American Student Activism
The Post-Sixties Transformation

The sixties, of course, saw the flowering of American student political activism. The American university was in turmoil, and students, for the first time since the 1930s, played on a national political stage. A sitting president, Lyndon Johnson, decided not to run for reelection in part because of student demonstrations against his Vietnam policies. Students were also at the forefront of a major change in American values and attitudes — particularly in areas such as relations between the sexes, reproductive rights, music, and social norms. For a short period in the late 1960s, public opinion polls indicated that the most important concern of the American population was campus unrest. What has come afterward has been an anticlimax.

It is certainly true that the two decades following the sixties have, in contrast to the decade of turbulence, been characterized by quiet. In reality, the situation is much more complex. There has been some activism, and the revolution in attitudes and values started in the sixties has not completely disappeared. The one major upsurge of student activism, the anti-Apartheid “divestment” movement of 1984–86, involved thousands of students nationwide and indicated a new trend in student activism. The current period seems apathetic only in contrast to the previous decade. It may, in fact, be a bit more active than the norm for American student politics.

Several things are clear about the past fifteen years. The first is that
activism is not dead. There was a flurry of concern about such issues as Nicaragua and campus racism, and there was significantly more involvement with the anti-Apartheid movement. It is significant that these are precisely the sort of issues that have energized American students in the past — issues that have a clear moral content and which may relate to foreign policy. It is also clear that although American student attitudes have become somewhat more conservative politically, the campus remains fairly liberal in orientation on issues of political ideology and particularly on “life style” questions. At the same time, American students have certainly turned “inward” in many respects. They have become more concerned with careers in a difficult economy, and the increase in interest in religions — first “alternative” faiths such as Hinduism and Zen and more recently fundamentalist Christianity and conservative Judaism — shows a concern for personal issues. In sum, the period since 1970 exhibits a variety of somewhat contradictory trends among American students. There is neither sustained activism nor total apathy; neither complete “careerism” nor altruism. It is difficult to fully understand the various trends evident on campus at the end of the 1980s.

The Legacy of the Sixties: Causes of Decline

The contemporary campus scene is frequently seen in the mirror of the sixties. Further, the legacy of that period may have some lessons for the recent period. It is, therefore, useful to examine briefly some aspects of that legacy. The student movement of the sixties declined for a number of complex reasons. It is not possible to provide a quantifiable explanation for the decline or even to assess accurately the relative weights of the causes. Nonetheless, it is important to catalog some of the key factors.

1. The key motivating force for student activism, the war in Vietnam, gradually wound down during the early 1970s. The war was the factor that mobilized the largest number of students and generated the most dissent.

2. The economic situation dramatically changed. The prosperity of the sixties helped to generate a feeling among students and the middle classes generally that individual economic success was assured in the context of a steadily expanding economy. The economic “costs” of activism were seen to be minor. The 1970s were characterized by rapid inflation, several “oil shocks” with resulting economic dislocation, fairly high levels of unemployment, and a generally gloomy feeling
about the economy. Some basic structural changes in the American economy also became evident. Students began to worry about the job market and how to fit into an uncertain economy. They increasingly chose "safe" fields for majors, such as business administration, computer science, pre-law and pre-medicine — fields in which job prospects were favorable.

3. The fields that became increasingly popular — in the sciences and professions — were not fields that tend to contribute to activism. Many activists came from the social sciences, and these rapidly lost popularity during the 1970s.

4. The tactics and to some extent the ideology of the student movement of the sixties, particularly in its later more militant and sometimes violent phases, did not lead to success. On the contrary, the majority of American students were alienated by both violent tactics and the hyper-revolutionary rhetoric of the Weathermen and other factions [12, 15]. It must be remembered that the activist leaders of the sixties felt that they were unsuccessful in their major goals — ending the Vietnam war and stimulating revolutionary social change in America. Many were bitter, and some turned to ever more radical approaches. Thus, the movement itself sowed some of the seeds of its own destruction. In some ways, the ideological and tactical self-destruction at the end of the sixties made it more difficult for activist movements in the following decades.

