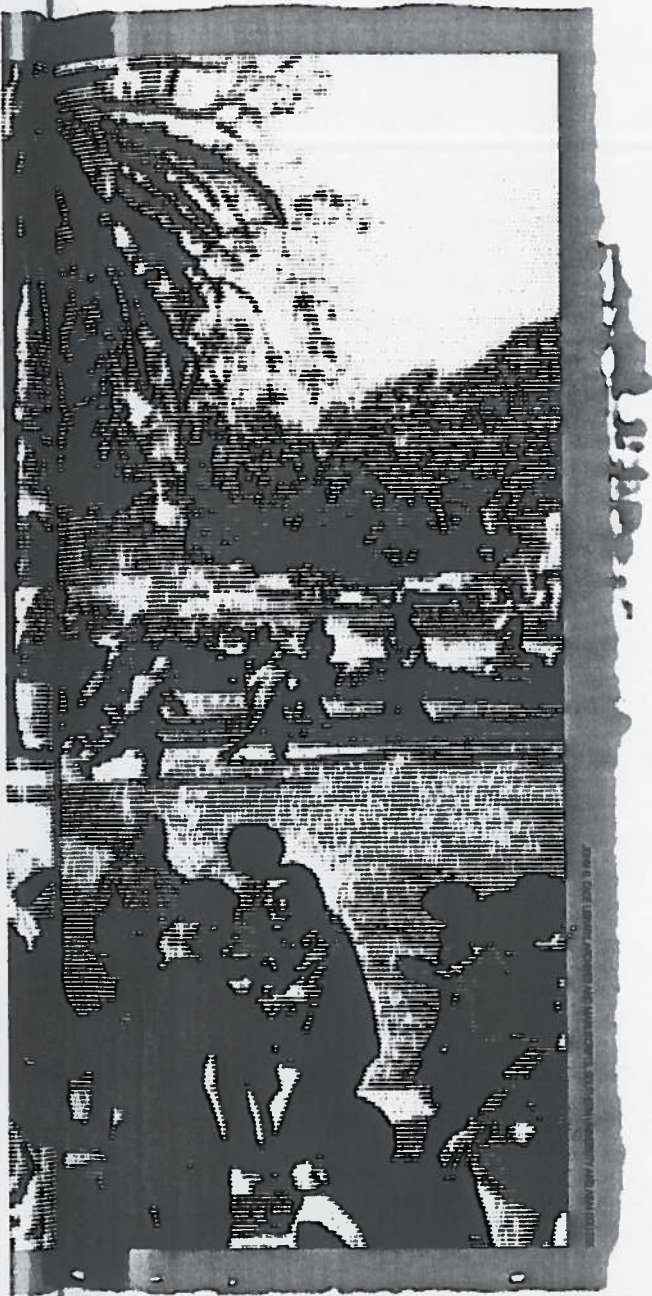


# *TAKING A*

IN 1972 PROTESTS BROKE OUT AT GRAMBLING  
AND SOUTHERN UNIVERSITIES AMONG  
STUDENTS WHO QUESTIONED THE GOVERNANCE  
OF THESE HISTORICALLY BLACK COLLEGES





Campus unrest proliferated all over the country in the 1960s and 1970s. In 1972 it reached Louisiana's Grambling State University and Southern University. But the protests at these historically black campuses were fundamentally different from that at Kent State in May 1970, and the protests at most black universities, including Grambling and Southern, were fundamentally different from that at Jackson State in Jackson, Mississippi, two weeks after the violence in Ohio.

Historians generally classify such protest as being the product of a long history of black student activism, stemming from social inequities and moving into university administration and back relatively seamlessly, or as an outgrowth of the broader student movement, which saw all forms of bureaucracy as suspect. But Southern and Grambling proved that neither of these assumptions hold. The student movement was necessarily influential, and the taint of segregation was clearly evident in the bitterness of black Louisiana collegians. But the protests in Louisiana were directed at black officials at the university, specifically dealing with issues they saw as influenced by race and class accommodationism. That isn't to say civil rights wasn't a factor in such events. The autocratic administrators were, in the eyes of students, tools of the white power structure in the state, which in turn authored the segregationist policy against which their other track of anger resonated. And even when civil rights wasn't the impetus for such campus activism, it was still there, hovering over the proceedings. And so, student protests at Southern and Grambling—at black universities in general—were neither the result of a seamless transition from candlelight vigils for voting rights nor an inherent continuation of or dependency on white college radicalism. They were a combination of those realities, additionally feeding from a long history of the contradictory nature of black colleges themselves and the historical frustration black students often expressed at those schools.

