

## Comments for the May 3 Forum on "Cornell 1969"

Henry N. Ricciuti, May 11, 1999

First a note on Professor Downs' book: I thought Professor Downs presented a remarkably realistic and perceptive portrayal of the 1968- 69 period at Cornell. Both his narrative of the events and his interpretation of them matched my recollections and sentiments pretty closely, so perhaps that's why I liked the book so much.

One of the main things the May 3rd Forum made very clear (not surprisingly) was that for those of us who were here in 1969, the same strongly held differences in point of view which prevailed in those days are still with us, and are not likely to change. This was best illustrated in the comments by Walter LaFeber, who reiterated his concerns that the intimidations and disruptions surrounding the crisis had resulted in an increasing erosion of basic academic freedoms for both faculty and students (a view with which I concur), and by Ben Nichols, who after 30 years, still doesn't believe that LaFeber's academic freedom had really been threatened at any time, and regards the main problem as the University's lack of responsiveness to the Black students' legitimate demands for relevant academic programs. (This felt like 1969 all over again!) So I don't think there is much hope that these kinds of persistent faculty disagreements as to the significance of what was going on, or what should or should not have been done, are likely to be easily resolved after all these years by further discussion among "veterans" of 1969.

But I think it is useful to ask what Cornell might have learned, if anything, from the events of the late 60s and early 70s, as difficult as that question is. This was apparently one of the aims of the Forum discussion, but it was not easily attainable in that context. One way to approach this issue would be to try to gauge what the impact of the 1969 crisis and the ensuing events has been on Cornell, both in the short run, and in the years since then. Is Cornell a better University because of the events of 1969 and what followed? Hopefully, perhaps some historians or political scientists might be challenged to analyze these difficult questions, as a follow up to the Downs volume--- perhaps Professor Downs himself?

One of the problems in dealing with such issues is the marked differences in peoples perceptions of what was happening during the crisis period, both at that time, and since then as well. For example, I still find it hard to understand how the 1969 WS takeover has come to be viewed by some as an event to be "celebrated" yearly (e.g., special sections of the Sun, etc.), with the implication that it represented a significant "victory" for those supporting the cause of more autonomy for Black students and for African American Studies at Cornell. In my view, if we're going to continue to mark the occasion of the takeover yearly, we should mark it is a sad day for Cornell, with no clear winners and losers.....in fact, one could argue that in a sense, we were all losers, at least in the short run and to some degree.

Why this view? Having served as chairman of the Faculty Committee on Student Affairs (FCSA) in 1969, I can recall the dedicated efforts of many fair and level-headed faculty and students, on this committee and others as well, trying to sustain the continued development of a campus judicial system which would truly protect the rights and freedom of all students and faculty during times of heightened campus activism. These individuals were at the same time trying to be prudently responsive to the threat of potentially violent unrest if the judicial system did not agree to drop some relatively minor charges against several Black students, on the grounds that the system was not legitimate for them. I believe the takeover of the Straight, as well as the disruptive events of the next few days, can be seen at least in part, as a reflection of the failure of the judicial system and the AAS to reach an accommodation on an issue which should have been resolvable without the extremity of the Straight takeover and its fallout, and we would all have been better off if we had been able collectively to avoid it. In a larger sense, these events reflected the failure of all of us --- administration, faculty, and students --- to find a way to work together constructively, and with mutual respect for one another's beliefs and concerns, in a manner which might have prevented at least some of the negative consequences of the snowballing events of the 1969 period.

What were some of these negative consequences affecting both students and faculty, which at least through my retrospective lenses, are no cause for celebrating 1969?

In the relatively short run:

a) the days immediately after the takeover were marked for many of us by a sense of chaos, uncertainty as to whether anyone was actually running the University, and a discouraging divisiveness among the faculty as they tried to determine

how best to respond to the crisis under continuing threats, intimidation and pressure from a variety of sources . Some of the threats were taken seriously enough so that several faculty members moved their families out of their homes temporarily.

(It's interesting to note the very different perception recalled by Caleb Rossiter at the Forum -- that the Barton Hall "Community" actions represented a dramatic positive movement toward running the university as a true democracy.....in my view, a somewhat romanticized recall of the circumstances and events of those days.)

- b) the resignation of several of Cornell's most distinguished faculty, who ironically were strong civil libertarians;
- c) the forced resignation of the President of the University, who had spearheaded and continued to be a forceful advocate of relevant educational programs for increasing numbers of African American students at Cornell;
- d) the effective demise of a potentially very effective judicial system based on a commitment to implementing the principles of freedom with responsibility, for all students and faculty;
- e) a heightening rather than attenuation of racial divisiveness (e.g., although the AAS leaders had agreed to participate in revising the judicial system if the faculty voted to drop the charges, they did not do so);

From a longer term perspective:

- a) My personal sense is that one of the net effects of the WS crisis and its aftermath was to make Cornell more vulnerable to extremism on the campus, in the sense that it remained rather tentative and uncertain as to how to respond without triggering another crisis of similar scope and negative consequences for our public image. Without examining the historical record, I recall a good many subsequent building occupations and obstructions of various sorts during the 70s when the University's tentative response would illustrate this point. I also recall a week during which the lights were kept on all night in campus buildings, and faculty were asked to volunteer to stay in their building overnight (in shifts), in order to minimize the possibility of bombings by student extremists, whose threats had been taken seriously (and I spent most of at least one overnight period in a Martha Van basement office for this purpose, listening for strange footsteps or noises at the windows.)
- b) From the point of view of faculty collegiality, I believe that we still have a considerable residue of the "politics of identity" which was so prominent in the 1969-70 period. I may be guilty of romanticizing the "old days", and perhaps this is simply a manifestation of larger social changes in universities, but my sense is that faculty are less inclined to engage in the kind of dialogue that requires one to be open to the possibility of being persuaded by others with whose views one may differ, in an effort to arrive at real consensus on difficult issues. Rather, there is a tendency for sub-groups to maneuver politically to accomplish their own particular agenda, without serious willingness to consider, and perhaps be influenced by, the views of colleagues who may disagree.

Is Cornell a stronger University today than it was in the late 60s and early 70s? Many positive changes took place at Cornell in the years following the crisis, and I believe that in many important respects we are a stronger University than we were in 1969. But if this is the case, my hunch is that it is because we somehow managed to survive the WS takeover and its aftermath, rather than because of these events. It would be tempting to speculate as to whether we might be an even better University today had we all found a wiser way to deal with the crises of the late '60s and '70s. Perhaps future historians may shed further light on some of these issues.