

I just wanted to ask what the reaction was to the first black students that were admitted, both among Centre students and the Danville community.

I would say there was, on the part of both the Danville community and the student body, a large majority accepting this wholly openly, if not warmly. There were a minority of people who had derived out of and still carried in their makeup a more prejudiced outlook; persons who were victims of a kind of conditioning that is not overcome simply by a rational decision of will. But we never have had on the Centre campus conflicts of the kinds that developed at times over the past fifteen years on larger campuses where students of different racial backgrounds tended to cluster together wholly as a group and to find points of group conflict with other groups.

Now it was some time before any Centre black was rushed extensively by fraternities. There was a point where we had to call their attention to the fact that the fraternities appeared to be blind in this respect, given the obvious qualities of minority students. With no more affirmative pressure than that they began to look at this more seriously. All the Centre fraternities have bid black students and continue to do so. In one or two of them I'm afraid the sense of openness does not seem to be as great as it should be.

During the mid to late '60s radical changes came over American college campuses. How would you describe the climate at Centre, some of the changes at Centre, that maybe took place with the growing mood of activism in this country?

Centre was not isolated from the rest of the world, and Centre students were subject to the same kinds of influences from the mass media of all kinds and suffered the same agonies of conscience and of spirit that were common to thoughtful people during the long period of the Vietnamese War. The first things one observes, I think, that, though activism began to develop out at Berkely in the early '60s, strident kinds of challenges to "the system" (that term, it's amazing how commonly it was used then and how we've forgotten it today), on Centre's campus there was very little disposition to become that politicized. The thing that was apparent in those mid '60s was the development of a greater sense of unease. A college student in those years was not experiencing a period in his life which in earlier and more innocent years was often referred to as "the happiest time in your life." I recall commenting one time that there had almost disappeared from this campus, as campuses all over the country, a sense of pure joy. It was a gloomy period.

I don't mean to say that there were not episodes of enjoyment of more casual and more social life unalloyed by overhanging social concerns or anxieties or internal personal conflicts; there were. But it was a time when I think I felt even more sympathy, really, for students. They were being caught up in a social condition that was more destructive of a sense of equanimity and balance and self-confidence during the college years than any time I have known.

Let me editorialize a little bit: I say I think one of the great mistakes the federal government made, among many other mistakes made in handling our involvement there in Southeast Asia; was its unreadiness to seek the taxes to pay our way. We are still suffering from the great indentedness that we accumulated by fighting that undeclared war on the financial backs of the future generation. But the provision which automatically provided deferment from the draft of any student enrolled

and proceeding normally toward a bachelor's degree was, I think, clearly the worst mistake we made. It led many students to feel, I think, a real moral tension growing out of the recognition that, even though they didn't want it to be that way, one of the factors that had them in the position of being a college student was that it sheltered them from the draft. They would be very pragmatic about that in one minute, and the next minute they'd be worrying about their guilt in that respect.

There were some students who were in college for that reason only, or dominantly for that reason. That was damaging to the morale of campuses. But any student who was thoughtful began to wonder about the reasons why he was in college. Was he really there for valid purposes, or would he stay if he were not going to be subjecting himself to draft to fight a war that didn't appeal to him?

Those were difficult times on the campus. You found many students functioning far below their abilities because of their agony of spirit in that respect. Others tried to relieve themselves of their sense of guilt by becoming strident opponents to the war, to the political system that was in place, to anything that was part of the system, that is, the social order that could allow these kinds of seeming moral contradictions to measure the order of our lives.

Over the years during the later '60s that sense of rebellion grew on this campus as on other campuses. We never had as much of a sense of rebellion against our institution as the nearest manifestation of the system as was true on other campuses in many parts of the country, and particularly on campuses, where I think, you had the level of intellectual activity that would be comparable to that of this campus. But these students at Centre were concerned about the conditions of our life at that time and suffered a great deal of agony on that account. The Spring of Kent State brought crowds together on this campus, as all over the country; partly internally generated, partly being generated by a network of drum-beating that was going on across the country and was never, I think, really analyzed by the press at the time. It was amazing--the communication among campuses and the efforts of some campuses to stimulate kinds of social rebellion, if you please, against the system all over the country.

That Spring and the previous Spring were probably the most tense times on this campus, and the general anxiety level of Centre students was disturbingly high. But I never saw communication really break down between the students and the faculty and administrators of the College. Sure, we differed over certain points of view, but communication remained. The maturity of students on this campus at that time was demonstrated in a very gratifying way. One could spend a lot of time talking about that Spring; I'm not sure how deeply into that you'd like to go.

Centre held a day of Concern during that Spring in which there was a march through the streets of Danville to demonstrate concern, and I believe there was a moratorium on classes on Friday. In reading the articles from around Kentucky and around the nation of that period, there was quite a split in administrations as to whether to grant moratorium to the classes, whether to show much of a reaction at all to the events on the part of the administration. How did you arrive at the decision to go ahead and not hold classes on that particular day?

There was consultation there, too. I can't recall the dates exactly. It was in that Spring and it was the Kent State week. There were calls for mass meetings to determine what kind of response Centre students were going to be making in those circumstances. There was a particular call on the part of some

concerned people for students to gather in the auditorium of Sutcliffe Hall on Wednesday evening (note--May 6) of that week. The leadership was basically self-appointed leadership, though student officers undertook to participate.

During those days I was trying to keep pretty close touch with what was going on on the campus, not to guide, but to understand it and hopefully perhaps to be helpful. On that night I had been at the City Hall for a hearing on some zoning questions or something of that kind in which the College had an interest. As I walked back to my home I realized the meeting was still going on over in Sutcliffe Hall, and I went over to listen. I heard some students calling for a walk-out of classes as a protest; this kind of thing was happening on other campuses. I heard other students expressing more moderate views. I heard faculty members who were there in good numbers listening and sympathetic but undertaking to say to students as they spoke: "You're going to lose ground academically if you do this." "We do understand." But expressions were not going much farther than that. Then there arose one young woman names Forrest Roberts. She was about 5' 2" high and must have weighed about 89 pounds. She looked like perhaps the younger sister of some of the members of the freshman class, though she was a senior; in other words, a tiny young lady. She spoke to the fact that she felt the students were not gaining any help in really understanding the conditions that surrounded their malaise of the time. And I recall she said, "I have sat here tonight, and I have listened to two or three of the faculty members that I value more highly than anyone else tell me 'Let's just get on with normal business.'" she went on, "It's hard to get on with normal business under these circumstances." Then with her voice breaking, she said, "Can't you see we need help?" It was a very moving experience.

It seems to me that someone then asked me whether I had anything to say. I spoke to my own concern for their concerns, and of my own sense of dismay and distress with all that was going on around us, but said that it seemed to me that they needed to bring the big issues of the moment to better focus. Since they couldn't possibly that night bring things to a focus, I suggested that they could at least then and there set up a few subcommittees, committees that might address themselves to different aspects of the thing, and that they might undertake to get together again to hear from them. They discussed this and went ahead and did it. And they called for a meeting the next day (Thursday) on the campus. They wanted to have such a mass meeting during the middle of the school day when everybody could be there, 10 or 11 o'clock in the morning to listen to better articulated views that might come up and to hear from some committees. To that proposal I responded by saying that I would ask the executive committee of the faculty the next morning to honor that time for a mass meeting on the campus, to encouraging members of the faculty to excuse any of their students, but also being prepared to meet those students who still wished to meet at that time, but also to have a make-up meeting that evening; in other words, to accommodate the midday meeting while keeping their academic machinery going. This was done; and when they gathered that morning, they had a lot of people who had prepared to express points of view. Again you had some people calling for closing down the campus. There were one or two faculty members who were saying, "What we are doing today is wholly irrelevant. We ought to..." These were younger persons. I won't say they were any less dedicated to their profession than others; but it's characteristic of us in our younger years to look for more dramatic ways of focusing issued when we are facing them.

One of the committees that had formed itself out of that Thursday night meeting had brought forward a statement of concern that they wanted to communicate to President Nixon the views of this campus. Their term "concern" was significant;

they had no easy answers, but they did have concerns that they thought needed to be heard.

The previous night's calls for indefinite discontinuance of going to classes were again being heard, along with calls for business as usual, and so on. I was back in the edge of the crowd, but I was seen by the vice president of the student body who was presiding at that time. He finally asked me if I had anything I wanted to say. I have to admit as I walked up there to the proverbial soapbox, I was still grappling for a way of trying to bring focus to what was going on there. I encouraged them to get ahead with that formal expression of concern. I said to them at that time that rather than simply wiring it off or mailing it off to the President, they might consider sending a duly constituted small committee to Washington to carry this message to the White House through one of our senators. I suggested Senator John Sherman Cooper because he was a trustee of the College, and I knew he would be sensitive to the students' concerns. I stated that, if they developed a statement that was supported by a majority of the students, whatever that statement was, I would draw on some discretionary funds to provide the funding for them to send a delegation of three students to Washington to carry their message. It seemed to me that that was one way to try to bring things to a focus and give them a sense of doing something, and it did seem to appeal to them.

But then I said, "I sense here three different attitudes, and I can't measure what the dominant view is. I hear some who say, 'Let's bear with this, but let's keep on with business as usual.' And I hear some who are arguing for an indefinite suspension in order to organize other ways of exploring our concerns, and then others who want an organized 'day of concern.'" I tried to outline just very briefly those three things to suggest ways in which each might be brought about; that we could simply go ahead with classes, and the individual could make his/her choice; that we might call for an indefinite suspension of classes with all of the losses that would accrue to individual students, of whatever persuasion, if we were to do that; or it seemed to me that we might structure the weekend beginning with Friday discontinuing that day's normal classes, and organize a series of seminars for that day. It would allow for a full day of organized examination of the issues from whatever perspectives anyone who wanted to organize a seminar might do. I suggested they set up a steering committee, and make it a focussed effort. They would have Friday; they should have Saturday (there were those who wanted a parade and this kind of thing). But we could make up all classes lost on Friday by rescheduling them for Wednesday of the next week. There would be no loss. Anyone who wanted to cut them could cut them, but at least there would be no short-changing of faculty contract time. Then I said, "Mr. Chairman, I know you are not taking votes, but I personally if you would, would like to see a show of hands on the three options. It would help me to understand better." Well, they bought the idea of the concentrated weekend. I reminded them that I was not on my own initiative going to cancel or reschedule classes. Though I don't think the faculty would have argued if I did, I felt I should talk with the executive committee. (I also felt confident that they would recommend to the faculty the suspension, or would act for the faculty to do so; and they did within two hours of that time.) That systematic suspension without any essential loss in the conclusion of the academic year clearly appealed to a large majority of the assembled crowd, and the student leadership put together in a short time a fine schedule of seminars. Members of the faculty worked with them on any idea, justifying my confidence that they would do so. We had everything from a panel discussion of the history of the political and economic conditions of Southeast Asia to a session on the music and poetry of political protest.

I had suggested to the committee working on the Southeast Asia seminar that they probably could get Amry Vandenbosch who was an emeritus professor of political science at the University of Kentucky. He knew more about Southeast Asia than anybody in Kentucky, having lived there for years. It was his field of scholarship, comparative politics focussed on Indonesia and Southeast Asia. In World War II he was the principal consultant to the State Department on the political problems of that area.

There were a whole variety of very interesting things that went on that day, but I spent more time sitting in on that symposium looking at the political issues in Southeast Asia. I watched students fill that hall to overflowing and stay for three hours or more.