And the frustration was there at Grambling. On November 1, 1972, a campus group headed by Student Government Association president Louis Scott presented a list of demands to president Ralph Waldo Emerson Jones. Group members wanted greater student participation in policymaking. They wanted a say in faculty hiring. They wanted a department of black studies, more comprehensive mail and phone service, the removal of the school dress code. Finally, they wanted 75 percent representation on university disciplinary committees.

This wasn't a protest against the bombing of Cambodia. It wasn't a protest for civil rights. It was a protest by black collegians against the

On November 16, 1972, student protestors at Southern University in Baton Rouge occupied the campus's administration building. In an effort to remove the demonstrators, sheriff's deputies and the state police tossed tear gas canisters into the building, which the occupiers allegedly threw back out of windows. Two students were killed in the ensuing melee.

# STAND

BY THOMAS AIELLO





**irbances**

Examples of student response to such authoritarianism date to the 1920s, but Grambling had a less extensive history with student militancy. It was cloistered in a small black town, and though there was staunch segregation in nearby Ruston, the Lincoln Parish seat, the city of Grambling itself proved a relative barrier to much of its harsher dictates. Still, Grambling wasn't immune from such realities. In 1967

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The *Gramblinite* student newspaper documented the protests that took place on the Grambling campus in November 1972, including photographs of a discarded protest sign (**bottom left**) and broken glass in a Student Union door and in the bookstore's display cases (**opposite page**).

approximately 800 students walked out of classes, ostensibly protesting Grambling's overemphasis on the football team and arguing that such aggrandizement hurt its academic mission. President Jones asked Gov. John McKeithen for a National Guard presence, and McKeithen responded with 800 men. It was a clumsy move. There was no violence in 1967. In addition, Jones expelled 31 of the dissidents.

The following year, a contingent of dissident students authored a more specific protest, chiding the administration for kowtowing to the white State Board of Education and seeking curriculum changes that more readily addressed the black experience. Again Jones responded by requesting state aid and approving a National Guard contingent on campus. Then he expelled 29 more students and dismissed



**GRUVANCE CONFERENCE**—Following the first regularly scheduled meeting with First Congressmen, the grievance compiled by a grievance subcommittee.



**PATIENTLY WAITING**—This crowd of students patiently waited outside the administration building while inside, a committee of students paraded free with a list of

**STUDENT ACTS ON GRIEVANCES**

# STUDENT ACTS ON GRIEVANCES

The real of the college is must be administrative supervision for any official publication.

The administration emphasized the fact that the Grumbine is student dominated but not student controlled.

The administration assured the service committee on this date that if they had recommendations for compensation three times the salary, they would be considered.

The administration already have acted on and given a positive decision.

The administration said that the students had the right to defend the right to hear out.

It was further emphasized that having weapons is against college regulations.

According to the board of appeals, the administration could not have 90 per cent representation because it is national.

The legal stated by the law is now finally students.

The school of administration discipline be held and that this was made in

him someone because of his ethnic background. The administration said it was not possible for the grievance committee to do this.

The grievance committee laborer members (journalist) and students that they have said so.

The board of administration many students was not aware of the expertise of Dr. King financial aid.

It was stated that much of the money available to students receiving financial aid was due to the efforts of Dr. Jackson.

Partially to the demand, Miss Ruth Marie Haight's position as instructor of psychology be relinquished.

