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Sophie C. Carter, University of Washington, undergraduate student, “Days of Decision: San Francisco’s 1960 House Un-American Activities Committee Protest as a Turning Point of the New Left”

Abstract: After the degradation of union power throughout the McCarthy era, a new politics took hold among young Americans, and its academic roots and appeal to young leftists established the university as the new institutional mediator for left-wing radicalism in the 1960s, allowing college students to promote antiwar, civil rights, and civil liberties campaigns both on and off campus. Years before the major events that are tied to the New Left in American collective memory, however, Bay Area college students’ protests against the House Un-American Activities Commission garnered national media attention for their perceived radicalism in the face of the federal government. Student protesters’ altercation with police at San Francisco City Hall in May of 1960 became a turning point at which the Old Left, New Left, and McCarthyism converged, providing valuable insight into the transition of broad leftist activism from union-based to direct action protest. Student protesters’ adaptation of the nonviolent tactics associated with the Civil Rights Movement prompted outrage from the public and the federal government, and students across the nation soon adopted not only their protest strategy, but also the structure of the student organizations that promoted the demonstration. These protests, the first of their kind and a major precedent for what would become the student New Left movement, problematize the university as the postwar institutional mediator for left-wing protest and radicalism, revealing the disparities and power relations between students, professors, and administrators in the pursuit of their respective political agendas.

Days of Decision:

San Francisco's 1960 House Un-American Activities Committee Protest as a Turning Point of  
the New Left

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## **Introduction**

The 1964 Free Speech Movement (FSM) established Berkeley's leading role in the New Left student movements of the 1960s and '70s, but its organizational and ideological precedents tend to be disregarded in analyses of student social movements. The FSM was not the spontaneous creation of a generation in the midst of a political awakening; rather, political awareness among Berkeley students had been evolving over the previous decade. The pressures of federal anticommunism and its manifestations at the university level had been mobilizing students to organize throughout the 1950s, forming student political groups that grew in opposition to increasingly restrictive university policies. The May 1960 demonstration at San Francisco City Hall reveals an earlier student activism situated on the precipice of what would become the New Left. These student activists' organizational structure, protest tactics, and principled goals not only reflect later developments like the FSM but also constitute the foundations upon which future New Left movements were built. Like the FSM, the City Hall protest developed from a tension between student political demands and the agenda of university administration, which was in the process of defining a new institutional and political identity for what Clark Kerr dubbed "the multiversity." Kerr, Berkeley's president from 1958 until 1967, played a decisive role in the trajectory of both protests, and his ambitions for the university as a uniquely American institution inform the conflict that arose between students and administration. This dynamic was central to the escalation of student protest, and it speaks to the complexities of using the university as an institutional support for student political activism.

Educational institutions faced unique pressures under zealous national anticommunist initiatives of the postwar era: the narrative of young people's susceptibility to communist

influence and accusations of subversive professors supposedly indoctrinating students both cast suspicion on universities in particular. Nationwide initiatives to root out “subversives” in education drew criticism for their infringement on civil liberties and academic freedom in the name of national security. Facing these suspicions and national anticommunist sentiment, the university was not a willing or natural support structure for left-wing activism, and its use as one was fraught with institutional conflict that shaped the way student activism materialized in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The case of San Francisco’s City Hall HUAC protests illustrates the growth of campus-based activism: the foundation of student political organizations, their proliferation, and the institutional obstacles that influenced their production and reproduction. This trajectory is pertinent to the broader historical debate over the trajectory of left-wing movements throughout the twentieth century, demonstrating the obstacles that shaped campus activism and the strengths and weaknesses that developed as a result. San Francisco’s series of student protests in May of 1960, the first of their kind and a major precedent for what would become the student New Left, problematize the university as the postwar institutional mediator for left-wing protest and radicalism, revealing the disparities and power relations between students, professors, and administrators in the pursuit of their respective political agendas.

