

RUMORS, PLOTS, AND CONSPIRACIES: THE *RAMPARTS* ARTICLE

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, “foreign intervention,” in the eyes of some, was a specter threatening the developing world. Advisors, consultants, and trainers were portrayed as “neo-imperialists” bent on ruling post-colonial societies through the subtle and sophisticated means of financial and technological assistance.

This period was highlighted by the election of Soedjatmoko to the Ford Foundation’s Board of Trustees, which quickly drew criticism from both left and right. In October 1970, *Ramparts* magazine published an essay by California-based writer David Ransom. He described Indonesia’s political upheaval of 1965 and 1966 as being the product of a sinister and elaborate American plot. The culprits? Ford Foundation, Rand Corporation, USAID, the Council on Foreign Relations, assorted American universities, and the CIA – he seemed to be implicating the entire free world. The Ford Foundation’s real interest in Indonesia, according to him, was the subversion of the government followed by the coaching of Indonesian economists to produce a national development plan compatible with “the new indirect rule of America.”

Initially, the so-called exposé generated little press interest, either in the US or in Indonesia. It was the fiercely nationalistic *Merdeka* (Freedom) daily that later gave Ransom’s thesis its curious staying power. In January 1974, when anti-foreign demonstrations in Jakarta reached their peak and Indonesian army intelligence needed a scapegoat, the article became the basis for accusations that “radical socialists” were behind a grand plan to discredit the government, with Soedjatmoko cast in the role of “mastermind.”

The *Ramparts* attack was spicy, entertaining, and persuasive in the way of most sensational pieces. But there were holes in the argument. Ransom did not take sufficient care to distinguish among the alleged parties. He ignored the fact that the Foundation’s entire extensive program of

educational activities – teacher training, English-language education, public administration and management, and research and development – had been initiated and conducted with the approval of President Sukarno. These activities, in fact, made up the bulk of Foundation funds committed to Indonesia.

Ransom focused on a team of Ford-financed, US-trained economists based at FEUI, whom he branded the “Berkeley Mafia.” After returning from their postgraduate



Even today the Ramparts article still serves as occasional fodder for conspiracy theorists.

studies – at Berkeley and other universities – some were appointed to influential positions in the Suharto government. The so-called “conspiracy” lay in Berkeley’s role in “training most of the key Indonesians who would seize government power to put their pro-American lessons into practice.”

But history is often simpler and less devious than it may seem. In fact the international educational exchange may have had several beginnings.

It could, for instance, have started with a few books. In 1950, the Berkeley student body had collected books for UGM in Yogyakarta. The students sought Ford Foundation money to ship the books. Ford said fine, but since the students had no corporate entity, the money had to be given through the university. Plain and simple.

It could also have started with Michael

Harris, Ford Representative in Indonesia at the time the training project was approved. He knew members of the economics faculty at Berkeley, including Thomas Blaidzell, who convinced the university of the merits of the project. In the meantime, Harris’s own close friendship with Sumitro Djojohadikusumo, the man widely regarded as the father of the “technocrats” and the instigator of the affiliation, was a matter of public record.

And Sumitro, in turn, had a personal connection with the then chairman of the Berkeley Department of Economics, Dr. Andreas Papandreou, a fellow socialist he much admired.

Ransom’s emphasis on Berkeley was odd, in light of Foundation-supported projects in Indonesia based at other prestigious universities, including MIT, Cornell, and the University of Wisconsin. The purpose of all of these projects, said another former Ford Representative, Frank Miller, was to “prepare teachers of economics, not public officials.”

In 1957, when Sumitro fled Jakarta to avoid arrest and later joined the PRRI rebels in West Sumatra, the affiliation with US universities stayed afloat despite “severe difficulties.” Sources close to the event agreed, “Any association with him [Sumitro] was a serious liability.” Although this also raised considerable suspicions about FEUI’s loyalty, the Foundation and all the contracting universities refused to retreat. In his 1965 report for the Foundation, consultant Richard Dye spoke glowingly of the dedication of two men in particular, Mohammad Sadli and Subroto, in keeping FEUI going during Sumitro’s absence. Widjojo Nitisastro echoed this exact sentiment almost 40 years later.

A decade elapsed between the time the Berkeley Mafia first went off to study and when they became Indonesia’s economic tsars – a long time, some might say, to sustain a ‘conspiracy’ to control the fate of a nation. As Berkeley’s Bruce Glassburner noted, “We were neither that diabolical nor that clairvoyant.”