

JUST ASKING QUESTIONS MAY 6, 2024

A Columbia '68 Revolutionary Takes Stock of Today's Protests

By Benjamin Hart, staff editor at *Intelligencer* who joined *New York* in 2017



A scene from '68. Photo-Illustration: *Intelligencer*; Photo: Getty Images

Columbia University hasn't seen a student movement as intense as the one currently engulfing campus since 1968. Students opposed to the Vietnam War — as well as the school's encroachment into Morningside Heights and other issues — occupied Hamilton Hall and the president's office, and the NYPD responded in violent fashion. James Simon Kunen was among them, and his 1969 book *The Strawberry Statement*, which Kunen wrote as a 19-year-old sophomore, became one of the defining documents of that chaotic period. (It was turned into a movie the following year.) With its sardonic but urgent tone and depiction of a campus and world gone mad, much of it feels like it could have been written right now. Kunen went on to become a journalist — he

wrote a book about his time as a reporter in Vietnam in 1970 — and then a public defender, a corporate communications professional, and an ESL teacher. I spoke with him about how he views today's revolutionaries and what his generation did and didn't accomplish.

Since you wrote *The Strawberry Statement*, you've lived a very full life. How much do you connect with your old revolutionary self? Are you the same guy now?

Yeah, I think I still have the same values and I still try to do my bit for social justice. Now it takes more the form of writing postcards to voters and calling up my congressmen and senators. But I still care about the same things.

Do you support the protesters at Columbia, and what do you make of the parallels to 1968?

Yes, I do. I feel like when you're confronted with a situation that is intolerable, then you just should not tolerate it. And in 1968, the situation was that I was a student with a college deferment, and so some young man was in the jungles of Vietnam in my place, either killing people or getting killed, and that was completely intolerable to me, and I just felt compelled to do something about it. And I think today, students see that 34,000 people have been killed in Gaza, thousands of them children, and they just feel like they have to do something.

You could argue that there was a bit more of a connection between Columbia and the Vietnam War in 1968. The school had an affiliation with the Institute for Defense Analyses, and there's the deferments issue you just mentioned, and the direct involvement of college-age Americans in Vietnam. In this case, students want Columbia to divest from Israel, among other things, but their demands are perhaps more tangential to what's actually happening in Gaza. Were your demands more coherent?

First of all, your premise is correct. I agree with the factual things that you've laid out. But to the extent they're looking backward, these protesters are not looking just at 1968; they're looking at 1985. And in 1985, students at Columbia protested demanding that the university divest from any investments in South Africa. And the university did. The protesters actually won that. And that, of course, was as a protest against apartheid.

So here, they're thinking — well, it's a little unclear to me, and I'm not sure how clear it is to them — that the university should divest from companies that somehow are engaged with Israel, do business in Israel, make money from Israel. I read that in some places, they want to sever ties with academic

institutions in Israel. So let's go back to '68. Actually, the university did ultimately drop its ties with IDA. But certainly, any effect that would've had on the war in Vietnam would be negligible. And if Columbia University now somehow sold all of its stock in any companies that do business in Israel, I don't think any protester would tell you that that somehow is going to really slow down the Israeli war machine.

I go back to feeling like you have to do something, so you reach out to try to affect something that's within your grasp, within your reach. And so you say, "Well, here I am at this university. This university is doing business as usual with Israel. Israel every day is imposing collective punishment on the civilian population of Gaza, which is not justifiable by anything, even the atrocities of October 7. So I can't just go to school and have a picnic on the lawn and go and get my credits. I have to reach out and do something that I can reach. So here's my university. Let's do this."

The tone of the book is funny, a little bit dreamy, but also circumspect. You're not even sure if you're totally doing the right thing or that you agree with everything that's going on around you, but you feel it's the right thing.

And you can make the case that what we did in 1968 backfired horribly, that it in some way contributed to Nixon's election and prolonged the war. I'll tell you what — I was just looking at *The Strawberry Statement* for the first time in a long, long time, and I write in there that when I was a little boy, I saw Davy Crockett in a Disney production say, "Decide what you think is right and do it." I think that's a good general principle to live by. But any general principle, in some specific situations, is not going to work out.

So it's a no-regrets attitude, but with the idea that the shit might hit the fan despite your best intentions.

Yeah, but please don't get me wrong, I'm not saying that. I'm just saying you could make the *case* that we prolonged the war. I don't know. Ultimately, I think the war ended not because 500,000 Americans marched on Washington, which they did repeatedly. The war ended because the Vietnamese won it. That's what happened. Anything else is speculation about alternative universes.

Do you have any sympathy for administrators, college presidents — not just at Columbia — who are trying to navigate this treacherous territory now that you're grown up, so to speak?

Yeah. Without knowing very much about it, I would just say that older people, like college administrators, tend to have learned the lesson that the perfect is

the enemy of the good, and that half a loaf is better than none. And so they look at these situations and think, *Maybe we can negotiate this*. And 19-year-olds haven't accepted that lesson yet. I know that I, in 1968, was saying, *No, I'm leaving this building when and only when our demands are met. Period*. So that's a tough position. Administrators today also have this situation where the waters are being muddied up with all these allegations of antisemitism and dangers to Jewish students, which to the best of my knowledge are greatly exaggerated, and which are being manipulated by people who don't give a rat's ass about antisemitism, except insofar as it helps them get votes sometimes, either from antisemites or from Jews, as a situation may require.

The Columbia administration cracked down in '68 in an extremely heavy-handed way. The violence was on another level compared to now, at least so far.

