AN OPEN LETTER TO THE FACULTY

A Personal Account by Provost Bonner of the Events at the University of Cincinnati from April 30 to May 18, 1970

The Beginning

On April 30, in an evening broadcast to the nation, President Nixon announced his plans for military action in Cambodia to safeguard the war effort in South Vietnam. An hour later, several hundred University of Cincinnati students gathered on the University Center bridge to protest or debate what many regarded as a widening of the war in Indochina. As partisans of various viewpoints spoke, the crowd grew and many joined in a march through the residence hall areas to Calhoun Street, where perhaps a thousand students blocked traffic, argued, and engaged in minor acts of disruption. The police summoned to the scene handled the crowd with restraint and professional discipline and rerouted traffic around the demonstrating students. A subsequent march down Clifton Avenue to Hebrew Union College and a sit-in on Clifton Avenue were handled with equal skill. Early in the morning, several hundred returned to the campus and continued the debate over possible courses of action. Demands for violent action were met either by indifference or pleas for non-violence. A city councilman and a state representative joined others in pleading for peaceful protest and it was finally agreed to stage a march downtown the following morning. At approximately 4 A.M. the crowd broke up to make plans for the march.

At 9:30 A.M., May 1, about 800 students, most of them from U.C., left the Center bridge for a demonstration downtown of their concern over the President's announcement. After approximately an hour in the inter-
section at 5th and Walnut, the police asked them to leave within five minutes so that traffic might resume. All but approximately 130 obeyed the order; these were arrested without incident and tried the same afternoon for failing to obey a policeman's order. Nearly all pleaded guilty and received fines of $35 and costs.

The campus remained calm over the week-end. It was the view of many that although efforts would be made by activists to stir further demonstrations that they were not likely to be successful. For nearly two years a small group of activists (perhaps 40 or 50) had sought unsuccessfully to lead campus opinion to stronger action over the Vietnam war and radical reform on the campus, especially in the area of student rights and freedoms. In the main, the University had responded sensitively and imaginatively to these efforts. By May 1, we were the only large university in Ohio that had not experienced a shutdown or been forced to use police or guardsmen to preserve order. More significantly, the University was the largest in the country not to have called on outside forces to preserve campus peace. Thanks to able student leaders of all political persuasions, a sympathetic faculty, and a responsive administration, concerned students at U.C. had not faced the alternatives of either bottling up strong feelings or else using violent means to achieve their ends.

The Second Phase

On Monday, May 4, came the second of three critical events that led to the final closing of the University of Cincinnati. That afternoon the first fragmentary reports were received from Kent State University of the
student deaths there. It was immediately apparent that this event, coming on the heels of the President's decision in Cambodia, would unloose powerful student feelings ranging from sorrow and concern to anger and frustration. Student leaders met with members of the Emergency Advisory Committee much of the afternoon in an effort to convey their apprehensions and work out a plan of action. All those familiar with the dynamics of student protest realized that it was critical that the University co-operate in providing a positive channel for the expression of these strong feelings. At this meeting, as well as at the Student Senate meeting that night, it was agreed that this expression, if it were to be effective in keeping the campus together, must be broad enough to appeal to a variety of concerns and political viewpoints. The theme of a Day of Commitment against violence culminating in a silent march and vigil was agreed upon. The march was to be silent, orderly, non-violent, and widely based.

The outpouring of marchers the following day was the largest such expression that day in the country and the largest in the recent history of the city. Classes were cancelled from 9:30 A.M. on and, on the recommendation of both the Student Senate and the University Senate, made voluntary the following three days. The march served much of its original purpose and the final vigil in Nippert Stadium was described by many as a moving experience. At least 5,000 persons and probably 7,500 or more took some part in the march or the vigil. The overwhelmingly majority of these were U.C. students. They were accompanied by high-ranking administrators and faculty members, including a number of senior scholars, who were interested in keeping the march peaceful as well as showing their own commitment.
On Wednesday morning, May 6, the group of activists seeking stronger action picketed various buildings urging students to join in a strike for the remainder of the week. The Provost's Office joined with the Student Affairs Division in issuing guidelines on the peaceful expression of dissent in order to clarify the ground rules for both pickets and those being urged to boycott classes. Demonstrators were barred from buildings, blocking entrances, and using sound equipment, but were assured of their right to carry signs, distribute literature, and advocate their cause. A spot check of classes indicated that attendance that day was normal or nearly normal everywhere on the campus.

At noon on May 6 the situation entered a new phase when 35 to 50 students, chiefly those who had been involved in the morning's call for a strike entered the Administration building and presented Executive Vice President, in Dr. Langsam's absence, with five demands. These demands were: that the University "condemn Governor Rhodes and the murders at Kent State"; "condemn the Nixon Administration's invasion of Cambodia"; "condemn the American imperialism in Asia, the world, and in national Black communities and other forms of imperialism throughout the world"; abolish ROTC on the campus; and turn over proxy votes on stocks and bonds owned by the University to the University Senate. Later, three further demands, described as "transitional and negotiable", were added, calling for a day-care center for children of students and the neighboring community; the reaffirmation of the Charter of Student Rights and Responsibilities; and University assistance to families relocated by the establishment of the city and federally-sponsored Environmental Health Center.
During the afternoon of May 6 it was possible, though difficult, to gain entrance to and leave the Administration Building. The number of students in and around the building varied but grew steadily larger as additional supporters, onlookers, and those offering assistance crowded into the area. Late in the afternoon, some of the students involved made clear their intention to remain in the building until Friday, May 8, the date on which Dr. Bursiek had agreed to answer the demands. A decision was made to allow them to remain in the public areas of the building so long as offices were not entered and no damage was done. It was still assumed that the small group of activists leading the demonstration would not be able to sustain sufficient student support to constitute a threat and that the use of external force in the fluid and uncertain situation at a time when feelings were running high on the campus would be a serious departure from the flexible and successful strategy followed previously in dealing with dissent.

The evening of May 6 was tense but quiet. Early reports that the students in the building intended to lock it the following morning were contradicted later by reliable accounts that the building would remain open and that a policy of non-violence would be followed. Although some offices were entered, only minor damage was reported and no private files were opened. The group itself voted to stay out of the offices for the remainder of the night. A meeting of the Emergency Advisory Committee broke up around midnight in a mood of cautious optimism.

Thursday, May 7, was a crucial day in the developing crisis. During the morning, the occupation of the Administration Building continued without incident, while striking students made efforts to persuade others to join the
strike against normal classroom activity. That these efforts were effective was indicated by attendance reports which showed class attendance off sharply in several colleges, notably Arts and Sciences and Education. Attendance at classes in most of the other professional colleges remained steady, however.

At a University faculty meeting in the early afternoon of May 7, resolutions were passed expressing sorrow over the Kent State deaths and opposition to the presence of National Guard troops on the UC campus. The faculty also recognized that the national unrest on campuses was related to the Vietnamese war and more particularly to the decision on Cambodia. It was further urged by the faculty that the name of Rhodes Hall be changed to Peace Hall and that if external assistance were required to preserve order at UC that the University Senate should be consulted if at all possible.

Soon after the faculty meeting a group of students, largely from the Administration Building, moved to Beecher Hall and occupied successively the entrance hall of the building and the the Registrar's Office. It was recognized immediately by all those in positions of responsibility that the situation had taken a more serious and threatening turn. Ostensibly, the move was made by the activist students in order to show the University that it wanted the demands answered without initiating violence, but the effect was to increase the apprehension of all observers that the situation was becoming increasingly difficult to control.

About 5:30 P.M. on May 7th, a group of fifteen, perhaps twenty, students occupying the buildings agreed to meet with members of the admin-
istration and faculty to discuss the demands. It was agreed that this
discussion would be informal and not binding and would be devoted largely
to clarifying the demands and the answers that might be considered responsive
to them. The meeting was held in a sober but cordial atmosphere and some
clarification of issues resulted. Further discussions were to follow the
next day.

