

# CONFRONTATION AT COLUMBIA: A CASE STUDY IN COERCIVE RHETORIC

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ON the broad steps leading up to Columbia University's Lowe Memorial Library, dominating College Walk, sits the placid, weather-stained figure of *alma mater*. On April 30 of last year there swirled about her feet the currents of anger, fear, puzzlement, and frustration; about her neck hung a boldly lettered sign: "Raped by the Cops."

The University had, indeed, been raped; it had been seized, immobilized, and ravished before the eyes of millions of American television viewers and newspaper readers, and word of the assault was reported throughout the world. But the attack that paralyzed the one hundred and fourteen year old institution<sup>1</sup> was not only an attack on Columbia University, it was the rejection of persuasive rhetoric for coercive rhetoric. To say that the "rape" was carried out "by the cops" is simplistic and propagandistic.

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<sup>1</sup> The entire University was not immobilized. The primary unit affected was Columbia College, which is for undergraduate men. Columbia University is a loose confederation rather than a unified structure, and such units as Teachers College and Barnard College (each of which has its own President and Board of Trustees), and the School of Law, functioned with much less interruption of schedules, classes, and programs. This is not to say that all units were not deeply affected by the crisis. Significant changes in the role of students in influencing policy are underway throughout the entire University community. (See, e.g., *New York Times*, May 13, 1968, pp. 1 and 47). In my own department at Teachers College, for example, a joint student-faculty departmental meeting resulted in the institution of a committee composed of all the faculty plus an equal number of elected students to pass on all matters over which the department has decision-making authority.

What occurred on Morningside Heights was much more complex and has serious implications for the student of rhetoric.

The actual events of the crisis have been described exhaustively by the news media; it would be pointless to reiterate them here.<sup>2</sup> But the ends of a relevant rhetorical criticism may well be served by an immediate and intimate examination of the rhetorical issues posed by the upheaval at Columbia. As a member of the Columbia University community I observed much of the action firsthand, while, at the same time, as a faculty member of Teachers College I was not involved as a direct participant in the actual circumstances of the rebellion.

The Columbia incident forces the critic to face squarely the distinction between coercion and persuasion. Leland M. Griffin makes a clear distinction between these two concepts.<sup>3</sup> He sees a rhetorical action as being "coercive rather than persuasive" when it is "essentially non-rational," when it is "dependent on 'seat of the pants' rather than 'seat of the intellect.'" <sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, Professor Griffin does see even coercive actions as rhetorical, identifying,

<sup>2</sup> The most thorough account of the events at Columbia appears in the *New York Times*, daily issues from April 24 through May 23; a good summary account is given in *Newsweek*, May 6 and May 13; *Crisis at Columbia: An Inside Report on the Rebellion at Columbia from the Pages of the Columbia Daily Spectator*, a collection of issues of the campus newspaper from April 24 through May 8, gives lively and complete coverage of the events from the students' point of view.

<sup>3</sup> "The Rhetorical Structure of the 'New Left' Movement: Part I," *QJS*, L (April 1964), 113-135.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

for example, a "physical rhetoric of resistance" and "body rhetoric."<sup>5</sup>

It seems eminently reasonable to view rhetoric as embracing all the available means of influencing human behavior and to recognize that some of these means are *persuasive* and some are not. Rhetoric, then, may be either persuasive or coercive. To make such distinctions is not merely to quibble over terminology. To be able to recognize a difference in these types of rhetorical activities should serve to sharpen our analytical powers and to enhance our interpretive abilities. The political scientist Yves Simon presents an interesting delineation of the two terms. "Roughly a man is subjected to coercion when power originating outside himself causes him to act or be acted upon against his inclination," Simon wrote. "Persuasion, on the other hand, is a moral process. To persuade a man is to awaken in him a voluntary inclination toward a certain course of action. Coercion conflicts with free choice; persuasion implies the operation of free choice."<sup>6</sup>

Undoubtedly, such a definition has flaws. The whole question of the extent to which man ever has a completely free choice, for example, is a profound philosophical one. Further, men may act against their inclinations at the behest of powers outside themselves and are said to be "persuaded" to do so. There is, nonetheless, a continuum suggested: Rhetoric becomes less persuasive and more coercive to the extent that it limits the viable alternatives open to the receivers of communication.<sup>7</sup> For

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Philosophy of Democratic Government* (Chicago, 1951), p. 109.

