed any acts of violence committed on black people.”15

After fielding threatening phone calls and dodging a bullet the week before, BSU vice president Paul Whiteurs was shot in the arm at U-South Alabama on March 9, 1971. “In my life, I have never had time to be afraid,” Whiteurs avowed after the unsolved shooting. “My philosophy is like many people—if you have nothing worth dying for then you are already dead.” Law enforcement officers also continuously harassed BSU leaders with some of the force they used to abuse black power figures off campus. According to an undated BSU flyer, a local assistant district attorney declared, “We are going to get those black students” at UC Santa Barbara.16

Similarly, the day before William Garrett of the Lawrence Police Department shot and killed Rick “Tiger” Dowdell, 19, on July 16, 1970, Garrett allegedly told his brother he was going to “get one of you Dowdells.” Dowdell, a U-Kansas rising sophomore, walked out of the Afro-House, the BSU’s new black cultural center, and soon after Garrett was chasing him in his car and then down an alley, where he discharged the fatal shot. In the small college town of Lawrence, the Dowdell black power activists were respected by the activist community and despised by
the policing community, leading to many altercations. Rick Dowdell entered the struggle as a student activist at Lawrence High, staging a walkout there in September 1968 (around the time the KU-BSU developed). Paralleling the BCM, a similar movement emerged in high schools across America, in which many black campus activists received their first taste of black power. Garrett claimed Dowdell shot first, while activists dubbed it a racist murder and gave the student activist the funeral of a martyr (just as students did for the other twelve youths killed during the BCM). The BSU vowed that the exonerated Garrett “shall reap what he has sown,” and the death sparked a weeklong student uprising that eventually led to the police killing of a white KU student, Harry Nicholas “Nick” Rice, and the wounding of a black chemistry graduate student, Merton R. Olds. Unlike those at Orangeburg, Kent State, and Jackson State, the Lawrence tragedies flew under the national radar.17

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When black campus activists were not being harassed, injured, or killed, they were being expelled and arrested, as at UW Oshkosh in late November 1968. For ransacking the president’s office, nearly the entire black enrollment (about ninety students) was arrested and expelled in one of the largest mass expulsions of the movement at an HWCU, touching off several unsuccessful student protests for their reinstatement. Instead of using their hands to damage a building, students at Bluefield State in West Virginia let a bomb do the damage that month, leading to a few arrests.18

Arrests were often clamored for by white community members and alumni. When administrators showed restraint, as did Washington-U chancellor Thomas H. Eliot, who ended a ten-day sit-in in December 1968 with a peaceful agreement, they usually received a stack of fuming letters. “Put your foot down,” ordered one commenter from his message. C. L. Husbands of Littleton, Colorado, declared the university was “no longer...worthy of the name Washington” due to its “ignoble surrender to the forces of riot and anarchy.” An alumnus in St. Louis condemned Eliot’s “outrageous concessions to inarticulate and illiterate Negroes.”19

These writers probably desired someone like SF State president S. I. Hayakawa, a Japanese American semanticist, who took over for the more liberal Robert Smith in late 1968 as the embattled college’s third president that year. Hayakawa instituted new rules for the college, including the banning of amplification equipment and noon rallies. Strikers ignored the rules on December 2, 1968. When Hayakawa heard the usual early morning strike refrains amplified from a sound truck, he stormed out of his office with mimeographed copies of his “emergency regulations,” followed by police, photographers, and reporters. He leaped onto the top of the truck, tried unsuccessfully to snatch the microphone out of the white students’ hands, then he looked around madly until he saw the wires of the amplifier. He grabbed at them until the sound stopped. Some students tried to remove Hayakawa. “Don’t touch me, I’m the President of this college!” A crowd hurriedly gathered to watch their odd new president before the police arrived.
and hustled him back to his office. The national media caught and reported the entire scene. With that single spontaneous act, Hayakawa became the symbol of presidential sturdiness, the most popular reactionary president of his day, who projected himself as a pillar that could not be pushed or swayed by the BCM. BSU leader Jerry Varnado would later say, “He would never have dared to do that to us. We would have trampled all over him.”