During the evening of May 7th the situation deteriorated rapidly.
It became clear that a small group, perhaps fifteen or twenty, would not
leave the Registrar's Office despite urgings on the part of other students,
including some who had participated in the 5:30 meeting. Other students
then flowed back into the Registrar's Office, some to continue the discussions,
others to support those who would not move, and still others to watch the
situation to see that no violence or destruction of property resulted.
Reports of non-UC students in the Registrar's Office grew; positive
identification was made of several, including some who had recently returned
from Cuba. While the number of outsiders was not large, perhaps no more
than 10 percent of the 250 students in and out of the buildings, it was
increasing and the closing of other state and regional universities increased
the potential for trouble on Friday and the week-end.

Discussions were held throughout the evening with numerous students,
faculty members, and staff persons who had been in Beecher Hall. Some of
those occupying the buildings declared their support of non-violence but
privately expressed their doubts about the situation remaining peaceful.
Student leaders, including spokesmen for Student Senate and other campus
groups, showed deep concern and recommended the closing of the University.
Faculty and administrative officers, recognizing the potential for violence as the number of outsiders increased and as exhaustion grew among those seeking to control the situation, also supported the closing of the University. President Langsam had returned to the city and faced a situation the following day which might lead to his bearing the responsibility of calling outside force. As the night wore on, further consultation brought more evidence that the situation was volatile, perhaps explosive, and that the educational climate on the campus had badly deteriorated. Those involved in the decision recommending closing believed that the choice was narrowing to closing the University for a "cooling-off period" or using massive force to keep it open. Not the hard core of activists but hundreds, perhaps thousands, of concerned students would be involved in any police action, many of them still uncommitted on the issue of tactics in the antiwar movement. The decision to recommend closing seemed both courageous and wise in view of the stark alternatives. No one, it is fair to say, wanted to close the University but almost everyone believed that a period of respite would allow feelings to cool and make a new beginning possible. This decision was consistent with resolutions passed by the University faculty and the Student Senate regarding the use of outside force on the campus.

The University was closed in the early morning of May 8 without incident. The students occupying the buildings left quickly after being assured the decision was firm and final. The week-end was spent in laying plans for the steps necessary to reopen the University a week hence. It was agreed that guidelines on reopening and a statement of the University's position regarding political demands were the first essentials. The Steering Committee of the University Senate was identified as the logical body to start work on these
matters. A committee worked with Provost Bonner in preparing a position paper on "The University and the World Beyond the Campus." This paper spoke to the issues raised by the strike leaders, including the question of institutional neutrality. Essentially, it argued for the central values of the University, such as freedom of inquiry, the right of dissent, and the importance of criticism, and their incompatibility with any form of political orthodoxy. "An individual, a group of concerned faculty members, or even an entire faculty or student body," the paper said, "may choose to take a position on a matter of public controversy, but the University as a corporate and public body may not do so." If it were argued that the University were already politicized because of defense contracts or ROTC, then, according to the paper, the case should be made and full debate follow. In addition to ROTC, the paper spoke to further issues raised by the strike leaders and others, including classified research on the campus and the educational climate for Black students. The position paper was received by the University Senate as a working document on May 13.

A second committee under Dr. Bursiek reported to the Steering Committee and subsequently to the entire Senate on May 13 on the guidelines for reopening the University. It recommended that the University reopen May 18, that a convocation and discussions be held the opening day, and that all students be sent a copy of the rules regulating academic freedom, disruptive demonstrations, and misconduct. The Senate subsequently approved a statement for distribution on "Preserving Academic Freedom in Times of Campus Unrest" which was then adopted by the Board of Directors with a specific interpretation banning sit-ins and occupations of buildings. Further actions were taken by the Senate the following day on many of the issues raised by the strike document,
as well as on recommendations that the various faculties they consider modifying some of the regular rules concerning academic credit for the remainder of the quarter.

