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ALUMNI MAGAZINE

Witnesses to History

In archived interviews
from 50 years ago,
Cornellians reflect on
the Straight takeover

PLUS:

Monarch butterfly maven

History of the gig economy

'First-generation Martian' Nagin Cox '86



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In the archives of Kroch Library resides a collection of oral histories recorded in the months following the takeover of Willard Straight Hall in April 1969, an event that would make headlines as the first armed occupation on an American campus. A half century later, those seldom-accessed interviews serve as vibrant testimony to the events of that spring, when Cornellians wrestled with difficult and divisive issues that continue to challenge American society today. To mark the takeover's fiftieth anniversary, CAM excerpts those histories—eyewitness testimony, striking in its freshness and detail, recalling a defining moment in Big Red history that had only just unfolded.

62 Upon Reflection

When Tom Jones '69, MRP '72, was a senior, he was among the dozens of African American students who took over the Straight. But in a remarkable transformation, the former activist went on to become not only a barrier-breaking finance executive but a University trustee who even endowed a campus prize for interracial understanding. This spring, Cornell University Press is publishing his memoir, *From Willard Straight to Wall Street*. "You had good people on both sides," he says, pondering the takeover in a recent interview with CAM. "Everybody was well-intentioned. Nobody was a bad person. But because of the communication breakdowns and other dynamics, you ended up in this almost unimaginable confrontation."

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A special insert produced by University Relations and the Division of Alumni Affairs and Development

COVER: A SCENE FROM THE OCCUPATION OF WILLARD STRAIGHT HALL IN APRIL 1969. CREDIT: CORNELL RARE AND MANUSCRIPT COLLECTIONS



Time Capsule

A half-century-old collection of oral histories in Kroch Library captures the tumult of spring 1969 in vivid detail

By **Beth Saulnier**

Over the past fifty years, the takeover of Willard Straight Hall has been exhaustively analyzed and revisited—in books, at least one documentary film, and innumerable articles, particularly those marking major anniversaries. But one trove of memories from those days hasn't been widely accessed. In the months following the takeover, dozens of Cornellians and other community members were invited to formally record their thoughts—on the occupation, the events leading up to it, its aftermath, and its potential legacy. The interviews were conducted as part of Challenges to Governance, an oral history project launched by the University Library to capture memories of the drama that had roiled the Hill, as well as to chronicle students' increasing demands for a stronger say in how Cornell was run.

The interviews—whose participants include students, faculty, administrators, and local officials—were recorded on audio tape and transcribed; those old-school typewritten pages now reside in red folders in Kroch Library, repository of the University's Rare and Manuscript Collections. To mark the fiftieth anniversary of the takeover, CAM read them from cover to cover (excluding those whose access is restricted at the interviewee's request). The following are excerpts from those histories—voices from two generations ago, when Cornellians wrestled with difficult and divisive issues that continue to challenge American society today.

The collection itself, and therefore the excerpts featured here, doesn't constitute a comprehensive retelling of the events of that spring. There are few voices from inside the Straight, for one thing; faculty and administrators predominate. The histories occasionally contradict each other on points of fact. Interviewees aren't reflecting on long-ago events with the benefit of distance and perspective, but rather recounting what recently happened. Some of the language may seem dated or insensitive to modern ears. But as the University looks back on April 1969, the interviews serve as potent time capsules—eyewitness testimony, striking in its freshness and detail, recalling a defining moment in Big Red history that had only just unfolded.

The excerpts have been condensed and edited for clarity.

ICONIC MOMENT: Black students exiting the Straight following the two-day occupation



CAMPUS CONFLICT
(from top): President Perkins (left) is shoved from the podium during a symposium on South Africa in February 1969; protesters dance on tables in the Ivy Room in December 1968 to express displeasure at a lack of progress on a black studies program; students address faculty and administrators circa 1969.

‘I think almost from the beginning we were inevitably on a collision course leading up to the events of April.’

— Ruth Darling

LEAD-UP TO THE TAKEOVER

In 1964, President James Perkins established the Committee on Special Educational Projects (COSEP), a program that recruited more African American students to campus, including those from less privileged backgrounds. Many participants would come to feel that the University didn't entirely welcome or accommodate them, leading to a series of protests and culture clashes.

Ruth Darling ASSOCIATE DEAN OF STUDENTS

“Clearly when COSEP was instituted we were all completely unaware of the magnitude of the problems we were getting into. I think we started off, not consciously, on a very paternalistic, somewhat benevolent basis, and we had no conception of the way black students would feel, coming into what was essentially a white racist university. At that time I don't think we thought we were racist; in fact, I don't think it even occurred to us. The main problem was we didn't know what we didn't know. It was our feeling at the time that all we needed to do was to ensure that black students would be welcome in our white fraternities and sororities,

and if we could accomplish this, our campus would be receptive and appropriate for black students. I don't need to tell you now how wrong we were, and how blind. I think almost from the beginning we were inevitably on a collision course leading up to the events of April.”

