

*The 1960s Free Speech Movement: A Roadmap to Modern Student Activism and  
Campus Policing*

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“There’s a time when the operation of the machine becomes so odious, it makes you so sick at heart that you can’t take part.... And you’ve got to put your bodies upon the gears, and upon the wheels, upon the levers, upon all the apparatus, and you’ve got to make it stop.”<sup>1</sup> These impassioned words, spoken by Mario Savio on the steps of Sproul Hall in 1964, embodied the spirit of the Free Speech Movement (FSM) at the University of California, Berkeley, and started the movement.

Savio’s call to action reflected the students’ determination to fight for free speech and political activism on Cal Berkley’s campus. The FSM emerged that fall after Katherine Towle, the university’s first female dean of students, banned student protests and political activity in a popular common space known as the Bancroft Strip.<sup>2</sup> The Strip had long been a hub for political discourse, making its suppression of political activism a direct assault on student activism. The administration’s decision sparked outrage, leading to protests and escalating tensions between the administration and its students.

By December 1964, the conflict came to a head when 1,500 students staged a sit-in at Sproul Hall, the university’s administration building, demanding recognition of their free speech rights and other grievances. The administration responded by deploying campus police to arrest the protesters. UC campus police detained over 800 students in one of the largest mass arrests in U.S. history. This moment not only defined the FSM but also marked a turning point in the history of campus policing. By deploying law enforcement to suppress dissent, Berkeley demonstrated how policing can be weaponized to maintain institutional control, cementing the administration’s

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<sup>1</sup> Mario Savio, "Mario Savio: Sit-in Address on the Steps of Sproul Hall," speech presented at Sproul Hall, University of California, Berkeley, CA, December 2, 1964, American Rhetoric, accessed December 16, 2024, <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mariosaviosproullallsitin.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> "September 14, 1964: Tabling banned on the Bancroft strip," Yale University, accessed December 16, 2024, <https://aap68.yale.edu/news/september-14-1964-tabling-banned-bancroft-strip#:~:text=On%20September%2014%2C%201964%2C%20Dean,known%20as%20the%20Bancroft%20strip>.

reliance on force over negotiation.

This paper explores how UC Berkeley's administration, driven by Cold War paranoia and external political pressures, relied on policing to suppress dissent, and how the FSM set a precedent for the nationwide expansion of campus policing.

Campus police departments were established in the mid-20th century to provide security on expanding university and college campuses. However, their role quickly expanded to include suppressing dissent, monitoring political activities, and conducting surveillance. This trend mirrored broader American policing practices, from the Pinkertons' violent repression of labor strikes in the 1800s to FBI surveillance of civil rights and antiwar activists in the 60s and 70s.

Activist and historian Ward Churchill argues, "The existence of an official/quasi-official political police apparatus can be seen as defining the opposite of democratic order." Highlighting the contradiction in using policing to suppress democratic expressions of dissent on university campuses, administrations like that of UC Berkeley were not immune to this trend. During the Cold War, they became increasingly entangled in external pressures from political and governmental entities.

FSM and student movements of the time, such as the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), drew inspiration from the 1960s counterculture and the civil rights movement, employing nonviolent direct action—such as sit-ins and marches—to challenge institutional authority. Meanwhile, white conservatives reacted with strident opposition to these efforts. Alabama Governor George Wallace declared "segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever!" emphasizing his and many others' refusal to integrate the South. The federal government advocated for surveillance and supported the suppression of dissent. By the late 60s, intelligence agencies like the FBI actively infiltrated groups

such as SDS and the Black Panther Party.

One infamous example is Thomas “Tommy the Traveler” Tongyai, an agent provocateur who encouraged student activists at Hobart College in New York to adopt violent strategies. Tongyai’s actions, funded by both the FBI and local police, reveal the lengths to which law enforcement and the U.S. government will go to suppress activism.<sup>3</sup>

In this state of national unrest, polarization, and radicalism, Berkeley grappled with financial and political pressures that shaped its response to student activism. By 1962, over half of the university’s budget of \$227 million came from federal research contracts linked to the Cold War, such as the space race and military research.<sup>4</sup> Their reliance on these funds made the university resistant if not hostile to student activism and leftist organizations such as the SDS.

