

CHAPTER 4

We Were Their Sons and Daughters

Occupation of University House

In the spring semester of 1968, student activism at Duke sharply intensified almost as soon as the semester began. In late November 1967, Douglas Knight had asked William Griffith for suggestions on the best time to “try to sit down with that group of Negro students.” Griffith must have recommended “very soon” because, on January 9, Knight met for the first time with representatives of the AAS. At the meeting, Knight asked for a list of Black student “problem areas.” Although no specific time frame was set, the students agreed to provide him with their list.¹

During the same week, the university issued, for the first time, regulations on pickets and protests. The new rules sought to distinguish between “legitimate forms of picketing and protesting” and “illegitimate” protests that “disrupt the orderly operations of the institution” or “jeopardize public order or safety.” In the event that “proper University authorities” determined that an “illegitimate” form of protest was underway, they were instructed to direct protesters to “cease and desist” within a specified period of time. If the protesters failed to do so, they would be subject to discipline by the university as well as possible arrest and prosecution under applicable criminal laws.²

Through the mid-1960s, Duke was hardly known as a hotbed of student activism. Indeed, until April 1968, one observer noted, “white students had not been motivated to demonstrate en masse over any issue.” In a March 1968 *Sports Illustrated* article on the student climate at Duke University, sociology professor Jack Preiss went so far as to label students at the school as members of the “timid generation.” If activism was not widespread at Duke, however, by this point, the university had a core group of thirty to forty student activists who considered themselves part of the New Left. Members of this group immediately began to test the new pickets and protests regulations. Small demonstrations were held when army recruiters came to campus on January 9, navy recruiters on January 11, and representatives of Dow Chemical Company in early February. Although one student was found guilty of violating the new rules, the pickets and protests regulations proved difficult to enforce. Most problematic was the “waiting period” provided for in the regulations. These were being “abused,” Knight said, “in such a fashion as to aggravate congestion and disorder.” After a couple of months, Knight announced that the “waiting period” in the regulations was “suspended.”³

As members of the New Left protested against the war, the AAS held elections for new leadership. Although Chuck Hopkins sought reelection as chairman, his candidacy turned out to be controversial. He faced opposition from those who favored a less confrontational approach to the administration. “There was one faction,” Brenda Armstrong explained, “that had a very acute sense of how Duke was mistreating . . . and acting against Blacks. [They] wanted to do something about the things that were going on. Then there was a faction,” she described, “that felt as strongly, but was not willing to [take] action. [They] wanted to talk about it, . . . to give the administration a chance.”⁴

As the election approached, Hopkins and his supporters worried that control of the AAS might be lost to the more conservative group. Faced with this possibility, Hopkins withdrew his candidacy and threw his support behind Armstrong; she then became a consensus candidate. “We had reached a point,” Hopkins recalled, “where I was over here, Stef was over here, somebody else [was over] there. . . . Brenda had a lot of respect from everybody. She was voted in to pull everybody together.” When the votes were counted, Armstrong prevailed. In her, the AAS had a leader who could bring the group together. “I was [conciliatory] to the conservative faction that couldn’t fight me,” Armstrong recalled, “as well as acceptable to the more radical element.” Hopkins agreed. “She did a good job,” Hopkins said. “She held people together.”⁵

On February 8, 1968, national events rocked Black students at Duke and throughout the nation. State highway patrolmen fired on a crowd of students on the campus of South Carolina State University in Orangeburg, South Carolina, following a protest to desegregate a local bowling alley. Three students were killed and twenty-seven other protesters wounded in what came to be known as the Orangeburg Massacre. Forensic reports showed that many of the victims had been shot in the back. The Orangeburg Massacre “hurled legions of students to the left,” historian Ibram X. Kendi observed. Soon, a wave of sympathy protests by Black college students swept the country.⁶

With racial activism increasing, the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. had a profound impact on the university and the country. King, who had spoken at Duke in 1964, was in Memphis, Tennessee, at the time of his assassination, supporting Black city sanitation workers who were striking to protest unequal wages and working conditions. His murder intensified all the racist terror the civil rights movement had been fighting against for years.⁷

The night after the tragedy, a group of 250 Duke students—almost all of them white—occupied University House, Knight’s official residence. They remained for almost two days. After leaving, the group reassembled on Duke’s main quadrangle. With their number increasing eventually to more than 1,500, they held a four-day sit-in that brought the university to a virtual standstill and came to be known as the “Silent Vigil.” Participants demanded that Duke respond to the King assassination with immediate, concrete actions that would clearly demonstrate the institution’s commitment to racial justice. They called on the university to grant its nonacademic employees a significant wage increase and, even more importantly, the right to bargain collectively. Further, the students demanded that Knight resign from the segregated Hope Valley Country Club.

The events at Duke following King’s assassination illuminate the racial dynamics in place at the university in the spring of 1968. Caught between stasis and change, they show how far the university was willing to go to dismantle the “plantation system” that had circumscribed employer-employee relations at Duke for decades. Occurring just five months after the AAS study-in on segregated facilities—and only ten months before the Black student takeover of the Allen Building—the April 1968 protests highlight the different ways that Black and white Duke students experienced protest. They also expose the role that race played in how the university perceived—and responded to—demands for change. In the end, the University House occupation and the Silent Vigil dramatized how a white institution struggled

with its racial past even as it aggressively continued to pursue its dream of national prominence.

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Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination on Thursday, April 4, 1968, sent a country already reeling from conflict to a new level of crisis. "In Chicago," historian William Chafe observed, "twenty blocks of the downtown business area burst into flame, set afire by rioters, as Mayor Daley ordered police to 'shoot to kill' arsonists. More than one hundred American cities witnessed violence. Soldiers garbed in battle gear set up a machine-gun emplacement atop the nation's Capitol. More than 5,500 troops were finally required to quiet the weeklong expression of screaming fury."⁸

For Duke's Black students, the assassination was a stunning moment of truth. "I remember that evening so well," Armstrong recounted. "It was 6:30 and I was studying on the floor of the dormitory. The girl who lived next door came in and said, 'Did you know Dr. King was killed?' and I laughed at her. I thought she was being funny. And then I turned the TV on." Soon, Armstrong's shock turned to anger. "No one could understand how I felt," she explained. "That was the angriest I've ever been. . . . I hadn't gotten to the point," Armstrong recalled, "where I [believed] that there were people who didn't like me because I was Black or [who were] unwilling to give me a chance. . . . There were people in my dorm that just said, 'Somebody would have shot him anyway' and 'He deserved to be shot.' Then I knew," Armstrong remembered.⁹

Other Black students responded with similar rage. In a political science class on the morning after the assassination, a Black student said that she was "sickened" by liberal white Americans who "never did more than talk about how liberal [they] are." Bertie Howard, like other Black students at Duke, experienced fear when she heard the news. "I was babysitting at [political science professor John H. Strange's] house the night King was killed," she recollected. "I just remember being afraid, because Strange had done a lot with people in the Black community. If the Klan would get anybody, they would come and get John. I remember locking the doors." For many, the feelings of grief were overwhelming. One Black student attending class the morning after King's death "began crying as he tried to explain how he felt when he saw his mother come home after working all day scrubbing people's floors and cleaning up after a white family."¹⁰

Like so many of her colleagues, Armstrong knew that King's death would alter the struggle for civil rights. "They just killed the spirit of anything that Black people wanted to do peacefully," she remembered thinking. "They took our prince." These deep feelings of anger and loss led many Black students to turn inward. "Our initial reaction," Hopkins explained, "was to separate ourselves from what was happening."¹¹

Among white members of the Duke community, reactions varied. Some were unfazed by the news. "There were a great many members of the Duke constituency who didn't care whether Martin Luther King lived or died," Knight recounted. "They felt he was disruptive." The *Duke Chronicle* described "students who clapped or yelled from their windows in ecstasy at the news of Dr. King's death." Others, like the Duke president, showed more concern. Knight was on his way home from a dinner in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, when his Black driver, George Gilmore, shared the news. "Dr. King has been shot and I'm afraid," Gilmore told Knight. Knight knew that Gilmore was concerned not only about how the Black community in Durham would respond but also how white people would react. "He knew better than I that, even as we drove, there were a good many white people rejoicing over that violence," Knight wrote. "I was as worried as he." Griffith focused on how the Black community in Durham would react. "The assassination of Martin Luther King was traumatic," he explained. "There was concern that the Black community would go berserk."¹²

The assassination had a powerful impact on many white students. King's visit to campus in 1964 loomed large in their minds. "Martin had spoken in Page Auditorium a few years earlier," David M. Henderson recalled. "Many of us who heard him . . . knew we were in the presence of a godly man. We were touched by his life and his death." John C. "Jack" Boger remembered the speech as "one of the most prominent events of our freshman year." Boger was attending the symposium "The Theology of Hope" when he learned that King had been shot. "The theology of hope seemed instantaneously irrelevant," he wrote later. "I left, stunned at the news." But even those who had not seen King were deeply moved. "I wept. I was afraid," one student remembered. "I don't think I could capture the atmosphere of those days," observed another student, who was a freshman in 1968. "There are no words to describe . . . how it felt to try and face a black student and look him in the eye in those first hours after the assassination." David K. Birkhead, former editor of the *Duke Chronicle*, summarized the feelings of many: "The world just did not seem the same after the death of Dr. King."¹³

A small coterie of members of the New Left at Duke saw the King assassination as a call to action. This was a chance to recruit other students to join their movement. Around midnight on Thursday, a group met in Birkhead's dorm room to discuss their response. "It was the hard core," Henderson commented. "We would have been the ones who said, 'We're going to do something. If other people come along, that's fine.'"¹⁴

Soon, the group in Birkhead's room learned that individuals active in the University Christian movement were meeting separately to discuss how to respond to King's murder. At around 2:00 a.m. the two groups began meeting jointly. The University Christian movement had already planned a Memorial Vigil for King at noon on Friday and flyers for the event had been distributed. They agreed that a candlelight march on Friday evening would be held, with the details for the march announced at the Memorial Vigil the next day.¹⁵

Discussion then turned to the destination for the march. After much debate, it was decided that the march would head to Hope Valley, what Henderson called "the symbol of wealthy white dominance" in Durham. While in Hope Valley, marchers would split into groups, canvassing the area to ask residents to sign a "statement of concern" that was being drafted.¹⁶

The Memorial Vigil at noon the next day lasted only a short time due to rainy weather. Soon, discussion turned to plans for the evening. At this point, both Griffith and Strange joined the discussions. Griffith was trusted by many of the student leaders, while Strange had become an informal adviser to many of the protesters. Henderson described him as "liberal," not "personally radical, just effective." Both were uneasy about the planned march to Hope Valley. Griffith's primary concern was safety. "At that time," Griffith recalled, "citizens in Hope Valley and other areas were making sure they had guns and ammunition in their houses." Learning of plans for students to go door-to-door in Hope Valley to solicit signatures, Griffith worried that these residents "weren't about to have people come off the streets into their homes. They were afraid."¹⁷

Griffith suggested that the march should instead head to Duke Forest, a neighborhood populated by many Duke faculty members and administrators. Griffith even suggested University House as a possible destination. "I felt that if they were going to carry any message," Griffith explained, "they ought to carry it to the Duke community." Strange suggested that students obtain signatures in Duke Forest for a petition on racial justice as well as an advertisement scheduled to appear in the *Durham Morning Herald* supporting racial equality and progress. Once Duke Forest was settled upon as the destination

for the march, Griffith provided the group with a map of the area and pointed out the location of faculty residences and University House.¹⁸

