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“One Brick Will Do the Trick:” A Structural Analysis of the May 1970 Student Uprising at the University of South Carolina

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“ONE BRICK WILL DO THE TRICK:” A STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS OF THE MAY 1970
STUDENT UPRISING AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA

By

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for
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Abstract

In May 1970, the University of South Carolina's campus erupted. Students protesting the Vietnam War, police presence on campus, the shooting of student protestors at Kent State, and restrictive campus rules stormed campus buildings and faced off with National Guardsmen in the streets of Columbia. This thesis examines the political context and structures at USC in the late 1960s which enabled this explosive but short-lived period of the university's history. Assessing USC activists' levels of campus coalition building, their place in the political context of the late 1960s, the openness of the school's political structure, and the forces acting on university and political authorities sheds light onto an environment which was ripe for radical student organizing and reveals core tensions on the Columbia campus which in some ways have never eased.

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Introduction

In a creatively written article for *The Gamecock*, the University of South Carolina's student newspaper, staff writer John Gash described a tense scene which unfolded on the steps of USC's administrative building on May 11, 1970.¹ As the school's board of trustees met upstairs, a small line of Columbia, S.C. police officers blocked a crowd of students from entering the building. As two students climbed onto the stone plinth above the doorway, a countdown went up from the crowd. When their countdown hit zero, the students pushed past the police and burst into the first floor of the university's administrative headquarters. While trapping the board of trustees upstairs, some of the students trashed filing cabinets while others discussed basketball, until a rumor started spreading that the National Guard was about to tear gas the building. After a brief attempt to barricade the entrance, the students apparently decided that it would be better to simply leave and "see the National Guardsmen," which for some meant pelting them with bricks and bottles.

This incident on May 11, and the night of at-times violent civil unrest which followed, was likely the most dramatic episode of the larger string of major student protest that broke out at USC during May 1970. The unrest's immediate trigger was the murder of four unarmed students at Kent State University on May 4, which became known as the Kent State Massacre and prompted protests and a student strike movement across the country. Immediately after the massacre, left-wing students called a strike at USC and held a memorial rallies for the murdered students on the Horseshoe, the historic center of campus, on May 7. After a confrontation with right-wing pro-Vietnam war students over lowering the Horseshoe's American flag to half-mast, the group of anti-war protesters moved over to the Russell House, the university's main student

¹ John Gash, "3...2..1..." Power to the People," *The Gamecock*, May 13, 1970. Archived copies of *The Gamecock* were accessed at the Historic Newspapers of South Carolina library, historicnewspapers.sc.edu/lccn/2012218660/.

center, about a block south of the Horseshoe. There, some of the students managed to get ahold of the center's keys and announced that they were about to lock the doors – an announcement of their intent to occupy the building in protest.

Quickly, students who were unwilling to participate in this illegal escalation began to leave. By the time the protest was declared unlawful, about forty students remained inside, with a large crowd of student onlookers surrounding the building. Eventually a contingent of Columbia Police Department and South Carolina Law Enforcement Division (SLED) officers arrived and arrested the students remaining inside, loading them onto a waiting bus. The students outside sat in front of the bus, blocking it from leaving, until police and freshly arrived National Guardsmen formed a line and pushed them away.² After a quiet weekend, students rallied on the Horseshoe again, this time in support of those arrested at the Russell House. After a brief time on the Horseshoe, someone let out the cry that “the Administration Building isn't too far away” – putting in motion the scene which Gash described in *The Gamecock*.

Despite these explosive actions, the activist scene at the University of South Carolina is often not included in accounts of the student movements of the 1950s and 60s.³ This omission is not unreasonable – the student activists at USC and the movement which they attempted to organize was not as dramatic, tragic, or impactful as those at the University of California – Berkley, South Carolina State, Columbia, Howard, or Voorhees, to name a few. Even the events of May 1970, while explosive compared to the rest of USC's history, mirror similar (and at times even more dramatic) scenes across the country that month. Nonetheless, USC students' efforts, as well as the political structures which they worked, lived, and studied inside of are still

² John Gash and John Lewis, “Russell House confrontation stirs much emotion, confusion,” *The Gamecock*, May 8, 1970.

³ For one wider account which does, see Kristin Elizabeth Grabarek, “Protest Activities in Southern Universities, 1965-1972” (master's thesis, Auburn University, 2006).

important for understanding student protest as a sociopolitical phenomenon and USC's history as an institution. While it is certainly not the only instance of protest or unrest over USC's long history, such an effort will naturally center around the May 1970 USC student uprising.

Even though the immediate trigger of the Columbia campus's multiple rallies, attempted building occupations, and the near-occupation of the school by South Carolina National Guardsmen was the Kent State shootings, understanding the explosive events of May 1970 is impossible if one's analysis only starts with the four murdered protestors at Kent State. Instead, it is more useful to understand May 1970 as an outlet of the political and social tensions which had been building at USC since the 1950s, and in many ways are still present on campus today. While the Vietnam War and (eventually-repealed) conservative campus rules were the top-line targets of the uprising, the tensions which fueled students' confrontation with university administrators was also rooted in the gradual transition between USC's former status as a university geared toward the Palmetto State's antebellum white elite and its modern status as a multiracial⁴ flagship institution of the state's public higher education system.

The Columbia campus permanently integrated in 1963 with the admission of Robert G. Anderson, Henrie Monteith Treadwell and James L. Solomon Jr. It had previously admitted Black students during Reconstruction, but after temporarily shuttering the school after federal troops left the South, it reopened as an all-white university. This integration, which followed the dramatic growth of the university after the GI Bill and post-WWII economic prosperity, meant that USC's cultural context was changing. However, its campus rules were not – the *in loco parentis* rights of the administration were the most dramatic element of the heavy regulation on

⁴ Of course, this is not to say that USC's modern relationship with racial minorities in SC is uncomplicated or entirely positive – enrollment trends for Black students are trending down even as the student population grows, and the school's post-war expansion largely came at the expense of Columbia's majority-Black neighborhood such as the Ward One area.

student life which the school's leadership exercised. Particularly as South Carolina's state political leadership amped up their repression of Columbia's local anti-war/counterculture movement, many students began to feel that the administration and local authorities led the school with too heavy a hand. This feeling was only aggravated due to the heavy police presence on campus in the later half of the 1960s, particularly targeting drug usage on campus.⁵

While these tensions slowly coalesced through various levels of student political actions and eventually manifested into outright student revolt in May 1970, one must be careful not to explain that outcome as simply a linear result of those tensions – colleges with unhappy students do not always result in tear gas, and often do not even result in sign-waving. The fact that USC *did* experience such dramatic and contentious campus politics suggests that not only was political dissatisfaction so high that it motivated dramatic action, but also that the school's political structures gave students the opportunity to escalate their dissatisfaction to such action.

Understanding what those political structures were, and how they related to the political stances of the student body, local government, and school leadership is essential for understanding the causes and course of the May 1970 unrest. In order to do so, this analysis will use the some theoretical ideas provided by political opportunity structure (POS) literature to analyze the structural environment at USC during the late 1960s and understand how that environment influenced the actions and strategies of student activists.⁶ It focuses on four different aspects of theoretically successful student political organizing in order to understand the

⁵ Henry H. Lesesne, *A History of the University of South Carolina, 1940-2000* (Columbia, S.C: University of South Carolina Press, 2001) 212-215.

⁶ For an extensive discussion of POS theory and its applications for understanding on-the-ground social movements, see Todd C. Shaw, *Now Is the Time!: Detroit Black Politics and Grassroots Activism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2009).

strengths and shortcomings of USC's movement, and how those characteristics resulted in an intense but short-lived episode of unrest in South Carolina's capitol.

Specifically, it uses archived records of political activity from 1965-1970 alongside issues of *The Gamecock* to assess USC activists' levels of campus coalition building (how radical students were able to broaden their organizations and their effectiveness as organizers), their place in the late 60's political context (the ways that the USC student movement was a part of the larger national movement and how that context was important for campus politics), the openness of the school's political structure (how the moderately open nature of campus politics facilitated protest), and the forces acting on university and political authorities (how state authorities often acted over university ones). These structural factors provided a fertile ground for radical protest to student organizers in the 1960s, but they did not dissipate when the tear gas cleared from the Columbia's streets in 1970. Many of the tensions which encouraged unrest in the 60s and 70s still continue today, as demonstrated by current USC student activism, and the same structural analysis is an important tool for understanding today's campus politics as well.

