



## How SDS Imploded: an Inside Account

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Fifty years ago, this June, the Students for a Democratic Society held its last united National Convention. It was torn apart by ideologically driven factions, each claiming to have the only correct approach for saving America. Ironically, SDS was initiated by the anti-authoritarian, but socialist oriented, League for Industrial Democracy. Al Haber, SDS's first president, encouraged it to work with any group that was seeking social change.

It may be unpopular to say, but extremism from within SDS destroyed it, not the government or the rightwing. Sure, they would have liked to see that happen, but in the end the leftist SDS leadership was demanding their supporters to conform to a party line as they embraced rightwing Senator Barry Goldwater's advice from 1964, "Extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice."

The potential to drift toward extremism is as possible today as it was in 1960s. It may seem odd to look back fifty years at a student organization's collapse as having any relevance to our major political parties today. But it is relevant to how the Democrats and Republicans craft their message and policies in the upcoming 2020 presidential and congressional elections. Candidates in each party are trying to rally their party's core supporters in order to win primary elections. That is a necessary and important activity, however it is a false assumption that it is okay to ignore those outside those targeted groups unless they accept a core party doctrine. Because, then they will likely reject both the candidate and their party.

The following perspective is based on my experience from being in SDS and from being involved today's politics as an activist. Recommending that extremism be avoided is not heard often from the left or the right. But a little history shows how it can undermine a great cause or organization.

By the time of its implosion in 1969, SDS had become the broadest and largest US student movement organization following WWII. It excelled in promoting the free exchange of ideas and solutions. Kirkpatrick Sale wrote in his book SDS, that their "literature list had ninety-two papers and pamphlets (forty-nine by SDSers). These were distributed widely to SDS chapters. They probably produced more than any other student group had ever before."

The organization was non-hierarchical, rotating elected leadership annually, with chapters independent of any central control and membership open to all. Having five members

paying a \$5 membership was all that was needed to form a chapter, which did not have to adhere to a national political line or report its independent stands to a national office. You didn't even have to be a paid member, like myself, to be an SDS campus leader. By the summer National Convention of 1969, seven years after their 1962 National Convention, where only 35 members were present, convention attendance had swelled to well over a thousand. Despite such success, it was torn apart internally by its national leaders vying for control of SDS based on who had the most valid beliefs for determining its future.

In its last year, SDS leaders spurned a broader outreach to the extent that even members, including past presidents, were cast out if they failed to follow a particular political line. As a result, SDS lost membership and leadership of the student protest movement. There is a cautionary tale here for both the Democrat and Republican Parties. The intensity and certainty in one's beliefs is not a substitute for presenting programs based on rational decision-making that preserve our liberties. My experience in SDS provided me an insight on what went wrong and how their errors need not be repeated.

I was a campus SDS leader with a role far below the radar of the SDS national leaders but still visible enough to be land on the Congressional House on Un-American Activities Committee's (HUAC) organizational chart, exhibit number 257, listing the most prominent SDS subversives. The SDS leadership had a far more accurate assessment of my importance.

I attended Bowling Green State University during the late 60's. Like many state colleges in Ohio, at that time, it had a conservative student body. During the 1968 presidential election, a poll showed that BGSU students supported Richard Nixon over Hubert Humphrey 64 percent to 18 percent; even though Nixon only beat Humphrey by 1%. When George Lincoln Rockwell, the leader of the American Nazi party, visited our campus in March 1967, he attracted an audience of close to three thousand who attentively listened to his message that he was fighting for the "White majority" in this country. On campus that was a pretty big majority, only 1% of our student body were Black students.

Within this socially and politically conservative student culture, there still was a sense of rebellion among students like me who resented the student leaders. We felt ignored because we did not belong to the student organizations that influenced campus politics. Perhaps, this was similar to how conservative blue-collar workers felt in 2016; being ignored by what some called "the elites" who were accused of controlling the federal government

I came across a document called the Port Huron Statement that was spreading among college campuses. Over 100,000 copies were printed and distributed by Students for a Democratic Society. It described a concept of "participatory democracy", how citizens, including students, should have some meaningful say about how their government or work environment operated. I liked that idea. Why not have some control over your life?

I joined a handful of students in the fall of 1966 to start an SDS chapter in the hope of influencing campus and national policies. We barely knew each other and for the most part we came from working class families. The SDS national meeting that previous summer had focused on supporting local chapters' efforts around issues, such as fighting for more relevant student "governments" and obtaining greater social freedoms on campus, while also opposing on-campus military recruiting and being drafted to fight in the Vietnam War.

