A COLLEGE CAMPUS IN THE EARLY 1960S

Going to college never posed an issue for me. In my small, smug high school everyone but the “business students” aimed for college. My family took college for granted. My father’s father had left his boyhood farm in Nova Scotia to attend Oberlin College, and my father had earned degrees at four different schools. My mother’s parents were both college graduates and so was she.

My father always resented the “fast talking adviser” who he said steered my sister Susan into the education school when she entered Miami University in 1951. For me he wanted a pure liberal arts college, to make sure I got a broad education. He nudged me toward the Midwest, where he had grown up. I wavered between Carleton College, a thousand miles away in rustic Northfield, Minnesota and Swarthmore College, a hundred miles from home near Philadelphia. The one Swarthmore student I’d met seemed unbearably self-assured. Besides, I loved to play soccer and Swarthmore had an outstanding small-college team. I knew if I wanted to play, Carleton was the place.

I attended Carleton from the fall of 1959 to the spring of 1963, a time when political cross-currents touched our campus and touched me. I studied history and I felt a part of it.

The Setting

Carleton College was ideally situated for a life of the mind. It sat in rural southern Minnesota, in a town whose water-powered grain mill had put it on the map in the mid-nineteenth century. A big Malt-o-Meal plant by the railroad tracks, its neon sign blinking on and off, symbolized Northfield’s continuing links to the surrounding farmland. How small was the town? It had no traffic lights. A kind of valley ran through the town, wide enough to fit the river, the railroad tracks, and the stores that stretched along Division Street. On either side, the land rose steeply, with Carleton atop a high plateau to the east and St. Olaf College on a steep hill to the west. Socially, Carleton was a secular island in a sea of conservative Norwegian Lutheranism. St. Olaf, a Lutheran school famous nationally for its choir, found acceptance in Northfield in a way that Carleton did
not. People weren’t hostile, but only on campus could we feel really at home. “The Cities” – Minneapolis and St. Paul – lay forty miles to the north.

Within Minnesota, Carleton ranked as an elite college, the most acceptable in-state school for the bright children of upper-crust families. From outside the state, Carleton drew mainly the children of professionals – teachers, lawyers, doctors, ministers, and the like. Few of us came from prep schools – the Midwest doesn’t have many – but few of us came from working-class families either. And the school was virtually all white: I remember a grand total of three American black students on campus during my years there, and no Hispanics at all.

On the surface everything seemed equal. We had no fraternities or sororities, students could not have cars, and Northfield offered little to spend money on. 1 “Conspicuous consumption” (a term coined by Carleton’s most famous ex-student, sociologist Thorstein Veblen) wasn’t part of the campus scene. A student-run “Co-op” controlled social events on campus, which were free — covered by an annual comprehensive fee (about $2,000 a year) which included tuition, room, and board. The only class distinction – one I was oblivious to – was between students who worked for part of their fee and those who didn’t.

About two fifths of the students were women. They seemed to speak up in class at least as often as men, and teachers treated them outwardly the same. (On the average, the women students were probably brighter than us, since the college admitted fewer women than men and therefore could be more selective.) Some of the strongest teachers were women, who made up about a tenth of the faculty. Outside the classroom, however, equality disappeared. Women had curfews – 10:30 on most week nights – and they couldn’t wear slacks to class unless the temperature dropped below a certain level (I think zero degrees Fahrenheit). There were other distinctions too: the maids always made the beds in the men’s dormitories, but not in the women’s. Still, women’s equality wasn’t “in the air”

1. Even a trip to the Cities needn’t involve big money. Everyone has a favorite story to show how much lower prices used to be, and mine has to do with a trip to Minneapolis my freshman year. Four or five of us took a taxi to see the Minneapolis (now Los Angeles) Lakers in a basketball playoff game. The driver took us there, waited around for two hours, then drove us the forty miles back. At the end of the ride we got into a big argument because he charged us $18 instead of the $15 the dispatcher had quoted.
back then. I never heard anyone argue publicly that women were being discriminated against.  

A Community of Learning

My father once told me a story from his medical-school days in Ann Arbor at the time of World War One. A hobo used to hang around the University of Michigan campus, using the library during the day. He met his modest living expenses by challenging students to ask him any question – he bet them twenty-five cents that he could give the answer, and usually he won. Forty years later, when I was a college student, nobody could have eked out a living that way. Academic knowledge was now too diverse, too specialized, for anyone to keep up. As for us, as students, we could hope at best for an earnest introduction to the separate fields, an appreciation of how their practitioners tried to make sense of the world.

A liberal-arts curriculum meant a delicate balance. Carleton required everyone to choose a major field, but not till the end of sophomore year. For our first two years, the college was an intellectual smorgasbord. During those four semesters I took courses in math, astronomy, biology, sociology, philosophy, English literature, economics, psychology, French, and history – a typical mixture. In my memory, those first two years burst with excitement. Some of the fields like philosophy, sociology, and psychology were utterly new to someone like me from a small high school. Other fields like math and English were taken far beyond anything I’d studied before. In freshman math, for example, we got a fascinating introduction to the principles of formal logic, which I loved (I wish they were easy to apply to the real world).