5. Media attention was an important part of the student movement of the sixties, and when the mass media turned to other topics, the activist movement lost an important focus [11].

6. The changing American political climate had a key influence on the decline of the student movement. American politics moved sharply to the right and has remained there throughout the past two decades. The election of Richard Nixon as president in 1968 was the beginning of this trend, and the "Reagan Revolution" of the 1980s solidified it. The 1986 Congressional elections and the Iran-Contra scandal weakened the conservative hold, and it is likely that the nation is entering a somewhat more liberal phase. Traditionally, student activist movements require a relatively liberal social milieu to flourish.

The decline and, by 1972, virtual collapse of perhaps the largest student activist movement in American history left a tremendous vacuum on the campus. Ever since then, the trend has been to compare activist campaigns to the sixties, a comparison that is unfair, because the more recent period has not been characterized by the social unrest and crisis
of the sixties. Recent activist movements have had to grow in the shadow of both the accomplishments and the failures of the sixties.

A Complex Configuration of Attitudes

There is no question that student attitudes have become more conservative on many issues since the sixties. In 1987 only 2.3 percent of American freshmen identified themselves as being on the far left with another 22.2 percent liberal. This is down, particularly in the far left category, from the 1960s. On the other hand, only 1.3 percent claimed a far right affiliation, and 18.3 percent were conservative [10]. The majority are “middle of the road.” However, there is majority support for nuclear disarmament, consumer protection, busing to achieve racial balance in the schools, and other items on the liberal agenda. A majority of students believe that couples should live together before marriage (52.1 percent), and 58.7 percent believe that abortion should be legal. Yet, only 19.3 percent support the legalization of marijuana and 23.8 back the abolition of the death penalty [10]. Ninety percent of American students claim religious affiliation, and 83.4 percent claim that they attended a religious service at least once in the previous year.

Religion is an interesting indication of change in student interest and perspectives. During the sixties, campus religious organizations continued to exist and some were involved in the activist movement. In the past two decades, there has been a resurgence of interest in religion, reflecting, it seems, a concern for personal values and orientations as opposed to societal issues.

Except during the 1960s, American student attitudes have not been notably different from the mainstream of the American population — particularly the middle class from which a large proportion of the students come. Student attitudes tend to be modestly more liberal on ideological issues and significantly more liberal on “life style” questions. In 1984, for example, Ronald Reagan had 7 percent less support among students than he had among adults. All in all, however, there is general consistency.

Arthur Levine and Keith R. Wilson [16, 17] have written persuasively about the “me-generation,” which dominated among students during the 1970s and, for the most part, up to the present time. It is characterized by student attitudes that place much greater stress on individual values and needs than did the socially conscious students of the 1960s. “Me-generation” students have chosen academic fields that
promise the best and most lucrative opportunities for jobs and careers, and when asked, they have named the achievement of wealth as an important goal. They have been interested in a variety of self-fulfillment movements, from EST to Hare Krishna, and there has been a modest return to traditional religious faiths. During this period, Americans, in general, expressed a lack of confidence in social institutions of all kinds: for example, confidence in the United States Supreme Court dropped from 50 percent in 1966 to 31 percent in 1977. Confidence in institutions of higher education dropped from 73 percent to 55 percent in the same period; people tended to rely more on individual orientations and concerns [17].

"Meism" has had a significant impact on campus life. Self-help groups have, for example, expanded significantly. Students have been more willing to threaten lawsuits against academic institutions and have been much more concerned with the quality of campus life. There has been more competition — for admission to the best colleges, for entry into the major fields that will yield high-paying careers, for grades in courses and the like. Social and sexual mores also seem to be affected, although here causes — and effects — are less clear, in part due to concern about AIDS.

"Meism" and Activism

The configuration of attitudes that emerged in the 1970s is reflected in a new style of campus activism. Without question, there is less activism and political concern in general. Further, the nature of the organizations changed during the 1970s, as did the tactics of student political groups. The rebirth of the student government organizations, which were a mainstay of campus life and one of the foci of political concerns during the 1950s, is an indication of the change [1]. Student governments have been concerned not only with the quality of campus life and with student service enterprises, but also with the representation of students in a wider forum within the university — and in some cases in a broader one [14].