I was surprised to find out that we were immediately accused by the College Administration and student government leaders of being un-patriotic, and possibly under the influence of the communists. Now, I had grown up reading about communists from John Birch pamphlets that were left at my dad's barbershop by his customers. I always wanted to see what one looked like. Turns out they looked like me. Anyone could be a communist sympathizer, if they didn't watch out what they were asking for.

After being elected our SDS chapter's president, our chapter worked with other campus groups to promote policies that the average student wanted but thought they could not get. As a result, an SDS member was elected Student Body President and a number of other SDS members were also elected to student government. Along with allies, we were able to get the student council, which still had a majority of conservative students, to establish a draft counseling service, dismantle campus restrictions on female students' social behavior, pass a student bill of rights which overturned other university rules, and finally approved adding a black student as a voting representative on the council to give them a position of power to address racist policies on campus.

In the fall of 1968, I hitchhiked to other campuses in Ohio and on the east coast to see what other SDS chapters were up to. It was an eye-opening experience. The real difference I found from our chapter's incremental approach of talking with other students on campus about our common problems became apparent when I visited the ivy league SDS campus chapters. Their members were from much wealthier parents than mine. The students I met were intellectually sophisticated, talking endlessly about the nature of class conflict and Marxism. Being a political science major, I had read my share of Karl's works and was familiar with Marx's analysis of capitalism and the inevitable working-class revolution. His ideas were worthy of exploring but I found that a number of chapters had approached Marxism almost as a religious dogma. When I attended one of the last SDS National Council meetings held, during the Christmas break of 1968 in Ann Arbor, Michigan, I encountered that orientation again.

Membership in SDS had exploded, which always had far fewer paid members than non-paying ones. One of the three top SDS elected national leaders, Robert Pardun, wrote in his book Prairie Radical, that by December of 1967, "On most campuses there were often ten or more active SDS members who had not paid their dues for every member who had, and we estimated about 30,000 de facto members in some 250 chapters." Others estimated that their numbers had reached 100,000 members and close to 400 chapters by the spring of 1969.

Despite having a constitution that said SDS "Membership is open to all who share the commitment of the organization to democracy as a means and a social goal" there was one particular group, the Progressive Labor Party, that set about to undermine that orientation. In 1965 they were just a small a tight-knit group; you had to be approved for membership by their leaders before being admitted. They advocated a Maoist type of communism, first supporting China but ultimately deciding that Albania was the best role model for America. Their immediate goal, however, was to take over SDS. They succeeded in doing that at the last legitimate SDS Convention, six months following the national SDS meeting I attended, where I encountered them for the first time.

How could such a small group, with such extremely anti-democratic views, take over a national organization that had advocated participatory democracy? The answer was that they won over converts through preaching that only they had the correct answers to creating a new political

order. Over the three days of the SDS gathering, I saw how a strong, crystal clear belief system based on some simple and seemingly logical premises had the power to enlist those desperately wanting to overthrow a corrupted political and social system.

I had expected to find something more akin to the atmosphere that greeted me when I walked through the main hall of the college building hosting the SDS meeting. Upon entering I was met by a chaotic circus of competing ideas and slogans. Colorful posters hung on the brick walls with a cacophony of barkers, wearing buttons with every conceivable anti-war, pro-worker, anti-establishment, and pro-revolution slogan imaginable. They were hawking their displays of slim pamphlets and thick books, stacked on flimsy card tables. It was the movement's version of a county fair to display competing ideas and promoting different approaches to create a new America and for some a new world.

This diversity reflected the grassroots non-voting membership which comprised easily two-thirds of the roughly 1,500 members attending that gathering. The three National Councils, which met before the National Convention in June 1969, were meant to discuss and vote on positions that would direct SDS's national officers. I estimated that this direction would be coming from only a small percentage of the SDS members present, since only the paid-up members could vote.

The council's general assemblies were dominated by the two largest factions clashing, the PLP and RYM (Revolutionary Youth Movement), as they prepared for their ultimate match later in June at the National Convention. At this time, many SDS members were searching for a more comprehensive political philosophy and theory than what the Port Huron Statement had provided. Its bottom up decision-making approach and encouragement of pursuing differing innovative solutions, was found to be inadequate by PLP and RYM, who replaced it with a top down authority structure requiring adherence to their own straitjacket beliefs.