The administration proved none said

committee on: 24-hour day switch door services for emergency purposes better and security measures exhibition of unwise attitudes by some instructors the students change in the rights of students such as a student relate to which ethnic Lack of adequate facilities through facilities available, over crowded use by the students; need for new buildings while present ones need renovation; need for more hired specialists; barbarous conditions in dormitories; changed dorm life; changes have created complications than before; elimination of some staffs; regulations of campus traffic be placed in student rooms.

The administration said these

## A PROTEST BY BLACK COLLEGIANS AGAINST THE BLACKS THEMSELVES, AND

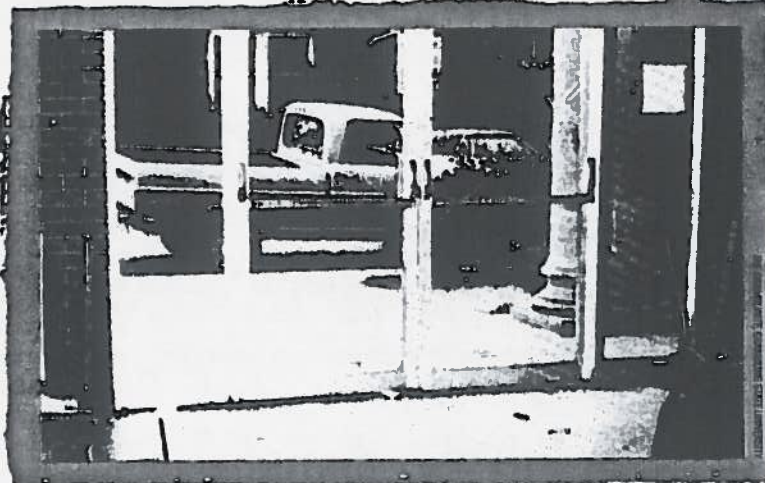


three faculty members.

Such faculty collusion wasn't rare. Faculty members tended to play a much more active role in the protest actions at black colleges and universities. White liberals played a role, but black professors, often made militant through their own collegiate experience, participated in even greater numbers. Howard University, for example, released radical professor Nathan Hare, who had been critical of black colleges. In August 1967, Hare described the schools as "caricatures of the most conspicuous aspects of white college trivia... These colleges, in the minds of many of their students, represent in almost every way a total failure."

The Grambling administration didn't do much to dissuade the students of that idea. The day after Scott made the Student Government Association's demands on November 1, 1972, Jones left for Hawaii with the Grambling football team. There would be no capitulation when the Tigers had a game to play. While Grambling's security force would be in charge of maintaining order on campus, forces from the Ruston City Police, Lincoln Parish Sheriff's Office, Louisiana State Police and Louisiana National Guard were on alert.

Shortly after 5 o'clock, November 2, one of the student groups meeting in front of the administration building began removing tables and chairs from the dining hall, using them to form a barricade blocking the street. Still, there didn't seem to be any systematic plan in place.



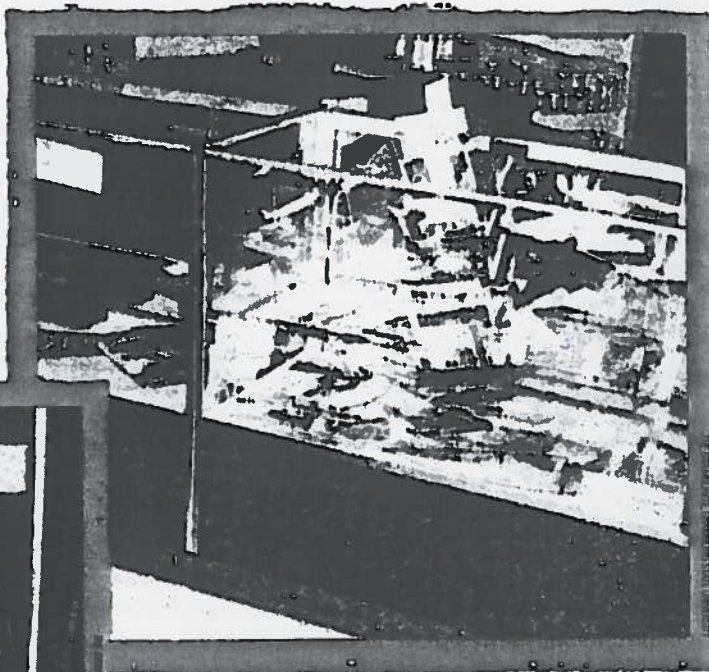
Around 9 o'clock, the violence started when a frustrated student threw a garbage can lid through a plate glass window at the student union. Students streamed into the building, looting clothing and jewelry from the campus bookstore.

Then the first shot was fired. A student blasted a glass door with a pistol, inciting students to begin destroying all of the glass windows and doors. The frenzied group then moved to Adams Hall, the women's dormitory. "Wake your dead up!" they shouted. They threw rocks into the dorm's large glass windows before moving on. At some point in the evening, members of the group overturned a Volkswagen. There was no order to the violence. No system. State troopers waiting on the edge of

campus moved in and began making arrests. By midnight, 12 students had been arrested and sent to the Lincoln Parish jail. The number totaled 25 by morning. With the core group of approximately 150 student protesters unable to marshal any sort of mass consciousness among a student body of more than 4,000, the brief revolution had fizzled. But the student unrest at Grambling seemed like an introduction, not a conclusion. The protest failed, but the protest wasn't over.

### PROTESTS AT SOUTHERN UNIVERSITY

Student activism was nothing new at Southern, just north of Baton Rouge. In the Rev. T.J. Jemison's Baton Rouge bus boycott of 1953, for example, Southern students actively declined to ride local buses. As the early '50s



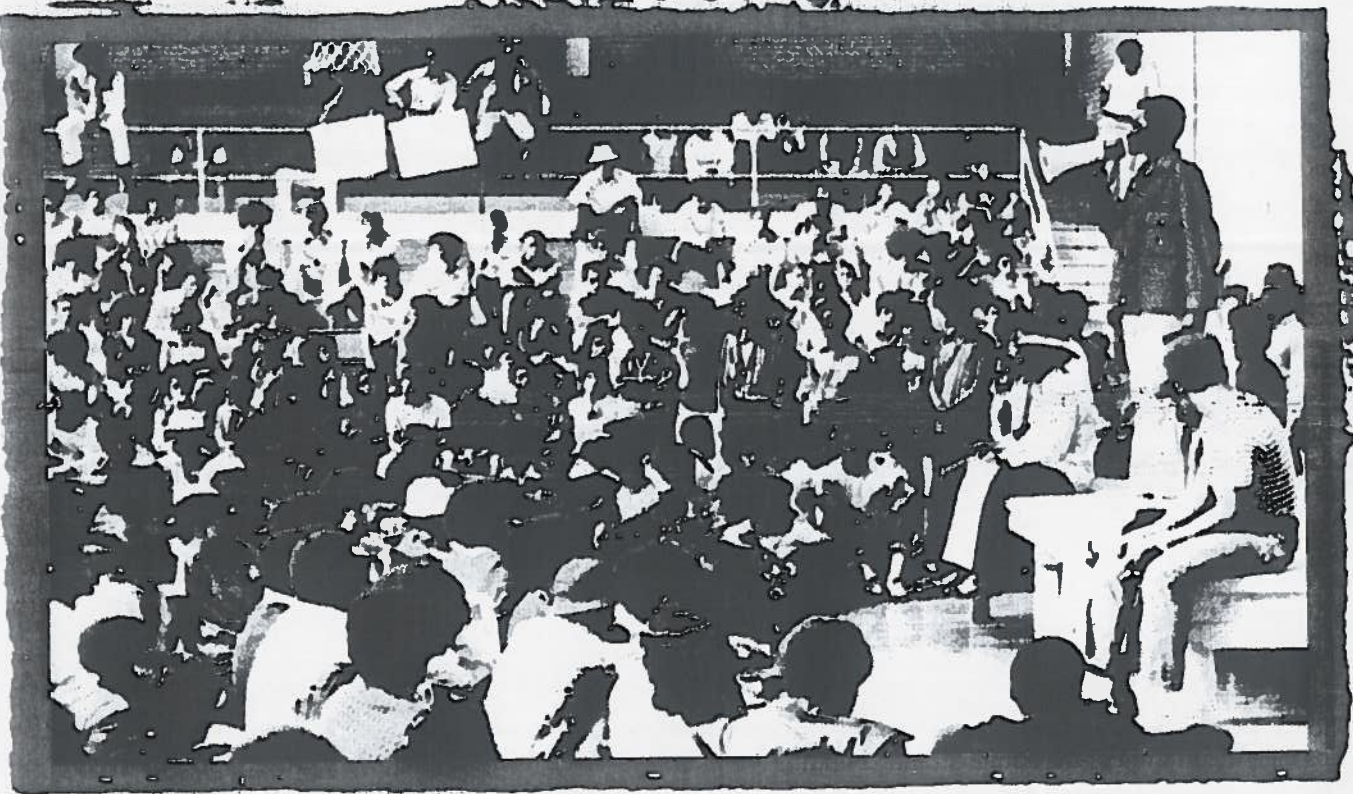
became the late '50s, Southern students began a series of lunch counter protests that preceded the popular birth of the sit-in movement at North Carolina A&T State University in February 1960.

When the Greensboro sit-ins of 1960 became a national movement, Southern again became a state flashpoint for racial protest. At the same time, however, it became a glaring example of the disconnect between a radical student body and a conservative administration. The state Board of Education warned the presidents of all Louisiana colleges, white or black, to discourage such radicalism through "stern disciplinary action," and Southern president Felton Clark obliged, issuing directives to stem the tide of protest before it even started. It didn't work. In late March, Southern students sat in at local businesses. An estimated 3,000 students marched to the state capitol. Clark expelled the 16 students arrested in the sit-ins and the one who organized the march.

At this point, the Southern administration had proved to the student body that racial equality







was less important than order, discipline and reputation. Hundreds of students filed paperwork to withdraw from the university, viewing their administration as a shill for the white Louisiana establishment. In a way, it was. But Clark was charged with maintaining the viability of a black college funded by a white legislature, and he knew that such protests would upset the already tenuous status of black higher education in a decidedly racist state. His actions came less from the innate Uncle Tomism of which he was accused than a pragmatism that sought to maintain Southern's place in the system.

In 1968 Leon Netterville replaced Clark as Southern's president. He was cut from the same authoritarian cloth, but by that time, the Black Power movement had arrived on campus. Renewed protests in 1966 and 1967 had led to the dismissal of three white faculty members, seen as abetting the activism. The following year, groups at both the main campus in Scotlandville and Southern's New Orleans branch demanded a Department of Black Studies. Netterville not only refused the request, he refused to acknowledge it existed. In 1969 students on the New Orleans campus replaced the American flag with a Black Liberation flag, leading to a police crackdown and 20 arrests. That prompted another boycott of classes and more demonstrations. The National Guard would occupy both campuses for weeks to keep order.

In October 1972, disgruntled students provided a list of demands to the administration. Their demands were

Student protestors at Southern University in 1972 demanded changes in the curriculum, changes in the administration and the resignation of President Leon Netterville. The university agreed to make some changes and study others, but the concessions were not enough for most of the angry students. Two student deaths resulted from a confrontation with law enforcement officers: Leonard Brown and Denver Smith (opposite page).

similar to those of the Grambling students, so much so that it was assumed in Lincoln Parish that the Grambling letter was based heavily on the influence of Southern's. (Grambling denied this.) They wanted changes in the curriculum, changes in the administration and Netterville's resignation. The

university responded on October 24 by agreeing to make some changes and study others, but the concessions were not enough for most of the angry students.

A group calling itself "Students United" marched to the State Board of Education seeking response to student grievances. Netterville, the students argued, was out of touch and nonresponsive to student

needs. The board was surprisingly receptive, proposing a three-week study of the campus situation at Southern. State education Superintendent Louis J. Michot addressed the 8,000-member student body at the Scotlandville campus and recommend to Netterville in private negotiations that he resign. "Students United" responded by issuing the investigatory board a list of 12 possible successors for university president, including the poet Amiri Baraka and radical professor Nathan Hare, who had launched his critique of black

colleges in 1967.

