

THE O.S.U. CAMPUS DISORDERS OF 1970: A PERSONAL VIEW

Charles B. Wheeler,
Emeritus Professor of English

Preface

One day in February of 1993 while I was visiting the Furnisses at their Arizona home, Todd reached into his files and pulled out a rather smudged and rumpled five-page single-spaced typescript and handed it to me, saying, "Do you remember this?"* I immediately recognized the cranky signature of my old Royal typewriter, but in the intervening 23 years I had totally forgotten that I had once sat down to record my on-the-spot impressions of the events of April/May, 1970 on the OSU campus, producing the document that now lay before me. So it was with a curious kind of binocular vision that I re-read it: vividly recalling through the mind's eye the look and feel of these events, once more in their midst, and at the same time standing outside of them with the perspective of more than two decades of intervening history, during which time I myself had changed along with the world I lived in.

I decided to transcribe the document exactly as it was written back then, and this is what follows below. To do anything further would have been to subvert the integrity of the original work. The only changes have been to tidy up a few stylistic quirks (I was then given to using "which" rather than "that" as a subordinating conjunction in restrictive clauses). Still, I now had an opportunity to add to it as well, supplying details and insights that for whatever reasons had not made it into the 1970 draft, and thus producing a more complete account. For example, I have known all along since 1970, and frequently regretted when I thought about it, that I did not back then make any real effort to document the campus unrest in a detailed way--especially by taking photographs. My camera sat at home, probably loaded with color film, and it never occurred to me, incredible as this may seem, to bring it to campus to photograph what was going on around me. I remember at one point standing at the window in my office on the fifth floor of Denney Hall, on the southeast side, from which one could get a pretty good view of the east end of the Oval, the walk across it to the Faculty Club, and the area in front of the Administration Building (now Bricker Hall), and thus of whatever action was taking place in that highly contested area. The National Guard had placed a cordon around the Administration Building, and a line of nervous civilian soldiers with loaded weapons was being confronted by a disorderly rabble of students that milled around in front of them, advancing and then retreating, chanting provocative

*W. Todd Furniss had been Associate Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at O.S.U. until December, 1963.

slogans, but never daring actually to charge the armed cordon--for very good reason, because otherwise we might have had a Kent State incident right here. But someone in the crowd must have decided that ridicule was a better weapon than direct attack, so pretty soon the forward line of students started to grovel, waving arms in supplication and bowing to the ground, mocking the superiority of their enemies and daring them to respond. It was, in a weird sort of way, rather funny, though I think that the soldiers were not amused. Anyway, where was my camera? These pictures are only in my head.

Now I was suddenly presented with an opportunity to recover those nonexistent photographs in words, as I've just done above, and add them to the contemporary account--also to add further comments to flesh out the original where this is needed and possible. Since I want to keep this original intact, so as not to muddy the binocular perspective, I decided to print the original in Roman type and to do all of the 1993 portions in italics.

I have been aided in this supplementation by an official report, "The Spring Events at Ohio State/ A Report of the Committee of Inquiry to the Faculty Council, November 10, 1970." The 10-member committee included two students and eight faculty members and was chaired by Louis Nemzer of the Department of Political Science.

One of the significant bits of background information that I learned from the report is that the student population of OSU had doubled in the decade 1960-1970, with 41,015 students on the campus in the spring of '70--an enormous expansion for which we had been mainly unprepared and with which we were still struggling to cope. It is no wonder that facilities were strained. The increase in black enrollment had not been accompanied by any special measures to accommodate the wishes of this newly significant population, and blacks were very restive. The administrative structure of the University still excluded students from participation. "Business as usual" was the implicit motto of the Fawcett régime. I guess I need not do more than mention the "hippie" movement, as counter-culturalism was then called, or the prevalence of drugs, the "tune in, turn on, drop out" mentality, and above all the draft and the Vietnamese war, which squarely opposed the federal government and its related institutions to the wills of the students. Campus ferment in the nation had been common well before 1970, starting in a major way with the events at Berkeley in 1964. By the late spring of 1970, the report states, there were large-scale demonstrations on at least 760 campuses (one-third of the total in the whole country) and on virtually all of the large university campuses. Additionally, at Ohio State the administration had to contend with the legacy of distrust created by the loyalty oath for employment (abolished only in 1982) and the infamous Speakers' Rule, cause of a controversy that went all the way back into the fifties. The shadow of McCarthyism was still widespread, and the traditionally conservative