Student lobbies emerged in many states and at the national level. Since 1971 the National Student Lobby has been active in Washington, trying to press for their interests in Congress and elsewhere. It was estimated that such lobbies were established on 22 percent of the nation's campuses in thirty-nine states by the early 1970s. The lobbies have mainly been concerned with ensuring that student interests are respected; they have tried to maintain guaranteed student loan pro-
grams, opposed tuition increases at state universities, argued against restrictions on student rights, and so on. One of the most successful student lobbies is the Student Association of the State University (SASU) at the State University of New York (SUNY). SASU represents most of SUNY's thirty-four campuses at the state capitol in Albany and employs a full-time staff to work with SUNY officials and the state government. On many occasions SASU has cooperated with SUNY on legislative initiatives, but occasionally it has opposed SUNY officials on issues of tuition increases. SASU provides information to legislators and has a positive image as an organization that is acquainted with higher education issues. Occasionally it has sponsored large-scale demonstrations in Albany to press for student issues. The organization also provides reduced rate travel, block concert tickets, and student shopping discounts. SASU has been a highly successful example of a trend among student organizations to combine a new style of activism with a concern for student-related issues, although its effectiveness and success in the 1980s seems to have been diminished.

The other notable trend among student organizations during the 1970s, which has seen a decline in the 1980s, was the establishment of the Public Interest Research Groups (PIRG). The idea for the PIRG was proposed by Ralph Nader in 1970, and by 1978 PIRGs had been formed at 11 percent of American colleges and universities in twenty-eight states [17, pp. 636–38]. The PIRGs, which do research on environmental and other social issues and also engage in lobbying for legislation and in public education, proved to be popular. They were able to combine student concerns for social issues that affected their own lives, such as the environment, with a tradition of social activism. The PIRGs were not generally involved in activist demonstrations but rather worked with government officials, provided educational materials, and tried to raise public consciousness about their concerns.

An example of a highly successful lobbying effort was the New York Public Interest Research Group, which in the late 1970s had an annual budget of $400,000 and more than one hundred thousand dues-paying student members. NYPIRG had a paid staff and concerned itself with issues such as telephone service, young people and jury selection, medical malpractice, nuclear energy, environmental concerns, and related topics. NYPIRG, through legislative lobbying and public information campaigns, was successful in several of these areas. Its concerns went beyond traditional "student" issues but tended to focus on matters that had a direct relationship to the lives of young people.

Although the "me-generation" was not primarily focused on activ-
ism and the level of campus political concern was at a low ebb during the 1970s, "meism" did have some political and social ramifications [16]. The kinds of student organizations that seemed to be most effective during the 1970s reflected student interest in issues that directly affected their lives and futures. The ideologically based social action groups that were much in evidence during the 1960s virtually disappeared from the campuses.

It is significant that the areas of activism that have been most successful in the 1970s and early 1980s were those that combined individual interests and social concerns. The most influential is probably the feminist movement, which has had a variety of impacts. Women's studies courses and programs are now entrenched in most universities, and an important field of scholarship has developed [3, 9]. Feminist student groups are also widespread and have been active both in campus affairs and in self-help for women students. Black student organizations have also been active and have had an impact on Black Studies academic programs. A gay rights movement emerged on many campuses as well.

The Paradox of the Eighties

The 1980s show something of a paradox in student political activism in the United States. On the one hand, the configuration of attitudes evident in the post-sixties period has continued without significant change. American students tend to be "middle of the road" and not significantly motivated toward social action concerns. There continues to be a strong focus on careers and worry about ensuring a safe position in the middle class. On the other hand, there has been a significant but sporadic resurgence of student activism. It has been activism more reminiscent of the earlier nonviolent period of the 1960s rather than the hyper-militant late sixties student movement. It can be argued that the 1980s have been a kind of transitional period between the extraordinary quiet of the 1970s to a more active period in the future. The end of the Reagan era would lend credence to this hypothesis, but there is too little evidence at this point to make any convincing generalizations.

