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War Protest, 1972: Students Blockade the SJU Campus

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War Protest, 1972:
Students Blockade the SJU Campus

Background Image adapted from: https://www.legion.org/flag/255086/we-want-hear-your-us-flag-story
1972-04-28, The Record p.1
https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/34797
Today's history lesson is about a student protest. No doubt some of you were on the scene last fall when the students here had a protest about the Pat Hall scandal. And of course we're all aware of the Black Lives Matter, Line 3 and other protests in recent years. So it seems timely to share a bit of campus protest history. Besides, I've had this opportunity on my radar for years...

Pat Hall 2021 Oct. 28 The Record p. 1
https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/44462/rec/12
Line 3 2021 March 12 The Record p. 1
https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/44245/rec/4
Black Lives Matter September 18, 2020 The Record p.5
...because next Thursday is the 50th anniversary of a protest that affected almost everybody working or attending classes at St. John's on April 21st, 1972. (Which I guess is probably nobody in this room, unless John Taylor is here.)
Background Image adapted from: https://www.legion.org/flag/255086/we-want-hear-your-us-flag-story
1972-04-28, The Record p.1
https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/34797
There is over 50 years’ worth of research and perspective available about the Vietnam war. Some of the history of opposition to the war on our campuses has been researched; a case in point is this 1977 history paper – which I’ve put online with the author’s permission – by Fr. Vincent Tegeder’s student, Jeffrey Hagen, “The War Protest Movement at St. John’s During the Vietnam Conflict.” (Mr. Hagen was being historically accurate with his title, probably with input from Fr. Vincent; it was never declared to be a war, so the correct terminology was “Vietnam Conflict”. At the risk of dating myself – but who cares, we archivists get more valuable with age! – as a young librarian, I used this term as an example of the importance of having the correct subject heading when using the library’s card catalog!)
But first, a bit of background. The presence of the military on the SJU campus goes way back to World War II and earlier. I’ve done a couple of history lessons on St. John’s during the World Wars – you can look them up in Digital Commons. The photo on the left, from the 1944 Sagatagan yearbook, and the one on the right, ten years later, show that the presence of soldiers-in-training continued after World War II ended.

Image published in the 1944 Sagatagan, p.65; this version is from the SJU Archives, O:\...\Depts&Programs\ROTC\Army Air Force 1940s\Box1803f5_SJ Army Air Force Unit During WWII.jpg
O:\Archives\SJUArchives\Images\Depts&Programs\ROTC\Drill Nov 1954 4-11 1.jpg
In fact, events like the “Military Ball” depicted here (on the left), and the “Pershing Rifles” banquet ceremony on the right...
O:\Archives\SJUArchives\Images\Depts&Programs\ROTC\Military Ball 1954 4-22 4.jpg
O:\Archives\SJUArchives\Images\Depts&Programs\ROTC\Pershing Rifles banquet 4-18 3.TIF
...were part of the campus milieu as ROTC became a standard fixture—to the point where, beginning in 1952 and until 1965, every Johnnie freshman and sophomore was required to take military science courses.

Enrollment in ROTC was optional starting in fall 1965—shortly after the ROTC Vitalization Act 1964, but maybe tied to ROTC no longer being a deferment from the draft.
But the Vietnamese conflict was not “the Great War,” and students began to ask why they were being drafted to fight a war they saw as unjust, and why a Catholic, Benedictine institution was providing a base for an ROTC soldier-training program.
One of the more well-known anti-war protests was when Vice President (and Minnesotan) Hubert Humphrey came to dedicate Alcuin Library in 1966. 

[Alcuin Library Dedication War Protest - SJU Archives - Vivarium (csbsju.edu)](https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/SJUArchives/id/251)
In the fall of 1970, when all the students returned, the battle over ROTC entered a new phase. Three students who were known for their anti-war, anti-ROTC views, enrolled in Military Science I. They were Jim Davies, the Record editor, John Thavis, one of the most fluent speakers and leaders of the movement at SJU, and Rich Fuchs. Their purposes in enrolling in MS I were, ‘first of all to learn what they were teaching and secondly, to disrupt it as much as they could.’ Of course they did not advertise their intentions to the ROTC department, but Col. Brummer clearly knew of their reputations and promptly ‘disenrolled’ two of the three.”