central Ohio citizenry were quite ready to see a communist plot in any organized dissent and to react accordingly. The board of trustees, mostly prominent Republican businessmen (all white, of course), stood for everything that the new generation of radical students despised. Ohio State was not going to change unless forced to do so. As early as April 26, 1968 there had been a confrontation when 41 black students entered the Administration building, locked it behind themselves, and presented Vice-presidents Gordon Carson and John Corbally with a list of "demands"--a word that was soon going to be the leitmotiv of an era.

The Narrative

The strike began on Wednesday, April 29. The picketing [*of major buildings near the Oval, including Denney Hall*] was noisy but orderly, and there was no interference with students going to class. During the latter part of the afternoon, however, the demonstrators had left the central campus and gone over to the entrance at 11th Avenue and Neil, where they pulled the gates to and built a barricade in the street, blocking the entrance. State troopers were called, as well as Columbus police, to remove the barricade. They were met, of course, by refusal, and there was a certain amount of rock-throwing. The crowd was then dispersed with tear gas and the barricade removed. [*It was later determined that agents provocateurs from the police or the Patrol had actually instigated the critical moves to close the 11th Avenue entrance.*] Police and troopers pursued demonstrators through the campus area, discharging great quantities of tear gas. At 4 p.m. the English Department met as it had been scheduled to, in a Denney Hall classroom, for the purpose of discussing some curriculum changes. At 5 p.m. a harried secretary stuck her head in the door and announced that we must all leave at once: the building was to be closed and locked by official order. We rose in some disarray and made for our offices. Those who left by the east entrance, as I did, went down in the elevator and escaped with no difficulty. Those who left by the west entrance were trapped for a while by tear gas and by the mob in the street, though they all eventually got away safely. That night the Columbus mayor slapped a tight curfew on the campus area and its environs, and police had a merry time pursuing fugitive demonstrators--or just ordinary citizens who happened to get in the way. The tear gassing and pursuit went far into the night and hundreds of arrests were made. There were no serious injuries.

On Thursday the 30th I came to campus by bus, and as I got off I noticed two helicopters circling over the oval, making a terrible racket, but no other signs of disorder. But as I approached the north side of Denney Hall I saw people coming down the walks toward me, holding wet paper towels over their faces and weeping. One of them was Jeanette Larocque, so I stopped her and asked what had happened. It seems that the National Guard, which had been called in during the night, had interpreted the gathering crowd on the Oval as being potentially

dangerous and had undertaken--on whose orders I know not--to disperse it, and so had launched a barrage of tear gas. The gas caught a lot of people out in the open who were there just because they were changing classes (many classes continued to be taught). Naturally the rest of the day was chaos. The Audubon Society canceled its wildlife film that evening at the Museum [*Sullivant Hall*] (the curfew was continued). Pickets were circling noisily in front of all entrances to the major classroom buildings.

That day I received my own baptism of tear gas. I was heading home from Denney, on my way to High Street and the bus, when I heard the now familiar plopping sound of tear gas canisters exploding and saw the smoke come up from the Mershon parking lot. I walked a block out of my way to avoid it, but I hadn't counted on a stiff southerly wind that picked up the cloud of gas and dropped it right across my path, so before I could figure out any solution I found myself weeping and snuffling as I walked toward High Street, incongruously carrying a brief case, umbrella, and raincoat just like any other middleclass commuter. To make matters worse, I then discovered that the buses weren't getting through the 15th avenue intersection and that I would probably have to walk home. After a few blocks of that, though, I found a ride with Paul Pimsleur and got home in good order. The gas had no bad effects--in fact, I went out later that afternoon and had my normal two-mile run around Beechwold. [*The brief case was heavy, because it contained my vital papers and books, or as many of them as I could cram into it, since I wasn't sure when, if ever, I could get back into my office.*]

On Friday, May 1st, the day began peacefully but soon degenerated again into disorder. The National Guard detachment had been reinforced and troops were everywhere. I think I held my class--I'm beginning to lose contact with certain past events now--but nothing of significance was taught. My attendance had been way off ever since the strike began. [*On this day, or one close to it, I had been walking east along 18th avenue toward College Road when a convoy of buses containing National Guard reinforcements passed me going into the central campus. A couple of black students were on the sidewalk ahead of me. One of them looked at the buses as they passed, a tense soldier's face at every window, and said to the other in a tone that mingled despair and contempt: "Not one brother do I see." For the troops were all white.*] That evening (the curfew was lifted) the entire English teaching staff met in Hagerty Hall auditorium to discuss the issues and our response to them. We finished the 2-1/2 hours in a remarkably unified frame of mind (though not unanimous), and we passed several resolutions that made reasonably good sense. We narrowly avoided passing some that were much more inflammatory and on which we would have been badly split. [*Al Kuhn handled the difficult situation with great skill. At one point a young graduate student stood up and shouted, "I say, shut it down!" Al kept his poise and turned the provocation aside with a soothing remark. But we had some really inflammatory speeches from the other side, too, the one by Thyra*

Kabealo particularly sticking in my memory. She would have had all the protesters eviscerated, I think, given her way. --The report of the Committee of Inquiry dates this meeting May 4. I am inclined to believe my own chronology. And it is very unlikely that there were two such departmental meetings.]

On Monday, May 4, the early morning peace degenerated quickly. Toward noon groups of demonstrators took positions in front of the doors of Denney Hall and began to interfere with entrance into the building. I left to go to lunch in some doubt as to whether I would be able to get back in, and sure enough, when I returned at 12:30 the stoppage was complete. The streets and grounds were full of milling, angry persons, both strikers and non-strikers. (By the way, the weather continued to be absolutely gorgeous, so behind every event narrated here you must construct an imaginary backdrop of pure vernal beauty--and try to savor the paradox.) [*Another oddity of the times is that students who had early classes, especially 8 o'clocks, went on with their education just as though nothing was at all abnormal. For the revolutionaries, who spent most of every night arguing and drinking and organizing and smoking pot, were so exhausted from it all that they typically slept till noon. The real business of revolution didn't begin until after 12.*] At that precise moment, I, who had done nothing more than watch in apprehension from my 5th-floor office window and who had walked past pickets without even looking at them, decided to get involved. I just couldn't stand not doing anything. So I stopped a passing member of the Green Ribbon Commission and begged a ribbon from him, thereby deputizing myself to keep the peace, and I spent the rest of my time on campus that afternoon at the east door of Denney Hall, trying to keep people from one another's throats and mainly just being visible as a representative (I hoped) of sanity. This Commission is one of the great things on campus--it's a voluntary organization of faculty members whose job, as I have implied, is to be present during confrontations and to try to interpose between factions for the sake of preserving order--also to witness events and to provide impartial testimony if that is needed. [*It had been founded back in 1964 in response to a quite different situation.*] The ranks of the group grew enormously during that week, as you might expect, and they did splendid service to the University. Some of them were at moments in real personal danger; I was not.

Not all of the verbal noise was sloganeering or shouting. One famous event was a sidewalk debate carried on between Murray Beja, of our Department, and Bernie Mehl, a professor in the School of Education with well-known libertarian views. He routinely gave all of his students A's, I was told, because anything else was elitist and demeaning to them. Standards? Are you kidding? Anyway, he and Murray had it out on the sidewalk next to Denney Hall, surrounded by a gaggle of fascinated spectators, of which I made a part for a while. Murray was stoutly defending traditional values, and Bernie, of course, was all for chucking them out, in the spirit of revolutionary populism. It was one of the few times that I knew of that the opposing sides had a clear-cut confrontation

minus pickets, placards, and chanting mobs. --And by the way, not many people on "our" side would have had the guts, as Murray did, to stand up to a representative of this seemingly irresistible tide for change and argue passionately for traditional values.