A detailed analysis of the broader political and economic context of the 1980s is beyond the scope of this discussion. However, it is important to mention several key elements. The fairly severe economic problems of the previous decade abated considerably, particularly for
the middle classes. The impact of the several “oil shocks” wore off, and rampant inflation ended. Unemployment, while quite high early in the decade, also declined.

The “Reagan Revolution” downplayed the welfare state. Wall Street boomed, a record number of large corporations merged, and the scramble for wealth dominated the national scene more completely than it had at any time since the 1920s. By the end of Reagan’s first term, the campuses seemed to be little more than YUPPIE breeding grounds, politically quiescent places where by far the leading undergraduate major was business administration. A *Newsweek on Campus* cover story summarized this mood in a cartoon showing collegians dropping the rebellious 1960s slogan “Don’t trust anyone over 30,” and replacing it with a more YUPPIE/80s sentiment, “Never trust anyone under $30,000” [7].

The rejuvenation of conservatism wrought by the Reagan Revolution from 1980–84 inhibited progressive activism on the two key issues that traditionally had mobilized the student Left: peace and civil rights. President Reagan effectively promoted a new cold war nationalism against the Soviet’s “Evil Empire,” obtaining Congressional funding for a massive military build-up and for the Contra war in Nicaragua. His invasion of Grenada in 1983 and the United States’ military victory there yielded much flag waving, which even affected the campuses, where rallies in support of the invasion outnumbered protests. Though there was some student involvement in the nuclear freeze movement and in demonstrations against the Contra war in Nicaragua, the conservative national mood prevented these causes from generating mass student support during Reagan’s first term. Moreover, the Reagan administration’s assault on affirmative action left civil rights groups reeling and promoted a campus backlash against minorities, which helped to stifle student activism on civil rights issues and stimulated a rash of campus-based racial incidents by decade’s end.

The Reagan landslide in 1984 seemed initially to seal the fate of the student Left as an impotent minority in a conservative era. Ironically, however, the landslide had the opposite effect, stimulating rather than suffocating campus protest. Because the election had made it clear that neither Reagan nor the nation’s rightward drift could be halted at the polls, student activists now concluded that protest was the only way to challenge Reaganism. And this challenge would occur on the one issue upon which the Reagan administration (and American university administrators) seemed most vulnerable: South Africa.
The Anti-Apartheid Movement

During the 1984–85 academic year, the apartheid regime in South Africa faced the greatest black insurgency in a quarter century. Black protest against white minority rule and the new “reform” constitution was met with repression which was brutal even by South African standards, culminating in March 1985 with a police massacre of unarmed demonstrators near Sharpeville. In response to these events and stimulated by extensive TV and press coverage of them, a solidarity movement took root in the United States, centered in black churches and civil rights organizations. This movement demanded that the Reagan administration enact sanctions against South Africa. But the administration, clinging to its “constructive engagement” policy, vigorously opposed sanctions. The solidarity movement escalated its protests through a dramatic civil disobedience campaign, orchestrating sit-ins at which demonstrators, including prominent political leaders, were arrested at the South African embassy. The anti-apartheid protests in both the United States and South Africa captured the imagination of American undergraduates in spring 1985, sparking the largest student protests since the 1960s [18].

Both on campus and off, the anti-apartheid movement grew substantially in the wake of a national day of protest held on 4 April 1985, commemorating the seventeenth anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination. Some four thousand demonstrators marched outside the South African embassy in Washington, D.C., and fifty-eight were arrested. On this same day several hundred Columbia University students brought the anti-apartheid movement to their campus. Chanting and sitting outside the main entrance to Hamilton Hall, they vowed to stay until Columbia divested all of its holdings in companies doing business with South Africa.

The Columbia protest lasted three weeks, and it inspired similar divestment protests on some sixty campuses. Several of these protests were far larger than the Columbia sit-in. At the University of California at Berkeley well over ten thousand students joined a one-day strike in protest against the arrest of 158 divestment protesters. More than one thousand Cornell University students were arrested in a series of divestment sit-ins.