Coalition Building and Campus Outreach

Scholars understand that friendship networks and voluntary associations can be important "mobilizing structures" for social movements by being everyday social interactions where political mobilization can be generated.⁷ Of course, the combination of friendship networks and voluntary associations make up virtually the entire social life of a college student. Between classes, school clubs, fraternities and sororities, study sessions, and house parties, it's hard to

⁷ John D. McCarthy, "Constraints and Opportunities in Adopting, Adapting, and Inventing," In *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings*, ed. by Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy, and Mayer N. Zald (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 141.

imagine an aspect of modern college life which could not in some way function as political agitation or mobilization, whether that is simply griping about a too-early curfew with friends or more direct political organizing. Since universities are a relatively insular community – college students are generally friends with other college students – members of these social networks often share large parts of campus political experiences, meaning that they easily function as mobilizing structures.

However, it is also clear that formal political organizing is essential – the potentially political nature of friendship or kinship networks is not enough to bring people into the streets or make many people politically active in other ways. Formal structures, such as unions, protest communities, and social movement committees are also important for movements to get off the ground and become relevant.⁸ Two organizations formed the bulk of this sort of formal movement work at USC in the 1960s. The most relevant one for the May 1970 protest was a group named AWARE,⁹ which formed in the spring of 1966 as a student organization chartered with the school. Initially, it was supposedly intended to be an apolitical organization which aimed to “promote the dissemination of ideas which will lead students into an awareness of the full spectrum of political and social thought,” according to a letter sent by AWARE to USC’s faculty and student leaders on June 22, 1966.¹⁰ However, that “apolitical” nature immediately disappeared, if it was ever actually present to begin with. The organization quickly declared their support for a “student bill of rights,” which sought to defend academic freedom, the confidentiality of student records, an independent student press, and to reform the student

⁸ Ibid, 141-7.

⁹ Despite the capitalized styling of the group’s name, it was not an abbreviation or acronym.

¹⁰ Letter from AWARE to USC student leaders, July 5, 1966. Jones Presidential Papers, University of South Carolina Archives, South Caroliniana Library, Columbia, South Carolina.

disciplinary process.¹¹ Even in 1966, at least some students involved in AWARE were also involved with anti-Vietnam war efforts on campus, and the “free-speech” focus of the organization also lined up with New Left priorities and rhetoric from other campus activists at the time.

AWARE quickly caught the ire of Thomas F. Jones, the university President, as well as the rest of the university’s leadership and local police. One conflict with Jones emerged in the spring of 1967, when William C. Westmoreland, the top U.S. military commander in South Vietnam and an South Carolina native, was awarded an honorary degree by USC in April. Westmoreland’s visit was met by protests from students and a chemistry professor, who unfolded a banner reading “I protest, Doctor of War.”¹² The protesting students were forced away by officers from the State Law Enforcement Division (SLED) and were met with heavy jeers along with the dissident chemistry professor. Despite the restrained nature of the professor’s protest, it sparked heavy criticism, including condemnation in the state legislature and the pages of South Carolina newspapers.

This incident prompted AWARE to demand that Jones “issue a public statement reaffirming the right of students to demonstrate on campus about issues with which they are concerned,” or else face a pro-free speech demonstration on the Horseshoe. On May 2, students met with Jones in order to deliver these demands. However, tensions between Jones and AWARE rose when someone leaked details of the meeting to a local newspaper. By the 14th, AWARE informed Jones that they would hold a pro-free speech rally on the Horseshoe the next day, but the protest was called off when Jones released a statement on the 15th which announced

¹¹ AWARE Bill of Rights, May 5, 1966. Jones Presidential Papers, University of South Carolina Archives, South Caroliniana Library, Columbia, South Carolina.

¹² Kristin Elizabeth Grabarek, “Protest Activities in Southern Universities, 1965-1972” (master’s thesis, Auburn University, 2006) 36-37.

the creation of a committee to study protest on campus and outlined new regulations on USC's assembly policy that apparently satisfied AWARE's leadership.¹³

Despite their limited victory in the May 1967 standoff with the administration, AWARE remained a relatively fringe group which seemingly got more attention than actual support. Local news reports from the Westmoreland visits say that the anti-war protesters were clearly outnumbered by supporters of Westmoreland visit and American involvement in Vietnam, and records of multiple AWARE meetings held in the spring of 1968 say that less than ten people attended. The fact that these records exist at all is notable – they were not meeting minutes, but appear to be the reports of someone sent to infiltrate the meetings and report their findings back, assumedly to the administration. These reports, particularly one from April 1, 1968, describe an organization which was seemingly struggling to activate students and hold events. A planned march on Ft. Jackson, the Army base located in Columbia, S.C., was nixed because of a lack of willingness to participate, and in the same meeting it was apparently announced that AWARE was being disbanded in favor of members participating in underground activities instead. Meetings were discontinued until further notice, but members were encouraged to participate in student government campaigns or underground political organizations.¹⁴

However, this image of AWARE turned around in the fall semester of 1968 when the organization, apparently brought back from its disbanding, voted to affiliate with the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the Southern Student Organizing Committee (SSOC), two prominent New Left student political organizations. In a handout describing the decision which was distributed in the Russell House, an AWARE representative wrote that

¹³ Letters from AWARE to Jones, AWARE Statement, Jones statement, May 1967. Jones Presidential Papers, University of South Carolina Archives, South Caroliniana Library, Columbia, South Carolina.

¹⁴ AWARE meeting, April 1, 1968. Jones Presidential Papers, University of South Carolina Archives, South Caroliniana Library, Columbia, South Carolina.

Both SSOC and SDS provide access to a large resource library of literature on political and social problems. They also provide manuscripts and comment on the techniques and methods by which problems have been solved (or mistakes made) in order to compare and form a basis for the approach to our own problems.¹⁵

This explanation for affiliating with the larger organizations clearly lines up with scholars' expectations about the important role that formal organizations play in social movement organizing.

AWARE quickly began to feel the benefits of their now-national network and coalition. The added outside support and coalition building played a large role in the momentum regained by AWARE in the second half of 1968. Meeting records (seemingly taken by the same mole) from post-SDS and SSOC affiliation AWARE meetings say that there were often over 60 people in attendance. The difference from the April meetings is striking. Just five months after apparently disbanding the organization, the new AWARE had visitors from multiple SSOC representatives and were planning actions to go along with the national SDS's strategy for the upcoming election day and to confront the conservative Young Americans for Freedom (YAF) group at an event which the YAF was planning to host.¹⁶ The organization also began to gain support from a few members of the USC faculty, who attended meetings and defended the students from administrative pressure.¹⁷

However, AWARE was not the only active student organization on campus which was hoping to prompt a larger student social movement. The Association of Afro-American Students (abbreviated then as AFRO but now known as AAAS) was formed in

¹⁵ "Why SSOC and SDS," Oct. 21 1968. Jones Presidential Papers, University of South Carolina Archives, South Caroliniana Library, Columbia, South Carolina.

¹⁶ AWARE Meeting, November 6, 1968. Jones Presidential Papers, University of South Carolina Archives, South Caroliniana Library, Columbia, South Carolina.

¹⁷ Carl Stepp, "Continued AWARE Suspension Suggested," *The Gamecock*, Feb 28, 1969.

the fall semester of 1967 with the support of USC's administration.¹⁸ In a letter announcing the school's approval of AFRO's formation, USC's Vice President for Student Affairs Charles Witten wrote that "I wish to commend you for the worthy purpose you plan to fulfill. We look forward to such programs as you may wish to present which will help the entire Carolina Community learn more about the Afro-American heritage."¹⁹

Despite Witten's apparent hope that AFRO would calmly facilitate educational events on campus, the organization quickly became more radical and contentious with the University leadership. The main motivating factor for this change seems to have been the Orangeburg Massacre on February 8, 1968, when South Carolina Highway Patrol officers killed 3 civil rights student-protestors in Orangeburg, SC. The horror of these murders quickly caused AFRO to adopt a more militant Black Power agenda. The organization invited students from South Carolina State University to come to Columbia and tell their story, further driving Black students at USC towards a more radical political position. Later that semester, AFRO published a document titled "A Report by the Negro Students of the University of South Carolina," which indicted the everyday racism on USC's campus and demanded 13 reforms, including academic curricula about Black history, a more diverse student body, Black faculty and guest speakers, and the elimination of systemic discrimination within university admissions, financial aid, and Greek life.²⁰ The administration seemingly took the report seriously – internal communications with Jones

¹⁸ Ramon Jackson, "Peace, Love, Education, And Liberation: The Black Campus Movement at the University of South Carolina" In *Invisible No More: The African American Experience at the University of South Carolina*, ed. Robert Greene and Tyler D. Parry (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 2021) 131–55.

¹⁹ Witten to Wright, Dec, 21, 1967. Jones Presidential Papers, University of South Carolina Archives, South Caroliniana Library, Columbia, South Carolina.