<sup>7</sup> This interpretation is similar to the one expressed by Thomas Nilsen in his chapter on "Persuasion" in *Ethics of Speech Communication* (Indianapolis, 1966). Nilsen, however, seems to place great emphasis on the "openness" with which a speaker reveals his strategy (p. 55), a proposition I find very difficult to accept.

while persuasion aims at moving a receiver to select one of the many avenues of action open to him, coercion attempts to offer only one route by removing all other approaches from the realm of the possible. In this view "rationality" and "emotionalism" are not on opposite ends of a continuum. Such a position would call into question practically all the means of modern protest, which, as Franklyn S. Haiman has pointed out, are much different from "a Faneuil Hall rally or a Bughouse Square soapbox orator."<sup>8</sup> I fully agree with the implication of Professor Haiman's article, that a view of persuasion that tends to see the process as an exclusively, or even essentially, rational one is too restricting.

Accordingly, the distinction between persuasive and coercive rhetoric focuses on choice. The Columbia incident demonstrates that rhetoric ceases to be persuasive and becomes coercive as the attempt is made to restrict choice. The Columbia incident affords a case study that might point the way to a reasonable distinction between these two types of rhetoric. I propose to examine coercive tendencies as they relate to specific events in the situation: the identification and exploitation of issues; the adaptation to counterarguments; the predictive results of strategy; and the use of physical force. Further, I intend to discuss whether coercive rhetoric is justified, with particular reference to the disruption of Columbia.

#### COERCIVE TENDENCIES AT COLUMBIA

*Identification and exploitation of issues.* Two questions had long agitated the Columbia community. First, should the construction of a gymnasium in Morningside Park, city-owned land adjacent to the campus that had been

<sup>8</sup> "The Rhetoric of the Streets: Some Legal and Ethical Considerations," *QJS*, LIII (April 1967), 99.

leased to the University with the proviso that it be a shared facility with the Harlem community, be continued in the face of mounting hostility by community groups and growing dissatisfaction with the plan by students and faculty? And, second, should the University modify or sever its relations with the Institute for Defense Analysis? It was on these issues that the Students for a Democratic Society seized.

The use of these issues by the SDS was exploitative. The protestors clearly were not offering, nor encouraging the exploration of, real alternatives. There was no option offered to propose a variety of solutions to the IDA and gymnasium problems. Clearly the SDS was not prepared to debate issues because to them these apparent issues were not real. The aims of the radicals were larger than those that they ostensibly espoused. Mark Rudd, in a position paper drafted in October, 1967, which outlined SDS strategy for the coming year, clearly stated the organization's objectives: "(1) the 'radicalization' of students—showing people the connections in the liberal structure, showing them how our lives really are unfree in this society (and at Columbia), getting them to act in their own interest" and "(2) striking a blow at the Federal Government's war effort ('resistance')." <sup>9</sup>Rudd went on to describe the results of a sustained SDS campaign: Students "will become conscious of their own interests and needs and the way the university acts against them, corrupting and distorting education. . . . We will be able to present our alternative to this university and this society as we discuss the role of the university under capitalism."<sup>10</sup>

To the SDS far more was involved than the gym and the IDA. The Univer-

sity itself, and through it the society of which it was an agent, was deplored by student radicals; nothing less than an "alternative" was envisioned. The goal was destruction, not reconstruction, of the university. Radical leaders logically discerned that such goals would be unsuccessful in gaining widespread support and that they could "never force the university to submit to our demands unless we have behind us the strength of the majority of students on campus."<sup>11</sup> To gain such backing Rudd proposed a strategy that depended on extensive organization and the statement of *specific* goals, for "to be militant is to fight to achieve a specific goal."<sup>12</sup> In the halting of gym construction and the abandonment of the IDA, the SDS had found specific goals that could marshal strong campus backing.

The subsidiary nature of these issues, however, became apparent as the crisis evolved. On April 28 the Board of Trustees announced the suspension of construction of the gymnasium, purportedly at the behest of Mayor John Lindsay.<sup>13</sup> Further, many believed that the report of Professor Henkin's committee studying the IDA would deal the Institute the death blow on the Columbia campus. One member of the *Ad Hoc* Faculty Committee, canvassing support for the Committee's mediation efforts, stated to me and to a group of my colleagues that the IDA was a "dead issue," since students and faculty alike believed it to be "on the way out." The apparent issues might have been on the way to resolution with substantial compromises being made by the administration were it not for another issue that the protestors had injected: full amnesty for all students involved in demonstrations. (This argument will be

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, April 28, 1968, p. 74.

<sup>9</sup> *New York Times*, May 13, 1968, p. 46.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

discussed later in another context. What it demonstrates at this point is that the protestors had not focused their efforts exclusively on the apparent issues.)

