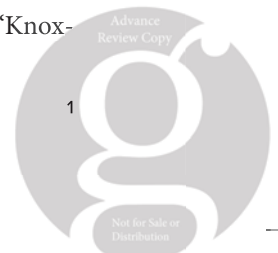


INTRODUCTION

As the tens of thousands of crusade attendees filed past local police and Secret Service to enter Neyland Stadium, they had little idea how the muggy May 28, 1970, evening would pan out. Nor did the few hundred college-age protestors, many of whom walked through security checkpoints outside the football stadium of the University of Tennessee hiding signs stating “Thou Shalt Not Kill” under their shirts and tucked into their waistbands. Rev. Billy Graham and the crusade’s organizing committee had anticipated this conflict, however—as had the university. Holding Graham’s week-long religious revival at the football stadium presented several headaches for the university; in particular it stoked frustrations of students and staff over the separation of church and state and that the crusade took place during finals. But student unrest had also been at an all-time high on campus that year. It was the announcement that President Richard M. Nixon would be speaking during the crusade’s Youth Night that sparked this particular protest. Although surprised by the upcoming presidential visit, the crusade organizers moved forward with their plans, while they, university officials, and the White House anticipated protests but expected them to be small and unimpactful.

They were wrong—to a point. This was Nixon’s first appearance at a university campus after the Kent State shootings earlier that month. The White House and Graham’s Knoxville crusade committee believed the reception would be overwhelmingly positive, important for Nixon amid the national discord surrounding his Vietnam policies. But Nixon’s dissenters, while vastly outnumbered, were loud. Their heckles and chants (including “One-two-three-four, we don’t want you anymore”) were clearly picked up in official recordings of the event, interrupting Nixon several times during his speech. The protest and subsequent prosecution of several students (named the “Knox-



ville 22”) who attended this event, and indeed the broader student movement in Tennessee, are largely absent from historical accounts, having disappeared from historical understanding of the state. Away from the famous Nashville movement (usually categorized as part of “civil rights” rather than student activism), the significance of Tennessee’s student activism has remained largely unexamined because when it did appear, observers dismissed it as an isolated event rather than as representative of a larger movement.

During a May 1970 news segment for ABC News, Charles Murphy concluded his report on Nixon speaking at the Knoxville crusade with a final word not about the event or its religious attendees, but about the protestors assembled there. “The anti-war demonstrators were a small minority,” he stated, “but the fact that they were even here, on a conservative campus in a conservative state, illustrates the deep division even here.”¹ While the discovery of the illegal Cambodian bombing and subsequent killing of students at Kent State and Jackson State had catalyzed student activism nationally in May 1970, Murphy’s statement overlooked the longer, sustained development of student protest in Tennessee.

The narrative of Tennessee student protest is the story of student activism in much of America during the twentieth century. The notion of the New Left inhabiting only a brief moment in time, rising and falling in the 1960s—“years of hope, days of rage,” in Todd Gitlin’s influential telling—is problematic in the context of Tennessee.² Student movements both developed and fractured more slowly in Tennessee than in the dominant national accounts of student activism. Student activism in Tennessee dates back much further than commonly perceived, as early as the 1920s, and despite the crushing effect of McCarthyism and Communist fears of the 1940s and 1950s, Old Left and New Left activists fostered intergenerational connections based on students’ focus on personal autonomy and social welfare.

Furthermore, interracial student activism was evident in the state prior to the start of the sit-in movement in February 1960, dating to collegiate student exchanges and workshops beginning in 1954. White and Black students fought for similar causes pertaining to student life on campuses and community improvement well into the 1960s, and only began to show significant differences around 1968. This is later than the shift in 1964 and 1965 often emphasized by scholars who study student activism elsewhere in the country.³ The student movement centered on issues related to autonomy and minority rights through the 1960s and reached its peak in spring 1970. From there, while racial inequality and student rights remained prominent focuses, Tennessee student activism evolved on a smaller scale to embrace a broader range of causes,



such as women's and gay rights. So while the majority of activism took place between *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954) and the national backlash against the May 1970 Kent State University shootings, viewing it over a longer period demonstrates that Tennessee student activism was more than just a flash in the pan.⁴

As the first statewide study of student activism to incorporate Black and white students and their work on campuses and in communities, and one of a growing historiography on southern student activism, this book will broaden scholarly understanding of New Left and white and Black student radicalism from its traditionally defined hotbeds in the Northeast and the West Coast. Previous studies of southern student activism and the New Left specifically detailed the distinctions between activism in the North versus the South. Building on their contributions from the late 1990s to the 2010s, this book draws connections with experiences of students across the South and around the country.⁵ In Tennessee, the stifling political and social order forced activism to develop more slowly; for the same reason, the period of mass mobilization among students in the 1960s itself was briefer. Leftist activists in the South had to endure more isolation—and greater risks—than their counterparts elsewhere.