Because it continued to rain, a group of about ten students and faculty went inside to discuss the evening's plans. They were joined by Peter Brandon, the Durham organizer for Local 77, the union that had been seeking to represent Duke's nonacademic employees in collective bargaining with the university. The group then decided that the destination for the march would be Knight's house. The demands would be framed as "an approach to Knight for a 'positive action'" and would ask the Duke president to take specific steps to advance the cause of racial justice at Duke. Brandon suggested that the demands focus specifically on the plight of Duke's nonacademic employees and his proposal was quickly accepted. Support for these workers had been slowly growing among Duke students and faculty since the mid-1960s. A Student-Faculty Committee had formed in late 1966 to support the nonacademic employees and, in April 1967, two hundred students joined the workers on a picket line to pressure the university to accept impartial arbitration of employee grievances. A number of students and faculty actively supported early efforts by the university's nonacademic employees to unionize. There was "very much a pro-working class sentiment among the core group" of activists, Henderson commented. "As soon as we started formulating demands, those demands regarding the workers were among them." The group also agreed that marchers who wanted to do so would sit-in at Knight's house until their demands were met.¹⁹

By evening, the students had crystallized around four demands. The first requested that Knight sign a *Durham Morning Herald* advertisement that would be circulated for additional signatures in Duke Forest that evening. The ad said, in part, that the murder of King had presented each citizen a stark choice "between the promise of America the Free or a harvest of death and inhumanity which is the result of continued oppression of black Americans." It stated that "we are all implicated" in allowing a society to flourish that "could take the life of a man who asked only for the freedom of his people" and outlined specific steps it urged white Americans to take to support racial progress.²⁰

The next two demands took aim at the "plantation system" at Duke. The first of these supported the nonacademic employees in their ongoing struggle to gain the right to bargain collectively with the university. It asked Knight to establish a committee of students, faculty, workers, trustees, and administrators to "consider" collective bargaining and union recognition for these workers.

The second of these two demands asked Duke to establish \$1.60 per hour as the base level of compensation for Duke's nonacademic employees—the national minimum wage for “for-profit” organizations. It requested that Knight make finding the funds for these raises a first priority for the university—ahead of any building programs.

The final demand was directed at the university's continuing relationship with the segregated Hope Valley Country Club. It called on Knight to resign his membership in the club. Knight, of course, had heard this demand before.²¹

Identifying negotiators for the group was the next step. Margaret “Bunny” Small, Birkhead, and Jonathan Kinney were chosen by a vote of the group. All three were active in campus politics, held leadership positions in student organizations, and were well known to Duke administrators. Kinney was the president of ASDU, Birkhead had served as editor of the *Duke Chronicle*, and Bunny Small had been elected president of the Pan-Hellenic Council before resigning soon after the start of her term.²²

In the late afternoon, a flyer for the 7:00 p.m. memorial procession to Duke Forest was distributed on campus. To emphasize the solemnity of the occasion, students were instructed to “wear clothes appropriate for mourning” and “bring candles to carry.”²³

Until Friday evening, April 5, Henderson noted, the core group of politically active students at Duke had found it “extremely difficult to organize a demonstration of any size.” “When we did decide to go to Knight's” house, Henderson recalled, organizers thought, “Well, we might get 20 people to go.” Therefore, they were “ecstatic” when 450 students and faculty converged on the Alumni Lounge on a rainy night to receive instructions for the procession. The emotions aroused by King's assassination, plus the fact that “the issues were not new ones,” explained the turnout, Henderson recounted. Seeing the size of the group, he “knew we had seized a moment in history.” Whatever the cause—especially given the small number of politically active students at Duke—the large turnout meant that most of the marchers had little, if any, prior protest experience. Many were also unaware that a sit-in at University House was planned.²⁴

Strange addressed the marchers before they headed out. He sought to forge a connection between the predominantly white protesters and the life and work of King. Describing the slain civil rights leader's commitment to non-violence, Strange spoke of King's belief that the “Black man cannot be free until the white man is free.” He recalled King's “regrettable conclusion” that “the white moderate who is more devoted to order than to justice” posed “the

Negro's great stumbling block in his [d]rive towards freedom." King called for "you and me, who probably are moderate," Strange told the marchers, "to walk in the rain for a long distance—past dark woods—to present a list of grievances to the president of the university. . . . We are gathered here tonight," Strange said, "to express our conviction that [King] shall not have died in vain. . . . Let us stand and act now," he concluded.²⁵

It took about forty minutes for the procession to reach Knight's house. Given that King, a minister, had preached the power of Christian love as a weapon for social change, it is not surprising that the march had a strong religious dimension. "It was like a pilgrimage, a crusade," Henderson said. "We could have as easily been singing 'Onward Christian Soldiers' as whatever it was we were singing." Small observed that many of the leaders came from religious backgrounds. "The whole development," she explained, "came from a circle of people who [had] religious affiliations—the University Christian movement, the YWCA—so there was a shared framework."²⁶

While the vast majority of protesters were white, some of Duke's Black student leaders joined the march, including Armstrong (the chair of the AAS at the time), Hopkins, Stef McLeod, and Howard. If Duke's white students felt passion born from protest for a noble cause, Black students experienced the march differently. According to Armstrong, these students were still reeling from the assassination of King. They remained confused about the motivations and commitment of their white colleagues. On the march, Howard wondered whether the planned sit-in at Knight's house would actually occur. "I remember . . . saying," she recounted, "Well, let's see what they are going to do 'cause we don't think they're going to do it."²⁷

When the marchers arrived at Knight's driveway, Henderson wrote, "Dr. Strange announced that some of the group would stay and that he would take those who would not stay to canvass the neighborhood for signatures and contributions for the advertisement." Griffith had called Knight to warn him that the students were marching to his house. "Mrs. Knight and I went to the door of University House to meet them," Knight wrote later. "I started to try to talk with them, but it was dark outside and both of us invited them in." A few marchers had trickled into University House before the Knights issued their invitation. Soon their numbers increased and, eventually, about 250 students entered the house. "It was dusk" when we reached the house, student Peter Neumann recalled, "and he couldn't see the crowd. The news that he had invited us into his house went like lightning to the back of the line. We couldn't believe our luck, but . . . Knight's beginning road to hell was paved

with his good intentions.” Neumann saw the shock Knight was experiencing. “By the time I entered his house,” he reported, “Knight, standing at the door, was in a state of near catatonic immobility.” Another student observed that Knight was “speechless” when he came through the front door of his house and found 250 “students sitting quietly in his living room.” The moment was powerful. Sally Avery remembered entering Knight’s house as “the moment I became a radical.”²⁸

