

Portrait of the Attorney General as a young militant

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A while ago, The Daily Caller reported that, as a student at Columbia University, Eric Holder participated in an armed takeover of the University's former ROTC office. John wrote about this at the time, but I want to expand.

According to the Daily Caller, Holder was among the leaders of the Student Afro-American Society (SAAS), which demanded that the former ROTC office be renamed the "Malcolm X Lounge." The change, the group insisted, was to be made "in honor of a man who recognized the importance of territory as a basis for nationhood."

This statement shows the separatist nature of the group Holder helped lead. And, indeed, Stefan Bradley, professor of African-American studies at Saint Louis University and author of the 2009 book "Harlem vs. Columbia University," has described the Columbia organization as separatist.

The Daily Caller contacted the Justice Department before running the story about Holder and the takeover. DOJ's spokesperson spokeswoman has not responded to the question of whether Holder himself was armed, and if so, with what sort of weapon.

The Daily Caller's information comes in part from statements by a friend of Holder at Columbia and in part from Holder himself. The friend, Steve Sims, told GQ magazine that he, Holder, and others "took over the ROTC lounge in Hartley Hall and created the Malcolm X Lounge." GQ calls Sims "the attorney general's closest friend" and "a man Holder describes as his 'consigliere.'"

Holder himself said in a 2009 speech that he and his fellow students decided to “peacefully occupy one of the campus offices.” Presumably, this was the ROTC office.

The information that the occupiers were armed comes from a deleted Web page of the Black Students’ Organization (BSO) at Columbia, a successor group to the SAAS. It states: “In 1970, a group of armed black students seized the abandoned ROTC office on the first floor of Hartley Hall.” If this account is correct, then Holder either has forgotten about the arms, pretends there were no arms, or means that the occupation was “peaceful” in the sense that no one was shot.

Student takeovers of college buildings were all too common on Ivy League and others campuses during this period. Armed takeovers were not. However, guns were not unheard of when Black students conducted the building takeovers. The most notorious example occurred in 1969 at Cornell. A picture of armed black Cornell students made it into Newsweek Magazine.

It’s ironic that black protesters were the ones who bore arms, for they were the protesters least in need of protection. Ivy League administrators were softer on black protesters than on garden variety anti-war protesters because they feared being accused of racism. This fact is reflected in the Daily Caller article. It notes that Columbia agreed to the demand of Holder and company and never prosecuted those who took over the building and held it for the better part of a week. White anti-war protesters who took over college buildings typically were prosecuted. At Dartmouth, for example, we were sentenced to 30 days in jail.

I always assumed that blacks brandished guns in order to promote a certain image, including the notion that they were more serious than bourgeois, white anti-war protesters. It worked. Throughout the Ivy League, black protesters were at the top of the radical pecking order.

Forty years later, Holder still seems proud of his militant activity. During a 2009 commencement speech at Columbia, he boasted: “I was among a large group of students who felt strongly about the way we thought the world should be, and we weren’t afraid to make our opinions heard.” He didn’t add that they felt so strongly they violated the law and, it would appear, armed themselves in the process.

Nor did Holder tell his audience what, specifically, he and his comrades felt so strongly about. As noted, his outfit — SAAS — favored racial separatism. Additionally, according to Professor Bradley, they actively supported the Black Panthers, who were widely viewed by black campus radicals as role models.

Indeed, the Daily Caller reports that in March 1970, the SAAS released a statement supporting twenty-one Black Panthers charged with plotting to blow up department stores, railroad tracks, a police station and the New York Botanical Gardens (what

the Botanical Gardens ever did to the Black Panthers, I don't know). And they held a campus rally on March 12, 1970 featuring Afeni Shakur — one of the Panthers out on bail and the future mother of rapper Tupac Shakur.

Among the black Columbia professors who publicly supported Holder and the SAAS during this period was Black history teacher Hollis Lynch. Holder says that Lynch is one of four professors who has “shaped my worldview.”

As Attorney General, Holder presided over a Justice Department that declined to prosecute members of the New Black Panther Party who intimidated white voters (with a club, not guns) outside a Philadelphia polling precinct in 2008. Does part of the “worldview” Holder formed at Columbia consist of the notion that, when it comes to race, you have break some eggs to make an omelet?

Finally, as John asked, “did Holder ever abandon his radicalism? If so, when and why? Many people hold goofy or extreme political opinions when they are young, but most grow out of them. Has Holder? Or was the boy-radical who took over campus buildings and offices—the father to the man—the Attorney General who suppressed the voter intimidation prosecution of the New Black Panthers?”

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