Who Killed the Berkeley School? Struggles Over Radical Criminology

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Introduction
Déjà Vu

During the 1960s and 1970s, The School of Criminology at the University of California Berkeley (UCB) had more than 30 full-time or part-time faculty members teaching upper-division and graduate courses in criminalistics and criminology. The School was the leading American institution devoted to criminology. Nevertheless, it was abolished in 1977 by California’s Governor, Ronald Reagan, and the UCB Chancellor, Alfred Bowker.

Bowker in later years defended himself by saying the School had become “politically incorrect”—implying that it no longer fulfilled its academic responsibilities. But his allegation was false. The School was closed because a group of 30 students and 4 faculty members had fought against the brutal suppression of political dissent as well as the racist and sexist law-enforcement policies prevailing throughout the country. These members also opposed the crimes being committed by the United States in the Vietnam War. They enhanced the academic status of the School among criminologists in the United States and Europe. They did not reduce that status.

Members of this group became “usual suspects” be-
cause they joined the thousands in the San Francisco Bay Area who had protested the crimes inflicted by the U.S. government during the War. In fact, the events leading to the School’s closing began when they publically expressed their outrage over the brutal suppression of “Stop the Draft Week” demonstrations in 1967.

These members were attacked by university officials even though they epitomized the highest ideals of their profession. They had opposed the devastation of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos because the U.S. government was creating landscapes overflowing with land mines, toxic chemicals, mutilated people, and corpses. The U.S. Air Force had strafed *everything that moved* including farm animals, children, old people, women and men.

Simultaneously, when political dissent erupted through the United States after Cambodia was invaded, civil liberties were lawlessly assaulted by the CIA, FBI, state, and local police. In Berkeley, Reagan sent an armed convoy of National Guardsmen to control this dissent.

Further examples starting with genocidal wars against Native Americans and the 1798 Alien and Sedition Acts demonstrate that the U.S. government has never been the entity idealized by public school civics lessons. Like Janus, the Roman God of gateways and exits, the Statue of Liberty, the gateway to the U.S. signals a vista of democratic spirits and American dreams. But that vista is periodically eclipsed by the suppression of civil liberties and human rights.