

A Time to Stir

Columbia University, 1968

A study in organising

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When the country
into which I had just set my foot
was set on fire about my ears
it was time to stir.
It was time for every man to stir.

Thomas Paine

Columbia's problem
is the problem of America
in miniature.

Tom Hayden



In April 1968, hundreds of impassioned students at Columbia University in New York take action against what they perceive to be racist and imperialist policies of that institution by barricading themselves inside five campus buildings. They remain behind locked doors, alongside a host of "outside agitators" sympathetic to their cause, for nearly a week. Faculty and administration attempt to defuse the tense situation as enraged Columbia undergraduates opposed to the protestors respond. Eventually hundreds of New York City police arrive on the scene and the occupiers are forcibly removed from university property.

Paul Cronin's *A Time to Stir* is a fifteen-hour illustrated history built from hundreds of newly filmed interviews, documents and other archival material, hours of historical footage, and thousands of never-seen photographs. It tells the story of the Columbia protest, when two key issues of the era – civil rights and the Vietnam War – collided.

A complete transcript of the project can be downloaded from the website. Also available is a book of the same title, edited by Paul Cronin and published by Columbia University Press, which contains more than sixty newly written testimonials from a range of participants.



A Time to Stir is presented in ten chapters, along with a prologue and an epilogue. All timings are approximate.

Protest to Resistance (75 minutes) sets the stage for conflict. Volatile changes are taking place in American society as millions mobilise against racial injustice and the war in Vietnam.

Organising (116 minutes) describes the growth of two student groups on campus: Columbia University's chapter of Students for a Democratic Society and the Students' Afro-American Society. The flashpoints for the protests are Columbia's proposed construction of a gymnasium in a nearby public park and the university's affiliation with a military think tank.

April 23, 1968 (160 minutes) shows how a rally is transformed into a mass occupation of a Columbia building, and how a racial divide occurs when African-American students tell white students to expand the protest by taking over other buildings on campus.

The communal setting of five buildings, occupied for nearly a week, one that inspires experiments with direct democracy and makes for a euphoric, creative rebellion, is described in **Inside** (65 minutes) and **Participation** (27 minutes).

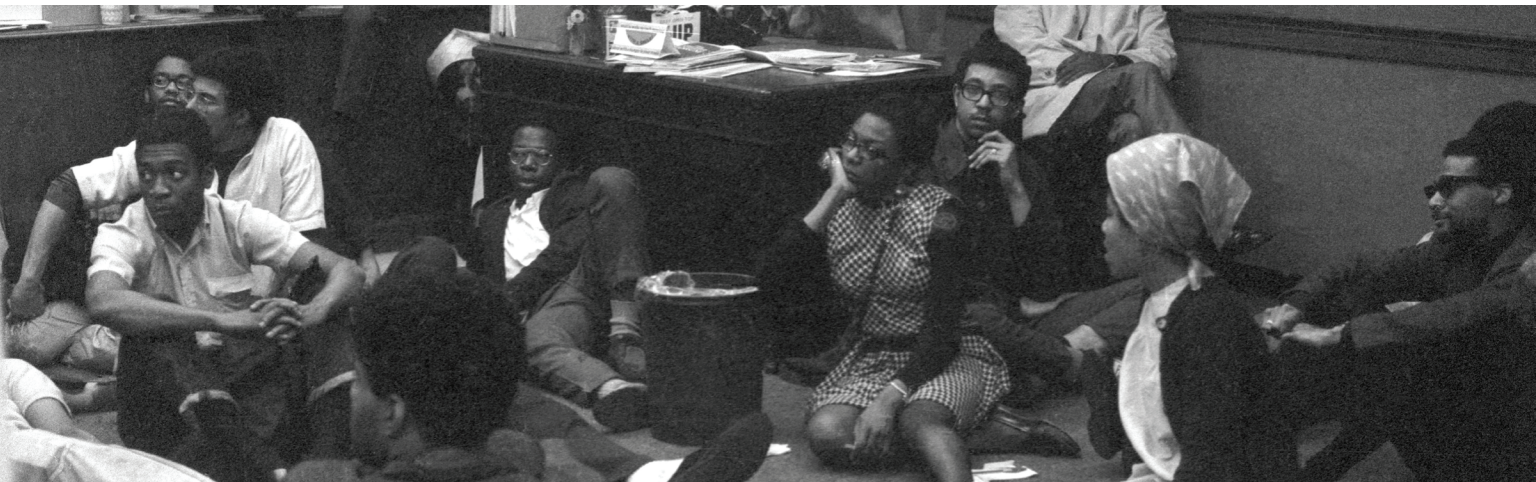
Decision-making of African-American students inside Hamilton Hall – different from those of the four other buildings – and media representation of the events are detailed in **Hamilton** (62 minutes).

