Statement by the Committee on Mass Media Concerning the April 1969 Crisis at Cornell.

This statement was prepared primarily as a resource for individuals to use in whatever way might be helpful to them in explaining these events to relatives and friends outside the Cornell community. It is hoped that those using it in this way will add whatever comments or emphases seem particularly important to them.

The Committee on Mass Media was formed in response to the general concern over the public's misunderstanding of the situation at Cornell. While the committee has been as careful as possible under the circumstances to check out the facts reported, we regard this as a preliminary report rather than a definitive history.

Many students, faculty, and administrators of Cornell University have been concerned about the way the recent events at Cornell have been and will be represented in the news media. This statement, written by a group of concerned faculty and students, is designed to present the situation as we saw it.

The Afro-American Society (since renamed the Black Liberation Front), very concerned with the establishment of courses relevant to the real problems of black people in this country, called last year for the establishment of an Afro-American Studies Program. President James A. Perkins agreed this past summer to lay the groundwork for such a long-awaited program. Frustration with what the AAS considered to be disappointingly slow progress of the Black Studies Program grew during the fall.

On Dec. 12 and 13 and January 10, members of the AAS participated in demonstrations to dramatize their dissatisfaction with the implementation of the Black Studies Program. As a result of these disturbances . . . six members of the AAS were cited by the Cornell judiciary for their participation in those actions. The AAS felt the indictment of only six of its members was discriminatory, because they regarded the demonstrations as political actions by the entire Society against the University. They also questioned the ligitimacy of that judicial system because it is a part of the structure against which they were protesting, and thus a party to the dispute.

The students were threatened with suspension. Confusion arose within the Judicial Board as to how to handle the case. At one point the Board insisted that the student appear or be immediately suspended, while it was later realized that the official citation given the blacks included a statement to the effect that

action could be taken in their absence. After four months, a six-hour hearing culminated in announcement at 2 a.m. on April 18 by the Cornell Student-Faculty Board on Student Conduct that three black students were to be reprimanded for "harassment and intimidation of members of the community." The vote was 4–1.

The black reaction was negative, not only to the fact that they felt that the judicial proceedings were questionable, but also to the fact that it has taken four months for these cases to be judged.

At about 3 a.m. the same morning, the women living in Wari House (the black women's cooperative), were awakened by a stone thrown through their front window, to find a large burning cross on their front porch. They immediately called the Campus Safety Division, who extinguished the cross. The officers then left to investigate one of the numerous false fire alarms that had been set off on campus throughout the night. The women at the Wari House viewed the cross as a threat of physical violence and were extremely upset that they had been left unguarded. (They were then unaware, however, of the series of false fire alarms being set off.) The women called the Dean of Students Office, and one and a half hours after the cross was discovered, a Safety Division patrolman was stationed to guard the house.

On Saturday, April 19, at 6 a.m., approximately 80 unarmed members of the AAS entered Willard Straight Hall (the student union) and told everyone to leave the building. This included 30 parents staying there for Parents' Weekend and 40 employees. They presented the University administration with their demands: nullification of the reprimands against the three students and investigation of the cross-burning incident and Safety Division handling of it.

SDS members were not involved in the takeover, but immediately set up a picket line in front of the building in support of black demands.

At approximately 9 a.m., 20 white male students took it upon themselves to try to break into the building. Eight were successful in entering, the others having been stopped by persons outside. A scuffle ensued inside and four students (black and white) sustained minor injuries before the whites were ejected by the black occupants.

Later in the day the blacks in the Straight received many anonymous telephone threats. It was reported that these included warnings that the building was about to be blown up, and that armed groups of fraternity men were on their way over to retake the building. As tension mounted, both inside and outside the building, the AAS sent out for arms. At 10:35 p.m., the Division of Safety confirmed that a rifle, two or three gun cases and some hunters had been brought into the Straight. Additional weapons were taken in. In all, some fifteen firearms were inside the building by Sunday.

SDS kept an all-night vigil around the building, as well as a watch on various spots around the campus to detect possible students' attempts to take independent action against the blacks. The Faculty Council met in emergency session all day Saturday and late into the evening, then resumed on Sunday.

Tension Rises

Tension continued to rise all day Sunday. Vice President for Public Affairs, Steven Muller, and Vice Provost W. K. Kennedy made direct personal contact with Afro-American Society members in the Straight and formal negotiations began. Both the AAS leaders and the administration realized that there was danger of some irresponsible act setting off a disaster. Finally, at 4:10 p.m., the blacks agreed to leave the building.

The agreement involved promise of an investigation of the cross-burning incident and 24-hour protection for Wari House and the AAS headquarters, amnesty for those in the occupying group and a promise to help secure legal assistance to defend AAS members against any civil actions arising out of the occupation, and a promise to call a special meeting of the faculty and recommend to it that the reprimands for the previous actions be dismissed. The blacks also agreed to cooperate in devising a more appropriate judiciary system.

They then took their guns and, escorted by campus police, walked without incident to their society headquarters a few blocks away. Muller said, "the agreement was not signed at gunpoint. When the black students came out of Willard Straight their rifles were unloaded and the breeches were open."

The following morning, Monday, April 21, Perkins announced that, for the duration of the present emergency, students with firearms in their possession outside their own rooms faced automatic suspension and that nonstudents bringing firearms to the campus would be arrested.

Also, students engaged in occupation of buildings in the future would be automatically suspended and nonstudents arrested. Any campus organization involved in the building occupation for coercive purposes would face withdrawal of official university recognition.

At 3 p.m., Perkins gathered a convocation of some 10,000 students, faculty and staff in Barton Hall. His address, which lasted 20 minutes and was carried by radio to the community, was the entire program of this extraordinary meeting. Newsweek (May 5, 1969, p. 29) described it as follows: "The president did not refer to the guns, the building seizure or the racial tensions directly; he simply asked everyone to approach the situation as 'humane men.' Many students were angrily disappointed. . . . ."

At the 4:30 p.m. faculty meeting the terms of the agreement under which the blacks had evacuated the Straight were reported. As he had agreed, Dean of the Faculty Robert D. Miller recommended that the faculty act to nullify the reprimands. His motion, however, was set aside for a substitute motion. The issue of the presence of guns in the dispute was a major element in the ensuing four hours of discussion. It was reported to the faculty that some of the fraternities also had guns. These were said to be for hunting purposes, but they had contributed to the general tension.

In the resolution that was passed, the faculty directed the Faculty Council to initiate discussions with the AAS regarding the issues basic to the entire

affair, and report back to another faculty meeting to be held on Friday afternoon. Miller then fulfilled his pledge to the AAS to resign as dean of the faculty in case the faculty did not act to nullify the reprimands. He called this an "act of good faith."

The faculty position was not understood by the students. It was generally regarded as a refusal to consider the position of the AAS, or to re-examine the judiciary system, which has operated in its present form for less than two years.

Frustration and tension spread throughout the campus. Immediately following the faculty meeting, 2,500 persons attended a meeting organized by SDS (which itself has a membership of less than 500) to discuss the seeming lack of faculty action concerning the black demands. SDS decided that it could not act until AAS had determined its own course of action, so postponed discussion and called another open meeting for Tuesday night.

The faculties of each college met during the day on Tuesday; the proposals varied as to details and some included important qualifications, but the faculties of the Colleges of Arts and Home Economics, as well as several individual departments in other colleges, voted to recommend nullification of the reprimands of the black students. Around 7 p.m., the Faculty Council announced a meeting of the university faculty at noon the next day and recommended that they declare null and void all judiciary procedures concerning the black students involved in the December demonstrations. The danger of possible violence had seemed to many to be out of proportion to the question of the reprimands.

Barton Hall Assembly

Student concern was high. Six thousand turned out for the SDS meeting Tuesday evening. This large turnout required the meeting to be shifted from Bailey Hall. Tensions had been heightened by a 6 p.m. radio interview, in which Tom Jones, of the AAS, had declared that the University had "three hours to live." However, as reports of the college and departmental faculty votes to recommend nullifications were announced, they were received enthusiastically by the crowd. In light of these votes and the response of the group, the AAS representatives left Barton Hall to meet and re-evaluate their position.

During the evening, many who had come prepared to take radical action moderated their stand. Others, who had come only to observe, were drawn into a deeper understanding of and support for the black position. As the student support of black demands grew, so did determination to avoid violence. At 9 p.m., the great majority of those present voted to "seize" Barton Hall, boycott classes, and discuss the issues until the faculty seriously considered the black demands.

It should be noted that this vote was taken with full recognition that such action directly violated regulations in force under Perkins' declared situation of emergency. Some time later, it was announced that President Perkins had given his permission for the group to use Barton Hall overnight.

At 4 a.m., after marathon small and large group discussions, the "Barton Hall Assembly" issued a press statement which included the following points:

1. The majority demanded at the very least that the reprimands of the black students be nullified.

2. It was deemed necessary that the university judicial process by which these past reprimands of black students were arrived at, be immediately voided and completely restructured.

3. President Perkins was requested to address the meeting.

4. The convocation invited members of the police force assembled around Ithaca to participate unarmed in the discussions.

