

McCarthyism, Vietnam, racism: These were among the targets during two decades of protests at IU.

What Did It Matter? The Legacy of Protest

AWAKENING CONCERN WITH PUBLIC QUESTIONS

"The Green Feather Movement spearheaded an awakening of student interest and concern with public questions of which any university should have been proud. The demoralizing effect of the action taken with this group is deplorable. If a university cannot tolerate, protect, and even foster such student activities, it is in peril of losing one of the chief reasons for its existence."

— IU biology professor Tracy Sonneborn,
quoted by Thomas D. Clark,
Indiana University: Midwestern Pioneer, Vol. 3

A crowd surrounds the university president's house, chanting slogans. Students stage a sit-in on a running track, calling for the elimination of race restrictions in the charters of fraternities and sororities. A rally against the government's foreign policy results in a near-riot when counterprotesters turn on the demonstrators.

These events sound familiar when referring to student unrest in the 1960s, particularly in such well-known hotbeds as the University of California at Berkeley or Columbia. But they all took place on the Bloomington campus. Even earlier, during the 1950s, when the so-called silent generation was on campus, IU students led the university — sometimes willingly, sometimes not so willingly — into the future. Just as their peers did at other universities, IU's student activists sought and achieved social change.

by JOHN BRANIGIN

In the years immediately after World War II, IU was anything but a workshop for social change. Byrum Carter, IUB professor emeritus of political science, remembers that there wasn't much in the way of student movements in the decade after the war.

"I came with the veterans," recalls Carter, who arrived in Bloomington in 1947. "Veterans were essentially oriented toward getting a degree and getting out. There wasn't much attention paid to questions of student rights or student activities. The only political movement I can remember that really had much significance in the early '50s was the Green Feather organization, and it had only five people."

In late February 1954, most students were engaged in the usual Bloomington campus concerns. The basketball team was 18-3, in line for its second consecutive Big Ten championship. Midterms were approaching, and party raids on the women's dorms were frequent. On March 1, however, the actions of a handful of students attracted the attention of not only the campus but also the country.

That morning, students came to their classes to find green chicken feathers tacked to the bulletin boards in buildings all over campus. Students walk-



ing to their classes were handed flyers explaining the feathers. Five students, calling themselves the "Green Feather Movement," put them up to protest the tactics of anti-Communist crusader Sen. Joseph McCarthy, then at the height of his political power. Just weeks before, he had accused the U.S. Army of "coddling Communists" in its ranks. Blas Davila, now a psychology professor at the University of Indianapolis, was one of the five students who cooked up the feather plan.

"We called ourselves the 'Green Feather Movement,' for Robin Hood," recalls Davila, BA'56. "We kept saying, 'They're your books; don't let McCarthyism take them.' One night we spread our propaganda

all over campus on all the bulletin boards, and then all hell broke loose. We were investigated by the FBI, and we thought we were going to wind up dismissed."

The five members of the Green Feather Movement were members of the Roger Williams Fellowship, a religious group that met at a local Baptist church. "We were always talking about these kinds of issues, like sophomores do," Davila recalls. "We spent a night dyeing feathers green in a bathtub and scattered these mangy old feathers all over campus. We thought we were being clever, but all we did was litter the campus with ugly chicken feathers painted green."

The Robin Hood reference came

TWO SIDES ■ As their placards make clear, these demonstrators were not of the same mind concerning U.S. policy in Vietnam. Photo IU Archives.

from the students' reaction to Mrs. Thomas White, a member of the state's textbook commission, who had previously stated her desire to remove Robin Hood from all student textbooks because the character had Communist connotations.

Opposing the anti-Communist tide was not a popular move for either students or administrators in 1954. In January of that year, a Gallup poll found that 50 percent of Americans viewed McCarthy favorably, and only 29 percent viewed him unfavorably. On the local level, reaction to the feathers was decidedly negative. The *Bloomington Herald-Telephone* called the activists "dupes" and "long-hairs," while the *Daily Student* reported that at least one



faculty member refused to comment on the Green Feathers' cause for fear of investigation.

