

## Scenario for Tragedy

The emerging script at Southern University sounds depressingly familiar. After an extended period of student unrest, the climactic confrontation with Louisiana state police and local sheriff's deputies last month ended with the death of two students. Law-enforcement officers quickly denied responsibility for the tragedy and offered "evidence" that none of their men had used firearms. Stories about shots fired by students or snipers were intended to show how the "peace forces" had merely defended their lives.

It is a dreary rerun of Kent State, Jackson State and Chicago. Once again, as in those earlier episodes, a preliminary report by an impartial, biracial commission indicates that it was the representatives of the law, not the protesters, who pulled the trigger.

At the time of the disturbances, a local official was quoted that the rebellion would be put down, even if more students had to be killed. It is hardly surprising that in such an atmosphere the deputies thought nothing of ignoring discipline and law by arming themselves with a collection of "private" weapons in addition to their official ones. The implication is that, like an illegal posse, they were prepared to make their own rules of warfare with ammunition that could not readily be traced back to them. Such hints of premeditated violence leave very little credibility for the by-now familiar tales of the armed militia in mortal fear of the mob.

Nor should it be overlooked that the students' anger had behind it a long history of grievances. The situation at Southern University, like that at many of the South's state-operated black colleges, has been one of autocratic rule by black administrators who, in turn, were caught in a cruel squeeze between the aspirations of their students and the dictates of the white political power structure. As remnants of that dual system which the Supreme Court outlawed in the public schools, many black state colleges continue to be both separate and unequal.

Under such conditions, black administrators have tried to contain the students' smoldering anger by autocratic rule. Four years ago, the American Association of University Professors censured Southern's administration for its disregard on due process. The tragic consequence has been radicalization. Frustration, anger and the new demands for both black and student power led up to the fatal collision with an unsympathetic and probably panicky external force.

In the making of the tragedy, internal and external efforts to substitute force for reason, and suppression for justice, are all of a piece. Specific violations by police, deputies or students must, of course, be punished. But the rule of law and justice will not prevail on campuses or in the nation until just grievances are heard and corrected—before, not after, violence takes its toll.