

Berkeley Revolt

War zone report

Lenny the Red-and-Black

1968

Editors' Note: The following events, now described as the Berkeley Rebellion, occurred between June 28 and July 2. Subsequently, the citizens of Berkeley won a complete victory when the city council lifted the curfew and allowed Telegraph Avenue to be closed off and a rally held. This article originally appeared in a slightly longer form in the *San Francisco Express Times*.

On the first warm Friday night of the summer, the Berkeley Magic Kingdom rose in spontaneous revolt. The radicals were beside themselves with anticipation and joy, but it was the hip people who drove the staleness and mediocrity from the scene. Self destruction was transformed into a rudimentary political force.

The Young Socialist Alliance and nine other groups had planned a Solidarity Rally in support of the French students and young workers. Their previous two attempts had flopped rather badly. This time they had only a permit for sound amplification in front of Cody's Bookstore and in case people flowed into the street, the police had given notice they would move in.

The magic kingdom is a lollypop. Beautiful women. Handsome men. It's stylish but loose and allows laziness in its common law charter. But Berkeley is beset by depression, its basic emotional foundation. Many people feel they can never leave, the rest of the country being more or less atrocious.

The monitors said that they expected the cops and didn't act very uptight about it. They believed it and they didn't.

The sound car drove up and down the street laying out the line: "Support the right of Berkeley citizens to freely assemble...support the right of free speech."

The first rumor comes through a friend in front of Nicole's: The stores have been warned to board up their windows. The police say there's going to be a riot.

The sound car repeats its message in very good Spanish. The voice is more relaxed and has another dimension to it.

Red flags go up on the flatbed truck in front of Cody's. One, Two, Three, Peter Camejo, Socialist leader and movement spokesman, is on time and briefly announces, "The rally IS going to be HELD." Up above, the cops have taken the roofs on both sides of the street.



photo by McGrath, *Berkeley Barb* (UPS)

Reese Erlich, one of the Oakland Seven, got up and told a long story. "Up against the wall, Motherfucker," was all I really heard. The lower East Side slogan. In Berkeley, the wall seems more metaphorical; the dead end of talk and bullshit.

The sidewalks were packed and the passageway for cars was growing smaller all the time.

"Fuck you," the people shout at the cops on the roof over Eclair's Bakery. "Fuckin' Pigs." "Go Home." Go Home? So nobody thinks Telegraph Avenue is his street.

The black flag anarchists in front of the truck: "Two, four, six, eight. Organize and smash the State." It's a side show. The real interaction is with the cops on the roofs.

"Hundreds of cops are massing in the University garage." The truth of the situation is coming home. The crowd is bored nervous and the street is getting dark. Some crazy cat leaps out on the street and sits down. The plainclothesmen on the roof over Irv's House of Leather smile as the monitors frantically pull him away.

A motorcyclist is surrounded by 25 people on Dwight Way, blocking the access to Telly. The plainclothesmen move off the roof. In a matter of moments, four policemen have the Dwight corner cleared. Is that All?

Another dozen walk along the cob forcing the people back on the sidewalk. Two thousand people. Is that All?

From far away, and yet it seemed to be inside me, a police lieutenant read the riot act, the order to disperse. The crowd is of one mind: Nobody's goin' anywhere.

"...an unlawful assembly exists"

"Fuck you."

"...the people of the City of Berkeley"

"We are the people."

By now, all the traffic has been blocked and shunted off. On Haste, a thin red line of clergymen are in a chain across the street. Up the street, the police have massed in formation. A lieutenant reads the article again and blankly listens to the men in collars.

Just then the street lights on the corner and on the rest of the 2400 block go out; and with them, last hope of "honorable compromise."

They started moving through the dark like an awakened beast. My group backed up across Telly. The cops cleared the 2400 Block in a few seconds, forcing some people south across Dwight and others north to the campus, four blocks away.

A fat bull, Alameda County Sheriff's Deputy, facing us on the end of the police line on Haste, roughed up a heckler and no sooner had they separated than a great box of garbage came down from the fire escape of an apartment house and crashed inches from his boots.

"Pigs Must Go!"

After a few rocks are thrown, it's our turn. No barricade. The lieutenant: "A chemical agent will be used. You are ordered to disperse immediately." People instinctively back up. Jeers.

"Let the Pig speak!"

The gutter runs water from an opened faucet, "for your face." Rags and towels are generously thrown down to the demonstrators. Not alone.

"Crack!" It's the flight of a malfunctioning space rocket; the can crashes. Then another. Then two more.

Running. Running. We're all running.

"Walk. Walk. Take it easy. Walk." Looking over my shoulder, I followed the crowd down a block to Dana.