Apparently, the New York City Police Department is better trained and better disciplined now than it was then. Not to say that there was no violence by the police the other night ...

Given their conduct during the George Floyd protests, I was sort of surprised there wasn't more.

I agree. I'm surprised as well.

From the administration's point of view, I'm wondering what the optimal thing for them to have done in this situation is, once the protesters occupied the building. Sending in the cops is not good. But if 19-year-olds don't want half a loaf, as you say, should they just be left alone? Should the school go ahead with classes and wait things out? I wonder what your perspective is, as somebody who has been on the other side of all this.

I would say that it was a very bad look for President Shafik to testify before Congress, and when Congresswoman Stefanik told her to jump, Shafik replied, *How high?* — and then the very next morning she calls in the police to clear out the tent encampment from the field.

Apparently, by the internal protocols of Columbia, she was supposed to consult with the University Senate. And the University Senate said, *Yeah, no, don't do that*. And she did it anyway. So that particular bust, I think, was, for lack of a better word, stupid.

So she made her own mess here, but then when it gets to a certain point, there's no good option anymore.

Exactly. She made her mess and that, I think, redoubled the size and

commitment of demonstrators, and then she ended up with the situation at Hamilton Hall. I am not in position to say what would've been a better thing for her to do at that point. I'm not a college president.

There's tons of media focus on this story, and there was tons of focus on the protests in '68. I sometimes feel like there's too much focus on a relatively small group of young people, and that may in fact be drawing attention away from the cause they are committed to. Did you ever feel that way when you were protesting? Do you feel that way now?

In '68, I did not feel that way. In '68, I felt *the whole world is watching*. That's something we chanted, and we were thrilled to see demonstrations starting up across the United States and in Tokyo and in Paris. Not always for the same specific demands, but it all seemed part of a tidal wave of youth that was going to cleanse the earth and sweep away racism and oppression and bring in the world that we wanted to live in. Naïve, but that's what I felt — totally thrilled.

Is it getting too much attention now? A few thoughts on that. One is if you look closely at any demonstration, you're going to see some things you don't like. There was video of a masked person with a hammer breaking a window in Hamilton Hall. I don't like that. Nobody likes that.

I saw that video about 200 times. It got magnified.

Exactly. Or you see a woman standing with a sign in front of the Sundial at Columbia that says " Hamas's Next Target," pointing at kids with Israeli flags. You don't like that. So you look closely at any demonstration, you're going to see some things you don't like, but if you subtract the whole demonstration, then what have you got? Silence. And I don't think silence is what we need right now. So I understand what you're saying, but ...

It is correct that we spend way too much time debating whether or not the demonstrators are justified or not, or whether they can be tolerated or not, or whether they're antisemitic or not, and not nearly enough time talking about the thousand children in Gaza with amputated limbs, not to mention the 10,000 who are dead. But are the demonstrations distracting from that? Would we be talking more about the children if there were no demonstrations? I don't think so.

No, probably not.

I would never have known this, but as I was preparing for this interview, I saw that on Tuesday night, the second night of Passover, there were hundreds of arrests in Grand Army Plaza of people in sweatshirts that said, "Not in Our

Name” — mostly Jewish people sitting down in the street in front of Senator Schumer’s apartment demanding or imploring him to not vote for \$13 billion of no-strings-attached military aid to Israel.

I live about a ten-minute walk from there and heard about something, but I did not know there were so many arrests.

I didn’t know, you didn’t know. Maybe if they had broken a window with a hammer, we’d all know about it. I’m not in favor of that, but so it sort of comes back to people doing what they can. And the idea that *Hey, if all these kids would stop raising hell, then there wouldn’t be a right-wing backlash and we could get down to talking about the issues, and the real horror of Gaza?* Not so much.

You said you were naïve about all the ending racism and sexism and so forth, but do you think that that whole global movement that swept the world in 1968 had a real effect on the world in the end?

Yeah, I think so. I mean, you can’t say that “But for the existence of the movement, these following things would not have happened.” But things that subsequently happened include women’s rights, gay rights, some real advances in racial equality. And I think the, let’s say “uproar” of the late ’60s, early ’70s, put everything in play and created some disorder from which new order could arise.

You could say it succeeded more socially than politically.

You’d have to say that when you look at what’s happened politically.

I have one other thing to say that I was thinking about. Again, with that video that we saw of somebody breaking the window in Hamilton Hall — that looks like violence. But think about it. Think of it as if there were Palestinian babies in Hamilton Hall behind them, and they’re breaking barricades in order to put themselves between the babies and men advancing with machine guns and bombs, in order to actually stop violence.

That’s a counterintuitive way of looking at it.

I know that if we were in a debating club, you could completely pull apart everything that I just said, but at least in the minds of the demonstrators themselves, they are putting themselves with arms locked to try to protect the babies from the falling bombs behind them. And you should see the occasionally annoying things that the demonstrators do in that context.

One could also argue in a debate club that the people organizing these protests are using slogans like “From the River to the Sea,”

and displaying maps that show Israel no longer existing and so forth. And that may seem threatening or dangerous to Jewish students.

Yeah, absolutely. You could certainly also sit down and have a quiet talk with the demonstrators and say, “Hey, let’s be goal-oriented. What do you want to happen? Okay, you want the bombs to stop falling and you want food and water to get in? Is what you’re doing a step in that direction, or is there something else that you could do that would better advance that cause?” So yeah, there’s lots of room for constructive criticism.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity