



The Rise and Fall of Students for a Democratic Society

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Introduction

Students for a Democratic Society was created as an organization whose goals were to activate young people into become political vehicles in order to spread democracy. SDS found its home across college campuses and its numbers soared during the early 1960s. SDS became subject to institutional collapse during the later half of the decade as internal and external forces conflicted with the movements overarching ideology. The radical factions that distanced themselves from SDS contributed to the collapse of the organization and by the 1970s there was a new revolutionary culture that had gained prominence in the United States.

The Port Huron Statement

The statement calls for “participatory democracy” as a way for individuals to determine their own independence and assist in creating a more civil world. The critical manifesto essential to the foundation of SDS was drafted by one of their future presidents, Tom Hayden. The early leaders' ability to articulate democratic messages and create a digestible narrative of reinvention came across in their communications both verbally and through written statements. So long as the organization maintained reasonably manageable numbers, SDS was able to speak, disagree and make arrangements for protest as **one unified group**.

The Progressive Labor Party

The Progressive Labor Party joined SDS in 1966 as a platform to gain members for their own organization. The PL faction continued to grow and dominate SDS. PL activists wanted to emphasize the working class to combat issues surrounding workers rights and Capitalism, while SDS was more focused on ending the war in Vietnam and combating racism. In 1969 SDS removed the PL Party from its organization due to a **lack of joint fundamental beliefs**. Internal conflicts in SDS caused many to lose confidence in the organization and either distance themselves or created their own factions. The overall structure of SDS was beginning to crumble during this time.

The Weathermen

A group of SDS deserters who began to call themselves the Weatherman believed in using violence and destruction to display their political beliefs. A slogan used by the group stated for activists to “**bring the war home,**” by inflicting damage on American soil instead of Vietnam. The group moved underground in 1969 after its formation due to being investigated by the FBI for criminal activity and general public backlash. They began to be known as the Weather Underground.

Revolutionary Youth Movement

In 1969 another radical faction called the Revolutionary Youth Movement split from SDS after opposing its stance on labor rights. RYM gained support by rallying with Hispanic organizations like the Young Lords and Brown Berets, along with the Black Panther Party. RYM eventually split into another faction within itself called RYM II that positioned itself against the Weathermen. RYM and RYM II were **unstable** groups with little to no institutional structure or strategy, making their efforts ineffective and dangerous.

How Its Foundation Led To Its Collapse

SDS was founded upon principals which supported universal inclusion and **lack of strong organizational authority**. The irony of SDS is that its founding institutional features were simultaneously the reason for its collapse. Membership soared due to lack of singular leadership, but that same structure gave room for oppositional groups to take hold. In the instance of SDS, bringing in bureaucratic methods may have saved the organization from institutional collapse. It is because of this complicated dynamic that resistance movements are unable to compete with stable institutions, forcing a constant readjustment in goals and ideology which ultimately leads to organizational chaos.