

## Module 09: The 1960s: Who Won? Student Protest and the Politics of Campus Dissent

### Evidence 4: "Strike Out?" May 1970

# A

#### Introduction

The Kent State shootings in early May 1970 was a violent end to one of many spontaneous demonstrations against Nixon's announcement of the widening of the Vietnam War into neighboring Cambodia. In the aftermath of the tragedy, students at campuses across the nation grappled with how to show solidarity, support, and protest. At VPI, as at other campuses, student activists organized a strike that would close the campus. The editorial below from the May 13, 1970, issue of *The Collegiate Times* explains the rationale behind calling for a student strike and why the most militant members of the campus community advocated what they called a "hard strike" — a complete and total shutdown of the university for the remaining weeks of the academic quarter.

#### Questions to Consider

- What does the editorial reveal about the goals student activists hoped to accomplish through a student strike?
- Why was the writer so adamantly opposed to the proposed "soft strike?"
- What would a "hard strike" accomplish that a "soft strike" would not, according to the author?

#### Document

##### Strike Out?

On Friday night, the SGA [Student Government Association] Senate passed their proposal for a so-called "soft strike." This proposal calls for each student to voluntarily strike his classes and asks the university administration to give credit for those classes which the student would miss while on strike. We cannot support such a "soft strike" proposal and we call on every student with the intention of striking to examine his conscience and reasons for striking before he makes what we feel is a bad decision by

striking under the present plan.

In the first place, the objective of a strike is to show Mr. Nixon that we disapprove of the present United States' policies in Southeast Asia and here at home. The only way this could be effective is for the entire school to shut down in protest to the Nixon policies. A halfway strike such as the "soft strike" proposal of the SGA will accomplish nothing in the way of persuading Mr. Nixon to change his foreign and domestic policies as a full-scale or "hard strike" would.

Secondly, the student who does strike under the "soft strike" plan is uselessly depriving himself of academic credit in a futile attempt at protest. The Commission on Undergraduate Studies has recommended to the University Council that striking students be given only two options in relation to grades for missed courses. Either the student will be permitted to take a deferred grade in the course, the exam to be made up by the Fall Quarter, 1970; or he will be permitted to resign from school without penalty. We feel that both of these alternatives are too high a price for a student to strike and risk his academic career when his striking will have no chance of having the desired effect on Mr. Nixon. Finally, the strike, if it is "soft" will lose any effect it may have by the fact that many of the student who are supposedly striking will actually be trying to get a better grade by deferring it or be taking an early summer vacation.

When we called for a strike last week, we were referring to what has come to be known on the Tech campus as a "hard strike." We do not think of it this way only as a strike. The object of a strike is not merely to allow an individual student to strike so that he can show his opposition to Mr. Nixon's policies. Rather, it is for the entire university community to show its revulsion over the events of the last few weeks at home and abroad. Only if the university community acts as a whole will a strike have any meaning to the administration in Washington. A "soft strike" is a meaningless gesture on behalf of the Senate in an attempt to appear liberal by using a watered down strike proposal so the Senate can say that they supported a strike.

If the students of the university really do want to say to Mr. Nixon that they are protesting his policies, then we suggest that they do not support the so-called "soft strike" but urge the SGA to sponsor a complete strike supported by all members of the Virginia Tech community. If the students do not want

a complete strike, then we would urge them to support no strike at all. The halfway attempt of the Senate embodied in the "soft strike" proposal will only succeed in weakening and sullyng the strikes at the other universities around the country. If the Senate wants to do something either do it right or don't do it at all; leave the halfway measures that only succeed in eroding the SGA's prestige.

Source:

"Strike Out?" *The Collegiate Times* (13 May 1970), 2.