Student activism in Tennessee straddles the historiographies of the 1960s student movement and the civil rights movement. Elements of Tennessee student activism related to one or both of the movements, and many participants did not see themselves as exclusively associated with one or the other. As such, Tennessee student activism makes a significant contribution to studies of the 1960s; previously understood distinctions between the two historiographies are less useful when considering state-level studies such as this one.⁶

Radical Volunteers also departs from existing work in its determination to scrutinize student activism in the communities in which campuses were situated as well as on campuses themselves. Campus-centered research provides deeper insight into specific events and the individuals involved, but by considering student activists alongside community leaders and members, a community-focused approach allows for a more representative accounting of students' initiatives and their effect on their communities.⁷ Incorporating primary resources focuses on the students themselves. This, alongside materials that detail the actions of university administrators, faculty, and state and federal actors, reveals a more nuanced story of student activism.⁸

I use a state study of Tennessee to examine the development of student activism in the mid-twentieth century. It is not exclusively a Tennessee story, nor a southern one; in moving across the state of Tennessee from campus to cam-



pus, including major cities and rural areas, and contextualizing African American and white student experiences over the long chronological period used in the study, it tells a previously overlooked story of student activism. Focusing on Tennessee specifically, rather than another southern (or non-southern) state, allows for connections to southern, western, and national similarities in my analysis. This is particularly important for context for this period of Tennessee's history given student activism's previously understudied nature outside of the famous Nashville sit-ins. The variety of geographical and demographic settings in Tennessee, as well as its location as a gateway to both the Border South and Deep South, makes the state an insightful case study.

Moreover, Tennessee's student activism is largely representative of most regions of the country, such as the Midwest where studies of Illinois and Oklahoma college campuses and ones in the Appalachian region of Ohio have demonstrated continuities in the focus and development of white student activism. This makes us rethink southern student activism as one not of regional exceptionalism but as a national story with a southern flavor. As much research on southern exceptionalism has shown, when compared with other areas across the country, much of what had been previously understood as exceptionally southern is in fact broadly representative of national trends.⁹ Looking beyond one moment or one place, Tennessee can be used to tell the longer, complex history of American student activism.

Framing student activism over a long period of time across the state reveals disjuncture as much as coherence in the movement. Though all case studies contain distinctive and representative features, Tennessee's geographical diversity lends itself well to a study of regional variation. The state's widely recognized West, Middle, and East divisions exemplify different regions of the South.¹⁰ Just as there was no one South, there was no one Tennessee. Political scientist Alexander P. Lamis described Tennessee as "a complex mixture of nearly all of the important elements found throughout the South."¹¹ Tennessee borders eight other states, with the heavily Black western part of the state bordering the Mississippi River across from Missouri and Arkansas, and the eastern portion running up alongside western North Carolina and the Appalachian Mountains. These geographical differences helped drive the state's economic history, which in turn shaped racial politics in each region. As one visitor claimed in 1962, "It is difficult to believe one state can have such different 'moods.'"¹² Tennessee's seemingly split personality impacted its emergent student movement.

The southern context mattered in shaping Tennessean activism. While for some white activists, their southern heritage molded their work as well as their identity, for others, including the majority of Black students, the region's



racial politics were more significant. One white student activist at the University of Alabama during the 1960s quipped, “Living in the South and being a freak isn’t like living just anywhere and being a freak,”¹³ a feeling many white Tennessee student activists would have shared. This sentiment was a consequence of the region’s pervasive political repression of left-wing activism and the small numbers of activists relative to the overall Tennessee student population. The South’s political order was more stifling than its counterpart in the North, and could easily turn violent. Student activists in the South grasped these constraints. In pursuing interracial activism, southern students addressed racial issues, but had to do so carefully. Race strongly influenced personal experiences of activism, however. For Black students in Tennessee, the desegregation of public facilities and the integration of higher education institutions was more immediate and personal. They certainly had agency in deciding to organize and participate in activism, but they had more to gain in terms of representation on campus, as well as more to lose; Black student activists were suspended or expelled for their activism in much higher numbers than their white peers. Though not “exceptional,” Tennessee student activism certainly had a southern inflection.