The next day—December 3, 1968—turned out to be even worse at SF State. On Bloody Tuesday, as it has been designated, the police had a new directive—prevent any large congregation on campus. In the morning, officers arrested and clubbed fifty picketers and chased one of them into the cafeteria, where they smashed more students. A white male student was hauled out with blood streaming from his face. When an enraged crowd mobilized at the administration building upon hearing about the cafeteria brutality, the police scattered and clubbed them too. After the regular noon rally, students marched on the Behavioral Science building. Hundreds of police officers stopped their advance with batons, impelling a colossal battle at the center of campus. Students used pieces of campus furniture as weapons. Over the campus loudspeaker, Hayakawa ordered students to disperse. “If some of you want to make trouble, stay right there. The police will see that you get it.” Hayakawa was not lying. Four officers jumped Don McAllister, a black student, creating a gash that bled profusely and almost killed him. Collegians caught so savagely by police clubs that they could not get up were thrown into paddy wagons. Two ambulances made runs to the hospital. At an afternoon press conference, after the ferocious melee, Hayakawa praised the police for their “restraint and professionalism” and declared, “This has been the most exciting day of my life since my tenth birthday, when I rode on a roller coaster for the first time!” The press stood stunned. Conservatives applauded. Sore strikers were enraged. Hayakawa’s quote symbolized the unapologetic militarism of some presidents in 1968.

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Weeks later, during a twenty-four-hour takeover of the U-Minnesota administration building in January 1969, activists turned a fire house on counterdemonstrators who had brandished white supremacist signs and shouted epithets such as “go home and take a bath.” White students ridiculed protesters or tried to end protests at UC Santa Barbara in October 1968 and at UW Madison in February 1969. Some of those counterdemonstrators at UW Madison were members of the right-wing Young Americans for Freedom (YAF) and wore “H” armbands to identify with Hayakawa, a former student. YAF members and conservative students in other groups, such as the Young Republicans and the John Birch Society, tried to slow the BCM at several other institutions, including CSU Stanislaus and Marquette in Milwaukee. At Delta State (MS), white students cheered and sang “Dixie” on March 10, 1969, when the police arrived to arrest rebelling campus activists.

Hayakawa probably cheered on January 23, 1969. During an illegal campus rally, police arrested more than four hundred SF State strikers, including Nathan
Hare and almost the entire leadership of the BSU and its allying groups, and charged them with at least three misdemeanors. Police used every paddy wagon in the city for the biggest single arrest in San Francisco history. Meanwhile, threats from the BCM detractors rose in volume in early 1969. The House Special Education Subcommittee held hearings on student unrest in February. Roy Wilkins threatened to sue institutions that established separate dorms or “autonomous racial schools within colleges and universities”—ironic, since local, more left-wing NAACP chapters were defending black campus activists. For CORE’s Roy Innis, Wilkin’s latest reproach became “the last straw. If Wilkins can use funds supposedly earmarked for black people to fight against those same people, then CORE will commit its resources to defend and safeguard the students in their demands.”

Nathan Hare continued Innis’s assault on Wilkins in Newsweek in February 1969. As part of a larger spread on the “Black mood on campus,” Hare made “the case for separatism,” and Wilkins presented “the case against separatism.” In the “Black Perspective,” Hare wrote that he was appalled by “the sneaky way in which critics like Roy Wilkins accuse us of ‘separatism.’” He added, somewhat accurately, “Our cries for more black professors and black students have padded white colleges with more blacks in two years than decades of whimpering for ‘integration’ ever did.” Wilkins sympathized “with the frustration and anger of today’s black students.” But “in demanding black Jim Crow studies…and exclusively black dormitories or wings of dormitories, they are opening the door to a dungeon.”

Shortly after black students at Duke opened the door and walked out of their barricaded building on February 13, 1969, hundreds of mostly white supporters and spectators started to disperse. To accelerate them, police drove cars through them, driving students into a frenzy. The students banged on the cars and tried to set them afire. Officers launched a barrage of tear gas, which ignited a social fire on campus, with police clubs fanning the flames. Students defended themselves. One black student even lashed at the police with a chain. When the police finally retreated into the administration building (and ultimately left the campus), the students numbered three thousand. Forty-five people, including two officers, needed medical treatment. Mostly white students were also brutalized a week later at UC Berkeley during the notorious strike for Ethnic Studies.