In "The Rhetoric of Confrontation," Scott and Smith have suggested that student radicals generally see as their goal the destruction of universities and by so "stalemating America's intellectual establishment," they will eventually "paralyze the political establishment as well."<sup>14</sup> Through their seizure of the two most burning Columbia issues, the SDS leaders had attempted to make only two choices available—support the SDS or support the administration's plan to construct the gym and stay with the IDA (for the moment, at least). But support of the SDS did not allow for a meaningful stand on the issues—it implied so much more. And the unhappy floundering of many faculty members and students during the hiatus between the seizure of the buildings and the police intervention clearly demonstrated their reluctance to accept either alternative. But the SDS would offer no other. Their exploitative manipulation of the issues was decidedly coercive in that it severely limited the kind of choices that could have been explored in a truly persuasive atmosphere.

*Adaptation to counterarguments.* Throughout the controversy radical leaders were at pains to prevent counterarguments or compromises from eroding their position. Their actual goal was not to answer objections or persuasively defend rejections of compromise. Their aim was to limit the choice of possibilities offered to the student audience. The answer to official statements and offers to negotiate was an unequivocal "bull shit," from Mark Rudd.<sup>15</sup> The choice then was between the SDS posi-

tion and "bull shit"; no choice at all. Through a linguistic tactic designed not to answer arguments, but to dismiss them from the realm of the possible, Rudd and other leaders consistently vilified the administration and obscured their offers to talk. Who, for example, could consider the position of a "son-of-a-bitch" who had rejected students' demands "a million times," as Rudd pointed out in a speech at the sundial.<sup>16</sup>

Words are so powerful, as Ogden and Richards observed, that "by the excitement which they provoke through their emotive force, discussion is for the most part rendered sterile."<sup>17</sup> Certainly one of the striking rhetorical tactics employed by the radicals was to use language and description to render counterarguments beyond the pale of consideration. The University itself was repeatedly labeled as "racist," as Rudd had done when he seized the microphone to disrupt a memorial service held for Dr. King earlier in the month.<sup>18</sup> Black militant leaders who invaded the campus contributed their own inflammatory descriptions to the racist theme. Charles 37X Kenyatta, leader of the Mau Mau, pictured the University as the "Columbia octopus," and the Chairman of the Harlem branch of CORE, Victor Solomon, proclaimed that "this community is being raped."<sup>19</sup> In a speech at a teach-in at Teachers College Professor Eric Bentley, a firm supporter of the strike, strongly suggested that President Kirk was a racist who disliked the recently murdered Martin Luther King. Whether or not the past actions of Columbia University had been in its own best interests, or in the best interests of its Harlem neighbors, or even in the best

<sup>16</sup> *Columbia Daily Spectator*, April 24, 1968, p. 3.

<sup>17</sup> C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning* (New York, 1923), p. 45.

<sup>18</sup> *Columbia Daily Spectator*, April 12, 1968, p. 1.

<sup>19</sup> *Newsweek*, LXXI (May 6, 1968), 44.

<sup>14</sup> Robert L. Scott and Donald K. Smith, "The Rhetoric of Confrontation," *supra*, p. 5.

<sup>15</sup> "Columbia at Bay," *Newsweek*, LXXI (May 6, 1968), 43.

interests of the liberal, intellectual community at large is beside this particular point. Radical rhetoric offered a choice between support for the protestors or support for their "racist" enemies. Again, no choice at all, but a coercive attempt designed to eliminate real alternatives.

From the very beginning of the crisis many recognized that the police might be called in to clear the buildings. The radicals failed to come to grips with this possibility publicly before the event occurred. When it came radical rhetoric was mobilized to place, once again, the reasonable investigation of the merits and demerits of such action beyond consideration. Their hyperbolic description of the event attempted to equate its defense with defense of fascist totalitarianism. Stories of blood and beating were rife on the campus; there were many examples of rumors and exaggeration. Now it seems apparent from all accounts that some police acted viciously; some took out their frustrations, built up during days and nights of tension and taunts, on unarmed students. It is a sad and distressing sight to see any student with blood running down his face. Nevertheless, the injuries sustained were superficial and none of a serious nature resulted.<sup>20</sup> A press release from the Strike Steering Committee is typ-

ical of the use of language to describe this incident:

Students have been clubbed, beaten, and carted off in police vans by the hundreds. Faculty members have been carried out on stretchers. And with that it is clear. University violence against students and faculty is an extension of its violence against black people in Columbia University owned buildings, against the community in the seizure of park land, against third world struggles in IDA weapons systems, against employees in denial of unions and decent wages. And now, in a 3 a. m. police raid, violence is used against students and faculty.

