

The Synod of 1969: An Overview

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With apologies to Saint Paul . . . what shall separate the Reformed Church in America into East and West? Shall biblical interpretation, or the ordination of women, or merger with the Southern Presbyterians, or social action, or draft cards or COCU or civil rights? Yes, in all these things we are less than conquerors, though amazingly God still loves us. In 1969, God must have found this a great challenge.

On the second evening of the General Synod meeting, a Saturday night, a drama group from the Wyckoff, New Jersey, Reformed Church performed *Murder in the Cathedral*. Perhaps they intended it as an entertaining diversion for the delegates, but the play may have been a bit more relevant than they anticipated. Delegates to synod did not resort to physical violence, but there would be much political intrigue and many hurtful and angry words spoken during the week of synod.

The synod of 1969 is famous for being the one where the Reformed Church in America (RCA) nearly divided. Since the Dutch immigration to the Midwest in the mid-nineteenth century, the RCA had two quite different styles of being church. Those differences had created significant tension in the 1890s when the RCA considered merger with the German Reformed Church, and again in the late 1940s over merger, ecumenical commitments, and biblical interpretation. In 1969 the poles of the Reformed Church were pulled far enough apart that there was serious discussion of a motion to dissolve it.

What makes a denomination so fragmented and frustrated that it considers dissolving? In this paper I will discuss some of the events that occurred before, during, and after the synod, that point to an answer to that question.

Perhaps a synod that occurred thirty-five years ago appears irrelevant, but tensions within the RCA persist. As I write, the Classis of California is thinking about seceding if the denomination permits an action the classis disapproves. The fissures look a bit different now, but there are still two very different poles in the RCA.

I have discussed the arguments for and against merger in a previous lecture that you can find in the volume entitled, *Concord Makes Strength*.¹

The eastern churches and ministers believed that merger was essential to their survival in the future. They did not see the Reformed Church in America as particularly distinctive. In fact, distinctiveness was more of a hindrance because

people did not know anything about the RCA and it seemed odd. The East wanted to be part of something larger and more easily identifiable. It already drew members from many denominations, and its Dutch ethnicity had long disappeared. It was simply part of the RCA's identity to be ecumenical.

Midwestern ministers argued that the denomination has a unique and distinctive witness. Ecumenical entanglements might compromise or swallow up this unique confession. Reformed doctrine and identity needed to be protected. These ministers were willing to cooperate in ecumenical efforts like the Billy Graham Crusades as long as everybody was on the same doctrinal page. But they were completely opposed to structures such as the Consultation on Church Union (COCU) and to mergers, because they seemed to provide a slippery slope leading to other mergers, a superchurch, and finally to Rome. They feared the RCA would be swallowed up by the Presbyterian Church and smothered by liberalism. Lay people especially believed that the merger was being forced on them. Congregational preferences became apparent as many Midwesterners argued that congregations should be able to vote on the merger.

Several groups developed in the Midwest to oppose ecumenical entanglements. Fellowship of the Concerned. ALERT. Awake Laymen Enlisted for Reformed Truth (opposed to merger with the PCUS). Society for Preservation of the RCA (specifically opposed to COCU after the merger failed) Etc. The East had its own pro-merger lobbying group. These groups collected signatures to list in ads in the *Church Herald*, collected funds, and produced pamphlets.

The greatest point of tension before this synod meeting was the failure of the proposed merger with the Presbyterian Church in the United States (Southern). The vote was 23 classes in favor and 22 opposed. All classes from Detroit east voted for merger. All classes west of Detroit voted against merger. Three classes (Cascades, Central California, and West Central) defeated merger by four votes. The most decisive votes were 4 Yes and 56 No in South Grand Rapids Classis and 3 Yes and 54 No in Zeeland. Pleasant Prairie voted 17 Yes and 31 No.

The failed merger attempt was the presenting problem, but as in many relational battles, it was only the tip of the iceberg. East and West represented two fundamentally different world views.

The Midwest still tended toward an inerrantist view of the Bible. Churches still had evening services and midweek prayer meetings. Midwestern members and ministers suggested frequently that if the eastern churches would return to these practices, then they would once again grow and thrive. Some even suggested that the eastern churches did not preach the gospel and that was the reason for their decline.