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Progress was slow, and there was no way the state Board of Education was going to approve Baraka or Hare as president. On Halloween night, 24 hours before Grambling's own stunted protest, 2,000 students stormed the administration building and warned that if officials didn't vacate the premises, they would "suffer bodily harm." Gov. Edwin Edwards ordered the National Guard to report for duty, and with East Baton Rouge Parish sheriff's deputies and State Police also called to the scene, law enforcement officers and military personnel helped evacuate faculty and administrators from the campus.

Southern's New Orleans campus would be closed for the remainder of the semester, but at Scotlandville, peace seemed to return. But not for long. On November 16, students occupied the Southern administration building for a second time. Administrators again called in sheriff's deputies and state police. The governor called out the National Guard. This time, however, the protest wouldn't end quietly.

## TWO DEATHS

There were approximately 2,000 students in and around the administration building when the police arrived. Almost immediately, the area was inundated with tear gas. Confusion. Screaming. With their eyes red and burning, students began running from the administration building. There were loud explosions amidst the haze, and when the smoke began to clear, two students lay mortally wounded in the street.

"The students had small military bombs," Sheriff Al Amiss announced. "The two students were killed by the bombs thrown right by them from a building window." Gov. Edwards acknowledged that no weapons were found in the administration building but clearly sided with Amiss's version of events: it was the protest that killed the students, not the police.

"At least 2,000 charged us," Amiss told reporters. The students had "overpowered a campus security guard, and that's where they got their tear gas." He had also seen the bombs. But in another statement, Amiss said, "We retreated back. The victims were shot as we were retreating to get our gas masks on." When pressed on the contradictory statements, Amiss suggested that perhaps the bombs had been filled with buckshot.

"The governor is a liar," said one student, speaking on condition of anonymity. "They were raiding the

administration building. I saw them throw double canisters and I saw the students throw them back. We did not have tear gas and we did not have bombs. No one in the administration building was armed. No one." This seemed a far more plausible explanation. Student unrest had been fermenting since October, but no attacks had been reported. The notion that students would conclude that now was somehow the time for violence seemed implausible. The police had the

resources to incite the violence. The constant frustration of white officers having to continually quell campus disturbances gave them motive. But in a war of words, the authority of the police (to say nothing of their whiteness) would clearly ensure that any and all officers would be protected.

The following week, attorney general William J. Guste Jr. opened a special investigation into the deaths of the two students, Denver Smith and Leonard Brown, headed dually by a white and black assistant attorney general. The FBI, too, would investigate to determine whether any federal laws were broken. By that time, however, the jaded students were openly accusing Netterville of premeditated murder. "They (the sheriff's deputies) fired once, picked up the cartridge release, put them in their pockets and fired again," said Fred Prejean, spokesman for Students United. Another member of the group, Charlene Hardnett, charged, "We are aware of the fact that Dr. Netterville set the students up for mass slaughter."

Nelson Johnson, president of the national Youth Organization for Black Unity (YOB), declared that there was another, more insidious force manipulating the student protesters. "White, radical, left-wing groups" had swooped in to bolster their own agendas. "As soon as the smoke cleared, white left-wing groups started parachuting in here trying to maneuver the students, among other things, to declare a massive

mobilization on Washington, D.C." All this sort of action accomplished, argued Johnson, was refocus students' anger away from their own interests. Never mind that YOB, too, was a national organization that descended upon the campus, or that it, too, was making a name for itself on the back of a tragedy. But for Johnson, such concerns about YOB were unfounded. It was a black group. And, ultimately, it was "working to clarify the issues and the basic objectives of the students' struggle which is around the question of black education." For Johnson, the broader

example of student activism on American campuses was hijacking the message and meaning of black



LEONARD BROWN



DENVER SMITH







campus protest. The students were situating themselves against the traditionally understood evolution of university unrest. Black education had been problematic long before America's incursion into Vietnam, long before the post-Brown civil rights movement had begun in earnest. This was student activism, and it was, at its base, a fight against racism, but it was also a unique coupling of those elements with a long history of black frustration with black higher education.