"One of the reasons we got attention was because some folks thought that this was more productive than panty raids," Davila says. "We got a lot of attention from the media. We heard from people like Ed Murrow. People contacted us, saying, 'This is a great thing you're doing.' But for a while it looked like we were in trouble."

The psychology department came out in favor of the Green Feathers, which warded off any administrative rebuke that might have been forthcoming. On the student level, an opposing "Red Feather Movement" dissolved after its anonymous leaders failed to follow up on their initial campaign.

Despite an eventual outpouring of student support, the Green Feather group didn't last. The administration refused to grant them official association status because of their politically partisan origins.

WAVING THE FLAG ■ Conservative students indicate their disagreement with the more liberal green-baggers. Photo IU Archives.

Their cause, however, continued.

"The movement moved on to the Big Ten and became the 'Joe Must Go' movement," Davila remembers. "We probably were the first protesters," he says, "but things have changed a lot since."

By the early 1960s, Indiana University was growing quickly, but the rules under which students lived had not changed. ROTC was still compulsory for freshmen and sophomore men, applications for on-campus housing still had a space for indicating the race of the applicant, and female undergraduates had to be in their dorm rooms by 12:30 a.m. on the weekends.

"At that time, IU was the biggest university in the world in so small a town," says IUB political science professor emeritus York Willbern. "There were bigger universities, but they were all in bigger cities. We had 25,000-30,000 students in a town that had only 50,000 people. It was to some degree still a university community."

Despite its rapid growth, the university hadn't changed much. "You had very strict rules," Carter remembers. "You had a kind of relationship in which the university took care of students who got into trouble. If you had students locked up in jail for drunkenness, the university would step in and help get them out."

As the 1960s wore on, however, it became clear that segments of the student community were chafing under the in loco parentis rules. The more liberal students, often derogatorily referred to as "green-baggers" after the dark green book bags they carried, particularly pushed the limits of administrative tolerance.

Early in the 1960s, demonstrations met strong opposition from administrators and community alike. A demonstration by the Ad Hoc Committee to Oppose U.S. Aggres-

sion on October 24, 1962, for example, ended in a free-for-all melee after 1,000 screaming demonstrators chased the 17 protesters. While the demonstration itself was a fiasco, it, along with other incidents, served to inflame a growing band of student dissenters.

James Retherford, now a graphic designer at the University of Texas, was a journalism major working at the *Indiana Daily Student* when the march took place. "Immediately after the Fair Play for Cuba march," he reports, "guys wearing brown trench coats came into the sitting room of the *Indiana Daily Student*." They sought out Retherford and the chief editorial writer to ask about the students involved in the march.

"[They] introduced themselves as graduate students in sociology and said they were doing a research project on activists," recalls Retherford, BA'68. "They started asking us questions. I may have been pretty naive, but I wasn't naive enough to believe that these people were really who they said they were. We figured out pretty quickly that they were the FBI coming to do a little undercover work. I started catching on that things weren't as they seemed, and I started becoming very skeptical about what the government had to say about a lot of things."

Retherford, who for a time was editor of the alternative IU newspaper *The Spectator*, became a colorful character on campus as his political awareness evolved. He wore his hair long and grew a beard. He often wore a top hat or beret around town. He says, however, that his appearance and activities met with little resistance from his fellow students.

"As I became more obvious in my dissatisfaction with the status quo, many, many other people did the same," Retherford says. "I don't recall any opposition from other students. We were not necessarily

outnumbered. What we were going through was going on in a lot of people's heads because people in '66, '67, had to think about what was going to happen when they gave up their student deferment. I have a feeling a lot of people were in the middle: guys in fraternities, the business majors, and so forth. They weren't necessarily in line with the right wing; they had some questions themselves."

Fashion back then was itself a statement. "The way we dressed was a protest," Retherford says. "So every time we showed up for class, that was in a sense a protest."

Retherford's actions did not sit well with the administration, particularly after his arrest for throwing a pie in the face of former University of California President Clark Kerr during Kerr's Patten lecture at IU. Kerr, chairman of the National Committee for Political Settlement in Vietnam, was speaking on the eve of Vietnam Moratorium Day. Despite the administration's efforts to prevent class disruptions, however, eventually a large proportion of the student body was involved in protests. Dissent was everywhere, whether it

meant taking on the administration or the federal government.

"Anybody who paid attention to what was going on at the time couldn't help but become more and more skeptical and more and more angry," Retherford says. "Ultimately, unless you took drugs and ignored it, you became political."

Retherford's legacy was *The Spectator*, which evolved from its nonpartisan beginnings into the voice of Bloomington's counter-culture. Unfortunately it collapsed in 1970 amid staff squabbling and a lack of editorial vision. It did spawn a rival that still exists. Once known as *The Alternative* around the Bloomington campus, *The American Spectator* was started in opposition to *The Spectator*. In fact, in *The Conservative Crack-Up*, Robert Emmett Tyrrell Jr., BA'65, MA'67, writes, "I founded a magazine to break the left's monopolistic hold on campus media."

As the 1960s wore on, demonstrations at Indiana University became more confrontational, and the protests concerned not only campus affairs but national political questions. Civil rights issues, which had



COMPETITORS ■
Bob Tyrrell founded "The Alternative" to counteract the liberal-minded "Spectator."

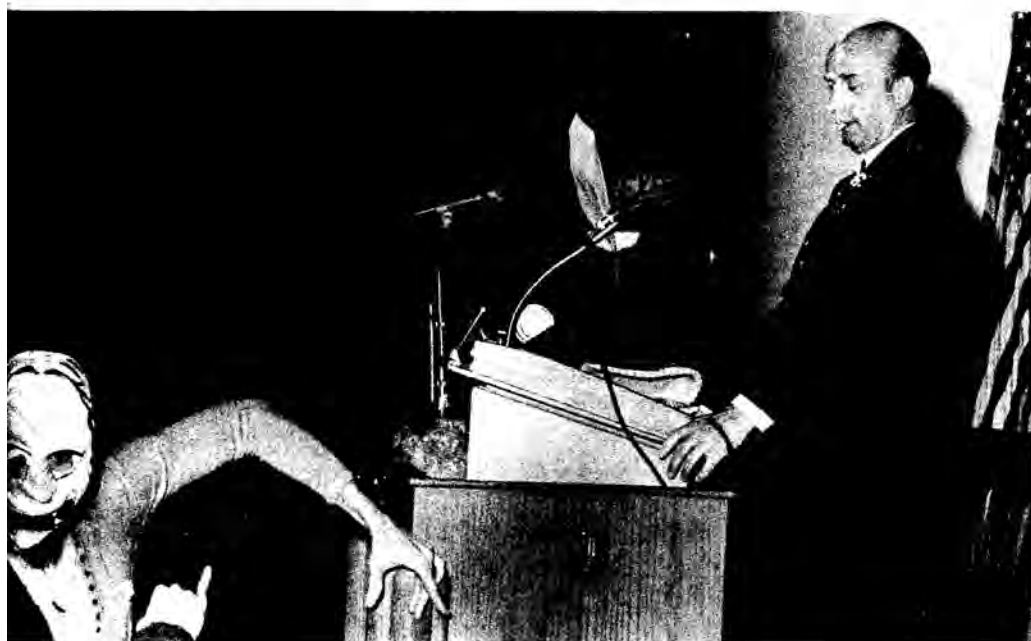
DEVIL'S PIE ■
When a masked man hit Clark Kerr, former president of the University of California, in the face with a custard pie, it made national news. James Retherford was arrested while Kerr completed his remarks in Woodburn Hall. AP/Wide World photo.

been simmering beneath the surface of campus life since before the days of the Green Feathers, burst into the open as students questioned the foundations of IU's culture. In April 1968, African-American students protested at the president's house to call for a black studies program. In May of that year, about 50 African-American students occupied the Little 500 track for 38 hours to protest racial clauses in the charters of greek organizations.

Women's issues were also addressed by student activists, despite the 1968 loosening of women's hours and dorm visitation rights. A group called Bloomington Women's Liberation questioned the economic, social, and political role of women in the university. The women's movement, however, tended to be overshadowed by antiwar and antiestablishment causes.