The faculty were a strange lot, and I mean that as a compliment. In an academic world where “publish or perish” was becoming a catch phrase, few of them had

2. Looking back, it’s astonishing how little open protest there was at gender inequality. It shows how fast the intellectual climate can change. In 1969-71, when I wrote my dissertation on the student movement of the early sixties, my research included reading through back issues of student newspapers -- twenty of the best ones -- for part or all of the years from 1959 to 1965. I found a total of one article saying that women as such are oppressed in American society. It appeared in the Colorado Daily and it was written by a man.
published much. Teachers rather than writers, they paid the price with low salaries and heavy workloads. However they felt about living in a small town, and whatever their hopes for professional success, they threw themselves into teaching. I think of the math department chairman, Kenneth May, who taught two hundred and fifty freshmen (over half our class) and encouraged us to call him at home up to 10 p.m. with any questions. Some of the faculty went on to bigger schools with better research facilities, but others -- including some of the most gifted -- stayed at Carleton to the end of their teaching careers.

Most of the classes were small, with ample participation. I fondly picture my astronomy teacher, Mr. Matthews, giving us a rough figure for the temperature inside the sun (thousands or maybe millions of degrees – I don’t remember). Sitting next to me was my friend Hugh Cameron, who came from a small town in northern Minnesota and later became a county prosecutor. This dialogue followed:

Hugh (blurting out): I don’t believe it!

Mr. Matthews: Well, they have ways of making those calculations and that’s what they’ve come up with. I know it seems hard to believe, but I hope you’ll take my word for it.

Hugh: Nothing could be that hot!

The initial two-year period of sampling courses was a time to discover limitations. I did outstandingly well in freshman math until, in the second semester, we came to calculus. It was like running into a stone wall. Likewise, I did quite well in French literature but terribly in French conversation. One semester of biology was more than enough. I can still see that dead frog in the pan of evil-smelling formaldehyde, none of its parts looking quite the way they did in the diagram. I hated that frog.

At Carleton, we felt a tension between grades and ideas. Grades were the key to future success: getting into a first-rate graduate program or into a good professional school, or just having an imposing resume for a job. Since everyone was bright to begin with, the pressure to study was intense. “Hit the books, frosh” was a common taunt for new students. “Quiet hours” were respected in the dormitories, and the college library was by far the most popular place to be on
weekday evenings. A cartoon that I remember from the school newspaper conveys something of the atmosphere. It showed students emerging from the fallout shelter under the college chapel, amid the rubble of a nuclear war. The caption read, "Well, back to the books."

The variety of academic disciplines could be overwhelming, but I struggled to connect them as best I could. Sometimes the connections were obvious: once the philosophy teacher talked in his lecture about "the efficacy of love" in human relationships, and in the very next class period the psychology teacher talked about experiments on “positive reinforcement.” Of course they meant the same thing. We read some history in the political science class, principally Richard Hofstadter’s fine book *The American Political Tradition*. At other times the connections were missing. I’m sorry that we didn’t learn more about evolution in our biology class, or about the history of the universe in the astronomy class. I’m also sorry that none of the courses used our immediate surroundings as a starting point. Only in astronomy did I learn anything about Northfield – I learned that its latitude is forty-four and a half degrees North.

**Making A Difference: Early Stirrings of the New Left**

A substitute teacher once told my eleventh-grade English class his philosophy of life. It went something like this: “I believe everyone makes the world a little different. Everybody does something, no matter how small, to change the world.” It touched off a lively discussion, of which a fragment stays with me. Either he or one of the students said, “Maybe all someone does is use some particular kind of toothpaste. That might still be having an effect, ‘cause maybe he helps make that the kind that most people use.”

That was my first, peculiar introduction to the concept of “making history.” In a different form, that concept was to be part of my life for much of the 1960s (when, for what it’s worth, I switched to Crest toothpaste), and ever since.

“The nineteen-sixties,” both literally and symbolically – meaning a decade of political insurgency, began February 1, 1960, during my freshman year in college. That day, four young students at the all-black North Carolina A & T College sat down at a department-store lunch counter in downtown Greensboro. They refused to leave. Impeccably dressed in coats and ties, they stayed patiently until the
police came to arrest them. Their challenge to segregation fell like a spark in dry tinder. Over the next few months, thousands of black students throughout the South defied Jim Crow practices in the same way. The “sit-ins” were an extraordinary mass movement.

I lived in Minnesota, not the South. (If I needed a reminder, I could look at the ice sheet on the inside of my freshman-year dormitory window, where the radiator’s heat met the outside cold.) But I was halfway through my first year in college. I was a liberal Republican, an idealist who thought that certain things were right and others – segregation above all – were wrong. In the spring of 1960 I took part in my first demonstration: a big symbolic picket in downtown Minneapolis by maybe a hundred Carleton and St. Olaf students. We picketed at a Woolworth’s store because black students across the South were being arrested at Woolworth lunch counters.