Cleveland Donald Jr., PhD '73 TAKEOVER PARTICIPANT

“Perkins did not create an atmosphere conducive to black people on this campus, so that encouraged black people to think that white men didn't care anything about them. Many of the faculty members, especially conservative ones, felt that black students should be treated just like any white students—that they were white students with black skin. And with that kind of attitude, the black students began to develop a more extreme position, and there was a growing amount of hostility.”

Walter Slatoff PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH

“One could feel the tension over the growing movement on the part of black students toward greater self-definition, greater separatism. More white students and professors were feeling that blacks were becoming hostile toward them. More black students were coming to feel that all whites were their enemies; others were simply feeling greater pride in their blackness. Whites were over-reacting to this and seeing it as some sort of threat.”

Darling (associate dean)

“I went to a security meeting, and we discussed what the procedures would be in the event of the occupation of Day Hall, how to keep the University in operation. And I said rather smugly that we had already planned what we would do in the case of an occupation of Day Hall—we would regroup at Willard Straight.”

PHOTO (MIDDLE LEFT): CORNELL DAILY SUN





THE OCCUPATION

Early on Saturday, April 19, a group of African American students entered the Straight and demanded that everyone leave; those evicted included families staying in the building's guest rooms for Parents' Weekend.

Donald (takeover participant)

"We walked in and one of the janitors was cleaning up and we asked for the keys. We informed him that black students were going to occupy the building. There was no overt threat of physical violence. The people who went into the building did not have sticks or guns or anything like that."

Rev. David Connor '59 CATHOLIC CHAPLAIN

"I walked over to the Straight with [members of Students for a Democratic Society, or SDS], where they set up a friendly picket, which said 'Support black demands,' 'Amnesty for black students,' and other similar signs. They were a small crowd of about forty or fifty. It was a cold, drizzly morning. The mood was not one of great panic. The Straight was eerily silent and the blacks were up in the pool room where we could see them shooting pool. Parents came in an almost tourist kind of way, taking pictures. There was a little bit of, 'Look, Mom, there's a real live demonstration.'"



STUDENT UNION
(from far left): An occupier looks out a window; students gather outside as an SDS leader addresses the crowd; parents pack their belongings after being evicted.

Michael Wright '68, BS '69 SDS MEMBER

"We decided the best thing to do would be to throw a kind of security guard around the building to give the blacks whatever moral support they needed. So a group of about twenty of us would go out every two hours during that night to provide a presence and try to keep away whatever whites that might want to get into trouble. I think a lot of what we did indicated to some extent the unconscious racism inherent even in groups like SDS. [We] were going out there to help protect the blacks when it was clear that they really didn't need protection and they were doing well on their own. I think a lot of people wanted to be part of something, after being frustrated in politics for a while. So not all the reasons for going out there that night were good ones, although in a lot of ways they seemed good at the time." >



'We walked in and one of the janitors was cleaning up and we asked for the keys. We informed him that black students were going to occupy the building.'

— Cleveland Donald Jr., PhD '73

‘I think it was an example of well-intentioned but naïve activity. They had no idea how far these black students had committed themselves, how serious they were.’

— Rev. David Connor '59

THE DELTA UPSILON INCIDENT

On Saturday morning, a group of fraternity brothers entered the Straight through a window with the aim of ending the occupation.

Donald (takeover participant)

“The DU guys came in and a few minutes later they were gone, ‘cause they were getting their rumps beaten very easily by the black students. They said they came in to talk. I think they must have thought because they were white they were going to frighten black students into leaving, but black students immediately saw their entrance through the window as a hostile act and immediately several people went after them to throw [them] out.”

Santo Laquatra '70 DELTA UPSILON MEMBER

“The only thing that was in our minds was to go up to talk to the blacks, listen to their demands, and try to get them to come out. We went in unarmed. We made it as far as the Ivy Room steps and were confronted. These people all had some type of weapon—a hammer, pipes, chains, knives, cue sticks. We said, ‘We’ve come in to talk to you guys to open up the doors.’ We were carrying on a conversation about ten minutes. Then [the occupiers were] like, ‘We’re

all done talking, and you boys better get out, because we’re going to hurt some people. We’re going to do something.’ It was getting wilder and wilder. We turned to leave and were surrounded. We were pushed down off the steps, and [a DU brother] was hit over the head with a hammer. It was about to be brought down on his head again when a DU picked up a cue stick and hit the black holding the hammer over the head. That’s when all hell broke loose. I was hit in the face with chemical mace [or] insect repellent. It blinded me; it took away my breath. I was dragged across the floor, kicked, and punched. I was terrified. One of my fraternity brothers put me over his shoulder and carried me out. We were harassed the whole way—hit with ashtrays and chains and punched and hit with cue sticks. We finally got out, and I was taken to the hospital.”

Connor (chaplain)

“I talked extensively with the students that went in, and I think it was an example of well-intentioned but naïve activity. They thought they could save Parents’ Weekend and Cornell’s face, and make themselves rather heroic if they would just go in and show these blacks that they weren’t afraid of them, reason with them. Then the blacks would hear what they’d said and open the doors. They had no idea how far these black students had committed themselves, how serious they were.”