By late February and early March 1969, the oppositional rhetoric had reached a fevered pitch. There were the campus critiques. Instituting the demands would be “like levitating the University Tower 30 feet off the ground,” a dean at U-Texas at Austin told students. After the BSA issued its demands, Eastern Michigan professors mockingly circulated eleven similar demands “for the Welsh Minority on this campus.” (In 1968, white students wrote similar lists at William Penn in Iowa and UW Oshkosh). President Nixon endorsed a tough stand against disrupters, and so did many professors and the majority of Americans. NBC News’ Chet Huntley called the ferment for Black Studies departments another “college
fad” that he hoped did not get out of hand. Bayard Rustin, the executive director of the A. Phillip Randolph Institute, condemned the “separatist demands” of the struggle. The National Governors’ Conference passed a resolution pledging to keep colleges open and safe. In the name of academic freedom, or more appropriately, academic power, faculty unrelentingly slammed protesters “who would subordinate intellectual freedom to political ends,” as Cornell professors wrote in March 1969. 25

On March 5, 1969, HEW warned all colleges and universities receiving federal assistance not to institute separate Black Studies programs, “separate housing,” or “separate social activity” spaces that excluded white students. In particular, in late February, HEW told thirteen private institutions, including Ohio’s Antioch, that they could be violating the Civil Rights Act of 1964. HEW gave Antioch president James P. Dixon two weeks to explain how its Afro-American Studies Institute for black students was not against the law. A literal interpretation of the Civil Rights Act in this “deliberate and crucial question” might deny black students rights that white students long have had at Antioch, President Dixon wrote back to HEW. In most cases, activists did not demand total white exclusion as much as white exclusion from control of their black programs. Therefore, they did tend to believe in separate but equal power relations, access, and organizing ability.

This interaction between HEW and Antioch was leaked to the press. “In defending the ‘Crow-Jim’ policy, Dr. Dixon gave HEW the greatest line of double talk I have ever read,” stated a Chicago Defender columnist. Psychologist Kenneth B. Clark resigned from his trusteeship at Antioch. “It is whites who need a black studies program most of all,” he said, echoing a view of white suasionists, who mildly supported Black Studies. Liberals, like the Antioch president, had to satisfy the wishes of black campus activists and reactionary conservatives. They castigated African American students for forcing them into this untenable position, saying their protests prompted the conservative reaction that curtailed their efforts at reform. Paradoxically, some liberal presidents did not enact reforms until protests took place. 26

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On April 9, 1969, seven Southern-U New Orleans students walked to the flag pole with their Pan-African flag and a sizeable police force watching. They opened up their flag, reported its meaning, read their demands, pulled down the American flag, and raised their Pan-African flag in a seamless series of motions and words. When it was lifted, the police had to fight through a crowd of two hundred observers and supporters to make twenty arrests. Black students, in the late spring of 1969, were also arrested at Memphis State (109), South Carolina’s Voorhees-C (25), Howard (21), Brooklyn’s Pratt (11), and Alabama State (365), where they were hauled away like cargo in three trucks for demonstrating at the state capitol for the termination of their president. 27

When not fighting white policemen, black campus activists were usually fighting white students, which occurred at City College of NY when it reopened
on May 6, 1969, after a two-week takeover by black and Puerto Rican students. Students also brawled at Queens-C (NY) in early May. As black and Puerto Rican students ran from building to building smashing windows, jeering white students chased them, shouting “animals,” “criminals,” and “get back to the jungle.” While the NYPD mobilized a small army of five hundred in six busses, seven paddy wagons, and a dozen patrol cars, more than one hundred angry whites converged on twenty black students. Outnumbered, the black students stood their ground. Punches and rocks were thrown until security guards closed a chain-link fence between the groups.  