Additionally, just a decade prior, President Truman signed Executive Order 9835, more commonly known as “the Loyalty Oath,” which allowed the U.S. government to investigate any of its employees thought to be involved with or a part of the Communist Party. In response, states including California, made their own loyalty oaths.<sup>5</sup> Berkeley President Robert Sproul implemented such an oath for university employees, reflecting the era’s intolerance and paranoia. The oath stated: “I do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will support the Constitution of the United States and the Constitution of the State of California”... “I do not believe in, and I am not a member of, nor do I support any party or organization that believes in, advocates, or teaches the overthrow of the United States Government, by force or by any illegal or unconstitutional means, that I am

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<sup>3</sup> Churchill, "From the Pinkertons," [Page 52].

<sup>4</sup> Free Speech Movement Archives, "Administrative Pressures and Student Political Activity at the University of California: A Preliminary Report," Free Speech Movement Archives, last modified 1998, accessed December 16, 2024, <https://www.fsm-a.org/stacks/AdminPress.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Shannon White, "I take this obligation freely: Recalling UC Berkeley's loyalty oath controversy," UC Berkeley Library, last modified March 21, 2022, accessed December 16, 2024, <https://update.lib.berkeley.edu/2022/03/21/i-take-this-obligation-freely-recalling-uc-berkeleys-loyalty-oath-controve>rsy/.

not a member of the Communist Party.”<sup>6</sup> This step, ostensibly meant to protect the university from external scrutiny, caused controversy among faculty members who viewed it as an attack on academic freedom.<sup>7</sup> However, the loyalty oath controversy of 1949-58 revealed the administration’s willingness to comply and bow down to political pressures, particularly those from right-wing politicians and anti-communist advocates. By the time the FSM emerged in 1964, this legacy of financial ties and Cold War paranoia had deeply shaped UC Berkeley’s administrative policies.

There are two key events of the FSM at UC Berkeley worth exploring. The first was the arrest of civil rights activist and graduate student Jack Weinberg on October 1, 1964, which galvanized the campus into action. Weinberg, who was staffing a table for the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) on Sproul Plaza, refused to comply with the administration’s demand that he leave. The situation escalated when university deans, led by Chancellor Edward Strong, called in the police to enforce the university’s new ban on political activity, sparking an unprecedented and transformative protest.<sup>8</sup>

Weinberg’s arrest happened during lunch, drawing thousands of students to Sproul Plaza. As word of the incident spread, students began shouting “Take All of Us!” and “Sit Down!”<sup>9</sup> This became the rallying cry that spurred students to block the police car transporting Weinberg. Soon after a crowd formed and 21-year-old undergraduate Mario Savio, climbed atop the police car to address the crowd. This resulted in a blockade that lasted 32 hours with other students making

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<sup>6</sup> White, "I take," UC Berkeley Library.

<sup>7</sup> "The Loyalty Oath at the University of California: A Report on Events, 1949-1958," Free Speech Movement Archives, accessed December 16, 2024, [https://www.fsm-a.org/stacks/AP\\_files/APLoyaltyOath.html](https://www.fsm-a.org/stacks/AP_files/APLoyaltyOath.html).

<sup>8</sup> Robert Cohen, "Teaching about the Berkeley Free Speech Movement Civil Disobedience and Mass Protest in the 1960s," last modified 2015, PDF.

<sup>9</sup> Cohen, "Teaching about."

speeches in a spontaneous forum advocating free speech.<sup>10</sup>

The image of Savio atop the police car became a powerful symbol of the FSM, drawing attention to the administration's suppression of free speech. Weinberg's arrest was intended to reinstate the university's authority and deter future political activity but instead, it galvanized thousands of students, bringing national attention to the FSM. The arrest demonstrated the administration's inability or unwillingness to navigate growing student activism fueling the perception of the university as—what Savio famously referred to— a bureaucratic “machine,”<sup>11</sup> indifferent to the values of free speech and democratic engagement.

Chancellor Strong's refusal to negotiate with the protesters further escalated the conflict. Only when President Clark Kerr, head of the University of California system, intervened was a temporary agreement reached with the Pact of October 2. Weinberg was released without charges, and a committee was formed to review campus rules on political advocacy. However, the pact did not address the underlying grievances of the FSM, leading to further escalation in the following months. Weinberg's arrest and the 32-hour police car blockade demonstrated the power of collective action and the effectiveness of nonviolent civil disobedience.