PHYSICAL ALTERCATION:

Delta Upsilon brothers leave the Straight through a window (top left) after a conflict with the occupiers; an ashtray is hurled after them (above).

Laquatra (DU member)

“We felt we could maybe start a precedent where people can respect law instead of just making a habit out of not respecting it. If we weren’t sympathetic toward the blacks, we wouldn’t have gone in at all, because we had nothing to gain. People say we went in there for glory, but you can forget that. It was something that we felt we had to do.”

Darling (associate dean)

“I’ve often wondered what would have happened if DU hadn’t taken it upon themselves to enter the building. With all our planning the week before, we had failed to consider this point: if a building’s occupied, what kinds of protective measures do you take as far as surrounding it? We did not do an adequate job, and we’re culpable for that. Had we prevented the boys from DU from going in, how different would the situation have been?”

ARMED OCCUPATION

After the DU incident, black students, who had stored rifles at the Afro American Society's headquarters on Wait Avenue, brought them into the Straight.

Connor (chaplain)

"Rumors were flying. The blacks were receiving threatening phone calls trying to intimidate them into leaving—telling them that armed whites were approaching, fraternity men were massing to take over the building. And the black students [could] look out and see that the campus patrol, thirty strong, would not be able to defend them against 200 fraternity men that had blood in their eyes. So the black students began to believe that they were really in a threatened position."

Darling (associate dean)

"I felt that in view of the action of the DU boys—in view of the countless rumors that there were carloads of white students and white people from the community approaching the Straight—it was not unreasonable that the black students would want to defend themselves. If I'd been in there, in that cavernous building with 6,000 entrances and windows, I think I'd jolly well have wanted a gun myself. I was also aware of the fact that actually there's no law against the possession of a gun. And I think some of us felt that we were as responsible for the guns being there as the blacks were for having brought them in."

Connor (chaplain)

"I think the white community failed to realize how much of the Ku Klux Klan spirit still beats in the breast of white Americans. I was in Owego, and some guy told me that he was in a bar the night of the black students occupying the Straight and heard eight men who were ready to go with guns from Owego to Cornell. They were seriously talking about it. I've heard similar statements about people in the Ithaca bars. They weren't just mild threats." >

PHOTO, BOTTOM: ITHACA VOICES/PROVIDED



'I think some of us felt that we were as responsible for the guns being there as the blacks were for having brought them in.'

— Ruth Darling

THE WEAPONS: Guns being brought into the Straight (above). Below: Some of the armed protesters during the occupation.



RISING TENSIONS

As the armed occupiers remained in the Straight on Saturday night, anxiety on the Hill was high. There were numerous wild rumors and false fire alarms, not to mention an actual fire at Chi Psi fraternity.

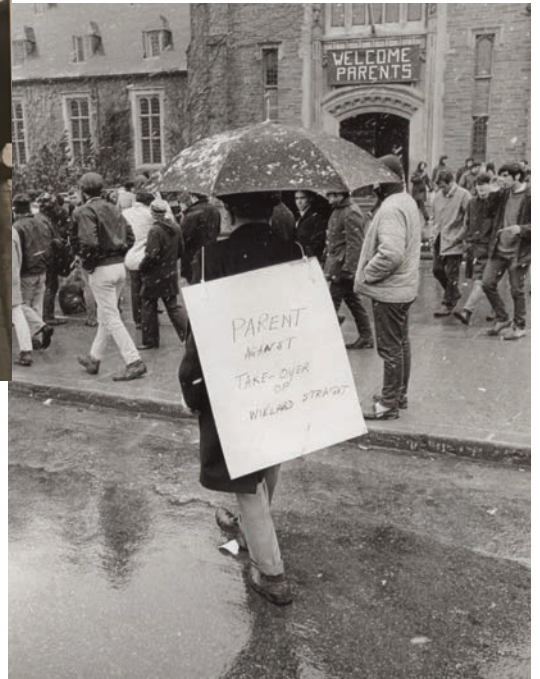
Stuart Brown Jr. '37, PhD '42 V.P. FOR ACADEMIC AFFAIRS

"The campus was extremely tense. There were reports coming in over the radio in the Safety Division of gunshots. Later a report came in that there was gunfire west of Library Slope in the neighborhood of the dormitories. Almost simultaneously, there came in a report that black students had been seen in the Straight with rifles—and those two reports, for a few awful seconds, were confused so that there was talk about black students firing down the slope. This was very quickly corrected; it was erroneous. But the two reports came so close on each other that a newsman got them crossed. As time went on, the campus cooled down considerably. Traffic fell off. The reports on firing guns finally ceased. Just as I left the Safety Division, a patrolman came in with about six decks of firecrackers, which he had taken off some male white students, and the inference was that most of the so-called firearms fired had really been firecrackers. We thought it was absolutely incumbent upon us to do what we could to get the students out of the Straight before another night fell. I felt strongly that another night like that one, in which tension built amongst the student body, could be absolutely disastrous."