The Green Ribbon Commission had set up a headquarters in the basement of the Fine Arts building. I remember that I was down there sitting behind a desk, I think simply keeping office hours, when a young male student (there were always students coming and going and milling around), intoxicated with the rhetoric of dissent, started parading himself up and down the room shouting "I don't care anything about the whole fucking University, I can do any fucking thing I want to--nobody tells me what to do!" Etc. And a female student (whom in fact I didn't know) reproached him, saying "You shouldn't talk to Professor Wheeler like that." I listened in bemusement. This was no crazier than most of what was going on.

The Commission met every morning at 8 in the Mershon Auditorium to review the events of the preceding day and to plan strategy. I'm not sure of the exact date, but very likely it was the night of May 3rd, or perhaps the 2nd, that I attended one of these and heard reports following the Kristallnacht of the day preceding, when mobs of protestors swept up and down High Street breaking windows in the University area. It was the most damaging, physically, of all the events.

On Tuesday the 5th the obstruction did not resume until afternoon, and I was thus able to teach my 1 o'clock class (our assignment, *As You Like It* ["Sweet are the uses of adversity"]). The pickets made a great racket, but we were on the side of the building away from them. [*The Kent State shootings had taken place the day before, and that event was in some sense the last straw. It brought the likelihood of violence even closer to our campus. From my 5th floor window that day I looked down upon a raggedy mob marching along 17th avenue behind a large placard upon which was written IN MEMORIUM. How sadly emblematic this was of the confusion and ignorance of the protest movement--they couldn't even spell!*] At about 2 o'clock the doors again became blocked, and I resumed my Green Ribbon duties at the door--on the outside. The afternoon wore on, with very few classes in session (none in Denney), and a strange air of hush over the crowd. It had become known that the University had obtained a "John Doe" injunction to clear the doors, and that after it was read the Guard would make a sweep and arrest anyone, and I mean *anyone*, who had not left the area. So we waited for the bust. The Green Ribbon people were instructed not to interpose but to leave promptly when the Guard arrived. Since I had every intention of doing just that, I finally decided to leave ahead of time, so I just went home. Later I heard that, miraculously, a few classes had even been held in Denney afterward.

Wednesday, May 6, was the showdown. I came prepared to meet my class but convinced that I would be unable to. With some colleagues I got a bite of lunch

early at the Faculty Club and then went to a Green Ribbon meeting in Mershon Auditorium at 12. The air was electric with tension; something was going to happen, though nobody knew what. As we sat in the meeting messengers began arriving with news of this and that: the campus was being assaulted physically and there was danger of real riot. I left the meeting and went to Denney, where the doors were again blocked. But I begged entrance back at the rear elevator door on the west side (where the janitors come and go), because I wanted to get just one book out of my office before leaving it for good. I had taken the precaution earlier of removing all really unreplaceable documents and records. I came back down the main stairs, because I wanted to see what was going on inside (where there was a first-aid station that students had set up in the Arts & Sciences office). As I went down, I passed a stream of students coming up the stairs going to class! This was mystifying. When I reached the bottom I saw that a couple of burly plainclothesmen had come over (again I don't know on whose orders) and had just shoved demonstrators aside and held the doors open--an act which required some bravery. Both of them looked like "Oddjob" in the James Bond movies. They were about as thick as they were high, bald-headed, and wore tight-fitting business suits. They bore no identification, but "cop" was written all over them. I looked at this in dismay, because all I could think of was that the building was being filled with hostages--no one could guarantee that these students could get out safely once they were in, and besides nobody was there to teach the damned classes anyway. At that moment Al Kuhn came down the steps and reported that two fires had been discovered upstairs in offices, and that the fire alarm system had been disconnected (it had been put to use several times in days preceding as a means of harrassment). We put our heads together briefly and decided to evacuate the building. Anything else was madness. So he talked the plainclothesmen out of action (I can't imagine how) and then we both went swiftly through the second and third floors opening classroom doors and telling groups of startled students that they must leave at once. It was, of course, wholly unauthorized. *[Later in the afternoon I ran into Ned Moulton at the east end of Denney and told him what we had done. He gave his blessing, and I told him gratefully that he was now my favorite administrator!]*