Though engaging in protests which evoked memories of the 1960s, the divestment movement sought to avoid the polarization of that earlier decade. The spring 1985 protests were nonviolent and directed more towards raising the divestment issue than disrupting or attacking
the university. This tone was set from the beginning at Columbia, where the protesters sat outside rather than inside Hamilton Hall and posted notices that though they were blocking the main entrance, the basement entrances would remain open. "We don't hate President Sovern," explained one Columbia protest leader. "We think we have a better argument than he does." Newsweek noted that "compared to the purple-hazed 60s," the divestment protesters "are exceedingly polite. Students at the University of Colorado at Boulder, for example, carefully negotiated with school officials before staging a demonstration that one administrator called 'the most civilized on the face of the earth'" [18].

The divestment protesters also seemed more studious and "high tech" than their predecessors. Students at Columbia and other campus sit-ins rotated on the front lines of the protest so that they could attend their classes. The activists also made good use of the personal computer revolution, quickly setting up a computer network linking over one hundred campuses to share the latest news about their protests.

The unambiguous moral issue of apartheid was at the heart of the student protests. The activists focused most of their attention on pressuring the university and the nation to use their economic leverage against Pretoria's racist regime. But beyond South Africa itself, the divestment protesters were seeking to send America the message that the political conscience of the campus had not disappeared and that their generation was ready and willing to raise its voice against the administration's right-wing policies. Soon after the divestment protests began, the New York Times reported that across the United States student activists were unanimous in agreeing that among their strongest recruiting points were the Reagan administration policies and even the personality of the President himself. "A lot of what's going on is in reaction to Reagan," explained a Berkeley divestment activist. "People are frustrated and aggravated with what's going on in El Salvador and Nicaragua. People with a lot of pent up energy finally see a chance to do things constructively [21].

This was a revolt against not only the President's foreign policy, but against the self-centered materialism of the Reagan era. The student protesters were saying that morality must take precedence over profitability, that even if the university had to take a loss financially it had a civic obligation to sever its economic ties to South Africa. Student activists were, moreover, trying to make a similar point about themselves, seeking to show that contrary to the media stereotypes, many collegians were not avaricious YUPPIES. Berkeley divestment leader
Ross Hammond explained that at his university the movement was "in part a reaction against the media for portraying Berkeley as a dead campus. That idea annoys people no end, people who really care. This is still a progressive campus." Similar sentiments were expressed by student protesters across the nation, including Yale divestment organizer Tom Keenan who proudly credited the demonstrations with "disproving the idea that we're one homogeneous student body heading for business suits" [23].

Though the surge of activism in spring semester 1985 was confined primarily to divestment, there were also protests on behalf of peace and affirmative action. At the University of Colorado, over 450 protesters were arrested during a demonstration against CIA recruiters. Anti-CIA protests also occurred at Yale, Wesleyan and the University of Wisconsin at Madison — where students sought to make a citizen's arrest against a CIA recruitment officer. Minority students incorporated into their divestment protests a call for greater minority representation on campus. And at Brown University affirmative action took center stage, as minority students led a brief strike and building occupation in April, demanding increased minority admission, financial aid, and a more Third World-oriented curriculum [4].

Underestimating the political strength and appeal of the divestment movement, most campus administrators initially turned down its demand for total severance of all university investments in companies doing business in South Africa [4]. The Columbia administration led the way in setting this hard line. Soon after the sit-in began, Columbia spokesman Fred Knubel announced: "Columbia has no plan to meet the students' demands." In justifying this refusal to negotiate, Columbia president Michael Sovern insisted: "no university can allow some of its members to force a position on it." Campus officials at many institutions stressed that total divestment would violate their fiduciary responsibilities, and some claimed that divesting would lessen America's economic leverage and its ability to press for reform in South Africa. The depth of this administration opposition meant that the movement would not win divestment overnight: a lesson driven home by the Columbia sit-in, which ended with no promises by the administration that it would move towards total divestment [8].

