An Unsung Hero in the Fight for Civil Rights

ALSO INSIDE:
College Protests
Anarchy and Ambition
Peace Society
Protests erupted in 1972 throughout the country.
On May 8, 1972, New Paltz students went from dorm to dorm at the state university, pulling fire alarms, their reaction quick and spontaneous. Few students had television sets, but word spread quickly about President Nixon’s broadcast announcing he had ordered the mining of North Vietnam ports.

Just hours after Nixon’s address, around midnight, the college’s assistant director of housing placed a frantic call to campus security.

As fire alarms continued going off throughout the early morning hours, a sympathetic professor allowed students to access the administration building, where they got to work. After placing furniture in stairwells to block the building’s upper levels, protesters locked the outer doors, then smeared epoxy cement in keyholes to prevent anyone from entering.

With the uprising spreading rapidly across campus—and the nation—students broke into the college print shop and removed...
mimeograph machines and typewriters. By the time State Police arrived later that morning, the pilfered equipment had already produced an “Information Bulletin” and a flyer titled “Where Will Escalation Stop?”

**National Protests**

New Paltz residents were not alone. President Nixon’s decision to further escalate the war in Indochina triggered a wave of indignation across the state and around the country. Hundreds of Columbia University students marched down Broadway, snarling traffic, while at Cornell, approximately 100 demonstrators occupied the engineering library for several days. Both *The New York Times* and the *Chronicle of Higher Education* agreed that the demonstrations were the most disruptive in years.

At the start of 1972, there was little indication that within a few months, campuses would erupt in some of the most turbulent protests since those following the killing of four Kent State students by Ohio National Guardsmen in 1970. Bellwether organizations, like Students for a Democratic Society, were in disarray. Other
President Nixon’s decision to escalate the war in Indochina triggered a wave of indignation.

reported a “greater degree of apathy” among the student body than in years past. A Vassar College peace vigil in Poughkeepsie that same month only drew single digits. Turnout was equally anemic at SUNY Cortland, where agents of the New York State Police Bureau of Criminal Investigation (BCI) reported that “all anti-war demonstrations during the current academic year have been poorly attended.”

**BCI Spies**

The BCI was in an excellent position to know. After all, the investigators assigned to its countersubversive unit monitored many demonstrations in the state during the 1960s and 1970s. Like every large police agency in the country at that time, the State Police devoted significant resources to the surveillance of groups advocating social change. As BCI agents later told members of a New York State Assembly Task Force, plainclothes officers attended demonstrations undercover and observed the activities of protest leaders because they feared potential violence. During those turbulent years, college campuses across the Empire State were honeycombed with informants who collected intelligence on political activism and funneled what they learned back to the BCI and other agencies like the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Dapper “BCI men” also routinely visited campuses to observe rallies, logging the names of speakers and others in attendance, and even snapping photographs of participants.

The BCI spies knew that behind the clichés about student apathy, there was a far more complex reality of persistent campus protest. Students were organizing around a variety of issues, demanding a greater voice in campus governance, and lobbying for equal rights for gays and lesbians. Despite its efforts to tame domestic dissent through “Vietnamization”
of the war, the Nixon administration’s aggressive maneuvers in Indochina also fueled campus protest. The so-called Vietnamization strategy shifted the US role to bombing targets in support of South Vietnamese forces who were expected to take on the brunt of ground combat operations. Between April 1971 and February 1972, American troops in Vietnam fell from 281,000 to 45,000 as the war was increasingly fought in the air. In June alone, US forces dropped more than 100,000 tons of bombs on targets in North and South Vietnam.

Although Vietnamization and a draft lottery made it less likely that college students would be drafted, it was the seeming brutality of a “remote-controlled” air war that drove dissent. At the end of March, North Vietnamese forces crossed over into South Vietnam, routing the South Vietnamese forces before quickly capturing Quang Tri City. A desire to influence negotiations with North Vietnam (which were by then at an impasse) and retaliate for the North Vietnamese incursion motivated the president’s decision to escalate further.

**Roads Blocked**

The preferred mode of militant action on campus was to block traffic on major highways. In Santa Barbara, California, protesters briefly occupied an airport runway and shut down a three-mile segment of US Route 101 for two hours. During rush hour, demonstrators in Chicago abandoned cars on the Eisenhower Expressway. In Boulder, Colorado, students used cars and burning logs to block a highway bridge and several major traffic arteries, as well as a Denver-Boulder turnpike. Protesters also blocked traffic on highways near the University of Iowa, Michigan State and Northwestern University. Meanwhile, attempts to do the same in Gainesville, Florida, and outside the campus of the University of New Mexico, resulted in violent clashes with police.