Student power emerges as the unifying theme across the decades and racial lines. Defined here as the demand for personal and/or political autonomy, student power was evident as a concept, from the campus-based protests of the 1920s around students’ rights through to the 1960s debates over *in loco parentis* campus policy reform. It is also a sentiment expressed by white and Black students alike, and one that unified students of diverse backgrounds on campuses large and small. Both Black and white students viewed attempts to establish personal autonomy within campus and community organizing as vital activities. They understood personal autonomy in a broad sense, conceptualized as student power: it covered immediate concerns over universities’ assumption of parental power over students, as well as apparent infringements of civil rights and civil liberties.

By the late 1960s, awareness of continued racial inequalities in education and society drove Black students in larger numbers to demand destruction of the perceived racial “machine” harming African Americans across the country. Many white southern student radicals were sympathetic to this Black quest to uproot the structures sustaining racism, but were less successful in persuading large numbers of whites of its urgency. Meanwhile, a growing majority of Black students no longer believed it was in their best interest to join forces with white New Leftists.¹⁴ The result was a further separation between the initiatives of Black and white student activists. By 1970, the situation in the South mirrored divisions elsewhere, though the split had come later. The Ten-



nessee case adds to the wave of scholarship challenging 1964 or 1965 as the divide between good/bad, interracial/separatist, or successful/unsuccessful categories of 1960s activism.

Student power was not a uniquely Tennessean, southern, or even American concept. Studies of student activism in the Midwest, most notably in Illinois and Oklahoma, highlight similar emphasis on students' personal autonomy as a unifying, pervasive theme. Termed "prairie power," the central organizing concept in these states bore striking similarities to the student power articulated by Tennessee activists, white and Black.¹⁵ Furthermore, as Thomas Weyant's research on Appalachian student activism in Ohio has demonstrated, student activists in that region (including much of East Tennessee) articulated a similar concept to student power, but one that he sees as emphasizing citizenship. Much as the Tennessee case demonstrates, Weyant found that personal ideas of citizenship drove students to be involved in activism around civil rights and the Vietnam War as well as campus reform. In examining why students were drawn to participate in activism, Weyant found that it was their views of themselves as citizens of the region, country, or world that led them to demonstrate despite "limited successes of protest and dissent."¹⁶ Yet unlike Weyant's work on student citizenship, Doug Rossinow's research on "the politics of authenticity" in Austin, Texas, or studies of activism in Oklahoma and Illinois, all of which focus on white student activists, the Tennessee case reveals how both Black and white students in Tennessee embraced student power in their drive for personal and political autonomy.¹⁷ Further studies should scrutinize student demands for power incorporating race as a factor shaping activists' choices.

In order to present the most comprehensive statewide study possible, this book incorporates a broad sample of historically Black and historically white institutions, public and private, in West, Middle, and East Tennessee, combining primary research with more locally focused studies.¹⁸ It concentrates primarily—though not exclusively—on majority-white institutions, largely because they afford a much greater range and depth of archival resources. Highlighting key trends within the borders of Tennessee without losing thematic and narrative focus requires a devotion to discrete events at particular higher education institutions. For example, the section addressing connections between student activists and Highlander Folk School focuses largely on Nashville college students, while sections on demonstrations against segregated public accommodations and on reactions to the Kent State shootings scrutinize major campus protests across different parts of the state.

While many studies on 1960s activism have made valuable historiographical contributions to liberal activity, campus politics of the era in fact was



shaped by a more complicated back-and-forth between students on either side of the political spectrum. Not all student activists in the 1960s were radical or even liberal, so focusing exclusively on one side or the other is problematic. Historians such as David Farber have rightly argued for further consideration of the Sixties as “the seed time of conservative populism and religious fundamentalism,” while Robert Cohen has stated that in order to “understand the distinctive dynamics of the southern student movement,” historians must recognize “that the South’s *prophetic minority*—envisioning an America free of racism, sexism, homophobia, and imperialism—faced the daunting task of organizing the region’s *recalcitrant majority*: rightward-leaning white students.”¹⁹ It is essential, therefore, to analyze the activism by liberal southern students not only within the region’s political and socially conservative context, but in direct conversation with conservative student activists.