"I don't think the women's movement at that time was separate from the general feeling of unhappiness with the federal government and state government, particularly the General Assembly," remembers Virginia Hudelson Rogers, MS'50, who became assistant dean of students in 1960 and was acting dean of students in 1969. "The protests that made the headlines were political and financial. The development of applying rules to men and women equally came on a little later."

By 1969 demonstrations had become a common part of campus life. In March, tuition rose 67 percent





A CHILL DRAFT ■
Is this a scene
from the Vietnam
Moratorium Day
on Oct. 15, 1969?
This undated
photo, from the
INDIANA ALUMNI
MAGAZINE archives,
bears no identifi-
cation.

after the state reduced IU's funding, and the increase brought thousands of students to Dunn Meadow in a daylong protest. The IU Homecoming Queen contest was canceled for the first time since 1930. Even the football team experienced a boycott by 14 African-American football players for alleged discriminatory practices by the coaching staff.

Campus unrest was a new experience for the administration, which was accustomed to handling individual incidents but not a massive protest movement. "1969 was a particularly startling experience for almost everybody," Rogers says. "The sudden movement of students against authority at all levels was something of a surprise. I don't know how many of us were really on our toes at that point because it was so totally new. My personal hope in the spring of 1969 was that at the administrative level we would not do something stupid."

The willingness of both student leaders and administrators to quell the more violent members of their ranks helped defuse the situation. IUB student body president Keith Parker spoke to students and administrators during the tense days on IU's campus in May 1970, after President Nixon announced that the United States would expand the Vietnam War into Cambodia. Parker's voice of calm prevented any violent clashes between students and police during the protests, when students

surrounded Bryan Hall and demanded to speak with administrators.

Parker, '71, remembers that the threat of violence was very real. "The people who got killed at Kent State weren't leaders," Parker recalls. "They just hap-

pened to be there. My concern was that something would happen that would trigger an incident where people who had very little involvement in charting the path would ultimately pay the price. Those cops were armed. If they turned around, and started to fire their guns, they're going to shoot anybody who is in front of them, not just the people that were chasing them. And I thought you unnecessarily put other people at risk."

The administration, on the other hand, had to resist pressure from unhappy parents and alumni to do *something* about the situation. "We worried about what might transpire in major gatherings such as Founders Day and Commencement," Rogers recalls. "We managed not to call in the police and the National Guard. There were times when the administration had called them to the edge of the city, but we managed not to use them. That would have been my very last choice."

Parker remembers getting along well with IU President Joseph L. Sutton, who was a frequent target of ridicule by some students. "In a lot of ways, I think I had a good relationship with him," Parker says. "I didn't agree with him on a lot of things, but I think he understood, better than some of his subordinates, that students have a right and a need to raise issues, and that was just part of his job to deal with that. Again, he didn't always agree — mostly didn't

agree — but he wasn't afraid to engage in a dialogue."

From a student's perspective, the legacy of the activists from 1950 to 1970 is a drastically different Indiana University. "I think if we hadn't done the things that we did in the '60s, we wouldn't have ethnic studies, we wouldn't have women's studies, we wouldn't have people talking about the 'engaged university,'" says Parker, who is now assistant vice chancellor at UCLA.

"I think a lot of things about universities would be different. Universities wouldn't be concerned about outreach. Universities wouldn't talk about ethics. I wasn't as directly involved in it, but it was the beginning of the environmental movement. I don't think people would be as concerned about recycling and environmental impact had it not been for that time. When students today think about these things, they think this is the way they always have been. But these are developments that took place during my lifetime."

Willbern sees the student movement as having been beneficial to the university community as a whole and believes its presence and reputation for unlawfulness can be overstated. "This campus, partly because of its size and the faculty, still was a community of sorts," he says. "There was a degree of respect between the faculty members, between each other and with the state, and [the demonstrations] did not get out of hand here to the extent that they did other places. It was far more contained and in many ways a healthier development here. I think it was healthy everywhere, although very unpleasant for awhile." ■

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