Jeffrey Hagen, p. 13

ROTC protests – over the decades – would be a history lesson unto itself, but it does tie into today’s topic. A name that will be familiar to some of you surfaces with regard to the ROTC issue in 1970, but not simply by virtue of protesting the war or ROTC. For the fall 1970 semester, three Johnnies “known for their anti-war, anti-ROTC views,” enrolled in the Military Science I course “to learn what they were teaching and to disrupt it as much as they could.” But the policies at that time said that only freshmen could enroll; others who might want to could only audit the courses, and those auditing could not participate in class discussion.
One of those students was John Thavis, then a sophomore. A month later, an article in The Record reports that John was appointed to chair a steering committee to “look into the events surrounding Kent State and report back to the USG [the Undergrad Student Government] with the facts in the case.”

1970-10-30-0-002
https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/34651/rec/3
John was also a writer for *The Record*, sometimes on behalf of the Peace Action Committee. Student activism seemed to be his forte.

1971-10-14 *The Record* p.1
https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/34636/rec/4

1971-11-02 *The Record* p.1
https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/34763/rec/5

1971-12-13 *The Record* p.1
https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/34753/rec/7
By February, John was running for Student Government president – but in so doing, he was actually leading a movement to *abolish* the student government and encourage students in the dorms to set up their own governments.

1972-02-14-0-001
https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/34792/rec/8 (on left)
1972-02-14-0-002
https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/34793/rec/8
The Abolition Party succeeded in being elected to a majority. Then their members ultimately resigned, but the remaining members re-constituted the student government. Thus John’s presidency lasted for all of one meeting (or rather, part of it). By that April, 50 years ago, John was leading the student body in another capacity.

1972-02-29 The Record p. 1
https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/34710/rec/2
The students are back after Easter break. The normal high for April 21\textsuperscript{st} is 57 degrees. But it's April in Minnesota. Some years I'm wearing my sandals by now; and sometimes, a warmish spring day can suddenly change to blizzard conditions. In 1972, weather forecasting wasn't nearly as reliable as it is today. Who would have expected almost four inches of snow? But I suspect the protest planners didn't give the weather much thought as they hastily put together their plan the day before.

https://www.weather.gov/wrh/Climate?wfo=mpx
Picture yourself driving to work on a Friday morning. It is snowing - one of those wet, heavy spring snows - and as you near campus, you see cars parked along the road and a barrier preventing anyone from driving in - tree logs, benches, and people are blocking the way. From here, you're going to have to hike to your job. Chances are you're not wearing snow boots.

1972-04-28, The Record p.1
https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/34797
A great article in The Record the following week documented the details well.
1972-04-28, The Record p.1
https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/34797
Besides blocking the south entrance by the cemetery, they also blockaded the road from Flynntown, near Stumpf Lake, and by the Prep School – which, in those days before I-94, was the main entrance into campus.

Text from https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/34797 The Record April 28, 1972, p. 1
(Though taken several years earlier, this aerial photo shows what things looked like before the Palaestra was built and the road re-aligned by the four-way stop.
1966  https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/SJUArchives/id/14295
The Record's staff gave the entire first page (of what was then only a four-page publication) to the event and its rationale.
1972-04-28, The Record p.1
https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/34797
The blockades stood because a significant number of individuals recognized some sort of guilt that this community bears in its contributions to the war.

John’s page-one piece explained it to the community, and counted it as a victory: "The blockades stood because a significant number of individuals recognized some sort of guilt that this community bears in its contributions to the war."

1972-04-28, The Record p.1
https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/34797
“ROTC materially contributes to a policy of murder in Indochina...”

“...it is clear that any organization aiding the implementation of a genocidal war policy has forfeited its right to exist on a Christian campus.”