In the late spring of 1969, Bayard Rustin, once again deriding the movement, implored college officials to “stop capitulating to the stupid demands of Negro students” and “see that they get the remedial training that they need.” At a two-day law institute sponsored by the NAACP in May 1969, Columbia’s Leon Denmark was not at all surprised at Rustin’s criticism. “Given his hookups and where he gets his money, he can’t do anything else but come out against black student demands.” Charles Duncan from Cheyney could not understand why Rustin had been calling them stupid. “We’re the most educated black generation” this nation has had, he said. Activists in particular were usually the smartest students, as the US commissioner of education James E. Allen Jr. announced in late May.  

Down south, after police drove out building occupiers (eight of whom were expelled) at U-Louisville in early May, Kentucky governor Louis B. Nunn told reporters, “I’m damned sick and tired of this kind of thing.” The tactic of taking over a building had steadily lost its effectiveness, as more presidents used court orders and the police to force out students they refashioned as “militants.” Apparently, the words of President Nixon in late April, who said “it is time for the faculties, board of trustees and school administrators to have the backbone to stand up against this kind of situation,” his strongest public comments on to date, had been fully digested.  

The backbone produced what some administrators feared—a tragedy. The campus that accelerated the LBSM early in the decade by patterning nonviolent protests concluded the decade with violence. Under the cover of nighttime, in late May 1969, policemen and National Guardsmen descended on a protest-imbued NC A&T campus only to be met by sniper fire from a dormitory. The officers fired back. “It’s just like guerillas in Vietnam,” said Greensboro mayor Jack Elam. The battle scene grew more intense when activists found 20-year-old honor student Willie Grimes dead in a clump of bushes with a gunshot wound in the back of his head. Students believed the police had executed him. The next day, May 24, students got their revenge. Seven police officers were shot by snipers, the worst critically injured in the back and lung by a .45-caliber slug. A student was shot that day, too, in the groin. On the third day of the shoot-out, Police Major E. R. Wynn resolved to end it. He declared a state of emergency and told the students they had five minutes to “get out of here.” The students answered with a spatter of gunfire, wounding a sergeant. Guardsmen returned fire, while a plane and helicopter flew low over the dorm and executed one of the government’s new counterinsurgency techniques, tried for the first time three
days earlier on white campus activists at UC Berkeley. The plane and helicopter unleashed swirling clouds of tear gas into the dorms. Coughing and choking, the students spilled out like bugs gassed out of cracks. The police swept the building and found nine rifles, and arrested two hundred students. Soon after, the students were all set free when the police could not compel any of them to disclose the snipers, ending one of the most horrifying demonstrations waged at a college in the nation’s history.\footnote{31}

Not surprisingly after all of this violence, many of the remarks from leaders that summer were unfavorable. Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall said, “Many of us are not going to let [the nation] go down the drain and stand for anarchy, which is anarchy, which is anarchy.” Andrew F. Brimmer, the sole black member of the Federal Reserve Board, suggested focusing on traditional courses, rather than advocating for Black Studies, if students wanted a future career. Harvard government professor Martin Kilson said at the annual NAACP convention that summer of 1969 that he was “opposed to proposals to make Afro-American studies into a platform for a particular ideological group.” In early September, Kilson described Black Studies as “a frightful experience of strangeness and alienation,” sordidly and indirectly positing that the overwhelming white curriculum did not (or rather should not) alienate. Another Ivy League black professor, Arthur Lewis, called Black Studies a “folly of the highest order,” because “employers will not hire the students who emerge from this process, and their usefulness even in black neighborhoods will be minimal.”\footnote{32}

White opponents used these ideas from ladder altruists to legitimate their opposition on their campuses and to remove the cloak of racism from their critiques. Citing Lewis, Rustin, and Brimmer, Robert H. Mills, a white accounting professor, asserted in September 1969 that “under no condition should Lehigh establish” a Black Studies major, suggesting it will not prepare African Americans to live in an integrated society. Responding to a black student request for more black history courses, U-Missouri-St. Louis chancellor Glen R. Driscoll explained his personal bias against a “proliferation of Afro-American courses… I am impressed that American development is the result of an intertwining and interacting of many streams, and I would prefer that each course reflect this fact.” As the Black Studies idea soared from desegregation of existing courses, to courses, to interdepartmental programs, to autonomous departments, to colleges, to a unique discipline, the grander the white (and to a certain extent black) opposition. Black students on many occasions were forced to settle for new courses in interdepartmental programs—a massive nonstructural transformation of many curriculums, which before the movement had zero Black Studies courses.\footnote{33}

