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The Student Protest Movement: 1967-1971

Notes from the Frontlines

Introduction

If one visits the campuses of most American colleges and universities today, they appear, at least on the surface, to be bastions of middle-class values and moderate, if not conservative, political ideology. Although the country is torn by an unpopular war and economic woes, collegiate life seems hardly to have been affected and most students seem committed to working within the political system to achieve political and social change.

Forty years ago, however, as many of you will recall, the collegiate scene was dramatically different. College and university campuses all across the country were roiled by paroxysms of protest, confrontation and violence as students and faculty took to the streets to express their moral outrage over the Vietnam War, the military draft and a broad range of social and political issues. As Derek Bok, the former President of Harvard, observed, the student activists also questioned the complicity of colleges and universities in national policies that they deemed destructive of the traditional values of the academy. Moreover, the impact of the youth culture, with its antipathy to traditional societal values and obsession with self-indulgence, the comradery of the street, the drug culture and rejection of authority, injected an unpredictable and potentially violent element into the protest movement.

During those stressful years, as an administrator at the University of Pittsburgh, I was intimately involved in dealing with both the causes and consequences of student protests and campus unrest. I witnessed each day the commendable passion and commitment of many dedicated students and faculty to ending an unpopular war and social injustice. But I also experienced the hubris, hypocrisy, naivete and outright foolishness displayed by too many of them that often jeopardized the achievement of their nobler goals.

I thought it might be interesting, therefore, to review, from a perspective mellowed by time, age and experience, the Student Protest Movement and its impact on one large urban university, the University of Pittsburgh, during the climactic period 1967 to 1971. I will examine some of the initiatives that we took to deal with campus unrest and illustrate how those policies worked out in practice. Finally, I will offer some thoughts on the consequences of the Student Protest Movement.

The Student Protest Movement

As you will recall, during the period 1965 to 1971, beginning with the Free Speech Movement at UC-Berkeley and spurred on by growing discontent over the Vietnam War, the military draft and social injustice, activist students and faculty at hundreds of American college and university campuses rose up in protest, demanding not only an end to those evils, but also fundamental reforms within their own institutions.

In the first six months of 1968 alone, it was reported that more than 39,000 students were involved in 221 major demonstrations on hundreds of campuses and between 1968 and 1970, some 11,200 students were arrested. Although most demonstrations were peaceful, many, such as those at Berkeley, Columbia, Cornell, and Stanford, were accompanied by violence and destruction of university property valued at millions of dollars. In a few tragic cases including the University of Wisconsin, Pomona College, Harvard, San Francisco State, Kent State and Jackson State, protests resulted in serious injury or death to a number of students, faculty, staff and police officers.

The Calm Before the Storm

In June 1967, I resigned from the Air Force to accept a position as Chief of Staff to the newly-appointed Chancellor of the University of Pittsburgh, Brigadier General Wesley Posvar, with whom I had served on the faculty of the Air Force Academy. A graduate of West Point, a Rhodes Scholar and a Harvard Ph.D., Wes Posvar flew in the Berlin Airlift and had been a test pilot, a teacher at West Point and a strategic planner in the Pentagon before being appointed Permanent Professor and Chairman of the Department of Political Science at the new Air Force Academy in 1955.

Fortunately, the Student Protest Movement was late in coming to the University of Pittsburgh, due largely to the fact that most of our students were from conservative, middle-class families from the local area and our faculty included only a few members of the New Left which had fomented protests elsewhere. Resolved to avoid the errors that had led to unrest and violence other universities, however, we took advantage of that delay to launch a number of initiatives to increase minority student enrollments, expand the number of minority and women faculty and administrators; build bridges to the local community; and enhance the role of students and faculty in university governance.

We also put into place new policies and procedures to anticipate and prepare for any student protests that might occur. We revised the Student Code of Conduct and Judicial Procedures; issued guidelines to be followed in the event of campus disturbances; required administrators to attend racial sensitivity training; and invited several black administrators and faculty to provide advice and assistance in dealing with racial issues..

The Chancellor emphasized the rights of faculty and students to free expression and peaceful assembly, as well as their responsibilities not to infringe upon the rights of others, making a clear distinction between acceptable dissent and unacceptable disruption. He also stressed his determination to maintain an orderly academic environment and to insure the personal safety of all members of the university community. He directed his administrators and police officers to be firm, but restrained in dealing with student protestors, to rely primarily on peaceful dialogue and negotiations to resolve any disruptions and to use force only as a last resort.