Reformed Church membership had declined for a couple of years in a row. The Midwest was still growing, although its rate of growth had slowed. The East had for years been dealing with decline, as many of the churches were in changing neighborhoods with large Jewish and Catholic populations. The eastern churches were looking for creative ways to do ministry. The old ways no longer worked. The East could not rely simply on denominational connections. They could see that there was little future in denominationalism. People did not retain a great deal of loyalty to the church they grew up in and they were becoming more mobile. Since there were not Reformed churches spread throughout the country, there was no way the denomination could retain a mobile membership.

Neither side understood very well the situation of the other. The Midwest did not understand the diverse, urban situation of the eastern churches. The East was not very sympathetic to the experience of the Midwest. Neither could see the fears and anxieties of the other.

There were other difficult issues that divided the two sections of the church. The RCA had decided to unify seminary education by creating a single Board of Theological Education to supervise both its seminaries. Many people thought that the denomination could not afford two seminaries but neither region wanted to give one up. The seminaries had begun planning their "Bi-Level, Multi-Site" program and already had met resistance. The Midwest was afraid its seminary, Western Theological, would lose while New Brunswick Seminary, in New Jersey, gained. The program as it was caricatured would force innocent Midwestern boys to the wicked East and might corrupt them.

During the sixties there had also been tensions within the Reformed Church over women's ordination, civil rights, Vietnam, and other social issues. There was also a continuing power struggle. Who appointed the delegates to the National Council of Churches? Who appointed the members of the Christian Action Commission? The Midwest felt slighted and out of the power loop. The move from the board structure to the General Program Council also left some uncertainties. Each classis had its own delegate to the General Program Council, but there was still uncertainty as to who was in charge and who had the power. And there was an ongoing sense that the Midwest raised all the money and the eastern power bloc spent it.

In the April 4 issue of the *Church Herald*, the Interchurch Relations Committee announced that it was recommending full membership in COCU. This made many Midwesterners furious. In the same issue, the results of the vote on merger

were also announced, and a number of eastern clergy were equally furious over its defeat.

The Eastern ministers believed that Midwestern parochialism was limiting their efforts to do ministry in a very diverse context. They met together several times to think and talk about the future. Most were interested in some kind of realignment, either with the United Church of Christ or with the northern Presbyterian church.

Lee Kester put a note on the back of a bulletin announcing the vote. He said that the Reformed Church in America was about to become the Reformed Sect in America. He suggested that divorce might be the best option because this wound would not be easily healed.

Harold Schut, past president of General Synod and chair of the General Synod Executive Committee, invited a dozen ministers, two from each regional synod, to a meeting in Chicago in late April. One question the group discussed was what each side needed from the other in order to stay together. Here is the western churches' list:

1. Complete withdrawal from COCU.
2. Complete separation from the National Council of Churches.
3. Control of theological education.
4. Control of the program and work of "475" [the denominational offices].
5. Agreement with the doctrines of the RCA as they understand them.

The eastern churches wanted less emphasis on doctrine and more on relationship. They wanted more openness to different ideas and approaches and more emphasis on reaching out to the world and less on doctrinal subscription.

Harold Schut believed were at an impasse. It appeared to him that the eastern clergy were willing to give, but the Midwesterners had "a hardness which you could not move or get over or get around on the side of." The midwestern ministers surely would have seen that differently. (Russell Horton said they wanted control of education at Western Seminary and control of 475 "for a while.")

These ministers left Chicago thinking about separation – someone had even mentioned that the RCA could show the world how to disagree in Christian friendship! Donner Atwood was quite discouraged about the future of the Reformed Church but still certain that the future of the larger church was in God's hands.

Other Reformed Church members were not quite so pessimistic and suggested other alternatives. Louis Benes and Howard Hageman both suggested that the RCA begin merger talks with the Christian Reformed Church.

Robert Schuller suggested starting a new denomination rooted in positive thinking. He proposed that when Norman Vincent Peale was elected president of General Synod, his acceptance speech could begin, "I have a dream." It could then outline the vision of the new church, which would be inclusive yet very different from COCU.

Isaac Rottenberg suggested that creative confrontation and good leadership could help get the RCA over this hump.