On May 9, more than 500 students marched down Route 32 towards the Village of New Paltz, where they blocked traffic at a major intersection in the Village. With traffic at a standstill, students passed out leaflets to puzzled motorists as a BCI investigator on the scene snapped photos, collected flyers, and identified protesters.

Back on campus, activists attended an afternoon rally on the campus quad where they discussed plans to block the New York State Thruway. Unfortunately for the activists, an informant working for the BCI also attended and tipped off the State Police.

By 3:15 p.m., dozens of students piled into their cars and left campus for the nearest Thruway exit, hoping that their action would force motorists to stop and think of what their country was doing in Vietnam. “Think, reflect as you sit in your cars about the situation of the world, about the situation of our country,” a flyer exhorted. “Understand, please, that this reflecting pause is necessary—for things can hardly continue as they are now.”

State Troopers met the student motorcade at the interchange but let them onto the Thruway after receiving assurances they would not attempt to block traffic. The protesters did not keep their word. Traveling in the right-hand lane, their motorcade first slowed to a crawl before eventually occupying both lanes and coming to a full stop. Photographs taken by BCI plainclothesmen show a frenzied scene as long-haired youth stand defiantly atop stopped cars, while others play a game of cat-and-mouse with the police who seek to regain control. In the end, New Paltz’s Thruway action involved as many as 125 students in eighteen cars holding up traffic for twenty-five minutes. After protestors refused to move their vehicles, Thruway Authority snowplows came to do the job for them.

Besides militant actions like highway closures, students also sought to demonstrate their dis-
pleasure in more strategic ways. Notably, they targeted corporations that profited from the carnage in Indochina. A day after their Thruway blockade, on May 10, around 600 SUNY New Paltz students attended a 9 a.m. meeting to plan the day’s major action: a walk from campus to the IBM headquarters in nearby Poughkeepsie. Later known for developing some of the earliest personal computers, during the Vietnam War, the technology firm had a Pentagon contract to assist in target selection for bombing runs.

Later that morning, as 150 activists proceeded to Poughkeepsie, they circulated a flyer indicting what was then the nation’s fifth-largest corporation for profiting from the war: “The automated air war which is killing 300 Indochinese a day,” it read, “would have a hard time continuing without IBM’s complicity.” By 2 p.m., after an influx of Vassar students doubled the size of the procession, as many as 300 marchers advanced along Route 9W to the Oakwood School, a Quaker institution, where students would meet with the IBM plant’s general manager and a company attorney. Leading this part of the protest was 22-year-old Michael Stamm, a Quaker peace activist whose parents were teachers at Oakwood. According to one press account,
This article draws chiefly on police intelligence files housed at the State Archives. The New York State Division of State Police Non-Criminal Investigation Case Files (A0795) is an invaluable resource for historians of the postwar US. In addition to surveillance reports from BCI agents, the collection includes photographs of student protests and news clippings from dozens of publications. In the course of carrying out their duties, State Police investigators acted as archivists by collecting flyers, posters, and other ephemera at the sites of demonstrations. Since many activist groups of the early 1970s were short-lived and failed to keep archives of their own, the State Police collection is likely to have the only extant copies of such materials. On file at the New York State Library is a 1977 Assembly Task Force report which offers a concise history of the BCI’s counter-subversive unit and explains how it employed a range of investigative techniques—including surveillance at many public demonstrations, the use of paid and unpaid informants, and maintenance of a sophisticated filing system to keep track of so-called subversives. For more on BCI surveillance of campus groups, see “Investigating ‘Subversives’” by Seth Kershner, Winter 2022.

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IBM parking lot property, they were promptly arrested by Poughkeepsie police.

More arrests followed on May 12, in a coordinated action that demonstrated how antiwar dissent could knit together a diverse coalition of students from public and private colleges, two- and four-year schools. As around fifty students walked twelve miles from the Stone Ridge campus of Ulster County Community College, another group of Bard College and New Paltz activists marched from a local center of antiwar activity: Kingston’s Trinity United Methodist Church. The two groups converged at the center of Kingston, where they proceeded in a loop around Academy Green, picketing the local draft board offices and a military recruiting station. Police arrested at least a dozen demonstrators for briefly blocking traffic.

The May 1972 protests were the last significant demonstrations of the Vietnam era. Largely forgotten today, they represented both a collective cry against escalation in Vietnam and a rejection of political apathy. An anonymous writer of a leaflet passed around during the IBM protests wrote that the May 1972 actions grew out of an “awareness among Americans that the greatest threat to our society lies not in the action of any ‘foreign enemy’ but in the inaction of our citizenry.” Protesters may not have stopped the war in 1972, but their remarkably militant actions shattered the myth of student complacency and challenged their fellow citizens to question their own complicity in the Vietnam War.