Darling (associate dean)

"We had a report that the tower had been occupied, and of course we immediately thought of [the University of] Texas [where a sniper had killed more than a dozen people]. And indeed there was a light up in the tower, and the entrance was barricaded. We called the Safety Division and they said they would investigate.





Eventually they called back and said, 'A workman left the light on and locked the door and barricaded it so no one would go up there while he was in the process of these repairs.' I can only say that we accepted the story with relief."

Robert Miller, PhD '48
DEAN OF THE FACULTY

"Certainly it was in my mind that the governor could at any moment decide to mobilize the National Guard or state troopers. A neighbor later told my wife that her son had been one of several young men who were organizing a vigilante group; they had guns. I think if it had gone another night, the odds were at least one in five that we would have had some shooting."

Steve Muller, PhD '58
V.P. FOR PUBLIC AFFAIRS

"My colleagues and I knew that guns had been brought in, but by nine o'clock [on Saturday night] we were also aware that this had gotten on the news, and that the climate had changed because everybody was uptight about the guns. And the other thing that had changed was the weather. Saturday was kind of miserable. By Sunday it was beautiful, unfortunately—lots of onlookers. We discussed how drastically the situation had been altered by the presence of guns, and how difficult it might be to avoid a situation where someone in that building with a weapon might feel sufficiently threatened to use it, and then we'd be really out of control—one shot, and a lot of people start shooting, and God knows what."

Jack Kiely '50
ITHACA MAYOR

"We all determined that the students really had to leave the building. We were recommending the use of court injunction. [Provost] Dale Corson said that they were trying to negotiate and felt they would be successful. We stressed that they must not come out with the weapons. Finally we got word that the students were coming out. With guns? Answer: Yes. Everybody went into orbit down here. This was a horrid mistake. There wasn't a soul in any of our police agencies that concurred with this."

Muller (V.P.)

(Who had entered the Straight with Vice Provost W. Keith Kennedy, PhD '47, and negotiated an end to the occupation): "I called [Corson] to report that we were waiting for them to get ready to move out, and he said, 'Now what about the guns?' and I said, 'They will not leave the building unless they can take their weapons with them. They feel threatened.' It seemed to me at that point that there was a premium on getting them out. I believed that they had no intention of using those arms for offensive purposes. They were concerned about being attacked while they walked across campus to 320 Wait. We had an agreement with [occupier Ed] Whitfield ['70] that the one condition under which we would break off negotiations was if the weapons were loaded. And Whitfield said that he would see to it that the breaches would be open and there would be no shells in there." >



DIFFERENCES OF OPINION (this page and opposite): Some of the many protest signs and face-to-face discussions that the occupation sparked

'I think if it had gone another night, the odds were at least one in five that we would have had some shooting.'

— Robert Miller, PhD '48



EXITING THE STRAIGHT

The University agreed to the occupiers' terms; chief among them was a pledge to petition the faculty to nullify judicial sanctions against several black students for previous protests, as well as a promise of amnesty for the takeover itself. On Sunday afternoon, the students marched out.

Muller (V.P.)

"The word came they were ready to go, and we went up to the main lobby. There we saw this group, which was much larger than I expected; I did not think there were over a hundred people. Also, we didn't realize that they would be in this almost paramilitary formation, with the women and some people in the center, and these sort of armed outriders on the outside. Nor did we realize that they were planning to carry the weapons sort of at port-arms. The doors opened, and there was noise from the people outside; the blacks remained absolutely silent. We went out after they had all left. I could then see the cameras, and I began thinking, My God, the pictures. I hadn't really visualized what that exit would look like."

James Pewett '71

SOPHOMORE IN SPRING '69

"Finally the big moment came, the doors began to open, and the blacks came out. When they came out brandishing the shotguns and rifles and pool sticks with knives taped to the end, the general reaction was one of shock. Out of the 2,000 people that were there, I would say around one-tenth raised their hands in a clenched fist, a gesture of support for the blacks."

Donald (takeover participant)

"The question was how were you going to leave that building, and uppermost in their mind was that black people had to leave as men. That meant that they had to leave hold-

ing those guns in their hands, since leaving any other way would be like a surrender. [Also] uppermost in their mind was what was going to be the reaction of the black community. And subsequently the reaction by the campus, and the whole society, only legitimized their act. These were men preparing for revolution."

Connor (chaplain)

"They came out with a position of power. They did not come out with their tails between their legs, cringing, trying to sneak out the back. They came out proud and responsible for their action. And the use of the open carbines—as politically unfortunate as it was, as far as the picture and the reaction around the country has been—I think was probably one of the best ways that they could ensure that they wouldn't be attacked, they wouldn't be insulted, their ranks wouldn't be broken, and that they would be able to march with great pride back to their co-op at 320 Wait Avenue."

Wright (SDS member)

"SDS people formed double lines through which the blacks walked out to try to keep back some people who were pretty hostile. I remember half getting into a fight with one guy who was screaming all sorts of things. I suppose the best thing we did that day was to just talk with a lot of people. After the blacks had left the Straight and people were hanging around there, we got into discussions with people who didn't understand what the blacks had done or who were very hostile about it, and tried to at least convince them that the blacks had been right—or if we couldn't convince them of that, tried to at least make them see it as much as possible from the blacks' perspective."