### **“An American Brand of Radicalism”: Escalation of Student Political Engagement**

Berkeley’s earliest political student organizations were permitted to function on campus as long as they were non-partisan, the most prolific of these being SLATE.<sup>1</sup> SLATE’s horizontal structure required unanimous decision-making, accountability of representatives to a unified platform, and public neutrality on issues that were not agreed upon.<sup>2</sup> Critically, SLATE’s commitment to a relatively apolitical stance established greater collective power; preventing

factionalism not only discouraged expressions of radicalism that may have further alienated them from the administration, but cohesion also established students' strength in negotiations with university leadership.<sup>3</sup> The "big tent" strategy was a tactical approach to conform to the demands of the institution; however, this was quickly recognized and targeted by administrative regulations. Shortly after SLATE released its first newsletter in 1958, university administration prohibited its distribution on campus.<sup>4</sup> That was only the beginning: university administration followed up with numerous policies directed at curbing the student government's power, inciting further student resistance. This cycle of student action met by administration suppression generated an escalation of student acts of defiance, garnering attention and support from increasingly wider populations of students and faculty members. By late 1959, student activists and university administration's mutual hostility had established them as rivals.

### **San Francisco's 1960 House Un-American Activities Committee Protest: Facts of the Case**

SLATE's strategy to extend its espoused non-partisanship to the HUAC demonstration depended upon the explicit articulation of their objectives: supporting free speech and opposing both the Committee's exposure of suspected communist sympathizers and HUAC's existence as a symbol of judicial overreach.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, the demonstration was not inherently radical or even left-wing. However, upon the protesters' arrival, they found the Committee had implemented a system that became central to the escalation of events: Committee leaders had issued passes to prominent anti-communist Bay Area residents and members of organizations sympathetic to HUAC. Picketers who had awaited entrance to the hearing room were bypassed by cardholders and promptly turned away. The students' outrage at this exclusion incited a larger crowd of approximately two thousand to participate in demonstrations on Friday, May 13. Further

confrontation regarding the pass system on Friday morning led protesters to consult Sheriff Matthew Carberry, who reportedly assured them that new audience members would be allowed into the hearing room following the Committee's afternoon recess.<sup>6</sup> When Carberry failed to return after the recess, students were once again bypassed by cardholders, at which point arguments broke out between protesters and the police line guarding the hearing room entrance.

Although the details of the rapid escalation of events are disputed, a preponderance of sources suggest that, as students sang in disobedience of the police command to remain quiet, officers displayed their billy clubs and unravelled courthouse fire hoses, provoking uproar from protesters. Prosecutors later claimed that Berkeley student and SLATE member Robert Meisenbach then snatched an officer's baton, using it to club the officer over the head, thereby instigating the use of the fire hoses.<sup>7</sup> Submerging the marble staircase in a layer of water from the fire hoses and rushing the group, police proceeded to drag protesters down the steps by their clothes, limbs, and hair, while others slid uncontrollably down the stairs amidst the deluge. Those remaining on the upper landing sat in order to avoid falling or being dragged away, chanting "we shall not be moved" in defiance. The scene was immortalized on the cover of the *San Francisco Chronicle* the following morning, swiftly drawing national attention, with reactions ranging from outrage at the protesters to criticism of the Committee itself to charges of police brutality.<sup>8</sup> The overwhelming support for the protesters within the Bay Area, however, demonstrated increasing disapproval within communities HUAC upended, and the May 1960 hearings in San Francisco would be the last time the House Un-American Activities Committee ever travelled outside of Washington, DC.

### ***Operation Abolition & Operation Correction***

Bay Area students' controversial protest was met with an equally controversial reaction: shortly following the protest, the FBI produced the propaganda film *Operation Abolition: The Story of Communism in Action*, which presented itself as a documentary detailing the events of May 12–14, 1960.<sup>9</sup> The film's narrator avoids accusing students en masse of being communists or even communist sympathizers, instead categorizing student protesters as naive “dupes” of the Party, succumbing to their sophisticated subversive tactics.<sup>10</sup> By accusing the students of acting as unwitting “puppets” of communist agents, the film villainizes the students while placing ultimate blame on the “common enemy” and offering the students a means of redemption. This narrative was designed to promote public outrage, suppress further student protest, and reinforce the importance of HUAC to US national security. *Operation Abolition* centers the argument that communist agitators have targeted and will continue to target young adults, both as soldiers in a war of protest against the American government and as minds in a war of information. In these ways, *Operation Abolition* lends itself not only to initiatives to curb freedom of expression but also to accusations of youth indoctrination, which the film argues in its conclusion is the Communist Party's greatest threat. Having fuelled a “pattern of communist revolution and insurrection throughout the world,” the Communist Party has now “chosen the minds of our youth as the number one area for their insidious attack.”<sup>11</sup> This rhetoric built upon the same fear that young people were susceptible to coercion by communist subversives that enabled HUAC to target educators, promoting further suspicion of left-wing activity on college campuses.