Though I didn’t know it at the time, the Woolworth pickets cracked the dam of 1950s apathy on northern college campuses. They launched the 1960s student movement in the North, and indirectly they launched the New Left. At the time, though, I didn’t feel I was a part of history. I participated because some older students on the soccer team told me about it – a black African soccer player from St. Olaf had recruited them. Picketing was new to me, and it felt strange. To me at that time, “politics” simply meant choosing individuals for office (Richard Nixon for president, for example, though I couldn’t vote for him because I wasn’t yet twenty-one). The Woolworth’s picket introduced me to what I later knew as issue-oriented politics. The idea was to advance a “cause,” to try to force whoever was in office to deal with your issue. I didn’t think about it that way at the time, but it was a way of asserting direct personal responsibility for what happened in society.

My sophomore year, 1960-61, was the real turning point, both for me and for the campus. Two older students who later became academic historians, John Miller and Jim Gilbert, helped to shake things up. Miller, after a year out of school editing a small-town weekly in Georgia, became editor of the student weekly, the Carletonian. He wrote in his first editorial that the function of a college paper “is to make people mad” and started by printing two articles by Jim Gilbert on his Christmastime trip to Cuba. The articles gave a radically different picture of life in Cuba than did the mainstream media, and provoked an endless stream of letters pro and con. Miller happily encouraged more controversy in the paper through a
range of personal-opinion columns.

The Cuba debate intrigued (and threatened) me because it put American foreign policy on the table for discussion. I had always assumed the government was making the best of whatever bad situations it was confronted with. American policies were moral almost by definition. Cuba shook me up – not because I instantly agreed with the critics of US policy, but because the debate offered a new, disturbing perspective on America’s role in world affairs. The Bay of Pigs invasion in April 1961 made the new viewpoint seem all the more plausible.

Issues that centered on free speech and civil rights felt most comfortable to me. Those issues seemed open-and-shut. But with Cuba as a wedge, I looked into broader issues with more radical implications. I listened to socialists and pacifists (as well as liberals and conservatives) who spoke as part of the student government’s Challenge program. I started to read some left-wing authors: a little Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels and, more influentially, the angry American sociologist C. Wright Mills, who died young in 1962. Mills argued that key decisions in the US are made by an interlocking “power elite” of higher-ups in the bureaucracy, the military, and the corporations. Unlike Marx and Engels, Mills had no clear notion of how things could change. He basically appealed to the consciences of intellectuals, and in my case he did a great job. His writings helped convince me that ideals I had grown up with, ideals such as fair play, honesty, equality, and democracy, were being betrayed by the realities of twentieth-century America.

Left-of-center political activism involved a medley of radicals, liberals, and people who didn’t know exactly what they were. Halfway through my junior year, still nominally a Republican, I ran for chairman of the liberal-radical Action Party and was elected – mainly because the party had just done badly in the Student Senate elections and I promised to make us more respectable. In fact, while I was chairman we elected every candidate we ran.

In addition to Action Party, the college had a chapter of the Student Peace Union, the biggest radical campus group nationally in the early sixties. And often an ad hoc group would spring up around a particular cause. Taken all together, we really didn’t do much. Sometimes we circulated petitions; less often, we demonstrated, usually in Minneapolis. Sometimes we brought in outside speakers for the student government’s Challenge program. Sometimes we raised funds
through a “sacrifice meal”: for every student who agreed to skip dinner in the
college dining rooms that evening, the Food Service would give a dollar to
whatever cause the organizers specified. And sometimes the Student Senate
(whose other functions are a blur in my mind) would be asked to pass a resolution
on one or another national issue. These resolutions usually took the convoluted
academic form “Whereas... Therefore...” borrowed from the National Student
Association.

The milieu of a good liberal arts college encouraged “global” ideas about
changing society, and I think the class composition of the student body helped
nourish this kind of political interest. Nearly everyone came from families in
which the parents had also gone to college. We took college – and the careers that
college made possible – for granted.\footnote{The other northern campuses that had the most left-of-center student activism in those years
included several other liberal arts colleges (Swarthmore, Oberlin, and Antioch most prominently) and the liberal arts schools of a number of the leading universities such as Berkeley, Michigan, Cornell, Wisconsin, Chicago, Harvard, Yale, and Johns Hopkins.} Our backgrounds gave us, from the start, a
readiness to believe that we could make a difference.\footnote{The Vietnam war is a good example: the civilian anti-war movement was overwhelmingly
middle-class, even while opinion polls showed that blacks and working-class whites were most
strongly opposed to the war. Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb’s book \emph{The Hidden Injuries of
Class}, which I read when it came out in the early 1970s, made instant sense when it talked about
how much more fatalism there is among working-class people.} When you add the heady
liberal-arts atmosphere to the class backgrounds that most of us came from, it’s
easy to understand how some of us picked up the idea of working to change the
entire society.