Cushing Strout

PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH

"We were all watching the blacks come out of the Straight, and we walked with them as they marched



A LOOK INSIDE:

After the building was vacated, administrators found that the occupiers had blockaded doors and windows with furniture and damaged some property.

up to Wait Avenue. For me the posture was the most significant thing—the way in which they carried the guns in a military formation, and the Che Guevara kind of style they dramatized. It never occurred to me that the guns would be used; I thought of them as having a kind of guerrilla theater quality. But I also felt that the sight of the administrators trailing along was very humiliating. I watched the agreement being signed, and it seemed to me that this was a situation of intimidation and that the administration had no options at that point. They'd been forced to do whatever was necessary to get the blacks out of the building."

Elmer Meyer

DEAN OF STUDENTS

"I was one of the first to go inside [the Straight after the protesters left]. It might have looked like a fraternity house after a long party. No major damage. There were some things that irritated me—the fact that somebody broke open the pinball machines and swiped the money, that they broke cue sticks. For some reason, somebody pulled down one of the big lights in the Memorial Room. And every one of those rooms where parents were staying had one panel broken out of [the door]. This kind of thing was unnecessary and, to me, degraded any symbol for being in there." >

A FEVER PITCH

Tensions rose on Monday, when faculty voted against nullifying the student punishments, jeopardizing the agreement that ended the occupation. On Tuesday, Tom Jones '69, MRP '72, gave a radio interview in which he menaced some faculty and administrators by name.

Mark Barlow, EdD '62 V.P. FOR STUDENT AFFAIRS

"Steve Muller said, 'There's a bad, bad interview of Tom Jones. I've heard it and he threatens you, Dale [Corson], and some faculty.' I mulled it in my own mind. I thought it was a very idle threat, and that there's a danger that one equates a threat with the act. It turned out that my kids heard the threat on the radio. They were pretty good about it—and I'm not so sure, in retrospect, that this is such a bad thing for them to have gone through. It's a violent world, and they damn well better figure it out now."

Clinton Rossiter '39 PROFESSOR OF GOVERNMENT

"That evening a student called me and said, 'Have you heard that your life is in danger?' I said, 'What are you talking about?' And he said, 'Tom Jones has threatened to take care of you.' So I drove over to Barton Hall where the Safety Division is. [A reporter] was there from WHCU and had this thing on tape. After he played it a couple of times I remember saying, 'I don't consider that a threat, and I'm going to go home and stay in my own house.'"

Barlow (V.P.)

"At one point we heard that the black students were going to take the library and destroy all the cards and microfilm. This stuff was rampant by Tuesday afternoon. This is when, at some point, 300 extra deputies had been brought in [to Ithaca]. It was our feeling that if the faculty did not overturn their thing on Wednesday we were in for real trouble. I was becoming very, very discouraged."

'At some point, 300 extra deputies had been brought in [to Ithaca]. I was becoming very, very discouraged.'

— Mark Barlow, EdD '62



DISSENTING OPINION: A student protests against the pact that ended the takeover.



BARTON HALL 'COMMUNITY'

As the crisis continued, students and faculty packed Barton Hall for a teach-in that would last the rest of the week.

Jeffrey Blunt '72 FRESHMAN IN SPRING '69

"The Barton Hall assemblies were going on just about every day that week. Classes were suspended. Very early the emphasis shifted to the broader structural and substantive issues—mainly restructuring the University, restructuring education, eliminating institutionalized racism. There was a spirit of action, of seriousness, and of real commitment from the mass of people who are ordinarily apathetic. You could see it in response to the teach-in and in the fact that so many people stayed

for so long. For most of that week, anybody you heard talking was discussing something to do with the takeover of the Straight—either the right or the wrong of it."

Brown (V.P.)

"I think that most of the people who went there found that, whether or not they approved of what was going on, it was so fascinating that they couldn't stay away. On Sunday, which was the last day of the assembly, we had visit us a school friend of my wife's who was bringing her daughter on visits to various campuses. The daughter had a friend at Ithaca College, and the plan was to meet her and to go to Ithaca College on that Sunday afternoon for an admissions interview. Over lunch I explained that I was going to have to dash because I wanted to be at Barton Hall. I urged that they go look at what was going on there. They did,



and got so engrossed that they sat on the floor the whole afternoon and missed their appointment."

Meyer (dean)

"The Barton Hall thing was exhilarating, positive, and one of the best things that happened around here. It's unfortunate that usually in American higher education it takes some huge crisis on a campus to bring people together to talk as people." >

TEACH IN: A packed Barton (top). Above: President Perkins addresses the crowd as two takeover participants and an SDS leader confer.



'I can honestly say that in all the years I've been here there's been nothing to resemble this. No polarization of this kind.'

— Clinton Rossiter '39



ACADEMIC ANGST (from top): A protest outside Bailey Hall, where the faculty was meeting to reconsider their original vote, which put the agreement that ended the occupation in jeopardy; a student hands out leaflets to professors on their way to the meeting.