On Berkeley's campus, the release of *Operation Abolition* politicized SLATE and its partner organizations. Though it reasserted its civil liberties platform, the combined media and

federal accusations against SLATE preceded their own narrative of the protest and undermined their intent.<sup>12</sup> Despite SLATE's rejection of political ideology, partisanship became more relevant among students in the protests' aftermath: the media, public, and federal targeting of student demonstrators fostered increasingly leftist sentiment among demonstrators, and the perceived success of the protest by some factions cultivated a desire to promote new explicitly partisan organizations on campus. Counter to HUAC's intent, the distribution of *Operation Abolition* throughout the United States not only failed to deter participation in protest, but its propagandistic nature sowed distrust in the Committee and the federal government. This shift emphasizes the City Hall protest and its legacy through *Operation Abolition* as a pivotal event in the evolution of student protest: not only was it now subject to national scrutiny, but public opinion was shifting in response. Ultimately, the reception of the film proved that the new generation was resistant to traditional red-baiting tactics and catalyzed the establishment of new student political organizations on a national scale, making it effectively "HUAC's greatest contribution to its own abolition."<sup>13</sup>

### **Mediating the Multiversity: Behind the Administration's Response**

The basis on and extent to which the administration opposed the escalation of student protest centers on a single primary figure: Clark Kerr, the former chancellor who had become president of the University of California at Berkeley in 1958.<sup>14</sup> Kerr's concept of the "multiversity" established him as a leading figure in university governance, promoting administrative expansion as the most necessary development to accommodate the changing nature of higher education in the mid-twentieth century.<sup>15</sup> University administrators, under Kerr's model, were "mediators," weighing the demands of the students, the faculty, the public, and the



state with the intent to promote progress, even at the expense of peace.<sup>16</sup> With the expansion of federal funding for universities occurring simultaneously with student criticism and protest of federal policy, Kerr chose the university's relationship with the state and federal government as the path to progress, even at the expense of peace between the student body and university administration. This multiversity principle drove the cycle of student action, reactionary administrative regulations, student rebellion, and student radicalization that emerged with the proliferation of student political organizations and protest, specifically as seen in the university's response to Berkeley students' role in the San Francisco City Hall demonstration.<sup>17</sup>

### **Institutional Accomplices: Faculty Support for Student Protesters**

Over the preceding decade, University of California professors had already been clashing with administrators. The need to develop new tactics of resistance to the 1950 Loyalty Oath revealed the relative lack of faculty authority over university policy, establishing a power imbalance between faculty and administrators that would continue to rear its head in campus controversies throughout the 1950s and '60s. UC faculty soon had their own conflict with HUAC in 1959, when 110 public school teachers were subpoenaed under the Committee's suspicion that communist subversives had infiltrated the education system at all levels.<sup>18</sup> As a result of educators', unions', and external organizations' collective efforts, the Committee was forced to cancel its 1959 hearings, driving its opponents to continue building local support in the hope of driving HUAC out of the Bay Area permanently.<sup>19</sup> This effort to target educators and the opposition it garnered laid the groundwork for HUAC's return in 1960: students had gained political awareness as a result of the 1959 hearings' infamy, and faculty throughout the Bay Area had established organizations to escalate community opposition to HUAC.<sup>20</sup>

When another round of HUAC hearings was announced in 1960, student and faculty organizations were already part of a “network of resistance,” in collaboration with external organizations like the ACLU.<sup>21</sup> Bay Area universities’ faculty developed a coalition of educators’ associations praising anti-HUAC demonstrations, organizing to raise money for legal counsel for arrestees, and advocating on behalf of students.<sup>22</sup> Faculty members’ ideological support of the students extended not merely to their arguments about civil liberties but also to their direct-action organizing and objection to HUAC’s existence. The Federation of Teachers not only endorsed but “publicly thank[ed] the college students of the Bay Area for their dedication, and for the courage to protest even in the face of brutal and unjustifiable coercion and arrest.”<sup>23</sup> Further, professors at regional institutions formed the Advisory Committee of Bay Area University and College Faculty, advising students involved in HUAC protest about their arrests and effective organizing practices for future demonstrations.<sup>24</sup>