I had suggested that anybody who would be helped more by it should take Friday and Saturday and Sunday and go home, or go out and lie in the sun on the lake. Some of them did just that. I should say that 20 percent of the students left the campus without any concern at all for those other activities. But those who stayed were deeply involved. They not only sat for three or four hours in a given session, they followed one in the morning with another after noon; and went on some evening activities as well.

Then on Saturday they had that major parade which you speak of. I encouraged their steering committee just to consult the police department to get a permit and to get down and talk with them about what they wanted to do. I said, "You won't have any problems, I'm sure; just do it." They did that; it was really a very moving thing. They decided they wanted just a parade, carrying a few banners but no shouting--absolutely silent. They came in large numbers. The town and the newspaper was carrying the report that there was going to be this parade in the Friday newspaper. People in town were worried about it with a great anxiety. Others of course had far greater confidence. It was so beautifully disciplined--not in serried ranks but the discipline of attitude--that it won a great deal of commendation in the community. There were people in the community that came up and walked with them; though the students didn't go out really to seek this. There were ministers, there were business people. It was very interesting what happened that day.

The parade wound up back at the campus, back in front of Old Centre there to hear a few people who still had things to say. One earnest freshman was calling for a reorganization of the government along socialist lines; others spoke of their sense of satisfaction. Then everything dispersed, and everybody was satisfied.

Those who wanted to understand more felt they understood a whole lot more, even though they didn't have the answers; but at least they understood the complexities that effected the situation in Vietnam. Those that wanted to make a speech stood up and made speeches. Those who wanted to listen, listened.

Monday we went back to classes. The missed Friday classes were picked up on Wednesday. The group went to Washington, came back and brought a full report. We set up a meeting so they could report to all who wanted to come. Senator Cooper, interestingly enough, had a delegation from Yale down at the same time. He took the Yale delegation and the Centre delegation together in his office and spent two and a half hours with them. Our students came back saying; (I'm sure it was the case) "We had better focus to what we went in there with than the Yale crowd did." That's understandable, Yale being a larger, more diverse campus. But Cooper heard

and talked with them, assured them he would convey a report to the White House, which he did of course. The whole thing had given them both a sense that they had expressed their concern and an opportunity to understand more fully what was going on.

The pleasing thing to me about it was that students of all persuasions on the campus felt like they had done something in a unified way. I remember one boy who approached me in the Hangout. I knew him barely by name because he was on the football squad. Coming up to me on Monday morning, he said, "Dr. Spragens, I just wanted to tell you how good I feel about what has happened here at Centre." He said, "My father is a policeman in Louisville, and I've had it up to here with people shouting about the 'pigs' and 'down with the establishment' and so on; there's been enough of it here." Then he said, "I've got a brother that's finishing high school this year, and I was telling him I didn't really want him to come to Centre, but I feel completely different about Centre today." He said, "I think I understand the student body a whole lot better than I did. I hope he'll come here over any other place he might consider." This boy off here on the right whose loyalties to his father had been challenged and trampled was just feeling really good about it, and the young fellow who made the fiery socialist speech, he too felt he had had a chance. The morale for the rest of the spring was superb. Everybody was in class, everything went beautifully, and all felt good about themselves. It was just one of those very gratifying experiences.

It might have gotten led some other way by someone more persuasive who had taught violence. You recognize in times like that, "This is when emotionalism can carry a lot of people with it." But that week was to me one of the most gratifying experiences I had on this campus because it seemed to me that the totality of the prior experience of those students on this campus had led them to rely more on their rationality than generally is the case, and also to feel like they were not neglecting their political responsibility by simply turning their backs on what was going on elsewhere in the world. You'll find a lot of students who will remember that for the rest of their lives as an experience in which they felt pride and satisfaction. Many alumni talk to me in that vein when I've run into them around the country at various times since then.

Tape 3, Side 1 (Part 5) Thomas A. Spragens Interview (continued)
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