Knight later acknowledged “what a wild thing it must have seemed” to open his house to the marchers. His reasons for doing so were complicated. For one thing, the Duke president viewed University House, completed under his direction in 1966, as both his personal residence and as a university building constructed to entertain large groups. Because the students did not attempt to enter the Knight family’s living quarters, the Duke president saw them as occupying public—not private—space. A second reason may have been that Knight, always confident in his powers of persuasion, thought that talking with the protesters might bridge differences and defuse an emotional situation. Perhaps most importantly, Knight knew a number of the protesters personally, having worked with them on university matters. He felt empathy for the others. Knight hoped that hospitality and conversation could ease the pain he knew the students were experiencing. “We did not see these distraught young people as demonstrators,” Knight wrote, “nor did we—even at moments of great tension as the evening wore on—see them as invaders of our privacy.” Knight explained later that he felt “very close” to the students and “wanted as little distance as possible between them and [himself] when the important questions turned up.” “There were a lot of [students] who were hurting,” Knight emphasized. “On a rainy night, if there was a possibility of getting in out of the rain to talk, why then let’s do it.”²⁹

Knight’s empathy for the students and sympathy for their cause would be sorely tested as the evening wore on.

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The 250 students occupied a large living room. “I had never seen a living room so big,” student Avery wrote: “brand-new, very modern, with almost no furniture on the . . . plush beige carpeting.” One student commented that the room “looks like a Howard Johnson’s Motor Lodge.” Designed to accommodate large groups, “the living room stretched out the full width of the back of the house,” Avery recalled, “with a glass wall rising two stories high.” Even this

grand space, however, soon became cramped. “The crowd at Knight’s house got very large,” one student remembered. “We really covered the floor.”³⁰

Kinney, Small, and Birkhead told Knight that they wanted to discuss the four demands. The three joined Knight in his private study, where negotiations went on for several hours, without progress. Throughout his Duke tenure, Knight had always been equivocal on the sensitive racial and political issues underlying the demands. “Birkhead would ask a point blank question, like ‘Do you believe in collective bargaining?’” one student described, “and Knight would respond in typical fashion that the question couldn’t be answered except in the ‘proper frame of reference.’” Asked to add his name to the signatories for the *Durham Morning Herald* ad, Knight refused because the text said that “we are all implicated” in the King assassination. Knight explained that he could not make such a statement on behalf of the university since “some of [Duke’s] trustees . . . did not feel implicated.” Knight also felt that he could not agree to a wage increase for Duke’s nonacademic employees. “I had to explain that I could not take such a step even if I would, and . . . why the option was not available to the university in any case.” Looking back, Knight acknowledged that his “earnest efforts to make both of these points . . . were guaranteed to be baffling and frustrating to the negotiators.”³¹

Every fifteen minutes or so, one of the student negotiators would emerge from the study to brief the larger group on the status of discussions. According to Henderson, “this was a pre-arranged signal [for protest organizers] to lead the cry that we were not leaving until we got the four items.” Henderson reported that at one point, when the group started shouting, “Hell no, we won’t go,” the house “shook” and Knight was “visibly shocked.” As to the four demands, every update was essentially the same—the Duke president was being “absolutely intransigent.”³²

Despite the lack of progress, the protesters remained upbeat. They sang protest songs throughout the evening, including “We Shall Not Be Moved,” the American folk song that was a standard in the labor and civil rights movements. “There was a great deal of camaraderie,” student Steven Burke recalled, and “pride that a gesture had been made.” Along with these reactions, however, Burke also remembered “anxiety resulting from the continual whispers that Knight had decided to call in the police—which seemed unlikely.”³³

During the evening, some of the participants watched television coverage of the violence erupting in scores of American cities. At these times, exhilaration gave way to concern. “We were all sitting there with the TV on,” Boger recalled, “watching buildings burning in Washington and rioting in cities and

there was a real feeling that this was an apocalyptic age.” “We heard reports that were frightening,” Jeff Van Pelt wrote later: “riots in city after city, violent police response, machine gun emplacements on the Capitol steps.” “The effect of watching the nation’s capital burn,” Henderson wrote, “intensified our determination to make the ‘system’ work.”³⁴

Armstrong had a different reaction to the television coverage. She could relate to the actions of the rioters. “I watched the riots on TV,” she recalled. “People were saying how they couldn’t understand how people could do that. I thought, ‘How could they not?’ I want to do that. But I don’t have enough guts; or, I’d been socialized to believe that’s just not the appropriate way of expressing your anger.”³⁵ Despite violence in many other American cities, Durham remained quiet on Friday night.

Negotiations continued until 11:00 p.m., when Mrs. Knight interrupted to insist that her husband eat something. At this point, Knight spoke to the students. Introduced by Kinney over shouts of “Hell no, we won’t go” and fidgeting with a matchbook, he addressed the protesters from a balcony overlooking the living room. Any hope that the Duke president would simply accept the four demands quickly evaporated. While Knight expressed sympathy for the goal of advancing racial justice, he told the protesters that he lacked the authority and willingness to make concessions in such a polarized environment. “If you think I can, sitting here, make many sorts of promises for an institution,” Knight explained, “all I can say is that I simply don’t have that power.” For Knight, caution was the mode of the day, even in the face of a racial crisis that was exploding across the country—not to mention in his own living room. Acknowledging the need to “keep our society together,” Knight nevertheless refused to make concessions under duress. “I don’t think pushing one another is the answer,” he commented. “I’m not setting out to push you, [and] I don’t want to feel that I myself [am] pushed.”³⁶