Campus administrators also reinforced their anti-divestment position by clamping down on the demonstrators. They initiated disciplinary proceedings against leaders of sit-ins and in several cases denied diplomas to students who had broken campus regulations. College officials began holding national meetings to discuss ways to control pro-
protesters. This led to the enactment of tighter campus disciplinary procedures at Cornell and other active universities and colleges. At Berkeley and Columbia, campus police were authorized to videotape demonstrations to facilitate the prosecution of students involved in unlawful protests. Divestment protesters denounced these policies, claiming that they could have a chilling effect upon free speech [5].

What these administrators had not counted on in taking this hard line was the groundswell of public support that would quickly strengthen the divestment movement. Divestment leaders such as Jon Klavens of Columbia understood, as college officials had not, that America’s revulsion against apartheid — exacerbated daily by the televised atrocities from South Africa — gave their movement an edge over campus administrators, who appeared scrooge-like in refusing to part with their South African investments. “We have as much of a moral high ground as the abolitionists, maybe more,” Klavens said. Despite early setbacks in the face of administration intransigence, divestment protesters remained confident that ultimately, in the words of Stanford Organizer Steven Phillips, “we will be effective because apartheid offends everyone’s sense of justice” [19]. Such confidence was well placed.

The campus divestment movement had never stood alone in demanding a change in university investment policies. During the first week of the Columbia sit-in the Reverend Jesse Jackson came up to Morningside Heights, and warmed the rain-drenched divestment protesters with a speech praising them for “setting a moral example for America” [22]. Similar praise came from Bishop Desmond Tutu. Joining these civil rights leaders were labor leaders, faculty, and hundreds of public officials across the nation who advocated divestment of state and municipal funds from banks with South African connections. The call for federal sanctions against South Africa was also beginning to gather support in Congress. This increasingly favorable public mood gave the divestment movement powerful allies in the community. When, for instance, UCLA and Berkeley students sat-in demanding divestment, several California state legislators, including House Speaker Willie Brown endorsed the protest and warned the university that its budget would get bottled up in Sacramento unless it divested. The combination of campus and community pressure led more than twenty-five campuses nationwide to partially or totally divest between April and October 1985.

The pressure for divestment increased dramatically during the 1985–86 academic year. Building on the organizational base con-
structed the previous spring, a national divestment mobilization in October 1985 orchestrated demonstrations on over one hundred campuses — nearly doubling the size and geographical scope of the movement [6]. If the 1983–84 academic year had been the year of the YUPPIE on campus, 1985–86 was the year of the shanty, as divestment protesters across the nation constructed shabby huts, and placed them on their campuses to symbolize the poverty and oppression of South African blacks [24].

With the movement gaining momentum, university administrators, regents and trustees began to back down from their original refusal to divest. The first big symbolic victory of the academic year came when the Columbia administration committed itself to total divestment in October 1985. Columbia also provided other administrators with a face-saving argument for reversing their earlier anti-divestment position. The Columbia administration claimed that it had opted to divest not because of student protest, but because the recent state of emergency imposed in South Africa had created a new political environment and rendered unrealistic the hope that United States companies could, through their presence and egalitarian employment policies, reform that social system and end apartheid. But Columbia was only the beginning; by the end of the 1985–86 academic year 120 colleges and universities had divested their South African holdings either partially or completely [24].

The biggest divestment occurred in July 1986, when the University of California opted to pull its $3.1 billion investment out of companies doing business in South Africa. This victory was perhaps the most striking demonstration of the degree to which the divestment movement had influenced public opinion and thereby caused a shift in the position of politicians. Where the previous spring California’s Governor George Deukmejian had vigorously opposed divestment, this conservative Republican now — up for reelection and recognizing the widespread and rising public support of the student movement’s goal — endorsed divestment and used his considerable political influence with the Board of Regents to bring about a surprising reversal of its earlier vote against divestment [24].