The best teachers I had at Carleton both encouraged and discouraged political
activism -- probably without intending either one. They fostered it in the sense
that they had one foot outside American culture. Both the smug placidity of the
Eisenhower years and the go-get-‘em boosterism of the Kennedy administration
left them uncommitted. I remember in one class a student used the word “Life,”
meaning \emph{Life} magazine, and the teacher said in near-pain, “That’s not what all of
us necessarily mean by ‘life.’” They provided a kind of shelter for us against
having to be 100 percent Americans. At the same time, they tended to see ironies
where the politically committed students saw injustices. I never heard any of these
teachers recommend doing anything politically. The one radical social-science teacher I had, an economist, hid his politics behind a veil of sarcasm and allusion. Only in private did his bitterness against capitalism come across directly.

The political students overlapped a little with the culturally alienated set who clustered around the campus drama group. Those people were part neo-Bohemian, part proto-hippie -- though long hair for men at that time meant shoulder-length, and I never heard of their using drugs. They saw a stifling air of conformity at the college, embodied in such policies as “women’s hours” and the college’s vestigial religious requirement. Few of them were politically active, but we saw them all as a reliable voting bloc for our Action Party candidates in student elections.

The deans of men and women were used to a family-type atmosphere in which college authorities had wide leeway to preserve the tranquility and good name of the school. Yet the admissions policy had put them on the horns of a dilemma. In seeking the brightest students it could attract from around the country, the admissions office was bringing in a growing number of skeptical nonconformists. The gamble was that these men and women, as distinguished graduates, would enhance the college’s academic reputation, without upsetting the applecart too much on their way through. The classic model – and warning – was the great maverick sociologist Thorstein Veblen, who had graced the college briefly in the

5. Under this rule, students had a choice of going to the Sunday service in the chapel, going to an off-campus religious service, or attending a Sunday evening lecture on a religious topic. (A fourth option was to lie about going to an off-campus service; people would sometimes claim to have gone to the “United Orthodox Reformed” or the “Pillar of Fire Evangelical” and get credit. When I was a dormitory proctor my senior year I allowed no cheating, on the theory that people are more likely to work to change a rule if they’re actually pinched by it.)

6. The dean of men was Merrill (“Casey”) Jarchow. As a dormitory proctor my senior year I had a lot of contact with him, and our recurrent conflicts over campus rules were a major theme of my last year in college. Small-town upper-midwestern to the core, worried about the college’s far-out image with his golfing friends among the “townies,” conservative in his instincts, he feared the consequences of too much freedom on the campus. As dean he’d seen a lot, and he didn’t expect human nature to change in a big hurry. I saw Casey Jarchow eight years later and we reminisced about the old days. He had long since been eased out as dean, and the college now had coed dorms. We both remembered our time together as a good one, marked by civility and a sense of speaking a common language, however often we disagreed.
late nineteenth century before running off with the president’s niece. Nobody did
that while I was there, but the student body was becoming a hotbed of
individualism.

Most students were neither rebellious nor rah-rah. Carleton was noted, above all,
for intense concern with courses and grades. A Conservative Party sometimes ran
in Student Senate elections, but defensively: they wanted the student government
to ignore off-campus issues. I don’t think most students cared what the student
government did. Only the election for student government president every
February stirred excitement, mainly because it offered an escape from the
midwinter Minnesota blahs. (Even then, I remember a second-hand quote from
Walt Alvarez, now a well-known geologist. He reportedly told a candidate, “John,
I hear that you’re a totally wishy-washy person who if elected will do absolutely
nothing.” The candidate started to protest, but Alvarez continued, “and on that
basis I’m going to vote for you.”) Starting in my sophomore year, the more liberal
candidates always won – I think because they offered the chance of some vicarious
excitement.

John F. Kennedy became president halfway through my sophomore year. Decades
after his death, I still can’t judge his impact on the student activism of the early
sixties. In my memory, he always seemed to be part of the problem, not part of the
solution. The youthful, militant Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee
constantly chided his failure to protect civil rights workers in the Deep South. He
sent the military budget soaring out of sight. He invaded Cuba and risked nuclear
war to keep Soviet missiles out of Cuba. He resumed nuclear testing in the
atmosphere and tried to scare Americans into spending big money on fallout
shelters. And so on. We always found Kennedy on the wrong side of our
“causes” or, at best, dragging his feet.

Yet that’s only true as far as it goes. It ignores something that springs to my mind
when I think about him: his eagerness to shape the world. A self-consciously
young president whose predecessor was (literally and figuratively) a grandfather,
he radiated impatience. “Let’s get America moving again,” he trumpeted. He took
America’s post–World War Two pre-eminence for granted, and foresaw the full
achievement of greatness for his country in all areas. His very dynamism was
infectious. I think his short presidency gave everyone – left, right, and center –
permission to “think big.”
“Majoring” in History

I planned to specialize in political science, but at the end of my sophomore year I chose history instead. History is a much broader, deeper field of study, but I don’t think that’s why I switched. The Modern European History survey course that introduced me to the history department drew mainly on my skill at rote memorization. Wars, reigns, laws -- all have dates, and my ability to learn the dates gave me a big head start in the course. Because so many of its components were cut-and-dried (like the baseball statistics I had once jammed into my head) history seemed a kind of refuge from the confusing array of ideas that I was meeting at Carleton. That was all the more true because the teacher stuck to a narrow view of history as past politics and past wars. He crammed nearly two centuries’ worth of intellectual developments into one confusing lecture at the end of the second semester.