For the rest of the afternoon, while deanlets fretted at the irregularity of the proceedings, we Green Ribbon members turned away everyone who came to enter Denney for a class, and we succeeded in closing it down tight. The big question about Thursday was whether the traditional May Day festivities and particularly the president's ROTC review would be held as planned. If they were, well. . . . Fortunately the dangers of the situation had penetrated the Administration Building, and an announcement came that it was all called off. But in its place we were asked by President Fawcett to convene regular classes on Thursday to discuss the issues and the possible solutions to the trouble on campus. This was a cockeyed idea on a lot of counts, and when I heard it I decided at once that I just wouldn't comply. The administration had not met face-to-face with the student body for a

frank and free discussion, so why should we, the faculty, do so in their behalf? The issues were pretty damned plain by then, and it all boiled down to one fact, visible to anybody on the streets: we *could not* continue in this way--the University must close. Well, just in time for the six o'clock news the announcement of our indefinite closing came. They had recognized the inevitable. During the afternoon the pickets at the doors had melted away, and I don't even remember their leaving; by then picketing had become irrelevant. Violence had been chosen instead. The fires in Denney were swiftly put out, as was a fire in the Fine Arts building (though it required summoning the fire department--protected by National Guard troops). But no one could tell what was to be next. So the University capitulated.

I don't know when we'll reopen. I doubt this quarter. My neighbor Bob Smith, who is Vice President for Development, thinks that it may take two weeks from now, but if it does that we might just as well not bother. So far everybody has been working mainly to get it shut down (close the windows, turn off the lights, empty the refrigerator--and I speak only somewhat in jest). You can't get on campus now without a letter signed by both the provost and the dean of your college: it's shut and sealed. WOSU is off the air. *Nothing* is going on.

The strike at OSU had been called originally because of what was felt to be the University's unresponsiveness to two sets of demands, the first by the Afro-Am Society and the second by an Ad Hoc group, so called, which swept together every other issue that could possibly be presented and merged them with the blacks' demands. The real causes, I think are somewhat other. First and foremost is the extension of this ghastly war. Secondarily, but not by much, is the feeling that the problems of the blacks are being pushed to the back burner and allowed to be forgotten. And especially on this campus is the feeling of alienation from the centers of authority. The University has for all its life taken a *de-haut-en-bas* tone in dealing with students, and Fawcett particularly has spoken and behaved as if he were the pope. Real problems have been met with public-relations responses and the rhetoric of greatness has been used to cover up the absence of the real thing. Business-as-usual has become a way of life too sacred to question. Well, by God, it's been questioned now. All the people who had been worrying whether Woody Hayes would get his Astroturf for the football field can start thinking of something important. They *can*, though I'm not sure that they will. I was not in sympathy with the strike as a tactic, and I was never anything but totally opposed to the use of force in pursuing it, but I can't overlook the fact that the strike is a sign of real and not imaginary troubles, and I reject the notion, still widely held around here I am sure, that if we are just patient it will all blow over and we can resume as before. To that extent, I suppose, I have been "radicalized." I can even contemplate 50% student representation on faculty committees without gagging. (much)