The nature of the University was clearly revealed. The Trustees and administration respond only to outside interests, student and faculty demands are met with violence.<sup>21</sup>

To label all counterarguments as total evil, to describe hyperbolically the controversial situation, and to picture the only choice as between the SDS position and brutal racism was to limit reasonable choices coercively.

*The predictive results of strategy.* When rhetorical strategy is so designed that it leaves the opposition no viable persuasive alternative, it is a coercive one. Scott and Smith have forcefully pointed out that "those who would confront have learned a brutal art, practiced sometimes awkwardly and sometimes skillfully, which demands response. But that art may provoke the response that confirms its presuppositions . . . and turns the power-enforced victory of the establishment into a symbolic victory for its opponents."<sup>22</sup> The demand of the radicals for amnesty was indeed coercive; it left no room for maneuvering, compromise, or examination of alternatives. It forced the administration to use coercive measures itself or submit to unconditional surrender.

The demand for amnesty obviously rendered meaningful discussion and

<sup>21</sup> Press statement, April 30, 9 a. m., distributed on campus.

<sup>22</sup> Scott and Smith, *supra*, p. 8.

<sup>20</sup> The question of what is or is not "brutal" is a difficult one. The *Columbia Daily Spectator* of April 30 reported that 135 people were treated for injuries in nearby hospitals and at a special infirmary set up at Philosophy Hall. *Newsweek* reported that 132 students, four faculty members, and twelve policemen were injured. No student or faculty member, however, was hospitalized. The Mayor's reaction was based on the reports of his aides on the spot, and is probably the most accurate assessment. Mr. Lindsay admitted that while some members of the police force "used excessive force," the majority demonstrated "great professionalism and restraint." *Newsweek*, LXXI (May 13, 1968), 59-60. To describe the police action as "beyond comprehension," as a flyer distributed by the *Ad Hoc* Teachers College Strike Committee did, is certainly to overstate the case.

compromise impossible. Student radicals could hardly have failed to realize that the administration would view such an action as surrender. Certainly on the subject of amnesty the administration's response, and that of the Trustees who "advised the president that they wholeheartedly support the administration position that there shall be no amnesty accorded to those who have engaged in this illegal conduct," was highly predictable.<sup>23</sup>

While faculty groups worked arduously to achieve a compromise, the demonstrators were adamant. Even the generally sympathetic *Spectator* was moved to comment that "the most serious loss of perspective has been shown by the students negotiating on the side of the demonstrators . . . throughout the latter part of the week, the demonstrators consistently refused to accept any solutions at all that were offered them by the faculty group."<sup>24</sup> As the sit-in continued, reaction began to emerge. Anti-SDS students formed a group called the Majority Coalition and blocked the entry of pro-SDS students with food and supplies into Lowe Library. One disgruntled student, addressing a faculty meeting, asserted, "Three years of the administration giving in to the SDS is a long time to restrain ourselves. . . . And in the last three days we've been sold out several times."<sup>25</sup> Pressure on the administration from the alumni was also building. The President of Murray Space Corporation, for example, wired the Alumni Secretary: "As an alumnus I am shocked at the handling of mob rule taking over Columbia University. These people are not supporting the University. How can law respecting alumni be expected to support a university run by

hoodlums and law breakers."<sup>26</sup> The tide of sympathy was beginning to run against the demonstrators.

It became extremely likely that, unless a compromise were reached, the administration would feel compelled to call in the police; the demonstrators utterly refused to agree to any compromise. They undoubtedly anticipated police action—one of the students in an occupied building said that he and his compatriots would not leave until their demands were met or until "we are carried out by the cops."<sup>27</sup> Undoubtedly, as Scott and Smith assert, in many cases "altercation with the police is enough. It is consummatory."<sup>28</sup> In the Columbia case, it not only fulfilled the function of unmasking the establishment in its true brutality (as the radicals saw it), but it also served to unite campus opinion behind the SDS leaders. The violent confrontation led to a broader base of support.<sup>29</sup> These supporters had not been persuaded; they had clearly been coerced. By inflexibly pursuing a strategy that almost inevitably led to confrontation, the demonstrators had forced the university community to choose, not between discernible positions, but between the bloodied students, armed only with their intellect and their passion to right hypocritical wrongs, and the unseen, powerful administration moving to protect its plush offices, aided by beasts with blackjacks and billy clubs. The choice of propositions, like the prose, was purple. And it was coercive.