Knight was scheduled to address a memorial service for King the next day in Duke Chapel. He told students that he planned to use these remarks to “suggest some concrete things that I feel that we have been doing in the university [and] some of the things we can do beyond it.” He continued: “If we don’t try to meet the frustrations of this world with violence . . . I still believe there are some things we can do,” but “we’ve got to have enough order so that we can accomplish them.”³⁷

By now, the students in University House were insisting on immediate action. They were unsympathetic to Knight’s plea for “order” and his request for time to pursue unspecified further steps. Would progress have

been made in the civil rights movement after Selma, one student asked, if not for pressure from people who were willing to “get up and say, we’re not going to take this any more? That’s what we’re saying,” the student insisted, “and you don’t seem to understand it!” Knight felt that he had supported racial progress at Duke. “One thing that I regret more than any of you know,” he told the students, “is that . . . you don’t really believe that I have fought for some of these things that you are talking about.” Knight wrote later that the students “couldn’t imagine how much I agreed with them.” “I trust that you fought for these things,” Boger responded, “but I think that there comes a time when we can’t temporize, when we can’t wait, when we have got to take a stand now.”³⁸

“What about your country club?” a student shouted. Despite demands that he resign from Hope Valley as early as November 1966, Knight seemed not to get it. Instead, he told the students that he “hadn’t looked upon [Hope Valley] as the important issue.” Knight argued, as he had previously, that he preferred to “work with members of *my* community who may not see the matter of country club membership as you do.” Knight didn’t consider it “wise” to cut himself off from the chance to work for change from *inside* the club.³⁹

For Boger, however, time had run out on Knight’s gradualist approach. “Tonight, tanks are in Washington; machine guns on Capitol Hill,” he said. The country was “polarized” and Boger feared that without decisive action by men of good conscience, it would become even more divided. “When you say that you must stay in this country club to deal with interests in this community,” he argued, “it may be that we have come to the time when we are going to have to start working in opposition to . . . some of the aims of some of these people in the community.” “That is not a fair representation,” Knight responded, once again not seeming to comprehend the urgency of the students nor the national moral crisis to which they were responding.⁴⁰

Asked by graduate student Huck Gutman if the university would be willing to make a wage increase for nonacademic employees a higher funding priority than Duke’s aggressive building program, Knight objected. Salaries for nonacademic employees had increased by 50 percent in the past five years, Knight pointed out, and “the money for the buildings doesn’t come from the same sources” as the money for wages. Knight acknowledged twenty years later that his comments were not helpful. “That’s the sort of rational response that’s not appropriate to that evening,” he said. “It didn’t have any impact.”⁴¹

Boger spoke for the entire group when he described the urgency of the moment. “I really feel that an old order has changed in the United States of

America,” Boger declared. “I think that the tanks that are right now rumbling down the streets of Washington [are] witness [to] this change.” Boger continued:

One of the things that we as young people will not allow in the future are institutions that remain . . . immoral. Good men involved in all levels of Duke University somehow cannot take moral stands because of various forces seemingly beyond anyone’s control. . . . In this new order we have to stand up morally as institutions. We have to make stands . . . that meet the situation at hand. We cannot [face] a situation in which the country [is] falling apart with “maybes,” “might happens in the future,” and, “we’re very concerned.”

“I have no doubt of your deep concern,” Boger told Knight, “but we have come here non-violently, as students of this university, to say we must do something important now. Duke University, we must do it now. We are non-violent, but we will not be moved.” After Boger spoke, the *Duke Chronicle* reported, students “exploded into cheering and applause.” “We’ll stand behind you if you take a stand,” they shouted at Knight.⁴²

Although the “reasonable middle ground” Knight had tried to claim at Duke was disappearing before his eyes, he persisted. When students began another chorus of “hell no, we won’t go,” the Duke president responded, “I don’t think we’re going to settle the questions that torment us and tear us apart by your operating as though you were a mob, which I don’t believe you are.” Knight repeated that he could not act in response to a “mandate” or a “demand.” “I think you have to understand,” he told the students, “how we try to do our best in light of the other things we have to do in the University. I’m not trying to pussyfoot with you,” he said. “I’m just telling you the truth about it.”⁴³

Knight’s interaction with the students totally failed to have the calming effect he hoped for. In fact, his remarks only exacerbated an already tense situation. “He has a way of talking down to students that can be most antagonistic,” Henderson commented. “Knight was terribly inept,” another student observed, “and was rudely harangued by the crowd.” Knight saw the disconnect. “Communication just went to hell in a hat,” he observed later.⁴⁴

After the confrontation with Knight, the protesters began to discuss whether they would stay overnight. Birkhead argued that remaining at Knight’s house was a small sacrifice given events occurring in the country. Kinney was concerned about the impact that leaving might have on the Black students at Knight’s house. Van Pelt had a somber recollection of why students stayed. “In a collapsing world,” he wrote, “holding together in the name of

what was right seemed the only sane thing to do.” Ultimately, approximately 90 percent of the 250 students who entered University House Friday evening chose to remain overnight.⁴⁵

Learning that the students were discussing the overnight occupation of University House, Knight told them he thought it was counterproductive. “My reaction . . . is that this very much limits my freedom to do the very thing that you are asking that we do together,” he said. “It’s as simple as that.” Asked by a WDBS radio reporter what he would do if the protesters refused to leave, Knight made clear that he would not initiate a confrontation. “I certainly don’t feel that removing them by force is an answer to our problems,” he commented. “Yes, they may stay.”⁴⁶

The women who wished to occupy Knight’s house overnight faced a problem—in April 1968, female Duke undergraduates who planned to spend the night off campus were still required to sign out of their dorms to a specific location. In a contradiction that captures the ambiguity of the protest, a substantial number of coeds were concerned about violating this rule. To applause from the students, Knight gave permission for Duke women to sign out to University House for the night.⁴⁷