(Later). I've just come in from the back yard, where I was part of an argument between Bob Smith and Phil Jastram, though unfortunately I got sidetracked by Smith's wife before I could hear much of what was going on, but I gather that Smith was defending the administration (naturally) and that Jastram was not. *[I remember the scene much better than the dialogue. Bob had invited me over to sit on the lawn with himself and his wife and have a drink and relax. We were well on the way to doing just that when we noticed that Phil had spied us and seen the potential for a debate. So here he came over the fence, eyes bright with crusading zeal--and there went our relaxing moment. I could have wrung his neck.]* I suppose that Smith would object to much that I have written above, factually and otherwise, but it's as true to my own views as I can make it. Particularly he would object to the claim that the administration had not met face-to-face with the student body. I will grant that they tried, after a fashion (on WOSU-TV). But there has been no real contact, and of course the problem goes back long before this strike began--hence it is not easily solved. A president who is never seen on campus, even in the Faculty Club, is dangerously isolated. In fact he's so isolated that he doesn't even know that he is. Jim Robinson, the provost, is a good man, but he has a very unimpressive public personality--not at all like his predecessor John Corbally. Vice-president Carson, of course, is so generally hated that he has to be kept under wraps for his own safety. Ned Moulton is genial and authoritative in manner, but I don't think he has any real power. The saddest case of all is poor John Mount, who is broken-hearted over the collapse of his world but is incapable of doing anything beyond wringing his hands. As Dean of Students he is wholly unfit. So where are we? Are all these guys going to get together and resign in a body, or fire each other? Can they see that they are, themselves, the greatest obstacle to settlement? That willy-nilly they represent in the minds of the student body all the parochialism and standpatterry that has accumulated in the body politic of the University in the century of its existence?

If I seem to speak somewhat ungraciously and ungratefully about our administration, let me say that my comments are mild indeed compared to some I've heard. And I don't doubt that the faculty as a whole must bear some blame for conditions. The strikers are certainly not without blame. The "demands" were ridiculously overstated and ill-sorted, there were some in the group of strikers who didn't want peace under any conditions, and there is no question but that a few Weathermen types came into the area from outside to join in the fun. They were spoiling for a fight.

Here I must leave it. I'll undertake to write again, but not at such length, whenever there is any real news. But you can expect the present state of suspended animation to last quite a while.

Postscript, 1993

The University did reopen, on May 19, under tight controls, and classes were held to finish the quarter (under our quarter system, classes typically went on through or even beyond the first week of June). Early upon the reopening, I had the distinction of having my Shakespeare class visited by a news team from Channel 6, who photographed a few minutes of the proceedings for local TV. I think Al Kuhn had sicked them onto me. Certainly I was doing nothing particularly newsworthy, though come to think of it standing in front of a room full of undergraduates who were not screaming in protest was by then a bit unusual. The mood of students was subdued. Everyone was more or less in a state of shock: they wanted nothing more than to finish the term and get the hell out of there. We were instructed to abandon letter grades for the final marks and award "pass/fail" only, though I seem to remember that students were given the option of taking letter grades if they wanted to--and I believe a few of mine did. Thus at least one person in my class got an honest "C."

But it wasn't entirely over on May 19. The strike coalition called a noon rally on the Oval that day, following the usual pattern, and on Thursday, May 21, a crowd of about 8,000 persons filled the Oval to listen to speeches from strikers and faculty members. For the first time it became clear that a very large segment of the University population was now fed up with violence and willing to let the process of negotiation take over. It was very dramatic: a true turning point. As a speaker from the center of the Oval called through the loudspeakers (provided by the University) "Shut it down!" from the periphery of the crowd came a massive shout of "NO!" The students were fed up! Finally something like a democratic vote had been taken. At that instant the strike collapsed. The bewildered revolutionaries discovered that they weren't wanted and that, essentially, they now had no following. There were sporadic outbreaks of disorder during the rest of that week, but the student protest more or less evaporated. It had never been an entirely student protest, anyway: a whole lot of people who had no personal stake in the outcome--street people, druggies and dropouts, kids from other campuses, blacks from the urban ghetto who saw a chance to harrass whitey--took part in the demonstrations. It gave them a temporary feeling of importance. If the University were ruined by their actions, what had they to lose? -- Some years after all this--maybe a decade, but I can't date it at all exactly--I was called in as the outside examiner on a Ph.D. exam in philosophy, and I sat in judgment on no other person than Bill Crandell, whose figure, clad in army fatigues, had been virtually omnipresent on the Oval (along with that of his sidekick Lorraine Cohen) during the demonstrations, breathing fire at the University and exhorting his followers to resistance. Now here he was, tame as a tabby cat, coming back to finish the degree that he had stopped working for in 1970. The Establishment, it seems, was not altogether bad.