Further informal meetings were held during the week of May 11 with the strike group (now renamed the Society Concerned About Mobilizing the People). In all these meetings the atmosphere was serious but cordial, and progress was made in defining issues and groundrules for reopening. Among other things, it was made clear that the previous demands were not intended to be "non-negotiable" but should have been described as "urgent".

The mood of many involved persons was one of cautious optimism by late Thursday, May 14. The decision to reopen the University had been taken; many students were anxious to return to classes; some progress had been made in defining the University's position on public issues; and informal discussions with the activist students had been encouraging.

The Third Phase

But on Friday morning, May 15, after the mailing of letters announcing the reopening of the University, came the third of the three crucial events that have kept feelings high and made campus peace elusive at the University of Cincinnati. In the early morning of May 15 the radio carried reports of the deaths of two students and the wounding of several others at Jackson State College. Since the University had closed for one day and made class attendance optional for three further days following the slayings at Kent, it was certain that the deaths of Black students could be accorded no less respect and concern in the campus community. Many Black students had expressed openly their dismay the preceding week at the outpouring of sentiment over the deaths at
Kent State when no appreciable reaction had followed the earlier deaths of Black students on several Southern campuses. Meetings of administrative and faculty leaders were held with leaders of the United Black Faculty Association and the advisor to the United Black Association, at which the concern of the University was expressed. Leaders of the two associations asked that a meeting of the University Senate be called for Sunday evening, May 17, to consider the situation. By the time of that meeting it had become clear to responsible Black faculty leaders, as well as to many others, that to accord the same treatment to the Black deaths as previously given the White deaths at Kent would mean another week of turmoil, divisiveness, and activist efforts to recruit Blacks to the interrupted campus strike. Only four days of classes would remain, even if violence and confrontation could be avoided during the week of May 18th. It was their recommendation that after a single day of mourning, the University close, not in respect for the Black deaths in Mississippi, but out of deep concern for the whole University community.

At the meeting of the University Senate, many faculty members and administrators agreed that the situation that had caused the closing of the University on May 8 had not yet stabilized and indeed was more explosive than ever. Several other universities, including Ohio University, had just closed for the remainder of the year. Apprehension over conditions on the campus was greater than ever and a new polarization of feeling was apparent. It was clear that education on the campus, at least for most of the residence hall students, had in fact stopped. No one who attended the Senate meeting on Sunday night, May 17, will soon forget the deep frustrations and anger that found voice that night. The University was clearly on the verge
of violent expression of feelings kindled by events beyond the campus. The Senate itself, only recently organized, still without opportunity to develop its procedures, made its recommendation under conditions of pressure and intense emotion. That recommendation, certain to be widely unpopular, was nevertheless courageous and right. It was subsequently supported by the Board of Directors and President, the Mayor, and the Director of Public Safety. Many expressed the view that the explosive feelings on the campus, now including Blacks, might well lead to a summer of turmoil in the entire community. When feelings have cooled, this decision can be weighed in the same scale with differing decisions reached on other campuses. As scientists and scholars, members of the faculty will want to reserve judgment until all the facts are in and the passage of time affords the perspective we so badly need. My own estimation of the decision is implicit in the preceding account and the conclusions which follow.

Concluding Thoughts

The closing of a great university is an occasion for soul-searching and sober reflection. A university is a precious and vulnerable institution whose civilizing values are badly needed in the crisis of our times. As a place of reason and disputation, however, members of the academic community are not equipped by tradition or by habit to think of the campus as a battleground where superior force is needed to enforce order. An educational climate cannot exist if it is made possible only by bayonets and tear gas. No university is eager to use police or guardsmen to preserve order if the use of force only leads to further conflict and violence. If we do use force at the University of Cincinnati -- and we are the last major university in the country not to have employed it -- we will use it reluctantly, with
restraint, and only as a last resort. Thousands of our colleagues across the country have seen no improvement in their educational environments after troops were called to the campus. Even the most pragmatic considerations would suggest that we not repeat mindlessly the remedies that have failed on hundreds of other campuses.