Meanwhile, negotiations resumed in the kitchen. Knight had an antagonistic relationship with Birkhead dating back to his time as editor of the *Duke Chronicle*. Knight asked that Birkhead be removed from the negotiating team. This request was accepted and Strange took his place. Still, no progress was made. According to Knight, by around 1:30 a.m., the group “could at least agree that nothing more would be accomplished that night.” Exhausted, Knight went to bed. Avery remembered the Duke president “on his way to his bedroom, carefully stepping over the sleeping bodies, followed by his basset hound.” Bob Ashley recalled Knight “looking beaten.”⁴⁸

By the end of the evening, protest leaders realized, according to Small, that Knight “was not going to negotiate with us; he wasn’t going to do anything. That’s where he was really a ‘wuss,’” Small reflected. “He should have done something. [But] it wasn’t in his character to step out on a limb.”⁴⁹

Both the atmosphere and the physical set-up in University House made sleep difficult. It was “a pretty tense situation,” the student narrator of a Silent Vigil audiotope commented. “It was hard to stay calm and cool about the whole thing.” The excitement also made sleep elusive. “There was a party atmosphere in that there was a bunch of people who were doing something that felt good,” Burke remembered. Henderson called it a “festive atmosphere.” Another student described the mood as one of “exhilaration” and “uncertainty.”⁵⁰

Black students in University House had mixed reactions to the unfolding events. Armstrong was concerned that Knight was setting a “trap” for the students and worried that police might still be called to evict the demonstrators. Deeply grieving King, she felt disconnected from the “festive atmosphere” she saw around her. Howard doubted whether the demonstration would succeed. “I don’t think there were a lot of people who had any experience with activism in that group,” she remembered, and “I’m not clear the sense of ‘groupness’ was there.” Howard was also concerned about the level of commitment of the white students. “Part of it was ‘stick-to-itiveness,’” she explained. “Even after they bedded down, I didn’t think they were going to stay. . . . It was just a fun thing for a lot of people there.”⁵¹

Griffith came by University House around 2:00 a.m., relieved that the students were safe. Griffith agreed with Knight’s decision to allow the protesters to stay through the night. Knight “very carefully, and rightfully so,” Griffith recalled, “never said ‘leave,’ which would have been a mistake. . . . He would have had to produce—[either to] have them leave or be reversed.” Support for the president’s decision, however, was far from unanimous. “The trustees, general public, and alumni felt” that allowing the protesters to stay “was a weak response,” Griffith recounted, many people believing that Knight “should have kicked them out.” “People were calling us from the University community and outside,” Knight remembered. They were saying, “Now, do you want us to get force to put them out?”⁵²

Pressure on Griffith and other administrators to end the occupation would build rapidly once morning arrived. To cover any contingency, a security force was stationed near the house.⁵³

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Before leaving for campus on Saturday morning to speak at the memorial service for King, Knight spoke to the protesters for about twenty minutes. He again stated that he had not realized how important a symbol his Hope Valley membership was. He told them he would do something about it “not today, but certainly not in 18 months.” Knight claimed credit that Duke was the first white southern university to prohibit the use of segregated facilities by campus groups, not mentioning the role the study-in by Black students had played in forcing the policy change. Reiterating that he could not respond under pressure, he told the students that he would form a committee consisting of administrators, faculty, students, and trustees to discuss the labor situation at Duke.⁵⁴ Taking no questions, he then left for campus.

At around 10:00 a.m., a group of senior Duke administrators, all white men, met to discuss the rapidly unfolding events. Presided over by Cole, attendees included Griffith, vice president Charles B. Huestis, vice provost Barnes Woodhall, director of information services Clarence E. Whitfield, vice president for institutional advancement Frank L. Ashmore, and university counsel Edwin C. Bryson. This group formed the core of an “administrative working team” that would participate, according to Cole, in a “continuous and expanding meeting of administrative and faculty colleagues . . . to decide on an appropriate course of action.”⁵⁵

When Knight joined the working team on Saturday morning, four courses of action were under consideration. Among them, according to Cole, was “the use of force for removal.” The final decision was left to Knight. He decided against the use of force. Instead, the Duke president would proceed with his planned chapel remarks, which, he hoped, would help resolve the crisis. Knight told his fellow administrators that, in his talk, he would commit “the university to certain efforts to improve relations in the Duke community and to appoint a committee composed of both Black and white members to examine problems in the Duke community.”⁵⁶

The students spent part of the morning cleaning up the public spaces they had occupied in University House. Throughout Saturday and the days that followed, the protesters were careful to present themselves as a moderate, respectful group motivated by morality and conscience. They were not extremists ready to use violence to force changes at the school. “We didn’t see ourselves as radical,” Bunny Small explained. “We weren’t destroying property or burning cities; we were a moderate voice of reason. We weren’t challenging the university’s power; we were challenging the university to play the role universities in liberal societies are supposed to play.” This message was received. “Even in their times of vigorous protest,” Knight wrote, “they were a surprisingly polite and civilized group. . . . They were at one level antagonistic because they were determined to make demands . . . yet they were restrained and disciplined along with their passionate sense of outrage.”⁵⁷ Cleaning up University House reinforced this perception.

Knight spoke at the King memorial service in Duke Chapel just after 1:00 p.m. In remarks he later called “an outburst against the violence and social injustice of our society,” Knight talked about the need for healing while cautioning that change would take time. Noting that he and Mrs. Knight “are probably the only ones here with 200 guests in their house at the moment,” the Duke president said he hoped that the student protesters were listening

to him. “The mixture of feelings and emotions among those of us here and among the men and women of this country are beyond rational description at this moment,” Knight said. “To be honest with you, I cannot say either to you or to my friends at home that all of the losses, tragedy, [and] bafflement of this moment can be resolved in a weekend.”⁵⁸