Conservative Trends and Campus Racism

Not all students, however, welcomed these divestment victories and the appearance of shanties and mass protest on campus. Since the early Reagan years, small but well-organized and well-funded groups of right-wing student activists had appeared on campus. The most vocal
and well known of these groups was at Dartmouth. It published an ultra-conservative magazine, the Dartmouth Review, which received financial support from conservative alumni. The Review was well connected to the right-wing Republican establishment; it drew attention and praise from William F. Buckley's National Review, and it served as an Ivy League recruiting ground for the Reagan White House — several editors went on to become administration officials. The Dartmouth Review was known not only for its conservative ideology, but also for its sarcastic and nasty editorials, which reeked of gay bashing and minority baiting. A 1982 article opposing affirmative action, charged that Dartmouth had lowered its academic standards in order to recruit blacks; it was headlined "DIS SHO AIN'T NO JIVE" [22].

With the emergence of an active divestment movement on the Dartmouth campus, the Dartmouth Review crowd had an opportunity to move beyond rhetorical attacks on the Left. Enraged by the appearance of shanties on campus, a dozen right-wing students (ten of whom were Review staffers) went out late at night armed with sledge hammers and destroyed the shanties in January 1986. The Review's next edition praised the assault and crowed that it would have been even better had the shanties been destroyed much earlier.

This incident provoked a wave of indignation at Dartmouth, particularly since the destruction of the shanties had been timed to coincide with the Martin Luther King, Jr., holiday. In protest against the destruction of the shanties, students occupied the administration building for thirty hours, until the administration agreed to hold a day long teach-in on racism. At the teach-in nearly two-thirds of the student body turned out and heard black students complain of the discriminatory environment they confronted at Dartmouth [22].

The controversy of Dartmouth attracted national attention to the issue of collegiate racism. "The shanty project," observed one reporter, "designed to focus attention on racism far away, forced many to face allegations of bigotry in their own backyard" [22]. Similar attacks on shanties occurred at the University of Utah, Johns Hopkins University, California State College at Long Beach and at UC Berkeley [24]. But such attacks were rare and aroused far more opposition than support among a national student body sympathetic to the anti-apartheid movement.

The End of the Divestment Movement

Unlike the student movement of the 1960s, which self-destructed because of its sense of failure (its leaders wrongly thought the move-
ment was failing to stop the Vietnam war), the divestment movement’s demise was a product of its own success. The movement not only won divestment on campuses across the nation, it helped transform public opinion sufficiently so that even President Reagan had been forced to modify his position by supporting very limited sanctions against South Africa. Having won so many major divestment battles, the movement now had to face the problem of determining a new goal and a more extended political agenda. But having, in effect, lost its raison d’être, the movement could not solve this problem or shift its focus; instead it faded in the 1986–87 academic year almost as quickly as it had emerged.

The movement’s collapse was linked to the fading of another important motivation for student activism — the need to halt Reagan and the nation’s rightward drift. The Reagan Revolution no longer aroused fear among students because it had dissipated in the wake of both the 1986 elections, which restored Democratic dominance in Congress, and the Iran-Contra scandal, which paralyzed the Reagan White House. With its two major enemies, university investments in South Africa and President Reagan, now weakened, the student movement of the 1980s came to an end.

The demise of the divestment movement left some activists wondering whether their pragmatism and moderation — which had drawn so much praise — had turned out to be a weakness rather than a strength. By focusing so intently on the limited demand of divestiture, the movement had inadvertently given the universities a way of opting out of the controversy: allowing administrators to render apartheid a non-issue on campus simply by purging their investment portfolios of South Africa-linked stocks. Thus, after winning many divestment battles in 1985–86, the campus world ceased protesting, though the apartheid regime continued its massive repression. The divestment movement’s collapse, moreover, coincided with the press blackout instituted by the Botha regime, which kept news of South Africa’s anti-apartheid struggle out of the reach of the American media. Movement activists watched helplessly as public interest in South Africa, which they had labored so hard to build, declined both on campus and off. The movement had mobilized campus opinion against apartheid, Reaganism, and YUPPIEISM, but it could find no way of sustaining mass anti-apartheid protest in the United States once the issue of university complicity with South African racism had been resolved.