For most Easterners, COCU was the best alternative. It was not as good as merger, but at least it was a sign that the Reformed Church was part of the wider Christian world and was willing to cooperate to some degree with other traditions. The Midwest didn't agree to merger, so the gracious thing to do would be to let the RCA go into COCU, especially since membership allowed the Reformed Church to give input to the future proposal without requiring a final commitment to it.

At Synod

As a historian, I am limited to what was reported in the *Church Herald* or voted upon and thus recorded in the *Minutes of the General Synod*. I cannot reconstruct who said what to whom and in what tone of voice. I can't recapture the tension of the debate or between people. I hope other participants in this conference will be able to do that in the discussion, because that is the really interesting stuff.

Controversy began before delegates had even gathered at the synod. On Thursday, James Forman and several others occupied the RCA offices at 475 Riverside Drive in New York City. Forman was given the opportunity to address the synod on Friday night, and he outlined what he saw as centuries of abuses of whites against blacks, and the complicity of the churches in such abuse. He presented a number of demands, based on the assumption that white churches controlled enormous financial resources and should share them. When Forman finished, Levin West, an African American pastor from Newark, responded rather harshly to him. Another pastor, who has not been identified, criticized West. On Saturday morning, an ad hoc committee was appointed to draft a response to Forman.

Much of Saturday was spent on the Christian Action Commission report. The delegates debated gun control and violence, national policy on Vietnam, abortion, and support for farm workers in California. The most controversial

part of this debate occurred when five young men tried to present their draft cards to the synod. In a previous year, the Synod had affirmed the principles of conscientious objection. In 1969 it had questioned the legitimacy of the draft. It seemed only logical to many people that synod should support the young men, and that the church taking possession of draft cards seemed like a better alternative than burning them. But others insisted that such action was illegal. The question of draft cards was referred to an ad hoc committee, which recommended the formation of another ad hoc committee to deal with the draft cards. The synod rejected this. It was willing to offer pastoral support and legal counsel but little more.

In the midst of the Christian Action report, something rather unusual occurred. About thirty-five women with signs and banners marched through the synod protesting the RCA's treatment of women. Carol Hageman said that Frances Beardslee (wife of John Beardslee, Jr.) had organized the march, in part out of frustration with the fact that women were encouraged to study at the seminaries but were not supported and were not allowed to be ordained. The women also presented about fifteen hundred signatures on petitions asking for ordination.

The vote on COCU took place on Saturday afternoon. There had been two overtures asking for full participation in COCU and two against. The Standing Committee on Overtures recommended full participation. The Interchurch Relations Committee also recommended full participation. But someone made a motion to postpone, and after a heated debate the synod voted 130 to 103 to postpone. Some delegates immediately protested the vote, and the president ruled that it would be taken again, without debate, on Monday. The vote then was much closer, 133 yes to 126 no.

Saturday night the synod met in a late session after the production of *Murder in the Cathedral*. A committee had been appointed to study the RCA's membership in the National Council of Churches. Those opposed to ecumenical entanglements may have seen the postponement of COCU as something of a mandate, because the mood seemed strongly against both the National and World Council of Churches. Mert de Velder asked for the floor and gave a lengthy speech in which he outlined his midwestern roots and his growing involvement in ecumenism. He insisted that the RCA did exert influence in these two bodies and argued that some of the common criticisms of the councils were little more than slander. He told the synod if it chose to withdraw from the National Council, "I'll not have any interest in serving this church any longer." Mert could be a compelling presence and a passionate speaker, and he seems to have pulled out all the stops on this one. The synod voted to stay in the National Council, even rejecting a proposal to make donations to the councils a matter of asking rather than assessment.

John Nordstrom had served in the east for several years and moved to Zeeland classis shortly before the synod. He says there were a number of late-night gatherings to sort out strategy. He met with the Easterners! But he said the two poles did not talk to each other much. "It was not a pleasant time. People were suspicious of one another. We were stubborn, frustrated, and not kind to our brothers, whether they were from the East or the West. There seemed little hope for reconciliation."

Each side was impatient with the other. The Midwest saw staying in the NCC as a generous compromise. The East saw the debate over it as a sign of how insulated and provincial the church had become.

The mood was not unlike that of a marriage that has gone bad. The two parties seemed to have little in common. They had completely opposite views on some of the most essential questions, such as the approach to scripture and standards and the nature and mission of the church. In addition to the very real differences, their perceptions of each other were distorted. Each side assumed the worst of the other, which is as deadly in a denomination as in a marriage. They did not trust each other and they certainly did not enjoy each other's company. And they could not talk to each other without bitterness and hard feelings.