FACULTY STRIFE

Amid widespread fears about what would happen if the student punishments weren't nullified as the occupiers had demanded, all eyes were on the faculty. After anguished deliberations, on Wednesday they reversed their previous vote.

Max Black PROFESSOR OF PHILOSOPHY

"I thought that the action of the faculty [to nullify] was necessary. I won't pretend that I was happy about it. We were in effect coerced by the gravity of the situation. I believed that if the faculty had not backed down the police would have been brought in, and there would have been gun fighting on the campus and people would have been wounded and probably killed. I think what happened was very bad, but if we were now in the position of looking back to a massacre on campus with students killed by the police, the damage to Cornell and to America would have been very much greater."

Brown (V.P.)

"I remember meeting one of the faculty who had voted to uphold the reprimands. I had been very angry with him—so angry he was stunned. When I met him the next morning, I apologized and said that I shouldn't have talked to him in the way I did. And he said, 'Don't apologize, you were right.' And this is evidence of the way in which the faculty changed its mind. They just hadn't really taken in the situation in which they were acting, and had been isolated from events in a way that faculty often get isolated. They just don't live in the world enough. They live in a world of ideas."

Rossiter (professor)

"I can honestly say that in all the years I've been here there's been nothing to resemble this. No polarization of this kind. I've seen people very angry at each other in department meetings and faculty meetings, but they get over it pretty soon. What I'm worried about this fall is whether we are going to have permanent rifts."

THE VIEW FROM BEYOND

The Straight takeover made national headlines, prompting impassioned responses from around the country.

W. Robert Finegan
DIRECTOR OF DEVELOPMENT COMMUNICATIONS

“Of the great bulk of mail that came to the president in the week following the occupation, most of it was from non-Cornellians, just citizens very upset. They weren’t thoughtful letters, most of them. They were just outraged. The alumni letters were categorized. Supportive: they felt that the president and his staff had done the right thing by getting the students out without any bloodshed, even though it meant agreeing to some terms that weren’t popular. Another category was against us totally. ‘President Perkins, resign’ was a recurrent theme. Then there was another category, which I would call middle of the road. They were very upset, but willing to wait and see what happened, and they hoped that the University would come out of this properly and strongly.”

John Marcham '50
EDITOR, CORNELL ALUMNI NEWS
(The magazine devoted its June 1969 issue to the takeover.) “Normally a heavy response would be ten letters on a subject. We had, by the time we closed [the following issue], sixty or seventy, which was an amazing response. And by now I think I’ve had as many as 300 or 400; we could have devoted the entire issue to the letters.”

Rossiter (professor)
“When we had the [faculty] reversal—and in particular, it became known that I had taken a fairly leading role in that—I began to get incredible mail. I suppose it split 50 percent approving and 50 percent condemning, some of it in violent and obscene language. I got a telegram from a professor and his wife at another great university—a man I’ve known for thirty years. And it read in effect, ‘The color of this telegram is the color you are.’ In case you’re wondering, the color was yellow. I thought at that time that I at last knew what moral courage was. Moral courage is doing something for which you will be accused of cowardice by some of your oldest friends.”



MAJOR NEWS: The takeover was covered in papers around the U.S. and even abroad (bottom left). Left: Students engrossed in the *Daily Sun's* coverage of the crisis.

LOOKING BACK

In many of the histories, interviewees contemplate the takeover’s meaning and how it bodes for Cornell’s future.

Marcham (editor)

“I’m trying to figure what happened that was radically different at Cornell. I didn’t think the guns were that crucial, although clearly they were a special first. But the thing that really pulled the place apart was the fact that all authority seemed to have gone, and that the president could not hold the University together.”

Darling (associate dean)

“It has deepened my concern and heightened the intensity of my feelings that we are facing such crucial issues that the answers we once used in the conduct of the University just will not do. I am tired of people who say, ‘If we just provide some structure for these kids, everything will be all right.’ I did not agree with that before the incident, and I do not agree with it now. While I still do not have the answer as to how the University should proceed, I cannot give credence to the other point of view.

The events of that weekend have only made me realize more fully how complicated all the questions are.”

Rossiter (professor)

