

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

Evidence 8: Plum Burruss, "SGA Senate Calls for Soft Strike," May 1970

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Introduction

The following article chronicles the campus debate over the type of student strike to launch in response to the National Guard troops' killing of student protesters at Kent State University in Ohio. As the headline and article indicate, VPI's Student Government Association (SGA) ultimately passed a resolution calling for a "soft strike."

Questions to Consider

- How does the SGA's strike proposal compare with the proposal advanced by activists who wanted a "hard" strike (see [Evidence No. 4](#))? Is it more moderate or more radical?
- How many students attended this meeting? How many students attend student government meetings at your school today? In 1970, VPI had approximately 11,000 students. What does the number of students attending the meeting suggest about how important students considered the strike?
- Assuming that the SGA, its popularly elected members, and the students attending the meeting represented a cross section of the student body, what does the SGA's decision suggest about where most students stood politically, what they believed in, and what kinds of political statements and protests they wanted and were willing to make?

Document

SGA Senate Calls for Soft Strike

"Strike" became the password at an emergency SGA [Student Government Association] Senate meeting Friday night.

The meeting was called in response to the situation on campus last week, and to decide which of four proposals concerning the strike would be

presented to the administration. The proposals were drawn up by separate Senate committees, and consisted of "no strike," "soft strike," "hard strike," and executive committee proposals.

The meeting had been announced during the rally earlier in the day, and over 1,000 spectators crowded into the large ballroom at Squires to watch the proceedings.

First on the agenda were the president's and vice president's reports. Sandy Hawthorne, SGA president, said it was time to act "effectively and immediately" and that over 200 colleges and universities has already shut down.

David Vice, vice president, reiterated the events of the past four days.

Although the hard and soft strikes were debated long and hard, no action was taken until Senator Pete Balas reintroduced Senator John Graham's motion to vote on whether to strike or not. The motion to strike was passed, although Senator Russ Daniels put up a determined fight to defeat it.

Next, the Senate had to choose between the hard and soft strike proposals. Basically, the hard strike would shut down the University for the remainder of the quarter, giving students four options concerning their grades and credits. Later these four options were included in the soft strike proposal.

The soft strike is essentially a voluntary one- classes would be held as usual, but students who chose to strike would be allowed to make up the work without penalty.

Most senators supported the soft strike with certain clarifying amendments as proposed by Senators Keko Swain, Pete Balas, and Sam Cravotta. Reasons for supporting the soft strike over a hard one included the basic right of a student to attend class, and the wish of the majority of the students not to go too far. When the final vote was taken, there were no dissenting votes against the soft strike.

Before a vote was taken, several faculty members and a student leader were extended the floor. These included Becky Ellsworth, president of Women's Interdormitory Council, Dr. Russell Cressimano, sociology

department, Dr. J.T. Regan, College of Architecture, and Dr. T.A. Travis, political science department.

Most spoke in favor of the soft strike, although Dr. Regan asked the students to utilize University government and Dr. Travis said only half of the political science department was in favor of a strike.

Joe Jennelle, an author and ardent defender of the hard strike proposal, summed up the reason behind the strike. He stated that the system of checks and balances in our government was in question, and that we must strike to show Nixon that he cannot supercede the wishes of the people.

SGA STRIKE PROPOSAL

Whereas: The escalation of the war into Cambodia by President Nixon is an act of aggression that deeply frightens the American students and is an action in which he consulted neither the elected representatives of the people nor some of his close advisors.

Whereas: The killing at Kent State was the result of student protest of this action and the indiscriminate killing, without warning, of students by the National Guard.

Whereas: The administration in Washington has been completely ignoring the dissatisfaction with their supposed efforts for peace.

Whereas: The administration in Washington, instead of moving for peace, has escalated this war considerably. The SGA Senate hereby encourages all students at VPI to express their concern within the following guidelines.

1. All regularly scheduled classes will continue as scheduled.
2. Student Life Policies pertaining to classroom attendance, "...Professors understand they should not raise or lower grades on the basis of class attendance alone..." will be strictly enforced. We hereby ask that university Council aid us in this enforcement.
3. Any student has the right to voluntarily strike on an individual basis. Those students will receive full academic credit for their work, with the various options recommended to the University Council:

- a. Taking the grade at present with the pledge that required work will be completed by Fall 1970.
- b. Taking an exam covering the quarter's work at a time mutually agreeable to the professor and student.
- c. Taking credit for the course, if he is passing, with a pledge that required work will be completed by Fall 1970.
- d. Taking an incomplete and rescheduling the course work with the individual professor. Students must inform professors of their intention to accept an incomplete grade within one week of the University Council's adoption of this policy.
- e. No university fees will be refunded to the student as a result of this action.

Source:

"SGA Senate Calls for Soft Strike," *The Collegiate Times* (13 May 1970), 1.