

What Happened in New Haven?

by Peter Sklar

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We arrived on the Yale Green at about 9:30 Friday morning where there were maybe 4 or 500 people gathered together around the bandstand near the Southeast corner of the Green. The people there seemed happy and peaceful. There were some people among the crowd who didn't seem to belong there: older people wearing white shirts, jackets and ties carrying walkie-talkies, cameras or sound equipment; clean-cut young men with administrative gleams in their eyes wearing beads and 'Free Huey' buttons on their shirts. The students and younger people in the crowd did not seem to mind these "intruders" from the press and elsewhere, but rather ignored them and continued to run about talking and laughing with each other. As more and more people assembled on the Green I couldn't resist jotting down on my note-pad the apparent absurdity of the presence of so many New Haven police, riot sticks in hand, lining the street facing the Green, the latter resembling more a People's Park than the scene of a potential riot.

I left the downtown area for a while and approached the outskirts of town where small groups of National Guards were standing on almost every corner, bayonettes fixed rigidly over their shoulders. Many stores had been boarded up before the weekend and, with the nearly deserted streets, added to the feeling that one was touring a movie set rather than the outskirts of a major city in the United States.

When I arrived back on the Green, someone was speaking over the P.A. system urging people to consult the marshalls whenever they needed any information or aid. The speaker finished his brief talk with, "We love you."

At about 2:00 a tape-recording of a press conference held earlier that morning was played over the loud speakers on the Band-stand. John Froines, Jerry Rubin, Dave Dellinger and other defendants among the 'Conspiracy 8' had spoken to the press and an audience of about 400 people in one of the Yale buildings that morning and what they had said was now being heard on the Green. Mr. Froines opened the conference by stating that New Haven would be the scene of many demonstrations and rallies until the Panthers and all political prisoners were set free. He introduced the other members of the Chicago conspiracy trial among whom the next speaker was Dave Dellinger. Mr. Dellinger pointed out that racism and non-violence were not the essential issues, but that the issue was the fact that the government has been holding Bobby Seale and other political prisoners in jails across the country on trumped up, unjust charges. He brought attention to the fact that New Haven had become something of an armed camp in spite of the fact that the demonstrations and rallies scheduled for the weekend had been planned with the intention of avoiding violent confrontations with the police.

Shortly after the recorded press conference, the first speaker of the afternoon, Jean Genet, took the stand. Mr. Genet a French author who came to America intent upon supporting the Black Panther Party, in not being able to speak English, addressed the crowd through an interpreter. A letter that Genet had received from the United States Post Office was read in which it was stated that Genet had been requested to report to a certain government Inspector regarding his passport and other official documents. It was implied that the Federal Government had issued the letter as a precedent for evoking his right to residence and travel within the United States. Dave Hilliard, Chief of Staff of the Black Panther Party was the next speaker. One of the points he made was that the government had deliberately flooded the city of New

Haven with National Guard, paratroopers, a situation where they could be trapped into a violent confrontation and inevitable slaughter. When he finished speaking, the entire crowd on the Green, by now numbering about 15,000, rose and began to chant loudly, "Power to the people". Among the remaining speakers was Robert Scheer, Editor of 'Ramparts' magazine. One interesting point made was that while most people felt that young people were generally incapable of understanding fascism and racism, through situations such as the militant atmosphere created by the presence of military and police convoys throughout New Haven, young people had a perfect and living example of how the fascist, racist mind functions.

The peaceful rally on the Green eventually drew to a close and thousands of young people filed into the many courtyards and colleges of Yale. In recalling the atmosphere of the afternoon, one of our writers, Chris Van der Veen later said, "With the exception of the unnecessary and frequent show of force by the police and National Guard, it was like a Sunday afternoon in the country."

Inside the Yale walls people were given free food and drinks at portable "cafeterias" within the various courtyards. The "menu" consisted of warm Spanish rice, bread, and fruit purchased with money from the Yale students' Activities Fee. The meal I had was simple but good-tasting and filling. For the next few hours, over a thousand people filled the old campus of Yale eating, dancing to live music, and seemingly enjoying each other's company. I got the

encircled the Green twice after which there arose a struggle between the marchers and the marshalls as to the direction and intensity of the procession. The hundred people or so at the beginning of the march finally succeeded in over-powering the marshalls and with signs and banners accompanying much shouting and chanting, the entire procession moved up Church Street away from the Green. The marshalls did manage to lock their arms together at the next corner at which the march was again diverted from the street and kept within the perimeter of the main part of Yale. The march then encircled Yale and again a struggle arose between the marchers and marshalls as to direction. At this point the struggle reached its highest level of intensity as one marshall was thrown to the ground, and others fought with demonstrators for possession of the two large colorful banners stating "Free the Panthers" at the front of the march. I was at this point near the front and I could see dozens of National Guardsmen and riot police lining the streets that surrounded Yale, bayonettes poised and ready, three-foot sticks clasped tightly. Newsmen with cameras and recorders seemed to be everywhere at once. The marchers once again broke past the marshalls and proceeded to head up the street where they were met one block away by about 30 National Guardsmen with rifles pointed straight ahead, and about 150 riot police with helmets and clubs. At this point, several members of the Black Panther Party arrived at the front of the march with loudspeakers and megaphones donated by Yale students. These five or six young



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feeling that I had somehow been transported into the future after a revolution had been fought and won, and that now, all the people were free to live their lives together in a familial, communal environment.