The second key event occurred just two months later, on December 2, 1964. In the lead-up to the sit-in at Sproul Hall, negotiations between students and the administration had broken down, making it clear that the administration would not concede to the students' demands. Despite this, the Bancroft Strip was once again filled with tables and political activity, and a mass march was organized to pressure the university to revisit the FSM's demands. In response, three FSM organizers, including Mario Savio, were charged with disciplinary sanctions. “They are charged with violating a regulation, vague to the point of meaninglessness, which states that students must

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<sup>10</sup> Cohen, "Teaching about."

<sup>11</sup> Savio, "Mario Savio," speech, American Rhetoric.

“observe proper standards of conduct and good taste. Their cases have been referred to the administration-appointed Committee on Student Conduct, which as expected is “advisory to the Chancellor.”<sup>12</sup> wrote a leaflet circulating campus. On December 2, after a rally attended by thousands, 1,500 students marched into Sproul Hall and staged a sit-in. California Governor Edmund “Pat” Brown, quickly ordered a massive police operation to clear the building and remove the protestors. In the early hours of December 3rd, police entered Sproul Hall and began arresting the protesters. Though the demonstrators adhered to nonviolent principles and did not resist—many went limp in classic civil rights protest posture—slowing the arrest process. By the time classes began that morning, campus buses were transporting nearly 800 students to jail.

The arrests marked the largest mass arrest in California’s history and represented an unprecedented level of police intervention on a college campus in the United States. The police action and the administration’s failure to resolve the crisis diplomatically drew massive criticism from faculty, who believed the situation could have been avoided through earlier negotiations. Many professors drove to Santa Rita prison to post bail for their students, further deepening the divide between the administration and the campus community.

On December 7, President Clark Kerr suspended classes to convene a meeting in Berkeley’s Greek Theatre to address the crisis. Tensions remained high within the community and were further heightened when Kerr refused to allow FSM leaders to speak. As the meeting concluded, Savio approached the podium to address the audience, but officers forcibly dragged him away. His silencing in front of thousands further alienated students, solidifying for many the perception that the administration was incapable of managing the situation or respecting free

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<sup>12</sup> UC Libraries, "Leaflet," Calisphere, last modified 2001, accessed December 16, 2024, <https://oac.cdlib.org/view?docId=kt1g5001d3&doc.view=content&chunk.id=0&toc.depth=1&brand=calisphere&anchored.id=0>.

speech.

The administration's repeated missteps prompted the Academic Senate, the faculty's governing body, to take decisive action. On December 8, the Senate voted overwhelmingly (824–115) to pass a resolution affirming that “the content of speech or advocacy should not be restricted by the University.” Off-campus student political activities shall not be subject to University regulation. On-campus advocacy or organization of such activities shall be subject only to such limitations as may be imposed under section 2.”<sup>13</sup> This resolution effectively ended the free speech crisis, granting students the freedoms they had been demanding for months.

The Senate's vote was celebrated throughout the campus. At a rally following the decision, Mario Savio proclaimed, “We are asking that there be no restrictions on the content of speech, save those provided by the courts. And that's an enormous amount of freedom”<sup>14</sup> He continued expressing his confidence that the students and faculty would exercise their newfound freedom responsibly.

The December 1964 Sproul Hall sit-in was pivotal for the Free Speech Movement and student activism. The mass arrests during the sit-in intensified feelings of alienation among students and faculty, deepening their mistrust of the administration and its reliance on the police. At the same time, the sit-in showcased the power of mass civil disobedience to challenge institutional authority, setting a precedent for student activism on college campuses nationwide. However, it also established a troubling legacy: the American university's use of law enforcement to suppress dissent, a practice that would resonate across decades.

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<sup>13</sup> University of California Berkeley Academic Senate, "Propositions to Be Introduced by the Committee on Academic Freedom at the December 8th Meeting of the Berkeley Division of the Academic Senate," in Free Speech Movement Documents, accessed December 17, 2024, [https://www.crmvet.org/docs/nor/fsm/641200\\_fsm\\_senate.pdf](https://www.crmvet.org/docs/nor/fsm/641200_fsm_senate.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> Mario Savio, "Mario Savio - 'We've got back to a traditional view of the university', Free Speech victory, 1964," speech presented in University of Berkeley California, December 8, 1964, Speakola, accessed December 17, 2024, <https://speakola.com/political/mario-savio-free-speech-victory-berkeley-1964>.