European history was a fitting gateway into the department. In keeping with the European heritage of the liberal arts, history at Carleton was very much in the framework of “Western civilization.” (The term always makes me think of Mahatma Gandhi, who, when asked his opinion of Western civilization, said it sounded like a good idea.) Russia and the Soviet Union were thrown in too, but not Africa and not Asia. Latin American and US history both started with the European “discoveries” rather than with the people who had lived in the Americas for thousands of years before Columbus. This emphasis on Western civilization jars me now, but at the time I liked it. I was used to it from high school, and it made history easier to master because it narrowed the focus.7

I approached most of my history courses as bodies of factual material to be learned. That was true of the two-semester American history survey, taught by a professorially handsome teacher named Carlton C. Qualey. Tall, ruddy, and

7. Of course we were exposed to a greater range of events and characters than I’d known about before. And we were encouraged to think for ourselves. I think of one roommate, also a history major, who went to Officer Candidates School in the Navy not long after graduating. One day, his instructor asked the class for an example of outstanding leadership, and my friend volunteered, “Genghis Khan.” He defended his choice even after the instructor said it wasn’t quite what he’d had in mind.
solidly built, with gray hair that rose up on either side of his balding head, he had a pontifical air that led students always to call him “Dr. Qualey” or “Professor Qualey,” never “Mr. Qualey. He reminded me a little of the stuffy History Department chairman in the British movie *Lucky Jim* (based on Kingsley Amis’s novel) who answered the telephone by intoning, “History speaking.” His knowledge was astonishing – he was a speed reader with a photographic memory – but his history was less interesting than what I’d once gotten from my best pre-college teachers. It was more matter-of-fact. American history for him was neither a way of celebrating America through stories (as for Mrs. Phillips) nor of passing on the torch of citizenship (as for Mrs. Schechter). For him it was the systematic study of the past by dispassionate scholars. He seemed to see the ebb and flow of opinion within the mainstream historical profession as our best guide for thinking about the past. Today I can’t remember his own opinion on a single historical issue.

It is hard for me to write about Dr. Qualey without seeming to mock him, but I don’t want to do that. He identified fervently with the historical profession, and sometimes dropped the names of famous acquaintances with an air of slight embarrassment. At the outset of his career in the late 1930s he wrote a solid book on Norwegian immigration, but someone else wrote a better-regarded book on the same topic at almost the same time. His teaching load at Carleton, where he was the only teacher of American history, left him little time to write. I feel sad about my last encounter with him, at the 1978 Organization of American Historians convention in New York. Long retired, he seemed out of place and was effusively glad to be approached by a former student. He gave his life to history – teaching it and seeking to write it – and I have to respect that. Now he’s dead.

History took on a new dimension for me in the spring of my junior year when I first encountered Richard Vann, who taught a sequence of three in-depth European history courses. Fresh from Harvard, he was tall and skinny with a puckish smile always ready to break out on his face. His Texas accent underlined his gentle humor. His breadth of view stood out even at a high-powered liberal arts college like Carleton. His lectures, touching on everything from Wagner’s music and Freud’s psychology to imperialism, were the essence of a liberal arts education. He refused to confine his lectures to politics and wars, but tried to show us modern Europe as a complex civilization. He delighted in give and take with students, often holding court in the college’s Tea Room after class and listening as much as he talked. Iconoclastically liberal in his ideas, he took delight in questioning
standard notions of the right and of the Marxist left.

Mr. Vann’s courses gave us a sense of controversy. You could choose which topics you wanted to read about, but each topic came with three or four assigned readings which carried different points of view. He gave his own opinions in the lectures, but he rarely put on the cloak of an “authority.” You couldn’t get by in his class by just learning facts and dates – you had to interpret history rather than passively learning it. Memorization was still my strong point, but I found this other way of looking at history very exciting. History became something to talk about and argue about.

Among the history students at Carleton, my best friends were Dan Styron and Cary Carson, two strong-minded people with radically different ideas about history. A minister’s son from Lincoln, Massachusetts, Dan was handsome with clearcut features and a winning smile. He starred in the student musical “Guys and Dolls” our freshman year. But part of him was restive and moody and removed from the superficial aspects of college life. By his junior year he had become a Marxist -- in the Trotskyist variation, which criticized Soviet-style communism both for being undemocratic and for failing to support worldwide socialist revolution. He won election as president of the student government that year, after promising not to speak out publicly on international issues while in office. That promise didn’t apply to private conversations, where his instant opinions were a challenge to friends like me. His voracious reading rarely confused him because his Marxism gave him a framework to put it in. Once I told him that American capitalism didn’t seem to be in crisis; he produced a newspaper story about American helicopters being shot down in Vietnam (the war rarely made the news at that time). “This is a crisis,” he said. After college, he was to attend graduate school briefly at Berkeley, then devote himself to working with the Socialist Workers Party, assigned to different cities at different times. Subject to recurrent fits of depression, he committed suicide in Houston in 1979.