"Look at that guy." There's a man standing in the smoke, right where the line of priests was. His arms are out. "He looks like a saint."

The night and the street are different at Haste and Dana. "Let's build barricades." At Telly some people were shouting "Oakland!" This is Berkeley.

The fastest organizing meeting in history takes place and before it's over, a slight blonde chick with glasses is rolling a car out. The tires are flattened. Two more cars. Wood. Rocks. Bricks. Garbage cans. Build. Work fast.

Still, it was only a few people doing it while the others stood around, debating with themselves, perhaps. A police car united us again. Two cops got out.

"Pigs go home."

Tear gas. More heat. The barricade is set on fire to cover the retreat down a block to Ellsworth. I didn't think I could run so fast any more. The apartments are full of friendly people. I could knock on a door if I had to.

The old barricade is still burning. It was like a night fire on the beach with all the young faces around it, nurturing it. "Another barricade," and like magic we're directing traffic off Ellsworth as the barricade goes up. I don't know how many we started with, but about forty are left. No cops. No nothing.

"Why stay here?"

"To Shattuck!" two streets down; the biggest stores in Berkeley.

The first arrest: Four cops in a '63 T-Bird swoop down on a chick standing near a barricade I hadn't seen before on Fulton three blocks west of Telly. "Run!"

She freezes and they've got her.

"Pigs." It's becoming appropriate.

Then the images started thinning out. It was over. Back up on Telly, people I knew were talking, relating separate experiences and identical feelings. Tear gas crystals blotched the street. A new odor for the Avenue. The cops were traveling around like hawks, driving by, threatening a toss, throwing cans of gas. Data like the Story of the Blake Street Barricade, the Campus Barricade and Fire, the Frat Dance that was going on in the Student Union, the two cop cars that were stoned away; were on their way into legend.

"What a trip," said someone who had dropped acid just before the rally. I bet it was.

Saturday was insane, altogether. The sun came up and reheated the night before. I, like everybody else in town, cleaned up, showered and looked very ready to go.

"Mass Meeting." I cringed at the sound that word makes.

An anarchist leaflet: "Dance tonight." Dangerous people?

About three hundred people were at Telly and Bancroft, the campus entrance, bright-eyed and alert. Two guys were wearing and displaying their gas masks and answering questions about where more could be had. The speakers sounded mild. Indeed, Friday had an atmosphere of mildness to it. You couldn't quite call it a riot. The people were ready for more; the limit of their passions was not yet reached.

The basic demands were set out by what appeared to be more of the socialists: An open Telly on July 4th; an open microphone for tonight. A good looking former fraternity boy spoke over the bullhorn long enough to ask everyone to train themselves in self-defense. At that, the crowd turned serious. There were 'many laughs, too. Find a cartoon way to put it, to say what happened and what it meant.

ON TO TONIGHT. WILL WE HAVE TO PAY FOR TODAY?

People were saying "riot" like they really liked the word. They were caressing it, like "rebel." It was an identity of self out of self...the men had reached out and got their hands on a piece of the world. The fact that there had been a near riot seemed small enough price to pay for that.

The sunset was magnificent and left us alone on the street at night in a crowd of people. The rally was more of a sideshow, not at all the purpose of the gathering. People wanted to hear the band, to dance on their street. And so they did. With lookouts posted to watch for attack, they danced in semi-peace. Further up Telegraph, a group of 75 people sat on the street between Virginia Cleaners and Fraser's, and gracefully passed around an endless number of contributed joints.

And right there on Dwight Way a great barricade arose, the largest I had ever seen, and a young man with long hair, George Washington style, stood at the crest of it. There were arguments at the barricade about what should be done. A couple were near fights.

"There're plenty of cops to fight if you wanna fight." No fight.

To my utter amazement, Wallace Johnson, the milk toast, nimble-headed mayor of Berkeley, came strolling up the avenue with his wife and nodded and waved to those who shouted his name from the barricade.

Oh God. Official sanction. It's all right, boys and girls. You can go home now, your cages are clean. Dance for awhile, says the mayor, and makes an announcement that nobody can hear or remember. Something about 10 o'clock and the band.

"Well, as long as he's here, we won't get smashed." Sounds good as far as it goes.

There were no cops on the building that we could see. A rumor flies like a concussion bomb: "The Heat is comin' up Dwight." But it's cool and the band starts up again. Confusing. No cops. That produced a purer fear. We didn't know what would come down.

Incense. Naturals. Loving couples.

A few McCarthy buttons started appearing. "Year! We won now for sure," was observed about that.

I ran into Father Dick York from the Free Church who started giving me the facts on the way the cops tried to break up the first aid center in the Lutheran Church. The fuckin' hospital bombers.