²⁰ "A Report by the Negro Students of the University of South Carolina," Jones Presidential Papers, University of South Carolina Archives, South Caroliniana Library, Columbia, South Carolina.

suggested that the social sciences undergo “curricula review” and pitched the idea of hiring a Black policeman at USC.²¹

After further urging from AFRO and other campus leaders the administration would create an African American studies program in 1970, though it was not given the funding, staffing, or respect which it needed to become a full-fledged program at USC.²² Nonetheless, the program’s establishment was a victory for AFRO, though certainly a limited one. However, none of the limited changes on campus seemed to change AFRO’s understanding of Black students’ position on campus, or the need for a militant Black Power movement at the school. Black student movement leaders led the successful campaign to elect Harry Walker as the first Black Student Body President at USC and successfully pushed for the establishment of African American Greek letter organizations. Much of this activism was internally focused towards USC and significantly less confrontational than Black student activism at other southern schools. Luther Battiste, an student leader and the manager of Walker’s campaign, said that “My goal was to make USC a better place for African American students who followed me, and to do that every way I could — by getting involved in student activities, getting involved in student politics, trying to create a social culture that made us feel comfortable but to do so by working within the system.”²³

Not everyone within USC’s Black student movement share the same desire to work within the system. There were certainly more militant students at USC, such as

²¹ Witten to Jones, May 6, 1968. Jones Presidential Papers, University of South Carolina Archives, South Caroliniana Library, Columbia, South Carolina

²² Jackson, *Invisible No More*, 140.

²³ “Luther Battiste recalls his role in UofSC student protest in May 1970,” *sc.edu*, University of South Carolina, April 27, 2020, https://sc.edu/uofsc/posts/2020/05/months_of_may_luther_battiste.php.

James Redfern II, a student who founded the Black Alliance for Defense (BAD), a seemingly more militant offshoot of AFRO. However, there is no indication that BAD ever got off the ground, or even that it included anyone other than Redfern himself. It is clear that the majoritarian position within USC's Black student movement was to mostly work within the framework of aboveground campus politics at USC, such as student government and administrative meetings. AWARE and AFRO, as the two social movement organizations on campus, had a somewhat cooperative relationship – AFRO members would sometimes attend AWARE meetings, for example. However, there there was not a firm coalition between the two groups during AWARE's existence. "Most of the African American students were not actively involved in the antiwar movement. That was more of a 'white thing,'" Battiste said.²⁴

AWARE certainly did try to make civil rights a part of their agenda. The organization held protest on the Horseshoe against the fact that there were no Black elected officials in S.C. which included burning a confederate flag,²⁵ and also supported direct action efforts to desegregate a local school. A series of articles in *The Gamecock* chronicles the organization's efforts to help fight unequal schooling in the Columbia area. Alongside the NAACP, AWARE established a "tutorial program" for Native American children who were barred from enrolling in a Ridgeville elementary school. AWARE students scavenged textbooks from the community to teach students ranging from 5-15 years old who were not allowed to attend the accredited Ridgeville school and were

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Brett Bursey, interview by John LaFitte Warren, Feb. 24, 2008, transcript, Thomas Cooper Library, Campus activism and the Vietnam War era collection.

instead forced to enroll in the non-accredited Four Hole school, which had only one teacher with a high school education.²⁶

These efforts notwithstanding, it appears that AWARE and AFRO were mostly unable (or to some extent, unwilling) to consolidate their social movement efforts and resources into a larger joint effort before 1970. This was likely, at least in part, due to the somewhat racially segregated nature of friendships on USC's campus in the 1960s, which would have made it difficult to form the trusted relationships needed for effective organizing. For example, in 1965 none of the Black students on campus had a white roommate, and some described being harassed by white students while watching basketball games. This social dynamic meant that that AFRO was an important social organization for USC's Black students, as well as a political one.²⁷ For their part, AWARE was unable to attract more than a few Black students to join or be active inside the almost completely white organization. While the school was still overwhelmingly white, forming significant political (or even social) relationships with AFRO could have given AWARE some of the benefits of AFRO's connections, such as the ones with SNCC and other student-activists at South Carolina State University, which was one of the centers of the civil rights movement in South Carolina. AFRO might have benefited from AWARE's national connections in the same way. Instead, the two groups functioned mostly independent of each other, which diminished the role they could play as formal political mobilizing forces for students on campus.

This changed after Kent State, when multiple student political organizations on campus joined together to form a strike committee. These groups included social

²⁶ Chuck Keefer, "'Freedom School' opens," *The Gamecock*, November 3, 1969.

²⁷ Jackson, *Invisible No More*, 135-40.

movement ones like AWARE and AFRO, as well as FREAK, a pro-drug legalization student organization. There were student political actors on campus other than radical student movement organizations, including some who joined the strike committee. The traditional vehicle for student political activity was the student government, which often functioned as a proving ground for would-be state politicians. Particularly in the immediate lead-up to the civil unrest in May 1970, the student government actually allied themselves with the anti-war student population, at least initially. Immediately after Kent State, Student Body President Mike Spears said that the student government would support and help fund the student strike which the newly created strike committee had called.²⁸ However, when the radical edge of the protesters declared the Russell House occupation on May 7, the student government and most of the moderate political factions on campus pulled their formal support from the protests.²⁹

The anti-war student protesters found an even less likely set of allies when the unrest started un earnest: fraternity brothers. USC's Greek life contingent might have been more attracted to the chaos of nighttime street protests than they were dedicated to left-wing political ideals, since particularly on Southern campuses fraternities are not exactly bastions of social progressivism, but they were in the streets nonetheless. The Inter-Fraternity Council was a backer of the strike committee,³⁰ and some fraternity chapters were even holding informal competitions to see which chapter was the most involved: "within a couple of days, they were having bragging competitions. 'Well SAE

²⁸ Jim Haney and Scott Derks, "Strike planned Thursday," *The Gamecock*, May 6, 1970.

²⁹ John Gash and John Lewis, "Russell House confrontation stirs much emotion, confusion," *The Gamecock*, May 8, 1970.

³⁰ Andrew Grose, "Voices of Southern Protest during the Vietnam War Era: The University of South Carolina as a Case Study," *Peace & Change* 32, no. 2 (2007): 153-167.

and 60 people arrested last night and KA only had 45 go down,” Brett Bursey, a USC student who had come to campus and joined AWARE in 1968, quickly becoming their co-chair, recalled.³¹ Such an unlikely combination of anti-war leftists and southern fraternity brothers speaks to the wide range of students with enough motivation to take to the streets, even if that motivation was as varied as the protestors.

It also speaks to the ways in which weak social ties are important for social movement organizing. At the risk of stereotyping, it seems reasonable to suggest that most radical leftist student organizers and fraternity brothers do not necessarily have incredibly close social ties between each other. However, as students at the same university, some members of these two groups almost certainly would have had *weak* social ties – taking the same classes, living in the same residence halls, eating at the same dining halls. While these encounters might not lead to friendships, they do form lesser social ties which can form “bridges” between different social networks,³² which is certainly important when trying to organize a mass protest.

The ability for AWARE, as the lead anti-war and New Left group, to join forces with AFRO and more moderate and apolitical organizations was a key factor for allowing the May protests to grow as large as they did. The fact that the strike committee represented students from so many different corners of campus allowed it to function as a very effective formal movement organization, and to transform friendship networks (like those within fraternities) into more direct protest activators. However, the fact that this committee was so ad hoc and widely spread also meant that its members had little in common with each other, even politically – the long-term goals of AWARE and the

³¹ Brett Bursey, interview by John LaFitte Warren, Feb. 24, 2008.

³² Mark S. Granovetter, “The Strength of Weak Ties,” *American Journal of Sociology* 78, no. 6 (1973): 1360–80.

student government were very different, for example. This dynamic is one of the key reasons why the protests ended so quickly. While the committee was able to activate a lot of students quickly, it was based around social ties and the shared experience of living on campus perhaps more so than shared political goals. When its activation triggered more radical action, it also caused the coalition to partly fall apart, making it difficult to keep students in the streets.

Regime Openness

Of course, students were not the only political actors working on USC's campus in the late 1960s. Equally important to the structural aspects of student organizing were the structural aspects of their political opponents – the school's administration and state/local political leaders. Understanding the regime under which activists are organizing is essential for understand the prospects and outcomes of social movements, including campus organizing. Scholars have shown that protests are most likely to break out under regimes which are not entirely open but also not entirely closed, which leaves enough space for activists to be able to work in the open but little enough space that people still feel the need to resort to extra-governmental political action in order to enact their political goals. In the sense of providing fertile ground for protest, these “mixed systems” offer the best of both worlds for the prospect of protest – it has neither the harsh repression of an extremely closed system nor the calm permissiveness of an open one.³³

The reality of campus organizing is that there are at least two somewhat different “regimes” that organizers must deal with, which each have some degree of independence

³³ Peter K. Eisinger, “The Conditions of Protest Behavior in American Cities.” *The American Political Science Review* 67, no. 1 (1973): 15.

from each other: university administrations and actual governments. The relationship between a student group and a university power structure may well be different than that group's relationship with the college town's local/state government, and the university leadership itself has its own relationship with governmental powers as well. This dynamic means that an analysis must look at all of those relationships: between the different regime structures themselves, and between the students and those regimes. Students, whether they were politically active or not, had to be aware of disciplinary power both from the Columbia Police Department and SLED, but also from USC's student disciplinary board and the University Police Department.