Unlike the divestment effort, which tried to build a national movement through coordinated demonstrations and meetings, the anti-
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racism movement remained local and there was no national coordina-
tion. By the end of the 1987–88 academic year, there was little evidence
of any student movement. In addition to these two major activist
thrusts of the past several years, there has been concern about Ameri-
can policy in Central America and widespread campus opposition to
supporting the Contras in Nicaragua. As in the past, civil rights issues
and foreign policy were key elements of a modest rebirth of campus
political concern.

At the end of the 1987–88 academic year, there were no major na-
tional activist organizations seeking to coordinate political develop-
ments on campus. While figures are unavailable, the traditional na-
tional organizations such as the Democratic Socialists of America
(DSA) have very little strength on campus. An effort early in 1988 to
create a national activist umbrella organization dissolved into fac-
tional and other disputes and yielded no results [13]. Thus, activist
initiatives tend to be ad hoc and uncoordinated. They have not been
able to reach a significant national constituency.

Conclusion

As the 1980s draw to a close, there are glimmerings of a revival of
student activism. Several issues in recent years have aroused fairly
widespread campus concern. These issues, relating to foreign policy
and race relations, are similar to questions that have engendered pro-
test in earlier periods. At least in a small number of the more elite
universities and colleges, there seems to be some activist leadership
willing to devote time and energy to campus political protest. The ini-
tiatives launched earlier in the period related to student services and
student political lobbying continue, but apparently at a lower ebb. The
configuration of attitudes remains basically unaltered, but there are
some interesting changes in curricular choices. There is a marked in-
crease in interest in careers in teaching and applications to law and
medical schools have declined. Interest in the social sciences, tradi-
tional breeding ground of activists, is modestly up.

Compared to the volatile sixties, the past two decades have, of
course, been notably apathetic. But in the broader historical context of
American student activism, the recent period is by no means unusual.
The decade of the 1970s might well have been below the norm for
American activism, but that of the 1980s is probably somewhat above
average. The basic patterns seem to hold. The issues that seem to moti-
vate students are those with a high moral content — issues such as
repression in South Africa, racism on American campuses, or United States intervention in Central America. The campuses which have exhibited most activism in the recent past are the same universities that were prominent in earlier periods — the more cosmopolitan and prestigious universities on both coasts, a sprinkling of major public universities in between, and some traditionally progressive liberal arts colleges. Students from the social sciences seem to be more interested in political participation than those in professional programs or the sciences. Thus, the basic configuration of American student political involvement seems to have been maintained over time.

Given the imposing historical reputation of the student movement of the 1960s, it is understandable that most commentators on student politics in the 1970s and 1980s have used the heyday of the New Left as a benchmark for comparative analysis. But this is the wrong comparison. American student activists during most of the 1970s and 1980s attended college when the nation as a whole was shifting rightward as it had in the 1950s, not leftward as it had in the 1960s. And if we make the more appropriate historical comparison between the students of the conservative 1970s–80s with their counterparts in the conservative 1950s — known as the “silent generation” because of their political apathy — the 1970s–80s college generations seem remarkably activist and liberal.

The lobbying, electoral work, and nonviolent demonstrations that collegians have organized on behalf of federal student aid, peace, affirmative action, women’s, gay and disabled rights over the past two decades far transcends anything students were able to organize in previous conservative eras. Indeed, student divestment protesters in the mid 1980s achieved what no previous generation of campus activists had ever managed: they created a mass student movement during the term of a conservative president (in contrast to both previous mass student movements, in the 1930s and 1960s, which had been born during reformist eras when liberals occupied the White House). Viewed in this context, what seems most impressive about recent student politics is not the absence of sixties-style confrontationalism, but the persistence of liberal values and activism despite the resurgent conservatism in the larger national polity. Having endured eight years of Reaganism, it seems likely that this liberal collegiate tradition will continue into the post-Reagan era and that the campuses will retain their potential as a source of progressive dissent in American society.
References

23. "The Times They are a Changin'," *Time*, 29 April 1985, p. 44.