Knight alluded to only one of the four student demands in his speech—the establishment of a committee to study labor issues. Acknowledging the importance of the university’s treatment of its nonacademic employees, Knight said that, in the next two or three days, he would speak about bringing together members of the board of trustees, faculty, student body, employees, and administrative staff to look “in common purpose . . . at those developments which will serve us best in this great University.” In all of this, Knight was intentionally unspecific. Rather, he spoke of the need for each individual and institution to assume their share of the “burden” for the violence and destruction in the world. He suggested that the protesters in University House were attempting to absolve themselves of guilt by making demands on others. “If I have one criticism . . . of the righteous indignation of some of my young friends of the moment,” Knight observed, “it is that they have felt that somehow we could pass the burden of responsibility to others. No man is guiltless,” he argued. Knight ended with a call to work together to find solutions to common problems.⁵⁹

While acknowledging in general the dimensions of the crisis Duke and the country were facing, Knight failed to respond to the issues that had motivated the protest. Having been told by Knight that he would address their concerns at the memorial service, the protesters were disappointed with what they heard. Not only had just one of their four demands been mentioned, but the Duke president had characterized their attitude as one of “righteous indignation.” Henderson described Knight’s decision not to take a dramatic stand on the issues as a “drastic mistake.” He cited Knight’s attitude as pivotal in contributing to the “determination” of the protesters. Once again, Knight knew that his efforts at communication had failed. He wrote later that his speech had “satisfied no one—including myself.”⁶⁰

After the memorial service, Knight went to Cole’s home. Later in the afternoon, William G. Anlyan, dean of the School of Medicine and Knight’s personal physician, stopped by to examine him. Anlyan concluded that the Duke president was near collapse and seemed at risk of suffering a relapse of his recent hepatitis. Anlyan ordered Knight into seclusion for forty-eight hours. “He and the provost looked at me,” Knight recalled, and said, “You’re not

going back to your house. You're going out to the lake and you're going to be away from this.' They meant it," Knight remembered. Although he later wrote that "part of me felt like a draft dodger," Knight did not protest. "There comes a time when the physical self just comes apart," he remarked. With Knight sidelined, board chair Wright Tisdale designated Cole acting chief executive officer of the university.⁶¹

As Saturday passed, demands to end the occupation grew ever stronger. "Calls were flooding in from alumni," according to Griffith, and they were saying, "Get those damn people out of the house. How can you allow them to stay in there another minute?" Over and over, according to Griffith, members of the administration heard the same refrain: "Why are they in Douglas Knight's home? We've lost control. The university has no leadership."⁶²

These reactions were, of course, colored by perceptions of Knight. At board meetings, Griffith recounted, the Duke president would try to make sense of the student activism emerging on campus to the trustees: "He interpreted why they were doing things and what they were doing." After a point, however, a number of board members had heard enough. "Those people would say," Griffith remembered, "'Doug Knight's been making excuses for those students for five years and we're no longer [wanting] to hear any more excuses, it's time to get them under control.' . . . Many people eventually said he's just an apologist for the students. . . . He can't control [them] so he's trying to validate what they are doing."⁶³

Thus, Knight found himself in an impossible position. He was perceived as a "wuss" by the student protesters because of his refusal to agree to their demands and as weak by trustees and alumni because of his inability to control the students.

Members of the administration's working team "were very concerned," Griffith recalled. "We were sensitive to what was taking place. We knew we had a limited amount of time. . . . The pressure [from the general public] was tremendous." Even some on the working team questioned whether the university's moderate course of action was the right one. "I disagree with the position taken by President Knight," Cole wrote later, that people in University House could be considered "guests . . . rather than . . . uninvited occupants. . . . Had the president given his approval," Cole commented, "I was prepared, together with Ed Bryson, to . . . use force . . . to try to dislodge the occupants."⁶⁴

Ultimately, force was not used. One reason is because the situation in Durham made such a move risky and difficult. "It was continually feared that an explosion in Durham would be sparked by events at Duke," Cole wrote later.

“The Durham Police force at the time was over taxed and over extended.” Cole believed that “this fact was never appreciated by those . . . who demanded a policy of throw the rascals out.”⁶⁵

A second reason, however, was equally important. Although the 250 students in University House were perceived as an occupying force by many trustees, alumni, and faculty, members of the administrative working team continued to view them sympathetically. “Those of us who were here . . . knew the people involved,” Griffith recounted. “These were people who had leadership responsibilities. Many of them we had gotten to know very well.” Ashmore described the leaders directing events as “people . . . with whom we have worked, and for whom we all had a great deal of respect.” Administrators, Griffith explained, felt that “we should attempt to work in a reasonable kind of fashion with people who were our students, they weren’t our enemies. They were part of our . . . University family. . . . You don’t kick your family out of someplace, you try to understand,” he explained. Kinney described the connection between administrators and protesters much more succinctly. “We were their sons and daughters,” he explained.⁶⁶

Griffith remained in regular contact with Strange by phone throughout the day. Around 8:00 p.m., Griffith and Anlyan visited University House to brief Kinney, Small, and Strange on Knight’s health. They told them that the Duke president was exhausted, would not be returning to the house, and would be incommunicado until 4:00 p.m. on Monday.⁶⁷

The news that Knight would be sidelined until Monday afternoon presented the leaders with what Henderson called the “first real crisis” of the protest. “Not only did we not know where to direct the demonstration,” he wrote, but “we did not know if we could hold the demonstration together.” The students were also genuinely concerned about Knight’s health. “We were afraid that he might really be sick,” Henderson remembered.⁶⁸

Unable to decide what to do next, the three leaders asked the students to designate seven additional representatives for consultation. Known collectively as the Committee of Ten, this group would lead the protest going forward. All were white.⁶⁹

After further discussion, the expanded leadership group decided that the best course would be to move the demonstration to Duke’s main quadrangle in the morning. Griffith was approached about the idea and he was very supportive. “My feeling was that there was not a whole lot of room in that house for more people,” Griffith explained. To gain additional support for the four demands, Griffith believed, “it was important to take [the protest] to the Duke

community.” Moreover, Griffith believed that the Duke campus was the right place for the four demands to be addressed. “I guess my feeling . . . is that Duke is a family, and if you want to change things, you should try to work with your family first before going externally.” Protest leaders asked Griffith if Duke women who joined the protest would be allowed to sign out of their dorms to the quad overnight. He “immediately jumped at the idea,” according to Henderson, “and called the deans to tell them about it.”⁷⁰

