



A Hard Rain Fell: SDS and Why it Failed

David Barber

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By the spring of 1969, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) had reached its zenith as the largest, most radical movement of white youth in American history—a genuine New Left. Yet less than a year later, SDS splintered into warring factions and ceased to exist.

SDS's development and its dissolution grew directly out of the organization's relations with the black freedom movement, the movement against the Vietnam War, and the newly emerging struggle for women's liberation. For a moment, young white people could comprehend their world in new and revolutionary ways. But New Leftists did not respond as a tabula rasa. On the contrary, these young people's consciousnesses, their culture, their identities had arisen out of a history which, for hundreds of years, had privileged white over black, men over women, and America over the rest of the world. Such a history could not help but distort the vision and practice of these activists, good intentions notwithstanding.

A Hard Rain Fell: SDS and Why It Failed traces these activists in their relation to other movements and demonstrates that the New Left's dissolution flowed directly from SDS's failure to break with traditional American notions of race, sex, and empire.

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