More importantly, their basic pitch for SDS's future was to reject liberalism, which was apparent when I saw the front page of the SDS's newspaper, the New Left Notes, that was issued for the National Council meeting. It featured a Picture of Chairman Mao with the headline "Combat Liberalism," followed by an article declaring that liberalism "stands for unprincipled peace, thus giving rise to a decadent, philistine attitude and bring about political degeneration..." It could have been written by the right-wing Young Americans for Freedom campus group, as they also hated liberalism.

The council meeting's final session came to a crashing end, with the main hall literally divided down the center aisle separating RYM and PLP followers chanting competing slogans: "Ho Ho Ho Chi Minh" versus "Mao Mao Mao Tse-tung." It was theater of the absurd; so distant from the real concerns of the tens of thousands of students who had sustained SDS as a movement leader.

The following SDS National Convention ended when PLP won a critical vote and RYM led a walkout of the convention, declaring that they were the legitimate SDS. Within months, the organization collapsed with no functioning SDS national office in touch with its hundreds of chapters.

The surge of campus organizing to fight the war and promote civil rights was immense before SDS's demise. An Urban Research Corporation survey of student protestors at over two hundred universities and colleges during the first six months of 1969 found that over 200,000 students

had participated in campus protests, many associated with local SDS chapters. But as the national organization began to apply class theory to every conflict, and after the national office split between RYM (which became the Weathermen) and PLP, fewer students joined, while many older members drifted away.

Without any national student organization to sustain such a wide and diverse protest movement, right-wing political organizations began to chip away at the progressive measures on campuses that SDS helped initiate. The Reagan era followed waving the banner of individual independence and liberty, which has since led to concentrating wealth into the hands of ever fewer people, and a steady attack on programs that protect personal rights.

The extremist beliefs that brought down SDS, occurred from within. They were not imposed on it by the government or right-wing groups. SDS's demise occurred because its leadership embraced absolute truths; demanding that there was only one true path moving forward; and labeling those not adopting their vision as enemies. Compromises and reason were their poisons; they blurred that vision by challenging the official pronounced premises and offering alternative ones.

This history may warm the hearts of conservatives who will gleefully see SDS's destruction as the result of flying too close to a socialist sun, which blinded their logic and melted their wings. That perspective feeds upon the same diet of hubris that undermined SDS's democratic foundation; the belief that your world view is the only correct one, such as considering that anything socialistic is bad.

For example, the repeated statements made by President Trump, his followers and a good portion of Republicans, would have the public believe that adopting democratic socialist programs would curtail our personal freedoms. By an imaginary leap in logic they point to Venezuela's dictatorial President Nicolas Maduro as the inevitable result. Rather they should look to their own libertarian Cato Institute to realize how ridiculous that assumption is. Cato Institute's Human Freedom Index, which presents the state of human freedom in the world based on a broad measure that encompasses personal, civil, and economic freedom, gives the US a ranking of 17. There are a dozen countries with socialistic programs who score higher than us.

In fact, SDS's implosion is more of a cautionary tale for the Republican Party than the Democratic Party. Because, at this time the Republicans' party is practicing the most extremist beliefs. This is most evident in the treatment of women, as the Republicans have allowed religious doctrines to abrogate personal freedoms. The founders of this nation, being very aware of the religious wars that had torn apart their homeland of England, incorporated the separation of church and state into our constitution.

The Republican Party's base now consists of those who have no tolerance for a democracy that allows citizens to control their own bodies. Instead they insist that their religious beliefs must dictate the most intimate personal decisions for everyone. So that now President Trump, who leads a democracy based on individual liberties, is accusing women of killing children because he needs the votes of religious fundamentalists, who refuse to acknowledge that the freedom from being controlled by religious doctrine is the basis of our democracy.

How is it that the Republican Party, which was born out of the desire to free black citizens from slavery, now is leading the charge to require all women to adhere to a dogma that many do not

choose to follow? While both Democrats and Republicans could learn from SDS's experience, that lesson is most immediately applicable to the practices being pursued by Republicans toward women. Their traditional conservative values are now being undermined by those within the party who are exhibiting the same behavior of promoting absolute truths that destroyed SDS in the 60s.

To quote Barry Goldwater again, he predicted this threat to the Republican Party over fifty years ago when he said. "Mark my word, if and when these preachers get control of the [Republican] party, ... it's going to be a terrible damn problem. Politics and governing demand compromise. But these Christians believe they are acting in the name of God, so they can't and won't compromise."

When religious dogma trumps democratic values, America's liberties are far more threatened than any bread and butter socialized services that the radical right so loudly accuse of endangering our freedom.