Cary Carson took part in campus politics too, as a moderate liberal cautious about tampering with tradition – one of the few students who defended the college’s religious attendance requirement. He had a brilliant sense of humor, adorned with a way of speaking that I remember as a Minnesota version of an upper-class British accent. He loved history. In approaching the past he refused to pick and choose the way Styron and I did. I remember one late-night argument our senior year: Cary said all historical topics were equally valid if someone wanted to
pursue them, and he happily volunteered, as an example of what he meant, “house numbering in seventeenth-century London.” If something had happened in the past, it was worth studying, no matter what it was. He’d obviously thought a lot about that point of view, and I couldn’t budge him from it. He later studied American colonial history in graduate school, and for years now has been Colonial Williamsburg’s vice president for research. It’s sobering to me that Styron, who reached always for the grand overview, dropped out of grad school fast and later dropped out of life, while Carson’s pursuit of the mundane detail has led him to professional success. He never bit off more than he could chew, but that turned out to be a lot.

For me, studying history in college completed the secularization of my thinking about the past. Carleton was founded long before as a Congregational school by New England settlers in Minnesota, and when I went there it had some kind of nominal affiliation with the Baptists and maybe the Episcopalians. But for practical purposes it was a secular school. The occasional nickname “Carleton Christian College” was spoken strictly as a sneer, pronounced only when a student wanted to ridicule one or another conservative policy of the administration. But I’m not even sure that the college’s waning religious identity explains why I learned a secular history there. Mr. Vann hosted Quaker meetings in his home, but his history courses might just as easily have been taught by an atheist.

The basic issue is that history, like other modern fields of knowledge, depends on tangible evidence. If there is a god who communicates with people, he or she does it privately and spiritually, and nobody else can verify whether or not the communication took place. An example that occurs to me is a paper that I wrote for Dr. Qualey on the US decision to annex the Philippines in 1898, after the Filipinos had won their independence from Spain. President McKinley’s account went like this:

I walked the floor of the White House, night after night until midnight, and I am not ashamed to tell you, gentlemen, that I went down on my knees and prayed Almighty God for light and guidance more than one night. And one night late it came to me in this way – I don’t know how it was, but it came ... that there was nothing left for us to do but to take them all, and to educate the Filipinos, and to uplift them and civilize and Christianize them, and by God’s grace do the very best we could by them as our fellow men for whom Christ
also died.

All the historians quoted McKinley, but none of them took him seriously. And if they had, how could they have decided between him and the even more pious William Jennings Bryan, who ran against McKinley in 1900 opposing the annexation? It would have been unthinkable for a historian to conclude that McKinley had acted on divine guidance.

We had no secular versions of the “grand sweep” that Biblical history potentially offers. The nineteenth-century liberal viewpoint that history is a story of human progress—ever-greater rationality going hand in hand with technological advance—could never have the same appeal after the carnage of our century’s two great world wars. In high school, we had learned a watered-down version of it, but this was college. Nobody at Carleton taught history from that foolishly optimistic point of view. And Marxism, with its view of historical progress through class struggle, was in disrepute as well. Mr. Vann taught about it, just as he taught about nineteenth-century ideas of progress, but neither he nor the other faculty saw it as a key to understanding much of history.

Only toward the end of my senior year, when we had to take comprehensive exams in our major fields, did I have to deal with the question of what history is. We history majors all had to read The Idea of History by the British philosopher and historian R. G. Collingwood, and were encouraged to read other books and essays as well. The month or so I spent cramming for the comprehensives was an exhilarating time. I felt like an authority whom some of the giants of the historical profession were seeking to recruit to their positions. For myself, I liked best an essay on historical relativism by Charles A. Beard. He argued that history is always at the mercy of each generation of those who write it—that “objective” history is an illusory goal. “Whatever acts of purification the historian may perform he yet remains human, a creature of time, place, circumstance, interests, predilections, culture,” Beard wrote.8 His argument seems obvious today, but it fascinated me at the time. I was becoming enthralled by history, and I wanted more of it.

A Place in History

From the start, my radicalized civic conscience intertwined with my interest in history. I identified myself and my fellow activists with a tradition of struggling for social justice. My favorite American history book in college was probably Eric Goldman’s *Rendezvous with Destiny*. It brought to life the American reform impulses that began in the late nineteenth century and gathered steam until the New Deal embodied many of them in law. I sometimes envied those who lived at a time in the past when issues seemed to have been so clear.

At the same time that I looked for people in the past to identify with, I had a vague, strongly idealistic feeling that we were making history. Issue-oriented politics seemed to be the wave of the future somehow – if enough people would really care. A National Student Association congress I went to in 1962, as a delegate from Carleton, brought that sense out most vividly. We met at Ohio State University in Columbus. We sat at long tables in a giant ballroom and deliberated in the name of “American students” on issues like nuclear testing, civil rights, and academic freedom. It was heady. “The eyes of the international student community are on us,” one of the NSA leaders thundered in an early-morning debate over nuclear testing.9

Part of the feeling that we were making history – both at that NSA congress and in the student movement generally – came from the borrowed glory of the southern civil rights movement. Leaders of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, some of whom showed up for the congress, had immense prestige among activist students everywhere. SNCC and the civil rights movement