Professors’ support of student protesters, in terms of inspiring activism and defending them to both administrators and their aligned external actors, established a temporary structure to insulate students from both internal and external attacks. This united front was not only critical to preserving outlets for students’ political expression, but it resisted the centrality of administrators to the multiversity structure that the administration was attempting to implement. This conflict represents the “network of resistance” as it relates to the university as an institution: students’ network of campus groups, educators’ creation of support structures, and their mutual collaboration with external organizations were all critical to advancing students’ right and ability to organize in the wake of the City Hall protests.<sup>25</sup>

**Conclusion: “The Silent Generation is No Longer Silent”<sup>26</sup>**

Students who cultivated the political consciousness that would stimulate New Left movements were breaking the boundaries of the “Silent Generation.” Their silence was imposed by institutions and social expectations designed to suppress dissent, with the functional consensus achieved during and immediately following WWII idealized as the model for democracy and economic prosperity. Their silence was guaranteed by the lack of institutions promoting activism and the presence of entities like HUAC. The students who rejected those social standards by protesting at San Francisco City Hall in May of 1960 drew attention not only to their mission but also to the apathy imposed by the past decade, “an apathy induced in no small part by the relentless effort of the Un-American Activities Committee to silence dissent and extirpate every form of unorthodoxy.”<sup>27</sup> Early New Left activism was novel in its tactics and goals and generational in its demographics and influences; however, this cannot be mistaken for spontaneity or inconsistency. Student activists were shaped by the history of union leftism—including the ILWU members whose protests they joined—and the political theory and institutional resistance of their professors. The popular perception of the 1950s as silent and stagnant is only a half-truth: though dissent was suppressed, it was not absent, and “it was those students who nurtured their political concern through the lean years... who provided the organizational outlet for this [new] political awakening.”<sup>28</sup>

Historical accounts often reinforce this half-truth: in histories of the New Left, the 1964 Free Speech Movement appears as an unprecedented student revolt, and in histories of academia, HUAC appears to have produced tumult met with little resistance; yet, following the debacle in City Hall, the Committee ceased traveling outside of Washington DC indefinitely. The massive

resistance the Committee faced, as demonstrated by student protesters, inhibited its ability to continue causing upheaval in communities like the Bay Area. The academic front may have been quieter in the intervening years between the loyalty oath controversies and student protests, but the political underpinnings of professors' roles within the university was already prompting students to organize. Further, educators' own history of resisting HUAC subpoenas and anticommunist administrative policies would inspire students' political awakening and inform their protest and organizational strategies.

The modern popular understanding of universities as the *natural* partners of social movements, both critical of the status quo and generating new ideas for reform, developed in conflict with the agenda of the midcentury university—the multiversity. The San Francisco City Hall HUAC protest, overshadowed as it is by the Free Speech Movement, demonstrated not only the capacity for students to make national headlines through direct demonstration but also provided the organizational precedent for resisting the university's suppressive structure. SLATE left a radical yet forgotten legacy of resistance, protest, and resilience.