At about 8:00, Jerry Rubin spoke at a miniature rally of 500 persons or so in a courtyard nearby the old campus. As his talk was drawing to a close, a man walked up to the platform and asked to speak to the crowd in the name of the Black Panther Party. He was given the microphone and proceeded to announce that several Panthers had been arrested outside Yale for crossing the street while chanting, "Free Bobby, off the pigs". Almost immediately, the entire crowd followed by over 500 more proceeded to file angrily into the old campus of Yale and then out through Phelps Gate into the street. Chants of "Free Bobby" and "Power to the people" arose from the marchers and demonstrators as the large group of over a thousand people headed down through the Green and on to Chapel Street. By about 10:00 about a dozen marshalls had caught up with the marchers and demonstrators and proceeded to direct the huge crowd from marching out into the streets and eventually succeeded in containing the people within the perimeter of the Green. The march then



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2:00 the next morning there emerged a steady pattern of demonstrators advancing and retreating as gas canisters were discharged and the gas dissipated. Inside the old campus of Yale, Alan Ginsberg sang and chanted to those who had grown weary of the encounters with smoke and tear gas and had come inside.

While it was often difficult to determine its actual number of persons actually interested in confronting the police as opposed to the number of people merely involved to the point of observing and following whoever happened to be leading the march or demonstration, to the best of my recollection of the events occurring Friday evening, there were never more than 150 to 200 persons actually engaged in any active resistance to the wishes of the police. Out of that number, none seemed willing to bring their level of resistance to the point of violence or confrontation although one gift shop did have its window smashed with a rock, and infrequently, bottles and beer cans were thrown at the police and guardsmen following volleys of tear gas.

The next morning, New Haven Police Chief James F. Ahern issued a press release in which he said, "While the danger of armed attacks against persons in the coming days cannot, of course, be ignored by the Police Department, at this point there are no grounds for concern."

The atmosphere the next morning on the Green was very similar to the way it had been the morning before. People ate the cereal and hot bagels offered for free on the food lines inside the old campus, and then moved out slowly to completely cover the Green by about 2:00. The speakers Saturday afternoon included Artie Seale, Jerry Rubin, Dave Dellinger, and Tom Hayden. Artie Seale, wife of Black Panther National Chairman Bobby Seale played a tape recording of her husband speaking from jail. Mr. Seale, during the tape, protested the fact that the national news media had stated that he had agreed he was getting a fair trial. In his own words, "That's a damn lie...I only said that I realized I was supposed to get a fair trial." Seale ended the tape by saying that he felt it was a racist system.

Jerry Rubin spoke for about a half-hour. Towards the beginning of his talk, he noted that Bobby Seale had been moved along with another imprisoned member of the Panther Party, an hour and half out of New Haven. He asked the crowd, over 20,000 in number, chant "Free Bobby, free Erica!" so loudly that Seale and Erica Huggins, the other Party member in the New Haven trial, would hear it. The entire crowd did rise, fists in air, and chanted loudly for several minutes. Rubin then went on to comment on the fact that there were over 500,000 people in jail in the United States for smoking marijuana. He said, "It would be like arresting the Jews for eating matzo!" He went on to emphasize the importance of a nation-wide student strike in that the United States still was holding many people in prison, such as Bobby Seale, for political reasons and that the United States was getting more and more involved in

igniting the people of Southeast Asia. He furthered his reasons for the student strike with the comment, "School is nothing more than an advanced form of toilet training." One of the most important and dramatic moments of the afternoon was when Tom Hayden was concluding his talk. Hayden stated that because involvement and action was more important and necessary than talk, this would be one of his last speeches anywhere.

That night there was another incident that nearly brought about confrontation in the streets. The New Politics building on Church Street was set on fire by arsonists at about 8:30. Police and guardsmen arrived on the scene almost immediately and proceeded to line the street as firemen worked to put out the fire. A crowd of about 1200 people gathered on the green and stood watching the proceedings. A few minutes later, a sound truck arrived with a member of the Black Panther Party urging people to get off the streets and head back to the old campus. The marshalls who had been out the night before were standing in the street between the riot police and the spectators keeping people back and urging them to head back to the campus. Eventually the people did start to move back, but a number of rocks and bottles were hurled at the police and Guardsmen. As the people were slowly beginning to head up the street, following the Panther sound truck, several rounds of tear gas were discharged and the crowd which had heretofore consisted mostly of spectators, began to become resentful. Again small groups of demonstrators emerged along several streets and allies surrounding Yale and more tear gas was discharged. At about 11:30 inside the courtyard of one particular college, several members of the Weathermen were heard urging people to stay in the streets and fight while members of the Panther Party were urging and pleading with people to "do what's best for Bobby and get the fuck off the streets". The atmosphere inside the old campus, in the words of Chris Van der Veen, was like "another world" than the one outside. "People don't care about what's happening outside". Chris recalled later one incident where



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about 200 people were outside sitting in the street singing "America the Beautiful". National Guardsmen and riot police were lining the opposite side of the street with one of the former urging the crowd to move off the street and continue singing on the sidewalk. The crowd remained and the police discharged about 8 canisters of tear gas, whereupon the people there scattered. While there were several incidents similar to the above, again like Friday night, there were no physical confrontations. The next morning, with the aid of Yale's radio station WYBC, I found out that a total of 17 people had been arrested all weekend in incidents involving the demonstrations. They included one Yale student who, in the words of WYBC, "was arrested for brandishing a water pistol at a police officer".

The one question I would like to ask people concerning the May Day weekend is, "Were the police and National Guard responsible for keeping the peace in New Haven?"