*The use of physical force.* I do not propose to devote much space to this

<sup>26</sup> *Connection: A Magazine Supplement of the Columbia Daily Spectator*, I, 2, May 10, 1968, p. c5.

<sup>27</sup> *Columbia Daily Spectator*, April 26, 1968, p. 3.

<sup>28</sup> Scott and Smith, *supra*, p. 7.

<sup>29</sup> The campus reaction is accurately described and documented in "The End of a Siege—and an Era," *Newsweek*, LXXI (May 13, 1968), 60.

<sup>23</sup> *New York Times*, April 28, 1968, p. 74.

<sup>24</sup> *Columbia Daily Spectator*, April 29, 1968, p. 4.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, April 26, 1968, p. 3.

consideration. Actions like pulling down a metal fence,<sup>30</sup> or holding a dean captive<sup>31</sup> seem clearly non-persuasive in that they employ direct physical force or its threat. Likewise the burning of a professor's papers,<sup>32</sup> or the fears one heard expressed that the strikers would retaliate against faculty who refused to support them, would generally be held to be coercive and not persuasive rhetorical strategies. Suffice it to say that such actions were also a part of the Columbia incident.

### IS COERCIVE RHETORIC JUSTIFIED?

Not all demonstrations, as Professor Haiman observes perceptively, are coercive. He clearly differentiates between the actions of a peaceful demonstrator whose act of protest is not inherently coercive, and the hostile audience that chooses "to go forth to do battle with them."<sup>33</sup> Violence, in such a case, is clearly the result of hostile action by anti-demonstrators who seek a confrontation.

At Columbia, however, no choice was given those who dissented from the protest: In the occupied buildings students could not go to classes, professors could not work undisturbed in their offices, administrators could not carry out their duties. The protest was clearly not a persuasive demonstration that gave an audience a choice of responsive alternatives.

Given the distinction between persuasion and coercion that I have suggested, the student radicals at Columbia chose to employ coercive rather than persuasive rhetorical procedures. Their rhetorical strategy was one of polarization; it aimed to admit only two choices,

one of which was consistently distorted. Were such procedures justified?<sup>34</sup>

Professor Haiman asserts that "if the channels for peaceful protest and reform become so clogged that they appear to be (and, in fact, may be) inaccessible to some segments of the population, then the Jeffersonian doctrine that 'the tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time, with the blood of patriots and tyrants' may become more appropriate to the situation than more civilized rules of the game."<sup>35</sup> In the Columbia case, there were, no doubt, some clogs in the channels. The Kirk administration was accused, for example, by as relatively moderate a student as the President of the Student Council of "sitting for almost ten months on a report recommending a greater role for faculty members and students in Columbia's disciplinary machinery," and of "being inaccessible to student leaders."<sup>36</sup> To think, however, in this case of "patriots" and "tyrants" is to oversimplify, to make an exceedingly skewed judgment that the facts hardly seem to warrant. This is no doubt the quintessential problem, for it hangs ultimately on the extent to which one may allow himself to go when condoning rhetorical strategies used in behalf of what *he* considers to be worthy causes. If rhetorical theory in the twentieth century must take into account the change described by Scott and Smith, that "civility and decorum serve as masks for the preservation of injustice,"<sup>37</sup> then

<sup>34</sup> I have not discussed the question of civil disobedience in the Columbia case. At Columbia the protestors were not breaking a law that was in itself deemed unjust (the laws of trespass), nor were they willing to be punished in any way for their actions. The argument that such incidents as the one at Columbia fall outside the concept of civil disobedience is ably articulated by Mr. Justice Fortas in *The New York Times Magazine*, May 12, 1968, and I could not improve on it here.

<sup>35</sup> Haiman, 105.

<sup>36</sup> *New York Times*, May 13, 1968, p. 47.

<sup>37</sup> Scott and Smith, *supra*, p. 8.

<sup>30</sup> *Columbia Daily Spectator*, April 24, 1968, p. 1.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, and also April 25, 1968, p. 1.

<sup>32</sup> *New York Times*, May 23, 1968, p. 51.

<sup>33</sup> Haiman, 112.

rhetorical criticism obviously must also provide for the examination of those cases in which civility and decorum are discarded for ends that are not obviously and unquestionably just. In the film based on Gore Vidal's *The Best Man*, the former President observed to a ruthless young politician that in politics, as in life, "there are no ends, only means." It may be that in the examination of

the means of protests, and not necessarily in any inherent worthiness of their goals, that rhetorical critics can hope to make meaningful contributions. An understanding of the distinction between persuasion and coercion might provide one means whereby rhetorical critics could reach judgments concerning the essential rhetorical nature of confrontation.