“...what can you do about the war in your own backyard?”

...and the editors said: “ROTC materially contributes to a policy of murder in Indochina...” “...it is clear that any organization aiding the implementation of a genocidal war policy has forfeited its right to exist on a Christian campus.” and “...what can you do about the war in your own backyard?”

1972-04-28, The Record p.1
https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/34797
President Michael Blecker’s next regular weekly report to students, faculty and staff made no mention of the protest. <ENTER> And the spring alumni magazine had the long-awaited Palaestra groundbreaking as its cover story.

1972 0428 Pres’s Rep to students fac staff Box251f1.pdf
But inside, there was an article about the protest, with a photo that conveyed the nastiness of the weather, the gathering of students around their leader and an angry employee taking issue with the blockade.

Entitled “A Question of How to Be Heard,” the article was a transcript of a discussion that included the leader, John; the chair of the government department; the former mayor of St. Cloud; a professor who had joined the protest; a student whose brother-in-law had just died in Vietnam; a professor who drove his truck through the protesters; and an English professor who later became SJU’s president.

https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/SJUArchives/id/5484/rec/41
Among the comments at the discussion: Joe Farry, future Dean, asked how best for students to learn effectively; Ed Henry thought the protest was counterproductive, and Fr. Hilary thought there could have been a better way of making the point without the secretaries having to walk all the way across campus to their offices.


https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/SJUArchives/id/5484/rec/41
About the article, John said later that – quote - “Lee Hanley having organized the discussion...was a really good result. [Lee] knew a good story when he saw one...” “A Question of How to Be Heard,” St. John’s Alumni Magazine Spring 1972, p. 8-14. https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/SJUArchives/id/5484/rec/41
“...The fact that [he] wanted to do this showed that the issue had reached a point where you couldn’t ignore it, the institution had to react. And on the one hand, [while] one effort was to assure alums and donors that SJU wasn’t a radical institution...it also brought the war question into the mainstream.” End quote.

President Michael Blecker weighed in as well, juxtaposing the violence of the war with the use of force to shut down the campus, and encouraging, rather, on a university campus, "inquiry and persuasion, which alone produce a moral commitment worthy of a Christian college."

President Michael Blecker commented in the Alumni Magazine as well, juxtaposing the violence of the war with the use of force to shut down the campus, and encouraging, rather, on a university campus, "inquiry and persuasion, which alone produce a moral commitment worthy of a Christian college."

https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/SJUArchives/id/5484/rec/41
The President’s message is on p. 14.
A little over ten years later, when protests over ROTC again arose, now-President Hilary Thimmesh appointed a committee which spent the 1983-84 academic year studying the issue. The “Values Committee on ROTC” concluded that reliance on military force is contrary to Benedictine and Christian values. But surveys of students, alumni, faculty, monks and parents favored keeping ROTC. Hilary kept the program, - quote - "affirming the positive influence that St. John's can exert for peace," with "intensified emphasis on the ethical and moral responsibilities of military leadership" ... “dedicated... not only to the common defense, but to justice and liberty.” End quote.

ROTC Report: from the May 17, 1984 issue of Community, p. 3 (of that pdf)
https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/SJUAиваетes/id/23599/rec/381
And what of John? He went to Italy, found a job as a journalist, and eventually became the bureau chief for the Catholic News Service in Rome, travelled with the popes, and wrote two books about the Vatican. Some of you no doubt recall his appearances on campus sponsored by the Koch chair, the Benedictine Institute, and the chair in Critical Thinking.

Lower right photo: from a 2013 email.
And those of us lucky enough to have gone on the Benedictine Heritage Tours were also fortunate to have John give us an orientation to the Vatican and Rome, something he did for several of the Benedictine Heritage groups.

Background Image: https://www.legion.org/flag/255086/we-want-hear-your-us-flag-story
Compiled in March 2022 from resources in the Archives of Saint John’s University by Peggy Landwehr Roske, CSB/SJU Archivist.

Special thanks to John Thavis ’73.

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