When the Student Protest Movement finally arrived on the Pitt campus in 1968, therefore, we felt reasonably well- prepared. Although we dealt with dozens of student protests over the next few years, I will mention just three incidents both to illustrate how our

preparations worked out in practice and to demonstrate that, if you look hard enough, you can find humor in the most serious situations.

The "First Annual" Spring Riot" (April 1968)

On the evening of April 16, 1968, which turned out to be an unseasonably warm day, Betty and I were attending a formal, black-tie dinner for donors and trustees at the Chancellor's residence. As the dinner was winding down, I received a frantic call from the Dean of Students who reported that, in protest of the University's failure to turn on the air conditioning in the residence halls, hundreds of disgruntled students had poured out of their dorms and surged into the two main thoroughfares dividing the Pitt campus, effectively blocking all traffic on those streets. Pittsburgh's Chief of Police, displaying little tolerance for such behavior, had quickly ordered his officers to forcibly remove the students from the public streets and to arrest those who refused to cooperate.

The Chancellor and I, still dressed in our formal wear, rushed to the campus, where we found hundreds of Pitt students enjoying an exciting and noisy confrontation with dozens of Pittsburgh police, who by this time had brought in police dogs to control the crowd.

Recognizing the potential for serious injury or worse to both students and police, we conferred quickly with the Deputy Chief of Police who was on the scene, and persuaded him to call off his police dogs and move his officers across the street to permit us to talk the students into going back to their dorms. He agreed and we immediately moved to the lobby of the main residence hall where Wes, to the cheers and applause of the protesters, seized an electric bullhorn, informed the students of the deal with the police and urged them to return peacefully to their rooms.

The mood of the crowd, fortunately, was more festive than hostile, and one student, noticing Wes's formal attire, broke the ice when he called out to the Chancellor "Aw, Wes! You didn't have dress for us!!" That drew a roar of laughter from everyone, and the students quickly vacated the streets, the police withdrew and the crisis ended. Wes and I then drove to the local police station where about 20 students were being held, and paid a modest fine to secure their release.

Although the media and some Trustees chastised the Chancellor for bailing out the students who had been arrested, he became an instant hero to our students and earned both the respect and gratitude of most faculty and trustees for defusing what might have become a much uglier confrontation.

In doing so, he also established a new campus tradition and for several years thereafter, on the first warm day in April, the students would pour out of the residence halls for what they called the Annual Spring Riot, a festive and peaceful celebration of the end of the school year, always taking care, however, to remain on campus and not to again block the city streets.

Occupation of the Chancellor's Office and the Computer Center (January 1969)

Eight months later, we faced our first really serious racially-motivated campus protest. Throughout 1968, the Chancellor and his staff had met on a number of occasions with the Black Action Society, representing our African-American students, who urged us to launch a major initiative to recruit more minority students, faculty and staff and to establish an academic program in Black Studies, to which the university leadership readily agreed.

But progress had been slow due to some faculty opposition and the difficulty in actually attracting qualified minority students and faculty to what had always been a predominantly white institution. The Black Action Society, disappointed with the slow rate of progress, decided to confront the Chancellor in person and in the early afternoon of January 15, 1969, seventy black students crowded into our office, demanding to meet with him. Two rather intimidating black students, menacingly dressed in dashikis and armed with African spears, were stationed at the door to turn away anyone seeking entrance to the Chancellor's office.

Although the Chancellor had not yet returned to his office, as luck would have it, just at that time one of the University's most conservative trustees, arrived on the scene for a scheduled appointment with the Chancellor and was forcibly denied entrance by the students guarding the door. Outraged, the trustee charged into my office, and demanded that we immediately call in the city police to end the occupation and arrest the protestors. After explaining to him our policies on handling such protests, I managed to calm him down and assured him we could deal with the matter peacefully without outside police assistance. Unconvinced, he nevertheless reluctantly agreed not to press the issue and to leave the situation in our hands.

Arriving back at the office, the Chancellor and I met with the students who presented Wes with a new set of demands. The Chancellor calmly responded with his usual candor. He made it clear he also was distressed that adequate progress had not been made in implementing the University's previous commitments and he promised to consider their concerns, but he refused to respond under duress to any of their new demands. The students, who were hostile, but orderly, were not mollified by the Chancellor's response and they left his office angrily threatening further disruptions.

That evening thirty black students burst into the University Computer Center, politely, but firmly ordered the users and staff out (after permitting them to shut down the main computer in order to preserve the data), and barricaded all the entrances to the Center. They vowed to maintain their "lock-in" until their demands were met.

Following our contingency plan, we quickly assembled a small team of senior administrators and several black faculty members who were close to the BAS. So far, there had been no violence and mindful of the costly destruction of computer centers at some other universities, everyone agreed that we should make every attempt to resolve the dispute by persuasion without the use of force.

After several hours of tense negotiations, we drew up six points of agreement to strengthen the University's commitments to diversity and affirmative action that walked a fine line between bureaucratic intransigence and capitulation to unreasonable demands. We also promised that no punitive action would be taken against the demonstrators if they would vacate the Computer Center promptly and without any damage. After some discussion with their faculty advisors, the students agreed to the deal, cleaned up all their debris and left the Computer Center undamaged. This time, the University promptly and forcefully implemented the agreement which enabled us to enhance significantly campus diversity and promote the academic success of our minority students.

Occupation of Lawrence Hall (Mar 1969)

Two months after the Computer Center incident, another group of about 300 mostly white activist students, demanding certain internal reforms in the University's academic policies and system of governance, marched on and occupied the lobby of Lawrence Hall, the University's largest classroom building, vowing to conduct a peaceful vigil until the administration agreed to their reform demands, most of which we regarded as excessive and unworkable.

For several hours, we attempted without much success to persuade the students to vacate the building at the normal closing time, and move their demonstration to another building so that classes would not be disrupted the next day. At about 11:00 pm, we delivered to them an ultimatum that if they refused to comply with our request to leave, we would seek a court injunction to require them to leave, and anyone who failed to comply would be subject to suspension or dismissal. The students responded that they did not recognize our authority to force them out, but that if a legal injunction were formally served on them by proper authority, they would leave peacefully.

Rather than force the issue, we decided to seek the injunction. It was now well past midnight, but we finally were able to rouse a friendly judge from his bed, who agreed to issue an order to vacate the building. But then we faced the problem of finding an officer of the court to serve the order on the students.

After many phone calls to the Sheriff's Office, a frail, elderly and very sleepy constable in a crumpled uniform finally appeared at the Chancellor's Office and announced that he was there to serve the judge's order. At around 3:30 in the morning, I accompanied the constable into Lawrence Hall, where, in a raspy voice, he introduced himself to the demonstrators as "your new professor." Borrowing a set of reading glasses from a nearby student, he shakily read the judge's order to vacate the building to the cheers and applause of the now-weary students, who quickly packed up their gear, cleaned up the lobby and happily left the building to catch a little shuteye before the next day's classes. The students were permitted to hold an "open university" in a vacant building for the next four days, but we successfully resisted yielding to any of their more extreme demands. Although student protests at Pitt continued on and off through 1971, none resulted in violence, injuries or serious damage to property. We made significant progress in addressing most of the issues that lay at the heart of the protest movement and we were gratified that the approach we had taken to manage campus unrest was largely validated.

by experience at Pitt and elsewhere. While none of us who were caught up in the events of that period would want ever to repeat the experience, I believe that the University of Pittsburgh managed to preserve its academic values and emerged from that difficult period a stronger, more open and more cohesive institution.

Epilogue

The high water mark of the Student Protest Movement turned out to be the tragic shootings at Kent State University and Jackson State University in May 1970 that resulted in the deaths of several student demonstrators.

Those events precipitated a historic march on Washington of more than 100,000 people and the largest nationwide student strike in history that briefly closed hundreds of colleges and universities. But the shootings had a sobering effect on most students who recognized that they could no longer control the escalation of violence and that the continuation of the movement would likely lead to further tragedy. Although scattered campus protests continued until the end of the Vietnam War, the intensity and destructiveness of campus demonstrations declined significantly in the aftermath of those events.

In retrospect, assessing objectively the broader impact of the Student Protest Movement is difficult because of the complexity of the underlying causes and the varied attitudes and motives of those who were involved. Some observers certainly agreed with the assertion of Professor Allan Bloom of Cornell, that "so far as universities are concerned, I know of nothing positive that came from that period; it was an unmitigated disaster."

A more charitable and, in my opinion, accurate view is that, despite its undeniably damaging and sometimes tragic side effects, the Student Protest Movement was clearly influential in bringing an end to both the military draft and the unpopular and costly war in Vietnam. Campus protests also encouraged colleges and universities to work harder to end racial and gender discrimination, promote institutional diversity, reform their systems of governance and rethink their strategies for managing institutional change. Whether the good that resulted from the Movement outweighed the negative effects on society, the university and the lives of those involved in the Movement is best left to the judgment of history.

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