So on Monday, after the second vote on COCU, when tensions were at their peak, Harold Schut made a motion asking for the orderly dissolution of the RCA. If the two sections of the church could not agree on their future, he said, it would be better to separate with peace and dignity rather than to continue fighting. Delegates were stunned.

He said it was one of the hardest things he did in his life.

Fred Mold describes it this way: "I can remember him getting up and making his proposal with tears in his eyes, you know? It was a very emotional moment, and you know I remember him beginning about how he loved the church and saying, 'But it's obvious that we are moving in two different directions.'"

I spoke with Carl Schroeder recently about the synod, and even thirty-five years later, he was almost in tears when he described the events of the synod. It was such a mess, he said. There was so much sadness. Was it worth the effort to put it all together again?

There was lengthy debate that day about the proposal. Some pleaded not to divide the church. Others said the divisions were so great that there was no

other choice. It seems to me that the motion to dissolve was masterful move. It called the whole church to account. Rather than one disaffected side or the other taking its marbles and going home, the whole church would cease to exist. One side would not "allow" the other to leave, but the whole church would decide that it could no longer be a church together. This made the denomination think about its future in a far more complex and serious way. The proposal was finally sent to the Committee of Reference.

That night, Norman Vincent Peale, recently elected president of synod, moderated the meeting. Carl Schroeder said that he completely altered the mood of the synod. He told jokes, many of them at his own expense as he admitted he did not know a great deal about Robert's Rules of Order. He disarmed the synod with his wit and candor, and he tried to ensure that the delegates would not go home angry. Peale had been reluctant to stand for election. He had been embarrassed in print when he said that joining the southern Presbyterians would keep the RCA out of COCU, and several leading Presbyterians said that was not true. Peale was reluctant to take on this hornet's nest when he had so many other commitments. And he was already over seventy years old. But Mert and Donner and a number of others talked him into it. Peale was not the most active president, but he certainly had a healing presence about him.

Tuesday morning the ad hoc committee on the response to the Black Manifesto brought a lengthy report to the synod. It was quite an amazing document, because it admitted centuries of white complicity in slavery and racism. It confessed to a number of sins against black people and expressed appreciation that Forman had helped the church see racial issues in a new light. It promised to make changes in some denominational policies, and it established a Black Council.

Given all the tension over race during the preceding fifteen years, given the riots that had occurred in cities in recent years, and given the tension of this synod, I find it amazing that this document passed without dissenting vote. But note that that is how it is phrased. Not unanimously, but without dissent. So probably not everyone voted for it, but they didn't vote against it either.

Christianity Today reported that this action was probably the most significant one taken by any church on race during the year.² Carol Hageman observed later in the summer at a meeting of the GPC Executive Committee that this was a great action that had not been recognized fully because of all the other controversy.

The Committee of Reference also reported back on Tuesday and fine-tuned Schut's proposal. It appointed (and funded) a Committee of Eighteen to study the issues and report back to the 1970 synod. If this committee reported that

there was no hope for reconciliation, a new committee would be appointed to work out the dissolution.

At the closing session Norman Vincent Peale told the story of a judge who proposed tearing apart the wedding picture of a couple seeking a divorce. Peale said: "Can you imagine taking a pair of scissors and cutting down through the Reformed Church in America? Sure, we have differences; that's as it should be. So let's let the better elements of our natures take over – and not cut the picture apart."³

I wonder how people felt on their way home from this synod. Some people would have agreed with Peale. Others would have been happy to wield the metaphorical scissors and divide the denomination as quickly as possible. Len Kalkwarf said he was so tired he could have slept for days afterwards. People were emotionally drained from the tension. Looking back after thirty-five years it would be easy to minimize the degree of conflict, but we should not do that. Many people thought the church would simply not be able to survive its disagreements. And as Harold said, "If the thing is going to come apart anyway, let's do it orderly like." There were still many strong feelings. Easterners felt alienated, as if their church had been wholly taken over by a conservative power bloc. The midwestern people could not figure out what all the anger was about and didn't know how some parts of their church had become so radical.