These powers were certainly not fond of left-wing activists. As has already been noted, the university administration had an informant inside AWARE meetings, and for a year and half the co-Chair of AWARE, Jack Weatherford, worked as an informant for SLED, eventually testifying against Bursey (Weatherford's roommate and fellow AWARE co-Chair) in court.³⁴ The university's informant inside AWARE routinely noted that the organization was aware of police surveilling and harassing the organization,³⁵ and on multiple occasions state or local law enforcement interfered with and shut down AWARE demonstrations on campus or around Columbia.

One such instance unfolded around a protest planned against Richard Nixon's 1969 visit to Columbia, which apparently attracted around 300 people, including the SDS's national secretary, to a planning meeting held the day before the protest was meant to take place. According to Bursey, local police and sheriff's deputies would not allow

³⁴ Brett Bursey, interview by John LaFitte Warren, Feb. 24, 2008.

³⁵ This surveillance even included attention from Columbia FBI agents, according to Andrew Grose's work on the protests.

anti-Nixon/anti-war protestors into where Nixon was arriving. Law enforcement then began to beat protestors, and arrested 11 people including Bursey, who was charged with assaulting a police officer. Bursey also alleges that his home phone was tapped and that SLED agents would arrange constant stops of Bursey's car by the S.C. Highway Patrol.³⁶

AWARE also felt the effects of the university's internal student disciplinary system. In a 1987 interview, Witten said that he was "trying to ride hard on AWARE and every time they broke a regulation, hold their feet to the fire."³⁷ Bursey, who had become a co-chair of AWARE, was banned from USC's campus after a series of less-than-legal protests including vandalizing a Columbia draft board. Other AWARE events triggered a hearing from USC's Student Affairs Committee on whether or not AWARE's charter as a student organization would be revoked, a clear example of Witten's determination to hold AWARE's feet to the fire as much as the university admission possibly could. One of this Student Affairs Committee meeting also featured police repression – at one point SLED agents burst into the meeting and arrested Bursey and Weatherford for their role in the draft board vandalization.³⁸ Bursey eventually spent two years in prison for the protest, in part due to Weatherford's testimony. By arresting Weatherford as well, SLED was able to build his credibility as a committed left-wing campus activist, thus making him a more valuable informant moving forwards. Clearly, SLED's treatment of AWARE was not just random harassment of trouble-causing college students, but a strategic campaign against what some people in Columbia saw as a communist threat towards the city.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Charles H. Witten, interviewed by William Savage, May 27, 1987, Tape 2, University of South Carolina. Department of Oral History, University Libraries, 1987.

³⁸ "Two students charged during Anti-Draft Week," *The Gamecock*, May 23, 1970.

Black students on campus were also targeted by police and university authorities. University archives are full of complaints from Black students about their treatment at the hands of University police, along with the everyday struggle of being a Black student at an almost entirely white school in the deep South. Leaflets distributed by B.A.D. enumerated multiple instances of Black students being unfairly disciplined or thrown off campus, often for actions which white students would likely not have faced consequences for. One such B.A.D leaflet argues:

Risher Cross was suspended for purchasing a stolen book, an act which happens to be rather popular on this campus. But dig this!! Several honkies have been cot possessing and selling marijuana, which is a federal rap, and they were only made to move off campus. Is this or is this not racism? It should now be clearly evident that every black student as to the methods used by racist administrators to systematically eliminate black students from this student body.³⁹

However, it is important to note that much of the harassment and hardships that Black students faced on campus was seemingly not *directly* related to activism as much as it was related to simple racism and prejudice. Unlike AWARE, AFRO enjoyed some level of approval from the administration, likely because they (in general) took a less confrontational approach towards campus politics, as has been mentioned earlier.

Nonetheless, Black activists still faced significant difficulties on campus, including harassment. In one instance, a drunk USC student (who was apparently on the school football team) tried to fight a group of Black students including Redfern and Eddie Tobais. Redfern was forced to call the police on the intoxicated student, who was arrested. Tobais was in the midst of being removed for campus himself, and in the same

³⁹ B.A.D., "Attention All Black Students Leaflet." Jones Presidential Papers, University of South Carolina Archives, South Caroliniana Library, Columbia, South Carolina.

B.A.D. leaflet which denounced Risher Cross's situation, the author alleges that another Black student who spoke out about racial issues was "silenced" and forced to leave campus.⁴⁰

SLED and Columbia-area's strict policing of AWARE, AFRO, and the UFO coffeehouse (a popular spot with USC students and anti-war GIs for counterculture gatherings and anti-war political conversations which became a target of Columbia's law enforcement in 1970) demonstrate how local political authorities were unwilling to tolerate dissenting political opinions, particularly ones from young people and African-Americans. Law enforcement was aggressive in their enforcement of anti-activist tactics in the lead-up to the May 1970, though of course nobody involved knew that they were in the lead up to anything. Once it became clear that the USC student body's reaction to the murders at Kent State was not going to remain peaceful or civil, the police's aggressiveness only increased. About 40 students (approximately the size of AWARE's core membership) were arrested during the attempted takeover of the Russell House University Union on May 7, the second day on demonstrations after the deaths at Kent State on May 4, and six students (including at least one AWARE member) were charged with illegal trespassing in the aftermath.⁴¹

It quickly became clear to S.C. political leaders that SLED or Columbia Police were not going to be enough for the city to keep the peace around USC's campus, and on May 11 Governor Robert McNair declared a State of Emergency and activated the S.C.

⁴⁰ "Fact Sheet." Jones Presidential Papers, University of South Carolina Archives, South Caroliniana Library, Columbia, South Carolina

⁴¹ Lesesne, *A History of the University of South Carolina*, 221. Barbara Herbert was a prominent AWARE organizer (though the charges against students from Russell were eventually dropped).

National Guard.⁴² As National Guardsmen and S.C. Highway Patrolmen (the same state agency which had killed three S.C. State students two years earlier) swarmed Columbia's streets the night of May 11, the government's tactics transitioned from being strict to being outright repressive. Authorities deployed tear gas onto protesting students, which got sucked into the air conditioning systems of surrounding USC dorms. As tear gas seeped into student's dorms, they naturally evacuated their buildings and went into the streets – which seemed to the National Guardsmen to be another wave of rioters heading into the fray. Hundreds of students were arrested during that night of protest. Burse describes how the local Sheriff decided to arrest him for supposedly violating his bond, despite only a judge being able to legally revoke someone's bond. Despite spending several nights in jail, Bursey was never charged with a crime from that night. Of course, many students were also more than willing to aggressively confront law enforcement officers in the streets; one National Guardsman claims that his group of Guardsmen had to take cover from arrows being shot at them from a dorm rooftop.⁴³

Despite this eventual repression, it would be inaccurate to say that student activists at USC operated within an entirely closed political system or that they had no latitude for their campaign strategies. One of the recurring aspects of the university administration's response to AWARE's presence and activity on campus was the internal idea – mostly stemming from Jones – that USC *could not* really strike decisively against the left-wing students. Jones routinely placed a high priority on student activists' rights under the U.S. Constitution's first amendment, namely those of free speech and

⁴² John Lewis, "McNair meets student leaders," *The Gamecock*, 5/13/1970.

⁴³ James Randy Wiggers, interviewed by Alyx Davis, 2008, transcript, Thomas Cooper Library, Campus activism and the Vietnam War era collection.

assembly. Jones repeatedly received criticism from angry or concerned parents, members of the media (particularly right-wing editorial pages), or politicians, who had heard about the formation of actions of AWARE on campus.⁴⁴

Jones frequently responded to this feedback personally, a practice which he had done since at least 1965.⁴⁵ In his response to one of these letters, sent by a Mr. Thomas G. Seigler from Florence, S.C. in March 1969, Jones admitted that AWARE, a “small group of 10 to 15 students,” had caused the school’s leadership “a great deal of concern,” but that the group would not be allowed to affiliate with the SDS.⁴⁶ Of course, this last assertion was not really true. Regardless of USC’s internal student organization or guest speaker policies, AWARE had certainly affiliated with the SDS and SSOC, and figures from the SDS would repeatedly attend AWARE meetings and protest events throughout 1969.