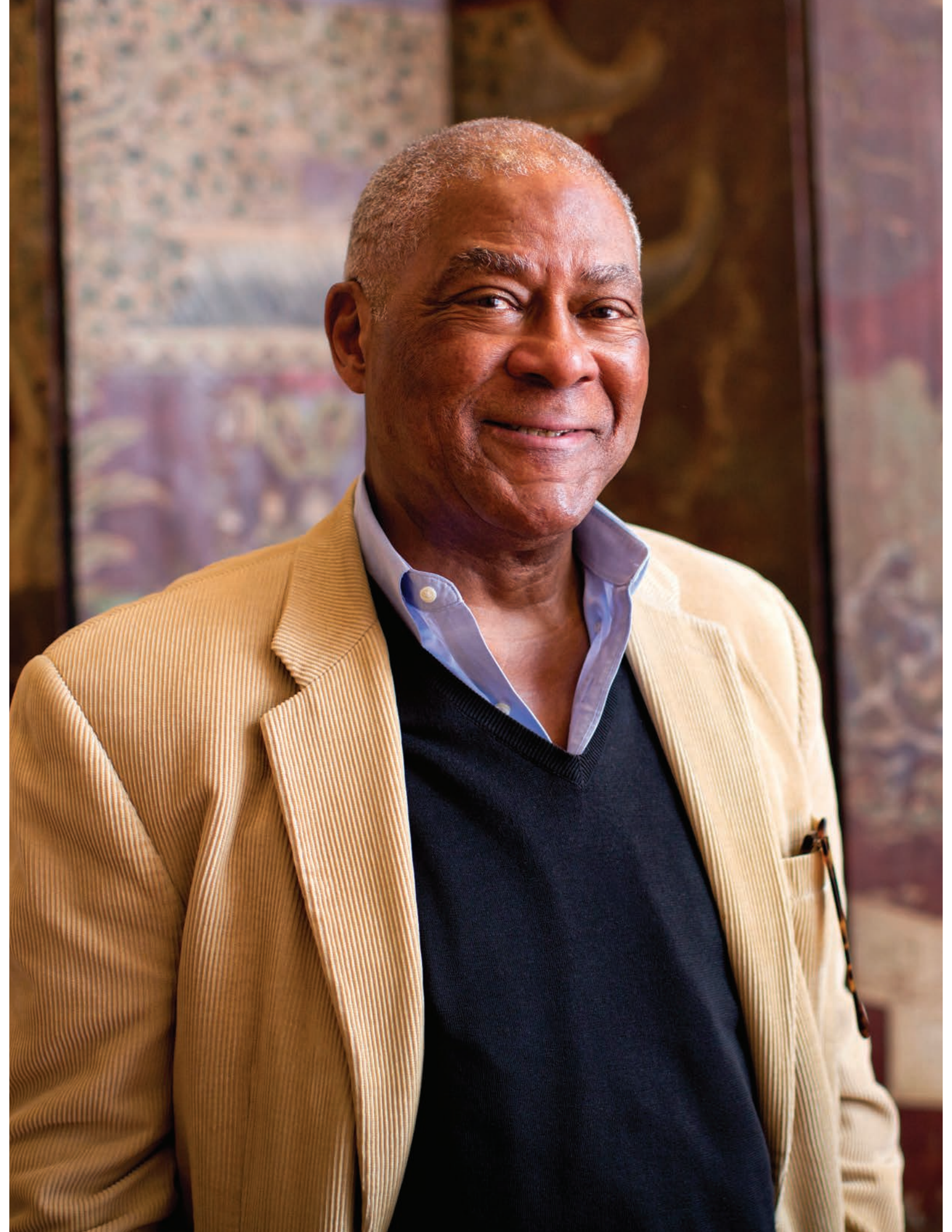
“I’ll tell you what I think has happened: we have had a revolution in the hearts and minds of people. A revolution in sentiment, in expectations. We haven’t had a shift in the balance of power. But we’ve had a shift in the expectations on the part of the students, and also on the part of the faculty looking at the students. I look at students differently today from the way I did ten years ago. They are more entitled to take part in the vital decisions affecting their lives.”

Orval French
PROFESSOR OF AG ENGINEERING

“It’s not going to be a simple matter to overcome the problems that we have placed in the minds of people all across this country and the world. I’ve got confidence, somehow, we’re going to do it. When we go back and read the history of Cornell, I’m amazed that Cornell’s here. I think if it could stand some of the problems that overwhelmed [the University] many years ago, I believe we have the capability of somehow succeeding again.” ■



The University is recognizing the 50th anniversary of the Straight takeover with a series of events slated for the week of April 15. Go to events.cornell.edu for more information.



Upon Reflection

At seventy, Tom Jones '69, MRP '72, ponders his unlikely journey 'from Willard Straight to Wall Street'

By Beth Saulnier

By many measures, it has been a remarkable evolution: from campus radical to Wall Street executive, from youthful firebrand to *éminence grise*.

In April 1969, Tom Jones '69, MRP '72, was among the dozens of African American students who took over Willard Straight Hall on the Saturday morning of Parents' Weekend, in what would become the first armed occupation on an American campus. Today, he is a trustee emeritus and a member of the University Council, the Big Red's premier leadership group for distinguished alumni and friends.

In the occupation's immediate aftermath—when the University seemed in danger of renegeing on the agreement that ended it, and tensions were at a fever pitch—he infamously said in a radio interview that Cornell “has three hours to live” and menaced several faculty and administrators by name. Now, he is the longtime benefactor of a campus prize for interracial understanding—named in honor of James Perkins, the Cornell president who resigned under a cloud in the wake of the takeover.

But in some ways, it was the Tom Jones who was photographed leaving the Straight toting a rifle—one of the event's iconic images—that was the incongruity, the unorthodox step on his life's path. He had, after all, been elected president of his freshman class. He'd joined Army ROTC, served on the student judicial



'If you would pick the most unlikely people to be in the middle of something like this,' Jones says of the takeover, 'it would be a person like me.'