"The cops are putting on their helmets."

At 11:30, it was still Sitzkrieg.

"The police are going to disperse the crowd with all means necessary," and the people started loading up with rocks, selecting and choosing the right size.

"Tear gas on Haste and Telly!" Walk. Walk. Walk. Walk. Walk. WALK. WALK. WALK, chanting as they come. (The bourgeois press reported they were saying "War.") The spectacle of self-control serves its purpose well.

"To the University!"

But before we could get there, a squad of cops blocked the entrance at Bancroft and the crowd turned the corner down and west heaving rocks as they shifted direction, while the cops did an old-fashioned Western saloon dance.

In twenty minutes, they were massing to clear Bancroft. Meanwhile the window of the Wells Fargo Bank lost its integrity.

The cops were moving. No barricade.

"Cocktail!" A highway patrolman went up like a scarecrow. Bank! The gas is in the air and the squad cars zip through the first ranks. The cops are angry, scared, murderous. There's barely enough time to throw off a rock as you run. They're out for blood.

"They've got somebody up there." Beat, club, kick. Men are frantically reaching for the hands of their girls, pulling them.

Real Fear. We're half coward. The Man is beating tonight, when he can overcome the urge to fly down the streets at sixty miles an hour. Snipers?

The sky lights up. "Fire on Telly!" It was a construction site. Some LA matchbox. It fits. The cops moved around all night in private as well as police cars, beating and clubbing people when they felt like it. Most were bystanders who came out to look. Many a studious soul and local businessman got his first taste of the whip.

SUNDAY:

"We had ourselves a riot." Some people are wearing outrageous grins.

"When I saw the fire I almost knelt down on my knees and prayed," an extremist was overheard saying.

The Mass Meeting at Hillel, 4 p.m.:

The less said the better. There was a big debate about whether or not to allow the bourgeois press to cover the meeting "One speaker FOR...One AGAINST." The press stays but a distinction is made between Their Press and Our Press (Barb, Express Times, KPFA, KSAN, Liberation News Service).

The talk is for small groups and no more large military operations. 6:23 at Provo Park. It's getting late. The curfew won't be lifted. It starts at seven: Piedmont to Shattuck, Derby to Bancroft (later extended to Hearst)...56 blocks. Provo Park is a mishmosh. We're being terrorized by some kind of a stall. In an hour, Firestone, Ford. Hardwick Furniture, Dutch Boy Paints and some other places on University, outside the curfew area, need some new plate glass windows.

The curfew area was as tight as you know what. At most of the streets on the perimeter, a collection of shriveled auxiliary cops in crinkled brown uniforms and Iwo Jima helmets kept the watch. Across the street from them, people gathered in clumps, straights together and hip people together. The line was drawn the night before.

The entire city of Berkeley is under curfew. If you are found on the streets, you will be arrested," the cop car warns. The big streets are clogged with traffic.

The word is, "Don't carry dope." The police are searching people and cars.

Has Berkeley done it again? Can this be considered another blow struck for the Revolution? It was an exceptional feeling to dance in the crosswalk of a revolutionary street, but torture to know it's a tease. In a short time the

people will have another experience of belonging, of having something to defend in DEED. But there's no longer any faith in the police. Their threat has become their act.

The individual and secretive groups may form and go about the business of starting a long war. The come-and-go groups will continue to say what they feel like whether it goes down well or not. The old hand Trots will keep making "literature" and trying to get everybody to take the primer lesson: good front is good, "Don't unnecessarily antagonize." Americans learn lessons like that very slow if at all.

Revolutionary gangs, indigenous to the neighborhoods, could have done a whole lot better and let's hope that they get organized that way and not with pledge pins.

People feel braver and more deeply afraid about the reactions to the likes of the Great Berkeley Commune Revolt of 1968. Things could get very mean and everybody knows it. One good thing: The usual one-upsmanship, who's the toughest, hardest radical in the west, disappeared temporarily in the haze of the gas.

The college generation was making a grand admission: There is something and maybe some place worth taking a stand on, worth attention on an equal par with oneself. The barricades were democracies, given that you wanted to build one. Political had new meaning. Roll the dice. The principal spokesmen failed to find the words to express it and missed an opportunity to be real leaders.

The theory was caught in fragments of things that people said all around town. If there is another slack like the previous months, Telly will really be a depressed area. In that case, people will have to re-learn the lessons, and the same old faces will greet them with a revised edition of what really happened and what it meant.

The more optimistic but less likely turn of events could be a general act of self-organization by the population of the rebel community. Maybe the good minds, who are tying themselves up in the examination of unhappiness as an art, will find a means and a reason to create.

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