The following chapters are organized chronologically and thematically. In order to trace the narratives of white and Black student protest, the first chapter introduces the earliest developments of youth activism in the state, which centered on 1920s and 1930s campus activism over student rights, as well as community organizing around Highlander Folk School and its role in fostering interest in activism concerning labor, civil liberties, and later, civil rights. Highlander bridged the gap between the Old and New Left, as well as revealing continuity between the two generations in motivations and thinking. While McCarthyism certainly damaged leftist organizing in the mid-twentieth century, tellingly, in the 1950s and 1960s white and Black students in Tennessee believed that they were connected to the Old Left. Highlander was an important site for mobilizing both Black students and white radicals dissatisfied with the slow pace of racial change. This is where southern student activism really began.

The second chapter places the well-known Nashville sit-ins from February to May 1960 into the context of sit-in movements across the state, and then examines efforts to desegregate public accommodations in other cities across the state.²⁰ By doing so, this chapter sheds light on the Nashville movement’s distinctive elements. It also traces the experiences of students with activism on campuses and in communities, thereby expanding the definition of youth activism and contextualizing radical thought and actions at colleges. Local circumstances mattered, as the contrast between older Black leadership driving activism in Memphis, versus the new, young leadership that emerged on college campuses in Nashville and Knoxville demonstrates. It also scrutinizes university administrators, faculty members, and community leaders. Well before the famous clashes of the late 1960s, these groups harbored anxieties about student unrest.



Chapter 3 traces efforts at economic reform by both white and Black students in the mid- to late 1960s. White student activists believed that labor organizing provided an opportunity for an interracial social movement of poor and working-class southerners. Their Black counterparts were more focused on the rights and needs of Black workers, especially sanitation workers in Memphis. There were evident points of agreement among Black and white students, but forging a common movement proved impossible. Black Power was increasingly influential, and with it a conviction among Black students that the needs of their community required race-specific rather than integrationist strategies. Yet again, the militancy of Black youth brought them into conflict with established civil rights leadership in Memphis and elsewhere.

The fourth chapter assesses the escalating campus activism of the 1968–70 period. It analyzes the tumultuous negotiations among students, faculty, and administration from the mid-1960s for increased student and faculty participation in university governance on the one hand, and expanding the realm of student autonomy on the other. As demands for increased student autonomy intersected with those for eliminating persistent racial inequalities on campuses, universities across Tennessee witnessed escalating tensions that were broadly based and increasingly intractable. These instances of campus unrest were pivotal in guiding how university administrators and politicians prepared for and reacted to demonstrations, particularly later anti-war protests. These episodes were part of a statewide, indeed regional and national (and even international), trend of student activism.

Chapter 5 shows that university students' paths continued along parallel tracks. The Vietnam War increasingly drove Black and white student initiatives in conjunction with continued efforts to gain student power. White activists opposed the war and sought an interracial, anti-racist, anti-imperialist alliance. Their Black peers, on the other hand, increasingly sympathized with other non-white populations worldwide while challenging continued racial inequality at home. Then tensions across the country and in Tennessee exploded following the announcement of President Nixon's escalation of the war in Cambodia and the subsequent Kent State tragedy in May 1970. This moment marked the apex of student activism in Tennessee. While demonstrations showcased anti-war and anti-establishment sentiments, these protests—as the President's Commission on Campus Unrest concluded—in fact built upon tensions over issues of race and personal autonomy long brewing among students, faculty, and administrators. Interest continued in issues that motivated students in the 1960s, namely race, student power, and minority representation.



When placed alongside existing accounts, this largely forgotten story of student activism affirms some aspects of the 1960s student movement and complicates others. Its scope reveals how broad this movement was, and how many different sorts of students—white and Black, private and public, western, middle, and east Tennessean—were involved. Though outnumbered, Tennessee student activists secured significant campus reforms, pursued ambitious community initiatives, and articulated a powerful counter-vision for the South and the United States.

Tennessee student activists built upon relationships with Old Left activists and organizations to create the possibility for radical change in the politically conservative region. For many, Highlander Folk School was both the inspiration and incubator for subsequent organizing.