If Griffith quickly embraced the prospect of a move, many of the protesters camped out in Knight’s living room were wary. Even before the plan could be fully explained, “dissension spread,” according to Henderson. Although most of the students in University House had little experience participating in demonstrations, the prior twenty-four hours had made a strong impact. “A number of people who had never questioned the authority of the university before,” Henderson explained, “suddenly found themselves in an occupying force in the house of the university President. They were pleased with their boldness, and many did not want to give up the position of power.” Writing later, one student commented that for him, the sit-in at Knight’s house had been a turning point. He said, “I had asserted myself for the first time in my life.”⁷¹

The group discussion that ensued was highly charged. Some students were concerned that a sit-in by two hundred or so students on the main Duke quadrangle would get lost, with the protest seen as “nothing but a joke.” Local 77 organizer Peter Brandon argued vehemently that the protesters should remain at University House. He said that preliminary discussions were underway for a strike by Duke dining hall workers but that any planning was predicated on Duke students having seized “a key installation on the Duke campus.” Leaving University House, he told the demonstrators, “will be judged a retreat by . . . Duke employees.” Bunny Small, who favored a move to the quad, worried that Knight’s illness would cause those on campus who were already skeptical about the occupation of University House to become even more antagonistic.⁷²

As discussions dragged on, tempers flared. Late in the evening, the increasingly tense discussions were interrupted by a student who told the group that Durham was imploding. “The police station reports police cars are burning in the police garage lots,” the student reported. “Marcel’s supermarket is burning, condemned houses all over Durham are burning, cabs started burning when the police changed shifts.” “Right after that,” a student described, “there was the most tremendous hush I’ve ever heard that fell across the whole place.” By Sunday, a 7:00 p.m. curfew had been declared in Durham and the sale

of explosives, firearms, ammunition, gasoline, alcoholic beverages, and other items considered dangerous was prohibited. The National Guard was mobilized to keep the peace. Tension at University House increased with news of the evacuation of Aycock Hall on the Duke campus following a bomb threat.⁷³

Sleep was again difficult for those occupying University House Saturday night. By Sunday morning, however, a consensus had formed around the plan to move to the main quad. When a vote was taken, 90 percent of the protesters supported the move.⁷⁴

Saturday evening, Brandon had suggested that a strike by Duke's nonacademic employees was under consideration. Early Sunday morning, he confirmed that planning for a strike had begun. The leaders of Local 77 saw the student protest as a way to gain student and faculty support for higher wages and collective bargaining. News of the potential strike raised the stakes for the students. "If the protest failed," Gutman warned, "some people . . . may get fired and find it very difficult to get work in Durham. . . . By involving the [workers and the Durham] Black community, we're giving them expectations," he explained.⁷⁵ The protest was no longer just a statement by Duke students and faculty to their university. Now events had real-world consequences for Duke workers.

Howard had been at University House since Friday night and was concerned. On Sunday morning, with the protest about to move to the quad, she commented on the "generally festive atmosphere" at Knight's house during the sit-in. Having participated in the AAS study-in outside Knight's office in November 1967, she was "quick to point out the difference in the organization and discipline of the two demonstrations," Henderson wrote. He recalled Howard pointing out that "whites put so much store in individuality that they were almost incapable of self-enforced unity and discipline." If the group went to the quad with the same attitude, Howard predicted, they would be "ridiculed for being so poorly disciplined." "It was too loose for me," Howard remembered. "I didn't think they cared. It was like 'how cute, here we are spending the night at Dr. Knight's house.' And I didn't think there was a seriousness of purpose." Howard was direct with the group. "This ain't going to be worth nothing," she remembered telling the group, "because you just don't have it—unorganized, undisciplined people just don't seem to be serious about it at all."⁷⁶

Howard's comments made a difference. Through a process of "collective decision making" but based largely on Howard's remarks, the decision was made that the protest on the quad would be a "Silent Vigil." No talking would be permitted, except during breaks and at mealtime. In addition, a group of

monitors would be established and instructed on how to keep the group together. Reminded that her comments gave rise to the idea for a “silent” vigil, Howard was surprised. “I would have never thought that silence was a part of it,” she commented wryly, “because that ain’t me.” As for the monitors, “of course they were there for discipline,” Howard recalled, “but the whole business about the monitors was a safety feature.” “The lessons of my youth participating in demonstrations were applied to the vigil,” she recalled, “as much for survival (how not to get beaten by the police) [as to provide a] recipe for a successful protest.”⁷⁷

With “trepidation” and no sense of how they would be received, the protesters started marching to West Campus around 10:30 a.m., accompanied by a police escort. Henderson’s thoughts were racing as he left Knight’s house. He recalled questioning “if we had made the right decision, wondering if Knight was sick, thinking that we had lost our power base, [concerned that the] struggle would get very diffused.” A small “cleaning crew” of students remained behind at University House.⁷⁸

Griffith and other members of the administrative working team were relieved that all but a handful of the protesters had vacated the president’s home. By labeling the students as “guests” and treating them as “family,” Duke administrators were able to end the occupation without using force. Oliver Harvey wondered, however, whether race had played a role in the administration’s restraint. “Naturally, 250 white students, the university is going to respond to,” he commented later. “Had we as Black people gone to Knight’s house, they would have tear-gassed us out, gone in and drawn injunctions on us. That’s law. But with 250 or 260 white students, no. Black students saw that as well as we did. . . . Duke is going to respect their whites, not us. They respect nobody Black, students or employees,” Harvey remarked.⁷⁹

When they arrived on the quad, the protesters assembled in rows. Churchgoers leaving Duke Chapel on Sunday morning were “somewhat surprised” at the reception waiting for them when services were over.⁸⁰ The Silent Vigil had begun.