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> SLATE is not an acronym, but rather the de facto title of a “slate” of candidates establishing a collective, issues-based platform. Armor, interview, 9; Goines, David L. *The Free Speech Movement: Coming of Age in the 1960s*. Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 1993, 69; “The Kerr Directives,” Fall 1964.
- <sup>2</sup> Armor, Dave. *SLATE Leadership and ASUC President, 1959-1960*. Interview by Todd Holmes. Transcript, 2018. Oral History Center, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 9; Lenske Kalaki, Aryay. “SLATE and the Birth of Student Political Consciousness.” Interview by Martin Meeker. Transcript, 2018. Oral History Center, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 18.
- <sup>3</sup> Franck, Peter. *SLATE, Law, and Politics on the Berkeley Campus*. Interview by Martin Meeker. Transcript, 2018 2017. Oral History Center, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 45–46.
- <sup>4</sup> SLATE: The Beginning of the New Left, UC Berkeley. “SLATE Archives,” 2010.
- <sup>5</sup> “Various Publications on San Francisco Demonstrations Against the House Un-American Activities Committee,” 1961. Box 915, Folder 10, Item 976. Mudd Library, Princeton University, 18–21.
- <sup>6</sup> Krause, Marshall. *ACLU of Northern California Attorney and Civil Liberties Advocate*. Interview by Martin Meeker. Transcript, 2018 2017. Oral History Center, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 28.
- <sup>7</sup> Duren, Joan. “Subpoenaed Student Tells ‘Why.’” *The Daily Californian*. May 4, 1960. Bancroft Library; “Various Publications,” 1961, 30–31.
- <sup>8</sup> “Eyewitnesses Exonerate Students.” *The Daily Californian*. May 19, 1960. Bancroft Library; “Various Publications,” 1961.
- <sup>9</sup> *Operation Abolition: The Story of Communism in Action*. Series: Motion Picture Films and Video Recordings, 1896–2008, 1960.
- <sup>10</sup> *Operation Abolition*, [1:55–2:06].
- <sup>11</sup> *Operation Abolition*, [29:38–31:15].
- <sup>12</sup> Lenske Kalaki, Aryay. *SLATE and the Birth of Student Political Consciousness*. Interview by Martin Meeker. Transcript, 2018. Oral History Center, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 35; “The Meisenbach Case.” Bay Area Student Committee for the Abolition of the House Un-American Activities Committee, June 1961. Free Speech Movement Archives.

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<sup>13</sup> Harrison, Joshua G. "Operation Correction: The Rhetorical Battle Sparked by Film Footage of the May 1960 Student Protest at San Francisco's City Hall." *American Communist History* 12, no. 2 (August 2013): 139; Simmons, Jerold. *Operation Abolition: The Campaign to Abolish the House Un-American Activities Committee, 1938–1975*. American Legal and Constitutional History. New York: Garland, 1986, quoted in Paddison, Joshua. "Summers of Worry, Summers of Defiance: San Franciscans for Academic Freedom and Education and the Bay Area Opposition to HUAC, 1959-1960." *California History* 78, no. 3 (1999): 199.

<sup>14</sup> Due to the impact of COVID-19, source material including Kerr's personal communication is inaccessible; however, the following collections would likely contain materials relevant to this research: Records of the Office of the Chancellor, University of California, Berkeley, 1952–1961, Records of the Office of the Chancellor, University of California, Berkeley, CU-149, University Archives; Clark Kerr Personal and Professional Papers, CU-302, Bancroft Library; University of California (System). Office of the President. Records: Routine Files, CU-5, Series 5, Bancroft Library.

<sup>15</sup> Kerr, Clark. *The Uses of the University*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995.

<sup>16</sup> Kerr, *The Uses of the University*, 27–29.

<sup>17</sup> Franck, interview, 14.

<sup>18</sup> "Various Publications," 1961, 12.

<sup>19</sup> Hoover, J. Edgar. "Communist Target: Youth. Communist Infiltration and Agitation Tactics. A Report, by J. Edgar Hoover, Director, Illustrating Communist Strategy and Tactics in the Rioting Which Occurred During House Committee on Un-American Activities Hearings, San Francisco, May 12-14, 1960." Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1960, 4; "Various Publications," 1961, 12–13.

<sup>20</sup> Paddison, "Summers of Worry," 188.

<sup>21</sup> Paddison, "Summers of Worry," 188.

<sup>22</sup> "Faculty Group to Aid Students in HUAC Fray"; Selvin, Hanan C. "Bay Area Students Legal Aid Fund: It Is Not All Over!," June 1960. Box 915, Folder 10, Item 976. Mudd Library, Princeton University; Selvin, Hanan C. Letter to Roger Baldwin, November 17, 1960. Box 915, Folder 10, Item 976. Mudd Library, Princeton University.

<sup>23</sup> "California Teachers Praise Picketers." *The Daily Californian*. May 19, 1960. Bancroft Library, 1.

<sup>24</sup> "Faculty Group to Aid Students in HUAC Fray." *The Daily Californian*. May 18, 1960. Bancroft Library.

<sup>25</sup> Paddison, "Summers of Worry," 188.

<sup>26</sup> "Various Publications," 1961, 66.

<sup>27</sup> "Various Publications," 1961, 58.

<sup>28</sup> "Various Publications," 1961, 21.

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