BCCs, the other major demand of BSUs, were opposed too, though with less intensity than Black Studies. BCCs were designated as a form of segregation. More than two hundred students at Morningside-C (IA) signed an oppositional petition in early 1970. In November 1968, an anonymous St. Cloud State (MN) student asserted that the center indicated “reverse discrimination.” “As they slink into their black sanctuary… they alienate all but a few well-chosen whites,” another anonymous student proclaimed at St. Olaf (MN), as if white groups were not doing the same. “The door is open, from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m., to us and our
blackness,” the Cultural Union for Black Expression (CUBE) responded. The vast majority of BSUs kept their BCCs open to all members of the campus community, placing the onus on white students to keep them interracial. Usually, they did not.  

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While black leaders and academics censured the BCM in the summer of 1969, Congress, spurred by their inflamed constituents, continued writing and passing laws to slow the campus activism of all races. The laws regulated student codes of conduct, revoked funds from protesters, legalized specific tactics (such as building takeovers), and empowered governors and presidents to declare a state of emergency if students threatened campus property (Oregon) and to proclaim “closed periods,” barring people from setting foot on university property (Wisconsin). Campus officers seemed to be preparing for war that summer. At the annual convention of College and University Security Directors, some 180 campus law officials sought the latest riot-control equipment. They advocated a hard hand to squash protests. That is “the only way to handle disruptions,” said Wayne O. Littrell, the association’s president. “This view is shared by other security directors, but unfortunately not by many administrators,” who realized, like many police departments that summer, that police brutality invigorated student activism.  

Administrators greeted the incoming class in the fall of 1969 with stern warnings against disruption, as they would for the next few years. Many colleges adopted or revised their disciplinary codes and circulated them widely for the first time. Colleges increased their police forces, increases that continued in the early 1970s. For example, Temple-U formed its own 125-man security force after previously relying on an outside detective agency, and Ohio State doubled and Southern Illinois almost quadrupled its number of officers, as academia became a policed space. Universities let it be known that they would seek injunctions against protests. Ohio-U president Claude R. Sowle informed students in the early fall of 1969 that “unlawful force is not an acceptable substitute for reason. It must be met with lawful force—promptly and without hesitation.” Administrators received training during the summer of 1970 on how to deal with protests. The US Army ran one of the programs.  

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In the fall of 1969, many black campus activists could not return to their institutions. Some protesters left because their financial aid was cut off as a punishment for their activism. The courts and prisons further deprived the BCM that summer and fall, as hundreds of black students faced criminal charges and were jailed, including students at U-Minnesota and SF State. For their role in seizing the administration building in November 1968, ten women and fourteen men at CSU Northridge went on trial in September 1969. They faced seventy-five felony counts of “willfully, unlawfully, feloniously and knowingly” conspiring
to commit kidnapping, robbery, false imprisonment, and burglary. In total, they were charged with 1,730 felonies—a record for the BCM. The NAACP retained a Los Angeles law firm to defend the students. The case received national exposure, since the government attempted conspiracy convictions for the first time, which, according to the students’ lawyers, “has significant ramifications for the entire nation. If the district attorney is successful in arguing that a conspiracy existed, the black protest movement is in serious difficulty.”

In January 1970, twenty students were convicted of conspiracy, kidnapping, and false imprisonment. In announcing his verdict, Judge Mark Brandler said, “We dare not and will not sanction or tolerate the use of force, violence, or other illegal acts to effect desired changes.” In effect, negotiating had not brought the desired changes and now effectual protesting became virtually illegal. Archie Chatman (the BSU leader) and Robert A. Lewis, both 22 years old, and 21-year-old Eddie Lee Dancer were sentenced from one to twenty-five years in state prison—the stiffest prison punishments for nonviolent campus activism in American history. Eight other students were assigned to the county jail for periods ranging from three months to a year, seven students were fined, one was placed on probation, and the final student had her charges dismissed. One of the students’ lawyers described the sentences as a “judicial lynching,” the Chicago Defender designated it as “an OUTRAGE.”  