9. The leadership wanted to condemn all nuclear testing in the atmosphere, while conservatives plus a few liberals such as Barney Frank of Harvard wanted to condemn Soviet testing but deplore the “need” for American testing. I was elated when the leadership’s position won. Nothing is ever simple, though. The NSA’s international operations, it later turned out, were being coordinated with the CIA. Looking back, it’s obvious that the NSA leadership needed the more radical-sounding resolution in order to keep the NSA’s credibility in international student politics. It was four years later that *Ramparts* magazine broke the CIA-NSA connection. Like countless other things I’ve heard about American foreign policy over the years, it made sense when it came out but I never would have guessed it on my own.
radiated energy. Here were the front-line troops battling our society’s most visible evil. They seemed to be bringing the nation to a historic crossroads: in one direction, a historic righting of wrongs; in the other, a tragic evasion.

The NSA convention introduced me to Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), a loose collection of some of the most thoughtful left-of-center student activists—not much of a membership organization except at the University of Michigan. SDS’s newly written and mimeographed “Port Huron Statement” seemed too long and imposing to read, but I met some of the SDS people such as Rennie Davis, Sharon Jeffrey, Bob Ross, Tom Hayden, and Steve Max. They were part of the NSA’s large grouping of liberal delegates. The campus activism of the early sixties couldn’t be carried by a single organization. It was held together more by a mood than by an agenda. We had an optimistic sense of new possibilities. We saw years of political inertia giving way to a crusade for humane values in American politics. We owed this sense of possibilities above all to the civil rights movement, which had shown the way starting with the sit-ins of the spring of 1960. Civil rights became a metaphor standing for the whole range of issues that concerned us. All sorts of things seemed to be on the table in the Kennedy years. We had our own rendezvous with destiny.

On our campus, push came to shove, by the standards of the early sixties, during my senior year, 1962-63. That year, several episodes concerning freshman traditions, the Cuban missile crisis, National Defense Education Act scholarships, use of the student union building, and open houses brought a new level of divisiveness to student politics. They presaged the far more freewheeling, confrontational years of campus strife in the late sixties.

Freshman traditions, unquestioned my freshman year, required first-year students to wear beanies with their first names sewn in. (“Find a girl and ask her to sew

10. The SDS people at the convention were part of the loosely organized liberal grouping of delegates, but they weren’t the most prominent within it. Tom Hayden, ex-editor of the University of Michigan campus newspaper and later the best-known of all New Leftists, came but he was on the fringes. He was no longer a student and therefore wasn’t a delegate. Earlier that summer he had drafted the “Port Huron Statement” of goals for a new political radicalism, and a special SDS convention had polished and approved it. It was available at the NSA convention as a long and imposing mimeographed pamphlet which I didn’t have the patience to finish.
your name on,” we were told during Freshman Orientation). We also had to do various silly things at the whim of sophomores, who in truth seldom bothered. It never occurred to me that anything was wrong in this. The next year’s entering class included the mule-headed John McAuliff, a tall, ungainly devotee of John Stuart Mill and classic English liberalism, who came to Carleton from suburban Indianapolis ready to defend his ideals. He posted on a bulletin board in the student union an angry protest at freshman traditions. Over the next two years, more and more students came to see the traditions as part of a homogenizing pressure at the college, an infringement on individual rights. By my senior year the new freshmen got mixed messages: they learned about the traditions, but they learned quickly enough that some students hated traditions. Despite the pettiness of the issue, feelings ran high. My co-sports-editor on the student weekly, Dave Beckwith (who later held the hardest job in Washington as press secretary to Vice President Dan Quayle) quit in protest after the paper ran an editorial urging freshmen not to comply with traditions.

The Cuban missile crisis came at the end of October, in the form of cryptic radio news. The only thing that seemed clear was that the US and the Soviet Union were talking about going to war, which meant nuclear war. Feelings ran the gamut of fright and confusion to a feeling that things would work out somehow. On my dormitory floor John McAuliff played a Pete Seeger song full blast: “Last night I had the strangest dream/I ever dreamed before/I dreamed the world had all agreed/To put an end to war.” A Trotskyist friend sneered, “McAuliff thinks world peace will come by leaders talking with each other. Peace comes through social change.”

The scariest moment in the missile crisis – one that I missed – affected a handful of students who went up to Minneapolis to join a peace rally at “the U.” The protesters were surrounded by a much larger number of hecklers, fraternity types who howled chants such as “Gimme a W, Gimme an A, gimme an R.” People were afraid of being beaten up. It was the first time in Minnesota in the early sixties that a student demonstration had been threatened by violence. But on our campus, not much happened. The Student Peace Union chapter got up a petition against the US blockade of Cuba, but most students either viscerally supported the American government or figured that “we don’t have the facts.” I think we got no more than eighty signatures in a student body of thirteen hundred.