This reliance on policing was based on policies like the “Kerr Directives,” issued by University President Clark Kerr in the early 60s.<sup>15</sup> These directives sought to impose order on campus governance by limiting student political expression and consolidating administrative control. On paper, they allowed for dialogue and free expression, but in practice, their implementation gave “Chief Campus Officers” broad discretion to restrict student activities under the guise of maintaining order. For example, the so-called open forum policy often relegated student expression to out-of-the-way areas, justified as preventing disruptions to “the free flow of traffic.”<sup>16</sup> Similarly, student governments like the Associated Students of the University of California (ASUC) were prohibited from addressing off-campus political issues, in an attempt to curtail their autonomy. When ASUC leaders pushed for more radical or partisan causes, the administration used financial control and constitutional changes to neutralize their influence.

The Kerr Directives reveal the administration’s priorities of preserving institutional order, protecting the university’s public image, and safeguarding external funding. Engaging in direct negotiations with students might have been perceived as capitulating to their demands and undermining the administration’s authority. Instead, by framing the FSM protests as violations of established rules, the administration justified their suppression as a necessary measure to maintain order.

Fast forward to today, and the frameworks established during the FSM continue to shape the dynamics of student activism and institutional responses. Universities continue to rely on similar strategies to suppress dissent, including using police to enforce compliance with institutional priorities. The legacy of the Kerr Directives—misapplied policies and an

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<sup>15</sup> "The Kerr Directives," Free Speech Movement Archives, accessed December 17, 2024, [https://www.fsm-a.org/stacks/AP\\_files/APKerrDirect.html](https://www.fsm-a.org/stacks/AP_files/APKerrDirect.html).

<sup>16</sup> "The Kerr," Free Speech Movement Archives.

unwillingness to engage in good-faith dialogue—has shaped how many universities manage student grievances, prioritizing administrative authority over student concerns. Modern universities have also increasingly become “machines,” aligning themselves with corporate interests and external funding sources. The privatization of funding models and the rise of private loans have made higher education less accessible, particularly for low-income students. These financial pressures have shifted the focus of universities away from fostering critical thinking and intellectual growth toward maximizing revenue.<sup>17</sup>In this context, dissenting against university policies or funding sources is even more challenging, as both are deeply tied to corporate and external forces. The parallels between the FSM era and today are clear: student movements continue to confront institutional systems designed to silence their voices, all while universities increasingly prioritize profit over their educational mission.

The FSM was both a reflection of its era and a precursor to future movements. Its success in securing free speech rights for students highlighted the power of grassroots organizing, collective action, and nonviolent civil disobedience. The movement’s influence extended far beyond Berkeley, inspiring student activism nationwide for decades—from Vietnam War protests and the anti-apartheid movement to Black Lives Matter and the ongoing pro-Palestine protests happening today. Its emphasis on nonviolent civil disobedience as a tool for change remains a cornerstone of modern activism, from environmental protests to social justice campaigns.

At the same time, the FSM forces us to reconsider the role of universities in a democratic society. Ideally, they should serve as incubators for free thought, debate, and civic engagement. Yet, as institutions become more entwined with corporate funding and government priorities, they risk undermining these ideals, prioritizing stability and revenue over intellectual and social growth

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<sup>17</sup> Davarian Baldwin, "Is Higher Education Good for Our Communities?" (lecture, University of Massachusetts Amherst, UMass Bowker Auditorium, Amherst, MA, September 24, 2024).

of their students. The FSM reminds us of the urgent need to protect these spaces for dissent and dialogue. Their message is increasingly relevant: collective resistance can challenge even the most entrenched systems. As financial pressures, corporate influences, and surveillance technologies continue to reshape higher education, the need for resistance has never been more urgent. Protecting spaces for free speech and dissent demands a collective effort. Yet, the pressing question remains: how can universities uphold their role as havens of democratic ideals and critical inquiry in an increasingly commodified world?

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