Faculty (31 minutes) shows how Columbia's professors try to mediate between the university administration and protesting students.

Politics (130 minutes) asks questions about what it means to be political. Were the actions of the Columbia student protestors more symbolic than ideological? Did their acts of resistance achieve the goals they set? What lessons can be learned a half-century later?

Leadership (96 minutes) focuses on a small group of Columbia students who hoped to force a New York City police intervention. This act, it was believed, would radicalise the entire student body.

Bust (120 minutes) explores the police clearance of the campus. The impact on students – both those for and against the protests – is immediate and profound.



A Time to Stir

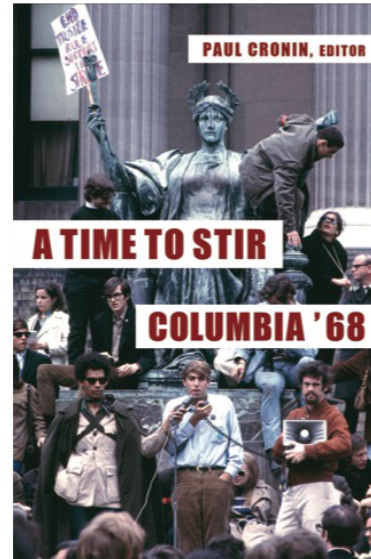
Columbia '68

PAUL CRONIN, EDITOR

A KALEIDOSCOPIC PORTRAIT OF THE STUDENT
UPRISING AT COLUMBIA AND THE LEGACIES
OF THE 1960S

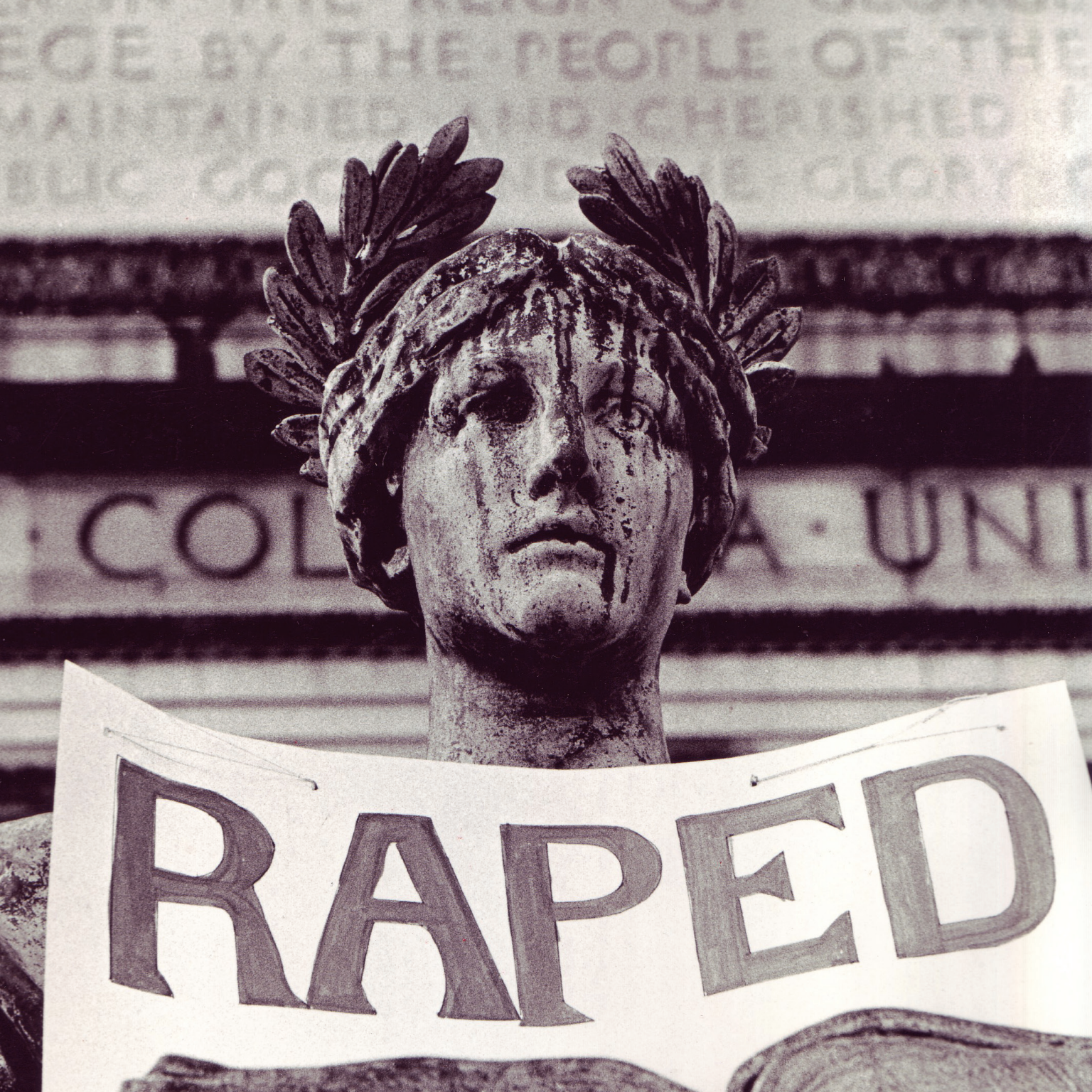
For seven days in April 1968, students occupied five buildings on the campus of Columbia University to protest a planned gymnasium in a nearby Harlem park, links between the university and the Vietnam War, and what they saw as the university's unresponsive attitude toward students and faculty. Exhilarating to some and troubling to others, the student protests paralyzed the university, grabbed the world's attention, and inspired other uprisings. Fifty years after the events, *A Time to Stir* captures the reflections of those who participated in and witnessed the Columbia rebellion.

With more than sixty essays from members of Students for a Democratic Society, the Students' Afro-American Society, faculty, undergraduates who opposed the protests, "outside agitators," and members of the New York Police Department, *A Time to Stir* sheds light on the politics, passions, and ideals of the 1960s. Moving beyond the student movement's white leadership, this book presents the perspectives of black students, who were dealing with their uneasy integration into a supposedly liberal campus, as well as the views of women, who increasingly questioned their second-class status. *A Time to Stir* also speaks to the complicated legacy of the uprising. For many, the events at Columbia inspired a lifelong dedication to social causes while for others they signaled the beginning of the chaos that would soon engulf Students for a Democratic Society. Taken together, these reflections present a nuanced and moving portrait that reflects the sense of possibility and excess that characterized the 1960s.



"Paul Cronin is the world's leading expert on the upheaval that unfolded at Columbia University in the spring of 1968, and in this richly contextualized collection of essays from participants in the rebellion, he treats the topic as comprehensively as possible. *A Time to Stir* showcases a broad range of perspectives, draws out numerous themes, and reminds us why the Columbia rebellion remains relevant today. *A Time to Stir* also makes for dramatic, exciting, and provocative reading. This is can't-put-it-down history."

—John McMillian, Georgia State University



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