The National Defense Education Act fight, also that autumn, began after the
Trustees decided to participate in the NDEA scholarship program. The scholarships had a catch: applicants had to sign an affidavit saying they didn’t belong to any “Communist” organizations. It was a compromise of civil liberties, and an insult to students – farmers didn’t have to sign affidavits to collect their subsidies. The Student Senate, with some of the independents joining our Action Party delegates, voted to ask the college to withdraw. That vote – which would have cost some students their scholarships – aroused a storm of protest. We backtracked as best we could; the Senate passed an amended resolution which merely asked the Trustees to leave the program if they could find equally good alternative sources of scholarships. (Only Cary Carson voted to stick by the original resolution.) It seemed like a good way to save face, but a special all-school meeting overruled us by about ten to one. I felt humiliated.

The next controversy took a different turn. Trivial though it may have been, it gave me my first glimpse at the kind of generational solidarity that became so important in the late sixties. By my senior year, the first-floor lounge of the student union building had become the headquarters for what Dean Jarchow called “those bearded, shoeless, long-haired guitar playing characters.” (One of those characters later made it big with the Monkees under the name of Peter Tork; at Carleton, he was, improbably, one of two students named Peter Thorkelson, and was known as “Peter H. Thorkelson.”) Nobody’s hair was really all that long; they did look scruffier than the average student, but other people used the lounge too, and everybody seemed to get along. The dean was mainly worried about what visitors would think.

One day a faculty-student committee that included the dean suddenly announced plans to rearrange furniture in the union. The obvious though unstated purpose was to consign the scruffy set to the second-floor lounge. A group of us decided to put out a leaflet in protest. It was a bizarre production. We had an old mimeograph machine but no paper – and the stores were closed. In desperation, we took rolls of paper towels from dormitory bathrooms, forming an assembly line

11. There the image of the college was safe as long as visitors were handled carefully. The story had long circulated of a group of prospective students and parents in the late fifties who’d supposedly been taken on a tour of the campus by someone from the admissions office. On the second floor of the union, according to the story, he’d absent-mindedly opened the door to a big closet, exposing to the light of day a couple in the midst of sexual intercourse.
to pass the towels through the mimeo and cut them up into individual leaflets. We
put a copy in everyone’s campus mailbox, then posted a sign-up list for our “Ad
Hoc Committee on Tolerance” on a bulletin board. Hundreds of people signed up,
either on the main list or on a separate list started by Cary Carson entitled
“Respectables” (people whom nobody would think were scruffy or immoral). A
few days later we put a paper ballot in everyone’s box, asking them to vote “yes”
or “no” on rescinding the changes in the union. The vote was overwhelmingly in
our favor – twenty to one, if I remember rightly -- and that was the last we heard of
the plan for rearranging the union.

The last controversy didn’t resolve so neatly, but it augured the future even more.
It had to do with the college’s zealous social regulations. During all my years
there, nobody made a public issue of “women’s hours” as a form of discrimination
against women, which obviously they were. Pressure for change focused instead
on open houses (monthly occasions when students in some dormitories could
entertain members of the other sex for a few hours). Most students wanted more
of them. The proposal was usually stated in terms of easing the artificial
separation of the sexes, an argument which the administration tended to interpret
as simply “sex.” Toward the end of my senior year, the school paper came out
with a front-page headline to the effect that “Fear of More Pregnancies Bars More
Open Houses.” This sophomoric challenge to authority freaked out the
administration; starting with that issue, the college stopped mailing copies of the
paper to prospective students. It was the death knell for the deans’ old idea of the
college as a family.

A common thread ran through these divisive issues, or rather, two common
threads. One was an idealistic assertion of “principle” regardless of the costs
(which in the case of the NDEA scholarships would have been considerable). The
other was a restiveness in the college atmosphere, a rejection of the idea that the
college should act as a substitute parent (in loco parentis was the Latin phrase that
was bandied about). Some students were simply in rebellion. They hated the
midwestern conformity that surrounded them, and regretted they had gone to
Carleton. Others like me tried to fit it all together – liked the college but tried to
find in the college/student relationship a set of civil liberties issues that ran
parallel to our idealistic views of national politics.

Looking back, the early 1960s were a strange time to be in college. We were on
the edge of a historical divide. In 1969, I read an article by a Wall Street Journal
reporter who went back to Carleton for his tenth reunion. His class graduated just before mine got there. It startled him to find how conservative most of his old classmates were – how little they had been moved by the ferment of the sixties. I think those people got established in their post-college lives before the civil rights movement blossomed and before the Vietnam war heated up. (The men didn’t need to worry about the draft.) For my class, the Class of 1963, even many people who stayed away from liberal/radical politics in college were hit by all the turmoil within a few years of graduating. I think of the football quarterback who became a radical Catholic; the conservative treasurer of the student government who was later arrested many times in anti-war and anti-nuclear protests; others who became radical teachers or filmmakers or tenant organizers. I think of one classmate who used to write conservative opinion pieces for the student paper and who came back to speak at a Carleton convocation in 1988. He described a lawsuit he was working on to stop the FBI and the Immigration and Naturalization Service from spying on churches. A student told me that his talk ended more or less like this: “It was at Carleton that I first learned to see injustice in the world. I know that’s happening to a lot of you too. I hope that wherever you find it in your later lives you’ll fight it, and if you do I’ll see you in the trenches.”