Rude and Raucous Catcalls: Governor’s Day

If action is to be our key term, then drama is the culminative form of action. But if drama, then conflict. And if conflict, then victimage. Dramatism is always at the edge of this vexing problem, that comes to a culmination in tragedy.

—Burke, Language as Symbolic Action

The U.S. invasion of Cambodia on April 30 led to violent protests and strikes across the country, and as historian Tom Wells has it, the month of May “witnessed the greatest display of campus discontent in American history.” By Monday, May 4, strike planning was underway across the state of California, with demonstrations at Sacramento State, Sacramento City College, San Francisco State, UC Riverside, USC, and others. Molotov cocktails had been thrown into an ROTC building at UC Davis (the first violence there), and 400 protestors were preparing for an afternoon rally. Before the day had ended, more than 1,000 Berkeley protestors had set trash fires, shattered windows, and burnt a military truck. To the north of Nevada, even small cities like Lewiston, Idaho, saw violence when 25 National Guard trucks were set on fire.

While the country witnessed the initial waves of violence, Nevadans were warned that a protest was imminent at the University of Nevada. Student Brooke Piper appeared on local television Sunday night, stating that a demonstration on Tuesday was not going to be a separate event; instead, he announced that the crowd was going to march up to the stadium. Early on Monday, May 4, the Sagebrush announced the protest, noting the 30 strike signs placed around campus and quoting student body president Frankie Sue Del Papa: “I hope striking students don’t disrupt other students during the ceremony.” Furthermore, a reporter noted that protest
organizers were considering a plan “to leave the rally area and march to Mackay Stadium for the Governor’s Day ceremonies.” Even the city paper, the Reno Evening Gazette showed a front-page photo of two freshman painting signs for the Tuesday protest. From all public accounts, a protest was looming, and there was ample evidence that demonstrators might disrupt the ROTC celebration. Yet, despite the accounts proclaiming a disruption of Governor’s Day, several participants and observers would later state that the protest was intended to be a separate event and claim that the decision to disturb the ceremony was “spontaneous.” A flyer circulated on campus, providing the day’s agenda of a march to the stadium, and the front page of the Sagebrush unambiguously declared that the ROTC celebration and the Peace Rally would culminate in a march to the stadium: “Unlike last year’s Governor’s Day Peace Rally, the two events will not be completely separated. Representatives of the anti-war group said they had received permission to participate in the ceremonies held in Mackay Stadium.” To anyone who might have had concerns—and the administration was undoubtedly watching the campus closely—it was clear that the rally would become a march, and the protest could become a disruption. Such evidence, however, would be overlooked in the days that followed, as the intended march to the stadium was misconstrued as a mass action instigated by radical faculty.

To perhaps state the obvious, when history presents itself only through newspapers and letters, we are left with a fragmented and partial perspective. Through oral histories, we can expose a different story. Rather than a faculty-inspired protest, Governor’s Day was a mismanaged student affair in which faculty tried to prevent violence. For example, one lengthy letter to president Miller documents sociologist James T. Richardson’s narrative of this week in May, noting that students had decided to disrupt the ceremonies and faculty had tried to dissuade them. However, without oral history records from 1970, this letter would provide the only details about the Monday night planning meeting at the Hobbit Hole: there’s no mention of Paul Adamian, Ben Hazard, Fred Maher, or any of the other “radical” faculty alleged to be provocateurs. In his oral history, Hazard regretted missing this meeting because he could have shared his wisdom about protest planning:

So, I did not go and help them organize a peaceful demonstration consisting of monitors, which help keep the ranks and act like a police force of the demonstration. I didn’t seek out legal aid, to make sure there were some attorneys there to protect the students on a legal basis, or make sure there were medics there to make sure that if anything did break out that medical attention could be provided on the spot.

Adamian, however, was present at this meeting, but he claims that he was largely uninvolved, recalling only the bad feelings and despondent people. However, oral histories three decades later provided details that were not disclosed in 1970. John Doherty, an undergraduate who lived in the Hobbit Hole, recalled that Adamian was