After Synod

The shock of the motion to dissolve may have caused a brief era of good feelings on the last day of the synod, but the hostilities continued to fester.

Some Midwesterners suggested that the eastern ministers were a bunch of liberals in dying churches and good riddance to them if they wanted to leave. Gordon Girod outlined this view in an article for the conservative Christian Reformed journal, *Torch and Trumpet*.

Many in the Midwest would be happy to see the Eastern Liberals, along with their Midwestern counterparts, leave the denomination, but we want it to be done in that way. We want them to leave, not to disrupt or dissolve the denomination. . . . We find no fault with the doctrinal basis of the RCA. If, then, the Eastern Liberals cannot and will not live with the doctrinal standards of the RCA, let them withdraw from the RCA. . . . We see no reason to enter into a conspiracy with them that would end in the dissolution of the RCA. This would imply that the RCA has no further reason to exist as a denomination. In the Midwest we can agree to no such thing. True, we want to

remold the RCA to bring it into greater conformity with its doctrinal standards, but this does not mean that we are prepared to scuttle the ecclesiastical ship. To the contrary, we would be happy to take over the rudder and controls of the ecclesiastical ship, if those who are not satisfied with the Reformed Faith would simply depart and take their dissatisfaction with them.⁴

More representative would be the Midland Reformed Church consistory. They proposed that eastern churches be allowed to leave under the same provisions churches would have been allowed to leave if the merger had passed. "Such a provision at this time would allow individual congregations to act according to their convictions and consciences on an issue crucial to their life, making the way clear than for the continuing RCA to act responsibly and unitedly without a resident party of dissent."⁵

The consistory of the Alsip Reformed Church in Illinois expressed its sympathy with the goal of reconciliation.

We insist, however, that all reconciliation be on evangelical terms of adherence to the Word of God and the Standards of the Reformed Faith. This simply means that we want this level of commitment, in sincerity and honesty on the part of the theological schools of the denomination, the boards and agencies of the church, and the ministers of the denomination. . . . Further, it is our firm belief that real unity within the denomination will not become a reality until all relations are severed with the National and World Councils of Churches and the Consultation on Church Union.

But they did not wish to dissolve the RCA, only to permit the malcontents to leave.⁶

Another letter to the editor observed that

Many who are supposed to build believers up in the faith do not urge them to believe in an infallible Bible as Jesus Christ did. . . . Therefore, I contend that there is no unity in the Reformed Church in America because there is no unity in the biblical faith among its theological leaders. . . . There is no unity in the Reformed Church in America because many classes have failed in their judging and passing upon ministerial candidates who are required to believe the biblical doctrines contained in our confessions.⁷

It was no wonder that some Easterners felt there was little possibility for reconciliation.

A few other RCA members offered other strategies. They suggested that East and West try to get to know each other better through seminary assignments, exchanges, even pen pals. Some believed that regionalization would be the key to happiness. Each region should be allowed to do what it needed to do in ministry. Others suggested that the Reformed Church see itself as a family with diverse perspectives and needs.

There were three more formal efforts that helped the denomination work through the issues.

Committee of Eighteen

The committee began meeting in the fall of 1969. Most of what I have read about it comes from Donner Atwood's papers, which are in the denominational archives. Midwestern members may have a very different perspective. But Donner complained that there were some very conservative laypeople who did not understand why they were meeting and what the issues were. The first few meetings seemed to be quite difficult. Clearly the tensions of the whole denomination were reflected in the committee. There were power struggles and disagreements. Some of the more conservative members identified the problem as the unwillingness of the eastern ministers to agree to all points of the Standards. The chair of the committee, Elko Stapert, sent a memo to the group in October asking for position papers on various topics. Regarding the mission of the church, he wrote, "We must consider the gospel message, as over the undue emphasis on the social issues."

I don't get the sense that the committee was the most effective source of reconciliation. It did provide a forum for some people to work through their differences in a small group. And the group may have made some helpful suggestions. But I think that personalities were so strong in this group and resistance was so high that people remained somewhat suspicious of each other throughout the process.

Congress on Evangelism

In the summer of 1969, Carl Schroeder became secretary for evangelism, after serving as a missionary in Taiwan for twelve years. He was very upset by the failure of the merger with the Presbyterian Church. He saw little future for the RCA as a separate denomination and thought seriously about whether he wanted to stay. He finally decided that "who I was, where I came from, who nurtured me, who paid for my education, who paid my salary . . . it was the people I was so upset with, and I could not just pick up and leave."