However, AWARE did come under heavy administrative scrutiny during the spring semester of 1969. Starting in mid-February (directly after the organization had sponsored a press conference of “GI’s United Against the War in Vietnam”), USC’s Student Affairs Committee decided to review the organizations affiliations. The committee, which was an advisory body to Witten, found in March that USC had violated multiple USC policies and suspended the organization without a formal hearing or trial. AWARE was only able to reform under probation and keep its charter in mid-March, after submitting a “letter of good intentions” promising to follow university policies int

⁴⁴ See letters to Jones, Jones Presidential Papers, University of South Carolina Archives, South Caroliniana Library, Columbia, South Carolina, Constad 2016.

⁴⁵ Alyssa Jordan Constad, “‘Antagonistic Describes the Scene:’ Local News Portrayals of the New Left and the Escalation of Protest at the University of South Carolina, 1970” (master’s thesis, University of South Carolina, 2016), 26.

⁴⁶ Jones to Seigler, 3/12/1969, Jones Presidential Papers, University of South Carolina Archives, South Caroliniana Library, Columbia, South Carolina.

the future. The incident was seen by some as clearly targeting the organization because of their political stances; AWARE co-chair is quoted in a *Gamecock* article saying that there was “considerable feeling that AWARE has been singled out for its political views.”⁴⁷ In another issues of *The Gamecock*, Jon Kraus, AWARE’s faculty advisor, said that the committee’s decision to suspend the organization was a “capricious and undeliberate use of their authority” and that the university had not properly demonstrated AWARE’s alleged wrongdoings.⁴⁸

This attempt at marginalizing AWARE was not successful. Barely more than a month after their letter AWARE was again able to host the GI’s United Against the War in Vietnam, this time for a press conference in support of eight U.S. soldiers who had been charged with anti-war activities at Ft. Jackson.⁴⁹ The showdown between anti-Nixon protestors and local police which was organized by AWARE and saw 3 USC students arrested took place that May, and by the fall of 1969 the organization was again hosting GIs and SDS organizers to events on the Horseshoe, this time under the banner of the newly formed South Carolina Revolutionary Youth Movement (SCRYM), a newly-formed chapter of Revolutionary Youth Movement, a far-left section of the SDS. This rally, which aimed to “bring the war to Columbia,” featured Jeff Jones, a national SDS leader who called for violence in order to “overthrow the existing system.”⁵⁰ While Witten was able to stop one speaker from taking the stage after citing improper

⁴⁷ Carl Stepp, “Continued AWARE Suspension Suggested,” *The Gamecock*, Feb 28, 1969.

⁴⁸ Carl Stepp, “AWARE Ordered To State Intentions,” *The Gamecock*, March 4, 1969.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ The tagline to “bring the war to Columbia” is a clear reference to other radical organizations in Europe and the US, which in unsurprising given the far-left positioning of the RYM and AWARE’s radical nature during the late ‘60s. The embrace of further left politics shows the escalation of AWARE and the USC left’s presence and tactics on campus, foreshadowing the explosive events which would unfold the next semester. For a fascinating look into French student radicals’ efforts to “bring the war home,” see Salar Mohandesi, “Bringing Vietnam Home,” *French Historical Studies* 41, no. 2, April 2018.

registration of off-campus speakers, the administration was clearly either unable or unwilling to actually stifle AWARE's radical rhetoric in the years leading up to 1970.

Indeed, it seems that Jones and his administration generally stuck to their stated commitment of (relatively) equal treatment of student organizations, even ones which were diametrically opposed to the school's leadership. Jones maintained that until AWARE members committed a crime, the administration had no standing to stifle their constitutional rights or confiscate their literature, noting in one letter to a concerned South Carolinian that the ACLU had already gotten involved in one past attempt to confiscate AWARE materials.⁵¹ Especially considering Witten's stated desire to crack down on AWARE, it is remarkable that they were able to remain a legitimately recognized student organization even after their suspension in the spring of 1969 and their radical turn in the fall of that same year.

However, this dynamic would change during the next spring as the calendar turned to the 1970s, a shift which shows the at-time similar strategy between the state government and the administration, because the beginning of AWARE's end actually started off of campus, in one of the most important episodes of Columbia's late 1960's radical politics scene: the closure of the UFO coffeehouse. The UFO was a popular gathering place for counterculture Columbians and in the eyes of conservative authorities, a den of marijuana and sedition. Columbia detective John Earl Dennis explained the horrors which unfolded in the UFO: "The type of people it draws may be good people, but they are different. Their attire is strange. There are tables for seating, but sometimes they sit on the floor, holding hands. It's a terrible situation. We have really got our hands

⁵¹ Letter from Jones to Moore, 11/4/1968, Letter from Jones to Rutledge, 9/25/1969, Jones Presidential Papers, University of South Carolina Archives, South Caroliniana Library, Columbia, South Carolina.

full with this.”⁵² The UFO was also popular with disaffected G.I.s from the nearby Ft. Jackson, a training base for the U.S. Army. It was closed by S.C. solicitor John Foard in January 1970 for drug usage and its owners were arrested; the closure was political victory for the S.C. Attorney General. However, it also triggered sizable backlash from USC students and other young people in Columbia. Protestors marched up and down Main St., where the UFO was formerly located, against what they saw as police overreach and the illegitimate closure of a popular establishment.⁵³ Many considered the former owners/staff who were arrested to be political prisoners.

In the spring of 1970 after the coffeehouse’s closure, the former UFO owners/workers did not stop participating in Columbia’s anti-war and counterculture scene. They turned to AWARE, their cultural and political allies at USC, and formed the “UFO Offensive Coalition” which worked to continue the former coffeehouse’s left-wing political efforts. In one rally in February 1970, titled “A Day of People’s Politics,” former UFO workers, representatives of the Black Liberation Army, the Puerto Rican independence movement, the Black Awareness Coordinating Committee at S.C. State, and anti-war Ft. Jackson G.I.s spoke about the war and student politics at the Drayton Hall theater on USC’s campus. Due to an agreement with the USC administration, the protest was supposed to be “limited to students plus 50 outsiders,” despite the fact that it was held off-campus.⁵⁴

⁵² Quoted in Grose, “Voices of Southern Protest during the Vietnam War Era,” 159.

⁵³ WIS-TV, “University of South Carolina protest against UFO closing, Vietnam War--outtakes,” Moving Image Research Collections, University of South Carolina.

<https://digital.tcl.sc.edu/digital/collection/localtvnews/id/268/rec/52>

⁵⁴ Harry Hope and Jim Wannamaker, “UFO backers gather at USC,” *The Gamecock*, Feb.. 9, 1970.

At least according to Witten, AWARE violated that policy during the meeting and allowed more than 50 non-students, and also violated university policy on fundraising.⁵⁵ The Student Affairs Committee again investigated AWARE in a series of hearings in order to advise Witten on what action he should take. AWARE's position on campus was not helped by the fact that their two co-chairs (Burse and Weatherford) were both arrested during one of those hearings on charges of vandalizing a local draft board office. Eventually, in a little-reported development during the spring semester, AWARE lost their university charter and ceased to be an organization at USC.⁵⁶ However, their effect on the development of left-wing politics at USC had already happened. AWARE was an essential part of the radicalization and escalation of USC's political scene which allowed for the uprising of May 1970 to take place.⁵⁷ It is also important to remember that the individuals who led and worked for AWARE were still on campus and could still use their first amendment rights, with the notable exception of Bursey, who was barred from campus after the draft board vandalism charges.⁵⁸

Taken all together, the dual regimes of the USC administration and local/state government show that the political structures which Carolina student activists worked inside and against were not entirely open, but also not entirely closed. On one hand, it is clear that local and state police were more than willing to use aggressive and possibly illegal tactics to discourage activism, and break up protests, and surveil radical student organizations. In their own way, USC's administration also tried to discourage and

⁵⁵ "AWARE to face charges," *The Gamecock*, Feb. 18, 1970.

⁵⁶ Grose, "Voices of Southern Protest during the Vietnam War Era," 158.

⁵⁷ Brett Bursey, interview by John LaFitte Warren, Feb. 24, 2008.

⁵⁸ There seems to be no indication that his "co-conspirator" Weatherford was charged – apparently being a police informant has its perks.

dissuade protests and radical politics, and eventually cracked down on them much more aggressively, but the less-aggressive toolbox of a university president versus a state law enforcement agency meant that the school's administration ultimately had to allow most protest activity which fell inside the lines of legality.

However, protesting was not the only recourse for addressing student complaints on campus. During the late 1960s USC had multiple forms of electoral student politics, including a student government and elected student leadership of the University Union, which was housed in the Russell House building. Of course, there is an obvious shortcoming to these forms of student politics, at least for campus radicals: their powers are inherently limited to the boundaries of USC's campus. Even if they had been ways for student government to exercise total formal power over the university's operations (and there certainly were not), that power still would not be able to really change the big picture problems of the Vietnam War, segregation, and "the current system" which AWARE and other New Left activists wanted to fight against. While AWARE likely appreciated the short-lived support from student government during the early days of the May unrest, they certainly would not have been under any qualms that intra-USC institutions were viable pathways for revolutionary politics – a perspective which was reaffirmed when the student government broke with protesters after the attempted Russell House occupation.