5. It was resolved that in any situation within Cornell University where students are involved in any way, that the decision making process would include students, faculty and administration.

The meeting reconvened at 7 a.m. and it was decided to send delegations to faculty members and classes then in session to plead the urgency of the situation and urge the faculty to nullify the reprimands at the faculty meeting scheduled for noon.

In that meeting many of the faculty considered the situation to have shifted substantially. Whereas the faculty had intended on Monday to set in motion a fundamental review of the entire circumstances surrounding the problem, this point had clearly not been understood by the community at large. Many students felt that the faculty was insensitive to the whole situation. Furthermore, over the intervening hours, a large part of the student body had become actively involved in support of the AAS demands. The faculty finally voted to nullify the reprimands and reaffirmed their desire to cooperate with the AAS and other appropriate groups in an atmosphere of peace and mutual respect to develop immediately a judicial system that all would consider fair.

The decision was announced in Barton Hall. At 2:10 p.m., hundreds of faculty entered the Hall to a standing ovation. A member of the faculty read a resolution passed at the faculty meeting expressing the desire to work with the students to make a better University community. Tom Jones then took the microphone to say, "I was right in what I said, because the old Cornell died at 9 o'clock last night when 6,000 of you stood up for black people. The old order has ended and this is the University Community."

Traditionally administration, faculty, and students have regarded themselves as separate groups with distinct interests. Beginning Wednesday, in a new atmosphere of mutual trust, many within these groups recognized some common goals: the eradication of "institutional racism" and an entire restructuring of the University to give everyone a voice in the decisions which affect them — the formation of a Cornell community. Classes were completely suspended in many colleges and in others classroom time was devoted to discussions of the problems facing the Cornell community and their solutions.

Starting at 9 a.m. on Thursday small groups of students, faculty, and administrators met in Barton Hall to discuss racism and all aspects of University reform, and in virtually every department of the University meetings were held on departmental reforms.

In the afternoon 5,000 attended a teach-in on racism. Harry Edwards, a black grad student in sociology said, in addressing the gathering, "as a generation we have an obligation to see that the racism passed on to us from our parents is not handed from us to our children. This is the place where it stops — it stops right here and now." Meetings continued on campus late into the night and resumed early the next morning. Despite the exhaustion, both physical and mental, affecting everyone, the urgency of the situation and the hope of real change kept them going.

Some Faculty Resign

The chairman of the government department and one other professor resigned from the faculty and the chairman of the History Department resigned his chairmanship. Twelve other professors in the government and history departments stopped instruction for the remainder of the semester. These faculty members and a minority of other faculty felt that their academic freedom had been lost by the coercion that they (the faculty) had shown to the blacks. The students insisted that academic freedom for all members of the community was imperative, and that they were trying to understand. Most of the faculty there said that they were going to stay to try to make Cornell a better place. A petition, asking the faculty who had resigned to stay and help Cornell in its restructuring, received overwhelming support.

Also on Friday, University Provost Dale R. Corson announced procedures for registration and storage of weapons on the campus. A storage facility is available at the Safety Division, and weapons will be returned as students leave Ithaca. As of May 1, many living units had been checked and guns had been turned in. The AAS had declared that all of their arms had been removed from the campus and invited officials to inspect their headquarters.

The situation of emergency was officially terminated at 6:00 p.m. on Sunday, April 27.

Robert Miller after overwhelming resolutions of support from the faculty and from the students in Barton Hall has been reinstated as Dean of the Faculty.

Over the same weekend there were three marathon sessions of the "Barton Hall Assembly" which took up proposals concerning racism, university restructuring, grading, and academic freedom.

On Monday, April 28, the Faculty Council proposed that a provisional assembly be formed to recommend future courses of action to the Cornell community. This proposal is similar to one made in Barton Hall over the weekend, and a coordinated version is to be presented to a special faculty meeting called

for May 2. It is proposed that such an assembly represent the whole community, including students, faculty, and administration, and with special concern for representation of the blacks.

Classes resumed on Monday, April 28, though several departments are making special arrangements to enable students to continue activity and discussion and some have suspended classes for the remainder of the semester.

The situation is still evolving. A key factor is that now large numbers of students, faculty and administrators are working and studying together in an attempt to find workable and just solutions to the many problems they face.

Suggestions for use of the statement

1. Send this statement, together with your own comments and observations, to relatives and friends. If you believe that something constructive has emerged from these weeks, tell them about it. Buy extra copies, or Mimeograph or Xerox your own.

2. Send it, together with your own views, to your local newspaper.

3. Be prepared to speak to interested groups in your home town. Have this statement, plus other materials, to document your position.

4. Send comments to:

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