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The major work of athletic activism that fall and spring of the 1969–1970 academic year occurred in the Western Athletic Conference (WAC). For suggesting they would boycott an upcoming game against BYU, which was affiliated with what the students deemed the racist Mormon church, U-Wyoming football coach Lloyd Eaton revoked the scholarships of fourteen black players. He kicked them off the team in October 1969, all the while ridiculing them, saying they now had to go on “Negro relief” or back “on the streets hustling.” Six of the athletes were starters on U-Wyoming’s undefeated and twelfth-ranked team. At a press conference a week after dismissing the “Black 14,” President Bill Carlson told reporters that football was more important than civil rights. With NAACP assistance, the Black 14 filed an unsuccessful civil suit against Coach Eaton and the University. Ten graduated from other colleges, and four played professional football.  

In the midst of the Black 14 affair, black students, demanding more well-paid black construction workers, shut down a construction site in December 1969, leading to campus disciplinary charges, to the delight of the New York Times. Thirty-six Harvard students did not report to the hearings and conducted their own “fact finding hearing” in January 1970. Several university officials were invited to defend themselves. None attended. LeRoy Boston of the New England Consulate of the Republic of New Africa served as judge and found Harvard negligent and racist.  

In February 1970, police arrested 896 Mississippi Valley State activists, the largest mass arrest in higher education history, 89 at Ole Miss, and 351 students at Bishop in Dallas. Mississippi Valley State president White did not file criminal
charges, but he did expel the students—close to a third of the student body—and required them to sign a statement pledging to not take part in protests in order to reenroll, a tactic also used at Tuskegee in April 1968 and throughout the LBSM. By late February 1970, only a few dozen had signed the pledge. One student leader announced, “Anyone [who] signs this should be enslaved.”

Sometimes the suppression came from parents, prompted by media coverage of protests or letters from administrators. On February 23, 1970, a dean of students at Pennsylvania’s Thiel-C sent a letter to the parents of black campus activists. “We are certain that you wish your child’s education to continue uninterrupted. Your advice and counsel to your child will be greatly appreciated.” In this case, the parents stood behind their daughters and sons, and were reportedly aggravated by the condescending letter. In other cases, parents were incensed when they learned that their kids were throwing away (or from the students’ perspective gaining) their education. On January 14, 1969, a mother heard that her child was in the occupied building at Brandeis-U outside of Boston. She raced to the campus, walked up to the hall, and pounded on the doors with her fists and umbrella. “Christopher Carombo, come out! Christopher Carombo, come out! I don’t believe in black power!” she screamed. A few moments later, a student hurried down the fire escape and ran into his mother’s wrath, and car, which quickly sped away.

During the 1970–1971 academic year, suspensions or expulsions of protesters led to campus activism and often police retaliation at Norfolk State (VA), Syracuse, U-Florida, and Hampton, where administrators suspended five activists, including SGA vice president Roxanne E. Sinclair. The “Hampton Five” freedom campaign compelled a 90 percent effective class boycott, and by early May the historic institution became a war zone. President Roy Hudson cancelled commencement and closed the campus because he “didn’t want to wait until someone was killed.”

Hudson had ample reason to think someone would be killed, as black youths were slain at Tuskegee, South Carolina State, NC A&T, Jackson State, U-Kansas, Pepperdine-U (CA), and Southern-U. At least thirteen youths (nine collegiate, three high schoolers, and one community activist) were killed by police during the BCM—thirteen tragedies on or near campuses that have largely receded from America’s memory. Absent from historical consciousness are the dozens of students injured by police bullets, the hundreds arrested and jailed, the thousands brutalized, suspended, expelled, and tracked by the intelligence community, and the millions who opposed the movement and endorsed these atrocities. Black egalitarian elites, liberals embracing their goals and disparaging their methods, conservatives hollering for their heads, professors clamoring for academic freedom to maintain academic white supremacy—it is remarkable black students were able to win so much, were able to change the racial constitution of higher education. Put simply, these baby boomers boomed with determination. It’s like what SF State BSU chairman Benny Stewart constantly told his members during their 134-day strike, “The only way a people can be defeated is when they lose their determination to fight.”