Nonetheless, student government did prove to be somewhat useful for USC students who were unhappy with internal university policies, such as housing or curfew rules. In November 1969, student senate legislation which included "an extension liberalization of rules for coeds" was approved by the Board of Women Visitors,

allowing *most* women at USC to live without a curfew.⁵⁹ The Student Body President during 1969, Barry Knobel, also pushed for looser housing rules, including “changing rules governing overnight guests, weight lifting equipment, musical instruments, decorations and appliances,” according to an article in *The Gamecock*.⁶⁰ However, it is still clear that the ultimate authority over these policies still rested in the hands of the school’s administration, and thus not the student body or its representatives. *In loco parentis* would stand until years after the 1970 protests, meaning that the administration would continue to hold significant rights over the student body during the entire run-up to the May 1970 uprisings.

Even in the relatively permissible context under the USC administration for student protest and political activity, student government obviously would be the favored forum for student politics. Since it was inherently under the umbrella of the formal university administration, it would have been difficult for student government leaders to directly challenge the authority of said administration. This systemic aspect of student government organizing meant that Harry Walker’s decision to run for Student Body President, and to eventually become the first Black student to hold that office, still continued the trend of Black activists at USC’s generally preferring to work inside the administration’s channels. This trend also demonstrates the ways that the political structures at USC were both open and closed. While Black students were able to utilize certain political structures for their advancement, such as Walker’s win and the establishment of an African-American studies program, the same structures still

⁵⁹ Alyce Youmans, “No-curfew system set for spring,” *The Gamecock*, Nov. 19, 1969.

⁶⁰ “Dorm rules relaxation is sought,” *The Gamecock*, Oct. 1, 1969.

facilitated a system of unequal treatment and opportunity towards Black students at Carolina.

Protest Timing and Activist Cycles

While analyzing local political structures is important for understanding the buildup and breakout of unrest in May 1970, it is also important to understand the larger temporal context which the buildup took place in. In his article “Cycles of Collective Action: Between Moments of Madness and the Repertoire of Contention,” Sidney Tarrow defines protest cycles as “an increasing and then decreasing wave of inter-related collective actions and reactions to them whose aggregate frequency, intensity, and forms increase and then decline in rough chronological proximity,” Tarrow, like most of the scholars studying social movements and political unrest, focuses on general social movements and not student movements specifically, but a version of his elements of cyclicity adapted to the context of a university is still deeply useful. Particularly insightful for this analysis is the importance of social movement organization, which Tarrow attributes to the fact that such organizations have “a vested interest in contentious politics” – protest is their main (or even only) tool.⁶¹ There are few forms of politics more contentious than occupying buildings and throwing bricks at National Guardsmen. More largely, though, both Tarrow and Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow look at the role that social movements play in “framing processes” – the ways that activists and their opponents actively define and construct the world which they are working in.⁶²

⁶¹ Sidney Tarrow, “Cycles of Collective Action: Between Moments of Madness and the Repertoire of Contention,” *Social Science History* 17, no. 2 (1993): 281–307.

⁶² Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow, “Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (2000): 611–39.

The May 1970 demonstrations at USC were only one of many student strikes and uprisings which exploded after the shooting in Kent State. In some ways, these incidents were the last major gasp of the New Left student movement that had played such a prominent role in 1960s politics, as both the SDS and SSOC collapsed at the end of the decade. Since May '70 at USC was so intensely related to those two organization's role in the school's politics, understanding USC's place in that larger story is crucial to understanding what happened on campus. While nearly all of the student politics on campus helped lead towards the flashpoint in May, the relationship between those two organizations (the SDS and SSOC) and their place in the larger New Left movement were the main driving focus of the short-lived activist window which opened in the South during the late 1960s. There had been essentially no anti-war movement in the South, including on college campuses, before 1965, a product of the region's conservatism and pro-military leanings. When anti-war scenes eventually emerged on southern campuses, mostly in the form of SSOC or SDS chapters, they were (at least initially) almost always outnumbered by pro-war opponents, as was clearly the case at USC. Both the SSOC and the SDS moved towards the left over the course of the 1960s, likely also contributing to the emergence of radical activist cores in the South. As the war progressed campuses became more and more opposed to the United States's involvement in Vietnam, particularly after the Tet Offensive of early 1968. These last few years of the decade after Tet (1968-1970) were the peak of anti-war activism in the South.⁶³

The same years also included a radicalization within the ranks of the southern New Left and a massive splintering in the national New Left movement. Student-activists in North Carolina and Georgia, mostly centered around the triangle area and Atlanta metro area,

⁶³ Jeffrey A. Turner, *Sitting in and Speaking Out: Student Movements in the American South 1960 - 1970* (Athens, G.A.: University of Georgia Press, 2010) .

respectively, ramped up their campus anti-war efforts alongside AWARE's gradual radicalization at USC.⁶⁴ It is worth remembering that when AWARE was formed in 1966 it was an ostensibly apolitical organization – the growth in of the organization within just a single generation of students from “free-speech” to advocating for revolution is remarkable. This growth reflects the larger path of the anti-war and New Left movement in the U.S. – as the war continued, the movement against it both grew and became more radical.

While it is unclear how much AWARE organizers were interested or aware of specific organizers at other southern universities, it is clear that their connections to national and regional organizations in the form of the SSOC and SDS show an understanding of the activist cycle which they were working inside of. As AWARE was recovering over the summer break of 1960 from their brush up with Witten and the Student Affairs Committee, the SDS splintered. Its June 1969 national convention was the site of a confrontation between the organization's two major blocs, the Progressive Labor Party (PL) and the Revolutionary Youth Movement (RYM). The PL was a Maoist faction which wanted to almost exclusively focus on organizing the traditional industrial working class and had a dismal view of left-wing and anti-imperial nationalist movements, while the RYM viewed students as a part of the working class and vocally supported Black nationalists and embraced counter-culture. The 1969 SDS convention saw an irrevocable split between the two blocs, culminating in the expulsion of the PL from the organization and the emergence of new lines between the remaining SDS members.⁶⁵

AWARE, while not technically a formal SDS chapter, had clearly chosen a side in the PL/RYM conflict. As they returned to campus in the fall of 1969, their “Bring the war to

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Dan Berger, *Outlaws of America: The Weather Underground and the Politics of Solidarity*, (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2006) .

Columbia” rally on the Horseshoe, as has already been noted, featured Jeff Jones as a leading speaker and was held under the banner of the “South Carolina Revolutionary Youth Movement.” Jones was a national leader of the SDS, but he only came to power after the expulsion of PL from the organization. Jones was elected at the 1969 convention as inter-organizational secretary as the only unopposed candidate in the leadership elections after the PL’s explosion, though the other elections saw the beginning of the SDS’s next (and ultimately fatal) split. This time, the RYM itself split between those who supported the “Weatherman statement” (an article published before the ’69 convention), known as the RYM I/Weathermen, and those who didn’t, known as RYM II. The Weathermen faction dominated the post-PL expulsion leadership elections which included Jones, and their politics notably focused more around internationalism and anti-racism than RYM II.⁶⁶

However, this is not to say that AWARE was a major player within the intra-SDS conflicts, or even a player at all – they would not even have had delegates at the 1969 convention. Instead, it demonstrates that not only were activists at USC paying attention to these debates, but they saw it necessary to fall into one of the camps vying for control of the SDS. This awareness itself shows that AWARE was not working within a bubble – they were actively a part of a much larger movement and thus were talking cues and initiatives from that movement. While the RYM/PL split was ultimately the beginning of the end for the SDS and the New Left’s mass movement (as the Weathermen faction would soon move underground and fashion themselves as guerilla revolutionaries), the fact that AWARE stood on the RYM’s side of the split is significant for understanding the group’s positioning within the late 1960’s activist cycle. The RYM faction was particularly focused on the issue of anti-racism and solidarity with

⁶⁶ Ibid.

national liberation movements, and their victory over the PL represented a win for that strain of New Left thought. As Dan Berger puts it in his description of the 1969 convention, “beyond the messy process of faction fights was the reality that a sizable sector of white American radicals had broken with white supremacy and deliberate, consciously, and proudly allied themselves with people of color and national liberation struggles.”⁶⁷ Bursey would agree with Berger, saying that “the group at the University was clearly engaging on more of this internationalist perspective than domestic perspective. I think that that students at the time were really well read and had a globalist perspective that took what had been a domestic fight for civil rights and took it international.”⁶⁸

This reality is obviously relevant to the political context of the South and at USC, where race was a particularly salient issue in the years following reintegration. By placing themselves on this side of the SDS split, AWARE was recognizing the centrality of race within southern politics and even the politics of USC’s campus. This intra-SDS fight was not the only instance of this sort of awareness on the part of AWARE. The organization hosted a “White Awareness Week” after the Orangeburg Massacre in 1968, in order to raise “white awareness of the political, social, economic, and democratic importance of Black power,” according to Bursey.⁶⁹ Along with AWARE’s work with the Ridgeville freedom school, it is clear that even white student activists on campus recognized that race – and the need for civil rights and Black power – were essential parts of the political context which they were working in. Bursey explained that “the work the SSOC was doing segued from dealing with civil rights and racism in the United States to equating imperialism, our foreign policy, to a racist foreign policy.”⁷⁰ If they wanted to

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Brett Bursey, interview by John LaFitte Warren, Feb. 24, 2008.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

advance their political agenda (of which the advancement of Black Americans was certainly a part) then they had to embrace all parts of that context, not just the Vietnam war or campus issues unique to USC, and work to stitch all of their political goals into a concrete package of qualms with the “establishment.”