But none of that solved the debate about motive and guilt. Guste's investigatory committee, composed of six whites and six blacks, held interviews behind closed doors. In the heated, mistrustful climate of the Southern campus, however, it was unlikely that the jaded students would be very cooperative. Reports began to leak out almost immediately after the investigation got underway that requested interviewees were failing to appear.

Meanwhile, a separate, unofficial investigation by the makeshift Black People's Committee of Inquiry held public hearings with witnesses who were far more cooperative. The group wasn't local. Led by Berkeley, California, councilman D'army Bailey and Georgia state

East Baton Rouge Parish Sheriff's deputies take positions in front of the Academic Building at Southern University. The State Police armored vehicle nicknamed "Big Bertha" is in the background.

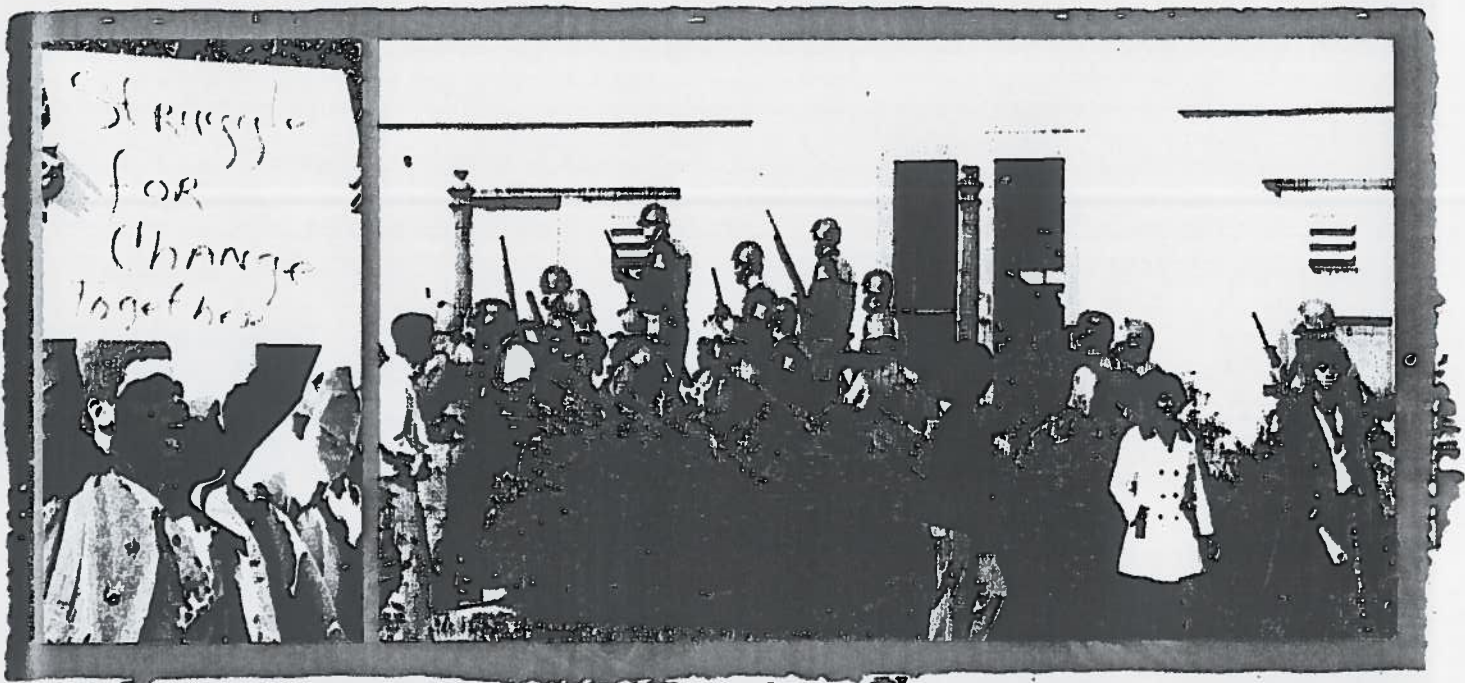
**NEITHER SHERIFF  
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FOR ANYTHING.**

representative and civil rights veteran Julian Bond, the committee was designed to use the fame of its members to bring pressure on Louisiana to act. Even Gov. Edwards appeared before the committee, hoping to salve the wounds of the Baton Rouge black community. He was unsuccessful. "I think you're going to find in the long run that this is just one of those things that happens when people flaunt authority," he told them.