In September about a hundred Reformed Church members attended the Congress of Evangelism in Minneapolis. It was the first time most RCA members had seen each other since the synod. Carl Schroeder was surprised at the level of hurt and anger still present. So he gathered people together and let them talk. He told his own story and invited theirs. And they did. They expressed their anger and sadness. They prayed together. It was a very healing time. Despite their stereotypes, midwestern clergy found that eastern clergy really did believe in evangelism, and eastern clergy found that midwestern clergy were not completely opposed to social action. Thinking together about a common task and finding agreement helped deal with some of the differences. It is important to note, though, that they dealt honestly with the differences first.

Festival

A Festival of Evangelism was held in the spring of 1970 in Detroit. One of the most effective segments was the use of small groups that met through the festival. People were mixed up East and West and in these groups actually talked to each other and began to realize that the people from the other region were not heretics or reactionaries. One of the high points of the festival seemed to be the deep relationships that were built in these small groups. They encouraged exchanges of faith and feelings, perhaps in ways not exactly typical for staid Dutch Reformed types. At the final Communion service, each group received its own bread and wine, and group members served each other. This was a new experience for many of the people and seemed to help the healing process.

Another memorable event at this festival occurred when a group of young people took the cross from the stage and carried it out into the streets of Detroit, followed by a large number of delegates. There was an emphasis through the festival on putting one's faith into action. That gave people something more to hold in common. Faith was something to share and something to do more than something to debate.

Why did the festival work? Harold Schut suggested that it had broad representation. It involved younger and older people. Maybe the church was ready to celebrate something.

Analysis

What helped the Reformed Church in America stay together?

First, the church was willing to face the depth of the conflict. For that we are indebted to people like Harold Schut and Donner Atwood and Mert de Velder

and many others who did not gloss over tension or pretend it didn't exist or try to make it disappear.

Harold Schut said that several years later he received a note from a Nebraska man who had been a delegate. The man recalled that in the discussion which followed the motion, he had said that Harold was arrogant and a fool. And the man apologized. "I really think you were a prophet," he said.

John Nordstrom writes, "In retrospect, if ever there was a moment when the Holy Spirit addressed the RCA – not just the synod of 1969, but the whole church – it was in Harold's motion. And now as I look back it is clear that from that moment the church was going to address the issues that faced it in a different way.

A second reason the church stayed together was loyalty. Eastern ministers were angry and frustrated and disillusioned. Their hopes for a more ecumenical future had been dashed. But their loyalty to the denomination overrode their anger. They thought the denomination was moving in a direction inconsistent with its history and identity, and yet they chose to remain.

Third, there was a shared sense of mission, including evangelism, outreach, Lay Witness missions.

Fourth, there was an attempt to talk about what the two poles had in common, and the people found out there were many such points. A shared history. A shared theological perspective even without complete agreement. A shared commitment to scripture even if the details were a bit different.

Fifth, many issues were avoided and, indeed, never resolved. Perhaps they could not have been. Perhaps all denominations have to learn to live with some deep conflicts. But it is also clear that those issues have arisen again and again to cause us conflict. Women. Ecumenism. The Bible. Social ethics. There are still some significant differences between the poles of the RCA regarding what it means to be Reformed. How do we affirm the Standards? Are we more committed to the broader church or to RCA identity and uniqueness?

¹ John W. Coakly, ed., *Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America*, No. 41 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 10-34.

² James Huffman, "After Bitter Debates, the Positive Thinker," *Christianity Today*, July 4, 1969, 36.

³ *Ibid*, 35.

⁴ Gordon H. Girod, "What About CRC-RCA Merger?" *Torch and Trumpet*, Oct. 1969, 4.

⁵ Paul Hostetter and Thomas Werkema for the consistory of the Reformed Church in Midland, Michigan, letter to the editor, the *Church Herald*, Sept. 5, 1969, 21.

⁶ Arthur Scheid and Frank Shock, Letter to the editor, the *Church Herald*, Sept. 26, 1969, 22.

⁷ Louis Branning, Letter to the editor, the *Church Herald*, Oct. 10, 1969, 17.