Of course, activist cycles work both ways. In the same way that the political context of the late 1960s in the South and New Left movement influenced AWARE, it also influenced the administrative, law enforcement, and activist reaction against AWARE. Witten’s response to AWARE was colored by his understanding of the national student movement, which he claimed to have predicted:

Something out in California started – maybe in the mid 60s, called “a free speech movement.” I used to call it the “filthy speech movement” and it headed [sic] by a guy of the name of Mario Salvio – when they were getting into scrapes with the police and occupying buildings and President Jones said “look at this” and I said, “just give us three or four yeas and we’ll have it here,” and we did.⁷¹

Witten also pointed towards AWARE’s affiliation with the SDS as a cause of the “trouble” on campus during the 60s, further connecting the problems and resistance which the USC administration faced to the national political context of the global student movement which unfolded across the U.S. and Europe.

Forces Acting on the “Regime”

While the dual regime reality of student politics meant that there were multiple sets of political structures to deal with, it also meant that those political authorities also had their own entanglements and obligations. This is particularly important for understanding the reaction of university administrations to student social movements, because unlike state actors,

⁷¹ Charles H. Witten, interviewed by William Savage, May 27, 1987.

administrations do not hold ultimate political power. At least in the context of a state university like USC, school leaders have to navigate their relationships with state governments and law enforcement both on a personal and institutional level. These relationships are important aspects of the political context that activists and authorities are working inside of, because they control the motivations and resources that school administrations have to respond to activists' demands and actions.

In the late 1960s in South Carolina, the political leaders in Columbia were paying close attention to what was happening on USC's campus. After all, it would be hard for them not to – the South Carolina State House, which houses the state legislature and Governor's office, is only three blocks away from the center of USC's campus. Governor McNair's office was heavily involved with the response to protest movements which erupted across South Carolina in the 1960s, including the hospital workers' strike in Charleston and the protests in Orangeburg over segregation and police violence. Of course, this included AWARE's demonstrations and the May 1970 conflagration at USC. Phil Grose, one of McNair's one time aides, described the governor's response as open, yet firm. "Governor McNair said we're going to leave the doors open to the Governor's Office, 24 hours a day. Any student, any faculty member, any parents who want to come in and talk to me or the staff can do so, which they did...it built some confidence that he was really paying attention to what was going on and was doing all he could to protect the well being of the student. But he wasn't going close the damn college."⁷²

South Carolina politicians kept a heavy hand on USC's administration, both relating to protest and unrest, but also day to day operations. "They try to point the finger at us – 'you're

⁷² Philip G. Grose, interviewed by Christian Buckson, Nov. 9 2009, transcript, Thomas Cooper Library, Campus activism and the Vietnam War era collection.

doing a bad job,” Witten said about politicians and the administration⁷³. He specifically referred to solicitor Foard in Columbia who was “after Tom Jones for some reason” and tried to embarrass USC over the relationship between local police and the university, which was a major complaint for many students who felt that local police had too much of a presence on campus and were violating students’ rights. Eventually, they reached an agreement that Columbia or state police would be accompanied by a member of the University Police Department, which while apparently not relieving the students’ complaints, does demonstrate how university policy had to acquiesce to state law. USC could obviously not bar police from campus, even if they wanted to.⁷⁴

When open student revolt broke out in May 1970, this oversight from state politicians naturally continued. Grose described the protests as a natural and spontaneous eruption, which had little clear organization. “It was dangerous in that there wasn’t much communication, there wasn’t an identifiable source representing much of anybody on the student side,” Grose said.⁷⁵ While Grose overstates the level of spontaneity within on USC’s campus, his ideas about the communication between students and the state government reveal that the governor was not interested in using the USC administration as an intermediary between themselves and protestors. He did, however, meet with student government representatives after the attempted Russell House takeover, saying that he was impressed with how they handled the situation.⁷⁶

Communication channels opened between student protest leaders and the Governor’s office after May 11, after the temporary occupation of the administrative building. The next day, as a crowd of over 1,000 protestors took to the Statehouse’s steps a blocks from the

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Grose, “Voices of Southern Protest during the Vietnam War Era,” 164.

⁷⁵ Philip G. Grose, interviewed by Christian Buckson, Nov. 9 2009.

⁷⁶ John Lewis, “McNair meets student leaders,” *The Gamecock*, 5/13/1970.

administrative building, McNair met with five student representatives. It is unclear if any of these five students had been members of AWARE or not, but their demands certainly lined up with the immediate goals which radical students likely had in common with the larger crowd. They demanded that the government grant amnesty to the students who had already been arrested, the removal of law enforcement officers from the Russell House, that the USC administration condemn the state violence on campus and at Kent State as well as the U.S. military's actions in southeast Asia, and finally that McNair speak to the crowd of protesters himself.⁷⁷

The state negotiators initially did not concede a single one of these demands, so after forty minutes of failed negotiations, the five students left the statehouse, claiming they did not expect to be treated as full humans by the state's government. The day earlier, McNair had also declared a State of Emergency in South Carolina and fully deployed the national guard onto campus, who used a large amount of tear gas to aggressively disperse crowds of protesting students. This aggressive strategy was ultimately successful, but it also completely sidelined the administration, in some ways literally. In one instance gas-mask wearing administrators tried to show a crowd of students how to use Vaseline to (apparently) ward off the effects of tear gas outside of the Russell House, just by where crowds of protesters were facing off with SLED and the National Guard. The direct response to the protesters was almost entirely done by the S.C. government, because they had the actual state authority which was necessary for the harsh crackdown which McNair and others saw as the most viable option for maintaining control over the campus.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

National political figures and organizations (and their branches at USC) were also paying attention. South Carolina's Senator Strom Thurmond gave a speech in 1965 arguing that the SDS and SNCC were avenues for communist gain in the US and must be resisted by "every reasonable American."⁷⁸ Somewhat surprisingly, a similar line was even parroted by USC's Young Democrats organization, whose president William Medlin told *The Gamecock* that "some fail to see that the very war which seeks to destroy communism in Southeast Asia is fanning the flames of communism here at home." However, Medlin was also sympathetic to the protestors' goals while being adamantly opposed to their methods. The Young Republicans were much less nuanced in their response, decrying students who they saw as helping "enemies of this country in an effort to demoralize the American people." They launched a so-called "Strike Back" coalition, which received some news coverage but does not seem to have been particularly influential to USC or its leadership.⁷⁹

However, this is not to say that the school's administration was not doing anything during the unrest, even if their power was completely outmatched and overshadowed by the state government. Multiple accounts of the protests agree that one of the most important parts of the regime response was the decision for faculty members to spend the night inside dorms. Over a hundred professors made visits to dorms and forty of them stayed overnight, serving as sources of information and calm throughout the "crisis" and the days following it, which proved effective in helping maintain calm after the first few days of protest. McNair and Jones also agreed to remove police from the Russell House, conceding to at least one of the protestor's demands, which gave Student Government more power over programming at the University Union, also

⁷⁸ Constad, "'Antagonistic Describes the Scene,'" 2.

⁷⁹ "Opinions vary among groups," *The Gamecock*, May 13, 1970.

relieving some of the tension on campus.⁸⁰ While it is clear that these concessions and strategies did include the university's leadership, it is also clear that after protests turned violent the state government was the main influence on the administration's decisions due to their law enforcement and political power.