Unsurprisingly, the Black People's Committee of Inquiry exonerated the students of any role in the deaths. The police officers incited the violence and there was ample evidence for prosecution, the panel said. But they weren't the only offenders. Members of the university administration refused to bring medical assistance to the slain students, one of whom most likely could have been saved with emergency care. The report of the biracial Guste committee, however, was surprising. The group found that the students were killed by a shotgun, not by a bomb—that the sheriff's deputies had incited the violence by lobbing tear gas at the protesters. It wasn't the students' fault.

Edwards took a hard line. He had seen the same evidence as had the Guste committee and he was unconvinced. Edwards disputed the findings at every turn. Owusu Sadaukai, member of the Black People's Committee of Inquiry, warned that a "judgment" needed to be made soon, that "Black people be informed before the whole thing is quickly forgotten, which is what usually happens in





these cases." He was right. Edwards' obstinacy assured that a judgment wouldn't be made anytime soon, and though Southern would never forget the incident, law enforcement quickly did. Neither Amiss, who had become sheriff less than four months earlier, nor his deputies were ever prosecuted for the shooting deaths of the two students. For professional misconduct. For dereliction of duty. For anything.

The violence that occurred at Grambling and Southern wasn't rare at southern black campuses. Not only did black colleges experience more campus protests per capita than did their white counterparts during the Black Power era, but more off-campus authorities were used to police the resulting problems. Of course, southern black colleges already were situated in a tense racial climate, and the scores of white police who appeared on campus demonstrated white southern mistrust of black students and increased the potential for violence. The dynamic of white officers policing black protests not specifically targeted at integration and similar civil rights goals also had a significant history prior to the Grambling and Southern protests of 1972. From the inception of Black Power to the fall semester of 1972, this combination of black students and white police proved dramatically combustible, at Alcorn A&M, Texas Southern, South Carolina State and Jackson State universities.

The legacy of violence at Grambling and Southern resonated in the years to come. In the spring following the 1972 protests, E.C. Harrison, Southern's vice president for academic affairs, published an enlightened study of student unrest at black colleges, which many of the activist students would have found either gratifying or disingenuous, depending on the level of residual frustration they experienced after the events. To be sure, Harrison's conclusions didn't jibe with Netterville's (or, for that matter, Jones's) actions. He argued for "modernization of organizational structure and administrative practices and policies,"

Members of the State Police Tactical Unit and East Baton Rouge Parish sheriff's deputies were dispatched to Southern University to remove students who occupied the Administration Building in November 1972.

and defended "an organization in which the faculty and student are involved in the formulation of policies and decisions." Administration officials needed to demonstrate patience. In addition, the community surrounding the university needed to "make a re-examination of their institutions, social customs and laws for their imperfections and inconsistencies." But in the years following the protests, Harrison's encomium to cooperation didn't solve the problems. And the federal investigation into the deaths of Denver Smith and Leonard Brown ended without indictments.

In the vast panoply of sociological and historical treatments of the nature and evolution of student protest, it is sometimes easy to forget what they died for—easy to forget the place of the Grambling and Southern protests in the broader trajectory of student activism at black southern universities. The national student movement and the strain of living in the racist South certainly had their place in student frustration, but the protests were directed at administrations deemed unresponsive to student needs. The Black Power movement, the broader culture of student protest and the inherent mistrust of white authorities gave impetus to the longstanding resentment against the administrators of Louisiana's two principal black public institutions to create a crucible of discontent during the fall 1972 semester. The broken buildings, the injured and arrested, and the legacy of two dead students would cast a pall over the universities that would linger for years. **LCV**

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