

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY

PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY

PRESIDENT'S ROOM

May 15, 1963

A letter to each Princeton undergraduate:

Now that ten days or more have passed since the event, I hope many of you may be ready to join in sober and dispassionate reflection about the spring madness of May 6. By means of this letter I would like to help you see it in the perspective of the University as an entity dedicated to the advancement of human dignity and enlightenment.

Student mobs rioting more or less senselessly are not new phenomena, but their antiquity hardly excuses them. They have deeply disturbed thoughtful men in all ages, and, during the Renaissance, one of these men not inappropriately branded such mobs as many-headed pieces of monstrosity. As we look back on the rioting here the night of May 6 and the varied expressions of concern, apology, and self-excuse that have been voiced -- responsible and sincere though many of them are -- it seems to me that too few have recognized the grim aspect of the recent riot and why this kind of expression of youthful exuberance, and/or frustration, cannot be tolerated or excused.

That there are high spirits and plenty of virility in Princeton students has seldom been subject to question. Nor have I ever doubted that some -- probably the large majority -- among you feel intense frustrations from time to time. You would hardly be the ages you are and this would hardly be an educational institution if this were not so. (To offer, however, the absence of cars and of girls as excuse for the rioting is a flimsy line of argument and one which quite erroneously presumes that riots are less of an institutional hazard where cars and girls are constantly present.) Add the season when "the sap runs", a protracted spell of warm weather, and a nearly full moon. Add further, as a more particular catalyst perhaps, a natural enough desire to postpone return to the hard work of studies after a particularly lovely House Party week-end. One has here, stirred and mixed, all the ingredients for the start of a spring riot. Nothing is heinous about the start. Nothing is untypical.

If, then, a riot were simply the sum of the motives that go into it, or could be judged simply by such innocence of origin, there would be no problem, and the University would not have found it necessary over many years to have on its books General Regulation #12: "Any undergraduate who is guilty of inciting to riot or of participating in a riot renders himself liable to dismissal".

This is the third riot at Princeton I have seen close to, and I do not mean from inside Prospect. As I watched the mob that Monday night and followed part of its course, it was apparent enough that some students were far more caught up in the collective frenzy than others, and that some indeed were following along only as spectators. But far more than this, I saw again the weird, senseless, often glazed-eyed frenzy of those who hardly in any sense could be called themselves.

The damage to property, which amounts to over \$5,000, and the very considerable disturbances occasioned off campus seem generally to be recognized, after the event, as matters demanding apology and restitution. And I must admit that when trouble of this sort spills into the town, it does seem to me more serious than when it can be confined to the campus. There remains, however, beyond the external effects, something intrinsically ominous and reprehensible about rioting, which matches (if it does not transcend) in seriousness the outward results, just as those results so often cancel whatever innocence or righteousness there may have lain in a riot's origin.

As I wrote in reply to the New York Times editorial of May 9, there is a common, frightening characteristic of rioting that makes it far too dangerous to accept as a form of play, and that should severely limit any general approbation of rioting as a mechanism for social action. This is the ease and rapidity with which mass play or mass protest swings into a condition of mass hysteria, wherein individuals not only throw off common restraints but surrender much of their identity. Otherwise responsible persons cease to be persons, and in the "minds" of those so involved, the rights and persons of others likewise become obliterated. The collective force of brute impulses rules the moment, and other persons lose significance except as they may chance to stand in the way and so become either interferences to or playthings for the mob. And such are the strange ways of the psyche that even after the event many involved don't realize what happened to them or to what they have contributed.

Observations collected from the police and other responsible persons, my own viewing, and the accumulated experience of the University over many years confirm that this is no extreme description either of what happened as part of the rioting of Monday the 6th or of the potential dynamite that resides in any student riot.

The collective surrender of selfhood by otherwise responsible individuals and the inconvenience, danger, and damage it worked against others seem to me equally deplorable. They strike against central

objectives of the University: the advancement, in individuals, of rationally based powers of analysis and judgment; the encouragement of a sense of responsibility toward others, as well as for one's own moral and spiritual self; the upholding of criteria for personal and communal conduct that dignify human life and do not degrade it.

The University's commitment to these objectives and its obligation to safeguard and advance them highlight still another very unpleasant aspect of any student riot. This is that substantial disciplinary penalties must be exacted against offenders who are apprehended even though many go scot free who are equally, or even more, deserving of blame.

Efforts to determine degrees of guilt among those caught have been made, and punishments of correspondingly graded severity have been accorded to these students. But it is naive to expect that in such circumstances justice can be perfect in the sense that, of the many participants, each can be given his due penalty, no more and no less. As with the law and its enforcement in the general society, a function of discipline in the University must be to protect and uphold values and standards of conduct essential to the well-being of the institution as a whole. Not the most pleasant corollary of this fact is that deterrence becomes a necessary aspect of corporate discipline; the latter cannot be guided by the pure spirit of justice alone.

These of course are the reasons why, in a state or civic community, ignorance of the law is not judged a valid excuse for its violation; nor can those who break a law claim leniency on the grounds that other violators have escaped apprehension. This, too, is why the University has General Regulation #12 on its books and must enforce it -- though not without graded restraint -- even though student riots are so often innocent when measured in terms of the participants' conscious intent and even though only a small fraction of them are ever apprehended for punishment.

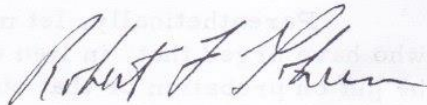
Parenthetically, let me say that I have been surprised by the number who have urged that, in lieu of penalties to individuals, all undergraduates be put on probation or that other forms of blanket punitive action be imposed. How could such a substitution be anything but an even greater form of inequity? If it is true that as many as 1500 undergraduates participated in the rioting (which from my own observations, though partial, I doubt), there remains the fact that a majority (1625) of the undergraduates were not participants. The latter hardly seem to me to merit either punishment by the University or the share, they cannot entirely escape, in the general ill-repute the rioters have brought upon the current student body.

This leads me to two final points. The riot certainly did Princeton no good in the public eye. Its sheer wantonness and irresponsibility stood, of course, in particularly sharp juxtaposition to the deeply somber struggles in Birmingham. But no one can justly complain about the emphasis given by the national press to this congruence of events here and there. In my view, it rightly underlines the anachronism in today's world of student riots such as the one of May 6. We are too much inter-involved, community to community and nation to nation, to regard the senseless frenzy and random violence of the night of May 6 in Princeton as a matter of local consequence only. When so much is at stake and in so many quarters which calls for the best efforts of educated and thoughtful men, what appropriateness is there to be found in this kind of behavior by individuals whom nature and opportunity have so favored for roles of constructive leadership and influence, as they have all who are students here? Can we be surprised when others expect much more of us both by way of performance and example?

"No man is an island". Neither is any university. But I would make clear, finally, that it is not concern with Princeton's "image" nor is it imputed "outside pressures" that guide my concern and occasion this letter. Those are secondary things. What matters to me primarily are the integrity of Princeton students as persons, the integrity of the University as an institution of higher education, and the ability of both to render significant service in the public interest because they act from a strong sense of inward self-discipline and responsibility.

Cassandras have sung woe over each fresh college generation through many ages. I feel no disposition to join them. I find far too many reasons to feel high confidence in you and in your fellows. The unhappy madness of the night of May 6 has not changed my conviction that most of you will make fully as worthy contributions in the future as has any preceding generation of Princetonians. This letter, then, has not been written in despair. It is offered in the hope that we can all profit from searching and responsible reflection over issues of this sort.

Sincerely,



Robert F. Goheen