Synthesis and Conclusions

The bulk of this analysis, and indeed most of the (limited) academic discussion about May 1970 student movement at USC, revolved around AWARE, AFRO, and the formal organizations which "led" the movement. However, the reality is that the vast majority of people involved in the unrest were not members of such an organization. Even at the peak of AWARE's presence on campus, about 60 people were attending their meetings, but the rally on the Statehouse steps in May garnered about a thousand, and hundreds had been on the streets the night earlier as their comrades threw bricks and bottles at law enforcement. While local media and various authorities often decried these groups as "outside agitators," every indication suggests that the vast majority of these crowds were made up of students, or at the very least young residents of Columbia.⁸¹

Of course, this is the key question about May 1970 at USC – what turned student dissatisfaction into an mass uprising instead of a 30 or 40 person picket on the Horseshoe, like most protests at USC? By looking at four structural aspects which were either present or absent at USC in the leadup to 1970, it is clear that the school's political structures enabled the turmoil on campus that was directly triggered by the killings at Kent State University. Student political organizing at USC in the late 1960s capitalized on the opportunity provided by the school's

⁸⁰ Grose, "Voices of Southern Protest during the Vietnam War Era," 164.

⁸¹ Constad, "'Antagonistic Describes the Scene,'" 44.

political structure through a small base of activists who were able to activate a much larger group of politically motivated students. By providing an outlet for more mainstream students' problems (both with the university and more broadly) radical anti-war activists were able to channel student outrage and concern into a string of protests which likely would not have happened otherwise.

Neither AWARE nor its post-disbandment remnants could not have pulled off such large and dramatic demonstrations without outside students since their membership was so small. Likewise, unaffiliated students did not have the organization or political language needed to effectively protest their concerns or to escalate their demands. The short-lived unity between radical left and more establishment students (like student government and Greek life) provided the impetus needed for the unrest to first break out. Even though this unity collapsed (at least partly, with the student government pulling its support) almost as soon as protestors entered Russell House, it had gotten the ball rolling and destabilized the campus enough that more action followed.

However, this loose and informal structure also meant that once the initial rush to the streets had been suppressed, students were unable to continue the aggressive direct action strategies which differentiated the "months of May" from typical student politics at USC. Particularly after AWARE was disbanded earlier that semester the avenues for structured and planned activism shrunk, and the massive presence of police and National Guardsmen obviously dissuaded people from taking to the streets. Even during the midst of the unrest, coordination and planning amongst protesters was informal, ad hoc, and chaotic. Outtake newsreel footage shows a group of students trying to plan their next steps during the night in a disorganized and

incredibly public fashion. One unidentified male student – with heavy sideburns and a strong southern drawl – tells the crowd that

There have been people that suggest blowing up a building – that’s not going to do it. There are people who suggest taking over a building, but let me tell you what’s going to happen if a building is taken over. We’ve found out today that if a building at Carolina is taken over then Governor Robert McNair is going to call out the National Guard –

At that point the student was interrupted by the crowd’s cheers: “let him!,” multiple people shouted. Another student then ran through the options, as one student yelled “one brick will do the trick,” to the group’s laughter. The crowd decided against the options “to sit here,” “to take a walk downtown,” and “to raise a little noise,” in favor of the plan “to raise a little noise and block off the administration building.”⁸²

The exact location and date of the video is unclear, but it appears that it is on the Horseshoe sometime between the attempted Russell House takeover and the Administration building takeover. If this estimation is correct, then it suggests that the May unrest was not strictly organized or planned out – it was in many ways an impromptu expression of the students’ will. The camera in the video of the planning meeting does not show the crowd, just a few men speaking, so it is hard to estimate how many people were involved in the decision. However, the meeting does show that there was some sort of clear leadership – even if they were just protestors who managed to wrangle a crowd around them, the students speaking about the proposed plans clearly had some degree of authority or recognition, even if it was informal. It is also worth noting that at no point during the recording does anyone mention the Vietnam war, or any national politics – the rallying cry is about how USC students are treated. This fact

⁸² WIS-TV, “University of South Carolina protests: students debate next steps—outtakes,” Moving Image Research Collections, University of South Carolina. <https://digital.tcl.sc.edu/digital/collection/localtvnews/id/268/rec/52>.

reinforces the idea that most of the people in the crowds were there as USC students first and New Left activists second (or even not at all). A group of dedicated organizers might have called the student strike and memorial rally which set May 1970's events into motion, but once they started, it was the rest of the student body who kept them going.

May's Legacy – University 101 and continued protests

As student protestors stormed the first floor of the USC administration building on May 11, Thomas Jones was one of the administrators trapped on the second floor. Apparently, as the university president sat behind the barricaded doors, he had the thought that “This is Carolina. For this to happen here, something must be wrong” Nobody but Jones himself can know what he was actually thinking at the time, but Jones's conveniently well-phrased thought was nonetheless emblematic of USC's long-term reaction to the unrest – to sometimes push aside the structural causes of student dissatisfaction in favor of a narrative which argued that students simply did not understand their place in the university.

The most direct example of this dynamic was the establishment of the USC's University 101 programs, which has evolved into a semester-long freshman seminar which the majority of first-year students at USC take. The program is designed for new students to smoothly transition into university life, and is recognized as a part of USC's top-ranking first year experience.⁸³ Its origin is the May 1970 student revolt, and the feeling from the administration that students did not understand the expectations that the school had of them, but also that the university was too impersonal to students.⁸⁴ This feeling was certainly true, at least the parts about the school being

⁸³ “University 101 Programs,” *sc.edu*, University of South Carolina, sc.edu/about/offices_and_divisions/university_101/.

⁸⁴ Dan Friedman (Executive Director of University 101 programs) in conversation with the author, February 2022. <https://otter.ai/u/KHrStABtOpu3WfwZQ-knHwBHpdg>.

impersonal, and was a significant contributor to the willingness of non-radical students to join the 1970 unrest.

The school's recognition of this problem, alongside the gradual liberalization of its campus rules which culminated in the 1975 end of *in loco parentis* policies, alleviated much of the tension from USC's campus.⁸⁵ In many ways these changes could be seen as a long-term win for the moderate faction of the May '70 protestors, though they certainly did not go as far as New Left radicals would have hoped for. However, it would be incorrect to say that the structural elements which allowed the unrest to break out had evaporated when students returned to campus in the fall of 1970; in many ways they are still present today.

Despite USC's reputation as a southern school more concerned about football and Five Points than politics, the past few years have seen multiple high-profile protests triggered by tensions due to the university's administrative structure. In 2015, students walked out of classes and protested against racism and a lack of inclusivity on campus as a part of the USC 2020 Vision campaign,⁸⁶ in 2019, students protested the politicized appointment of Robert Caslen as the university's president, and throughout 2021 students protested against the school's systemic failure to address sexual harassment and violence.⁸⁷ While none of these three outbreaks of student activism (nor the smaller sporadic demonstrations which received little to no news coverage) were as dramatic or costly as the May 1970 unrest, they still directly challenge the narrative that May '70 was a singular blemish on USC's apolitical reputation.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Henry H. Lesesne, *A History of the University of South Carolina, 1940-2000* (Columbia, S.C: University of South Carolina Press, 2001), 256.

⁸⁶ Claire Randall, "Rise Up: 2020 Vision and a New Era of Intersectional Grassroots Activism" (senior thesis, University of South Carolina, April 2017).

⁸⁷ Hannah Wade, "Students find ways to make change outside university boundaries," *The Daily Gamecock*, April 26, 2021. <https://www.dailygamecock.com/article/2021/04/student-advocacy-looks-different-wade-news>.

⁸⁸ For examples of this narrative, see Grose, "Voices of Southern Protest during the Vietnam War Era" and Lesesne, *A History of the University of South Carolina*.

Indeed, it makes sense that these noteworthy protests are still breaking out at USC, because the fundamental tension at the heart of May 1970 is still present. USC's political structure is still in the protest-encouraging state of being neither closed nor open – students are permitted to organize and protest as long as they follow certain guidelines and regulations, but have no ability to exercise formal power on campus outside of the very limited authority of Student Government and the Residence Hall Association. This status means that students have little recourse outside of protest to express their dissatisfaction or to try and force administrators to make changes or reforms, so when those dissatisfactions boil over, some sort of protests are almost inevitable. Students are put in a position where the only way to make change on campus is to try and force authorities to do so, so the disruptive nature of protest is both attractive and necessary – asking nicely only gets you so far. Should these moments which require disruption emerge at the same point as other protest-facilitating variables, such as suitable levels of campus coalition building and a wider aggressive activist cycle on the upswing, USC's leadership should not be surprised if campus explodes as it did in May 1970. This is particularly the case today, as the current USC administrators at times seem inclined to downplay the importance of student activism, much like Thomas Jones did in the leadup to 1970.⁸⁹ As that month's events at USC show, even schools with placid and conservative reputations can break out into unrest and violence if the conditions are right.

⁸⁹ For one example, see then-university president Harris Pastides's refusal to acknowledge the USC 2020 Vision campaign's role in the installation of plaques about the school's history of slavery on the Horseshoe: Katharine Thompson Allen and Lydia Mattice Brandt, "'The Right Time': Performing Public History at the University of South Carolina, 2010–2020" In *Invisible No More: The African American Experience at the University of South Carolina*, ed. Robert Greene and Tyler D. Parry (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 2021) 167-86.

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