What, then, is gained by closing the University? Do we face in October the problems left unresolved in May? No questions have been asked more often in the days that followed the closing of the University. The only reply that can be made at this time is that responsible leadership on this campus is committed to reopening under conditions that will be different from those that existed on May 18. The feelings which have run so dangerously high will subside; the closed and paralyzed universities around us will have a chance to recover; the common cause which brought Black and White activists together will fade; and the exhaustion which has plagued those on the firing line these past three weeks will pass. We have traded eight remaining class days for the time to regroup and rethink, to plan and work for a new beginning. If that time is used well by all of us, we will have gained an opportunity denied our sister institutions, namely, to reopen without deep wounds, without sharply polarized feelings, and without the burned buildings whose remains stand as constant reminders of what has happened.

The story of this University's handling of its campus unrest is a proud exception to the dreary record of violence and disruption on every major campus in the country. We stand virtually alone in the state and nation in having the courage to do what is right educationally and morally without regard to the often uncomprehending criticisms that come from beyond
the campus. If we have failed to communicate that story both on and off the campus, ours is the loss for who would really trade his place here at Cincinnati for the bayonet-ringed campus at Columbus, the closed universities at Athens and Kent, or the bitterly divided campus at Buffalo? Over the past few years we have faced many crises at Cincinnati, all of them serious, all of them involving the possibility of force and violence, and all of them fraught with possibilities for bad publicity. In each instance we have chosen that course, no matter how unpopular at the time, which seemed best in the long-range interest of the University. I believe that we have done this once more in the decision on May 18 to close the University.

Of course, the conditions that will face us on reopening are not entirely within our control. The course of events in the state and nation are certain to affect us in the future as they have in the recent past. For better or worse, we in the universities are the focal point for the dangerously divided feelings in this country about the war. Almost certainly, we would not have closed the University but for the consequences flowing from two crowded weeks of events in Cambodia, Kent, and Jackson that inflamed campus feelings. It is not enough to say that student reaction is irrational, wrong, or directed at the wrong target. As educators, we must do all in our power to understand the students and then to deal with their programs and tactics, however misguided.

I hope you will pardon me if I close with some remarks adapted from an address delivered to faculty members before the present crisis, which in some ways seem even more appropriate now than they did then.

"Beyond the day-to-day routines of teaching, counseling, research, and departmental chores is the purpose for which we are here -- to
prepare and guide fellow human beings -- younger and less experienced than ourselves -- to realize their full potential in a troubled and disordered world. We live in a revolutionary time -- and the ideas that were current about higher education ten or twenty years ago -- are now obsolete. Across the country, through the ranks of young men and women and younger faculty members, has swept a revolution in manners and morals and standards and expectations that makes communication as difficult for them as for some of us. Most of the old gods are dead -- most of the standards to which we could give nearly universal assent ten years ago are gone or fading fast. No one seems to know any longer what is right or wrong -- except for ourselves -- and even there we're no longer so sure.

It becomes more difficult to teach and to counsel young people -- at exactly the time when they need more counselling. We're so afraid of telling them the wrong thing that we often tell them we can give them no advice at all. The temptation is strong to leave the educational arena, to withdraw into scholarship and research, where the rewards are more evident and the certainties more clear.

But I would urge you not to withdraw. More than anyone else, the committed faculty member, interested in the student and higher education, can give a face to the University, give voice to its aspirations, explain its apparent indifference, and provide a link to the many services and responsive adults who are available on the campus. You can be the conscience of the University.
You can supply the ideas and the support we so sorely need to meet the problems that I've outlined here today.

There is no question, in 1970 we're all on the same team and we're all on the front line. If one of us fails, we all fail, as every campus crisis has demonstrated. But if you can keep before us the larger educational objectives, if we can create together a spirit of excitement and hope about the tormented future, if we can think of our own individual tasks and responsibilities as linked to moving the whole University toward goals we have helped to shape, then perhaps the burdens of the months ahead will lie a little lighter on each one of us."