University of Minnesota
Office for Student Affairs
Student Life Studies

OBSERVATIONS AND COMMENTS CONCERNING THE OCCUPATION OF MORRILL HALL BY REPRESENTATIVES OF THE AFRO-AMERICAN ACTION COMMITTEE AND OTHERS

By

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What is said in this report derives from individual interviews with a special assistant to the President of the University and with an Assistant Dean of Students who works in the Office of the Vice-President for Student Affairs. Also, editorials and news reports in newspapers outside of the metropolitan area, as well as those from the Twin Cities area, have been reviewed. And several panel discussions which were arranged to discuss the Morrill Hall event for the benefit of persons in the University community were attended to learn more about the general reaction to this confrontation.

While the Morrill Hall event can be viewed from the same perspective as the "freedom of speech" controversy which occurred at the University several months earlier--that is, as an example of students taking action to express their commitment to values which they felt were not being implemented by University authorities--there is not much question that the Morrill Hall episode assumed a much greater importance in the life of members of the University community and also provoked a greater response from the general public. Much of the general public seemed to regard the Morrill Hall take-over as but another example--though more

disgraceful--of failure of the University to be mindful of and responsive to the traditional values and proprieties which the public expects to be upheld. As expressed by the University Director of Alumni Relations, numerous friends of the University were shocked and saddened by what had occurred during the autumn quarter when the use of vulgar language in the Minnesota Daily had gone unpunished; but the Morrill Hall episode, coming on top of this, incensed many and produced a deep feeling of indignation and outrage.

Praise for the way in which President Moos handled the confrontation came not only from a variety of University organizations, but from groups in the community such as clerymen, and from metropolitan newspapers and some newspapers outside of the Twin Cities area. Even newspapers which expressed support for the manner in which President Moos had responded to this confrontation usually made a point also to express their belief that there should be penalties imposed for those responsible for the disruption and damage that had occurred. Public outrage to what had occurred in this controversy was so great that numerous newspapers exaggerated the extent of physical damage and seemed content to speak with such vindictiveness as to appear evidently biased and racist.

Undoubtedly it was a reasonable move to schedule panel discussions after the Morrill Hall incident so that various "insiders"--or spokesmen for these persons--could present various aspects of the situation to the public and so that members of the University community could have a chance to inquire directly of these persons concerning the controversial

situation. It is my impression from attending several of these conferences that what usually happened is that the presentations attested to the great amount of defensiveness that existed, and to the lack of mutual respect, primarily, rather than to provide evidence of progress in resolving tensions between AAAC members and supporters, on the one hand, and their critics on the other. Perhaps the most likely impression one would gain from attending such a discussion without prejudgement is the sobering realization of the extent of the lack of mutual respect, understanding, or friendliness which characterizes social relations between groups of diverse racial or ethnic backgrounds.

Representatives of the office of the University president revealed a sensitive grasp of the many considerations involved in the controversy which culminated in the take-over of Morrill Hall by dissatisfied students. One belief expressed by these men is that the extent of racist sentiment at the University--and by implication, throughout the state of Minnesota--had not been realized by most white people before this confrontation. This ties in with the expressed belief of the student leader of the AAAC groups that an objective of that groups's action was to dispel the prevelant conception what "it cannot happen here"--that is, to shatter the base of complacency which black people ascribed as underlying racist aspects of life even here in Minnesota. The report of one informant from the President's office supported the belief that the confrontation arose because of a breakdown in communications between segments of the University community--and further emphasized the extent

to which communication difficulties hindered arriving at some sort of mutually acceptable settlement even during the process of negotiations. The defensive belief that either others should support one or else (perforce) they are against one was paralleled by a militant stance in communication, demanding plain yes or no answers. For the complex world in which we live it often seems that only qualified answers are reasonable; but this consideration constituted a substantial obstacle to effective communication. A representative of the President's office remarked that because of this very real problems of communicating effectively--particularly under the pressure of time and growing public impatience from many quarters--the presence of intermediary representatives from the outside community who acted as facilitators of communication or as interpreters between the militant students and University representatives was welcome and desireable. There was a suggestion that should such a controversy arise again, it would be well to bring in such persons even earlier in the dispute because of the value that they possess in facilitating mutual comprehension and understanding.

One encouraging aspect of the negotiations between black students and University representatives was that the University was represented by student and faculty members as well as administrative staff, all of whom displayed a remarkable lack of factionalism in working together for a resolution of the conflict. The University deserves commendation for rapidly following instituted procedures to insure that just such broad representation would participate in resolving this University problem.

The special assistant to the President of the University mentioned the polarization of attitudes in the general public about how the University and how the militant students were reacting in this controversy, noting that in the future there would be less chance for the University to follow a flexible approach in dealing with conflicts such as this. In retrospect, the amount of criticism expressed throughout the state and in legislative sessions culminating in the restructuring of pulic representation on the Board of Regents gives evidence of the accuracy of these views expressed by the University administration.

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