A HALF-CENTURY LATER: Jones at home in Connecticut (left). Above: His new memoir from CU Press.

board, pledged a popular fraternity. As Jones himself puts it: “If you would pick the most unlikely people to be in the middle of something like this, it would be a person like me, who loved everything about Cornell from the minute I got there.”

It's a Friday in mid-January, and Jones is speaking with CAM in the airy living room of his expansive home in the Connecticut suburbs. While the house's classic gray stone exterior and New England charm blend in with the affluent neighborhood like it's been here for a century, in fact it's relatively new; Jones and his wife of forty-three years, Addie, had the house they'd lived in for decades demolished and a new one—with a traditional façade but an open, modern interior—built in its place.

For Jones, the many years of commuting to Manhattan—of breaking barriers as he climbed ever higher in the overwhelmingly white world of finance—are in the rear-view mirror. These days, he runs TWJ Capital, a small equity investment firm based in nearby Stamford that focuses on expanding companies in several software sectors as well as in specialty retail. (He's the senior partner; the other partner is his eldest son, Nigel.) At seventy—an age, he notes, to which none of the men in his family had previously lived—he's in a reflective state of mind. In April, timed to coincide with the fiftieth anniversary of the Straight takeover, Cornell University >

Press is publishing his memoir, a book it took him five years to write and revise.

Entitled *From Willard Straight to Wall Street*, it covers such topics as his time on the Hill, his early career in Boston at the accounting and consulting firm Arthur Young & Company, his rise to lead TIAA-CREF (the nonprofit sector retirement fund that counts Cornell among its institutional clients), and his tenure as head of asset management at Citigroup. The latter job ended, painfully and abruptly, when he was forced to resign following a scandal involving the firm's private banking operations in Japan. Jones, who denies wrongdoing and says he was unfairly scapegoated, vehemently fought the ensuing SEC charges against him, and they were ultimately dismissed. As he puts it with a rueful laugh: "I was one of that first wave of African Americans who reached the top of the corporate ladder—and one of the first who was thrown off."

In addition to parsing his professional and personal journeys—including a brief first marriage to Stephanie Bell '71, BFA '72, whom he wed as an undergrad after she became pregnant with Nigel, and his long union to Addie, with whom he has two daughters and a son—Jones serves as a witness to some notable historic events. Not only was he a youth during the civil rights movement and the era of Black Power, he was in his Citigroup office in 7 World Trade Center on September 11, and served on the board of the federal mortgage lender Freddie Mac at the dawn of the home lending crisis.

Jones's Cornell experiences bookend the memoir. It opens with his time as an undergrad government major and AAP grad student—he stayed on campus for a master's in regional planning, largely because he wanted to help ensure that the University honored its pledge to establish an African American studies program—and concludes with his alumni service as a Medical College overseer and Cornell trustee, as well as his establishment of the Perkins Prize, given annually to a campus group that promotes interracial understanding and harmony. Perhaps surprisingly, his student days comprise just a few dozen pages, and he covers the events surrounding the Straight takeover in fairly concise terms. "I didn't go into greater depth because of my conscious decision to just tell my story," he explains. "I'm not trying to tell the stories of all the other black students who were there, to interpret the events that they lived. I'm not inside their heads and hearts." And, he adds, he had no interest in assigning blame or virtue—either

'You had good people on both sides,' Jones says of the takeover. 'Everybody was well-intentioned. Nobody was a bad person.'



ADDRESSING THE CROWD: Jones at the microphone during the week-long Barton Hall teach-in following the takeover (right). Above: Jones (left) talking to President James Perkins.

to the activists or the administration. "You had good people on both sides," he says. "Everybody was well-intentioned. Nobody was a bad person. But because of the communication breakdowns and other dynamics, you ended up in this almost unimaginable confrontation."

From Jones's first days as an undergrad—he arrived on campus at sixteen, having skipped two grades—he'd felt at home on the Hill, despite being one of just thirty-seven black students in a class of 2,600. His family had moved frequently due to his father's career as an engineer, and he'd lived and studied in predominantly white environments. It was a typical background for the few African Americans in the Class of '69 and earlier, who often came from relatively affluent, integrated circumstances. But as Jones points out, many of those who matriculated in the few years after he did—recruited through the Committee on Special Educational Projects (COSEP), President James Perkins's program to attract black students from less privileged backgrounds—brought a very different perspective, one that opened Jones's eyes to the wider world. "They had searing personal experiences with the ugly side of American racism, and of course that shaped them," he says. "As I talked to them, I began to internalize how different their experiences were. And as I began to read more—and of course, all of this was going on at the peak of the civil rights movement—I came to understand that this harsh side was far more common in the experience of most black people."

In his memoir, Jones shares a fact that will likely surprise many readers: he wasn't among the Straight takeover's architects. "In fact," he writes, "when the idea to take over the building came to a vote the day before, I voted against it." Today, the occupation is often described as intended to pressure the University to offer coursework that reflected the African American experience—but in fact that promise had already been made. It was actually aimed at convincing Cornell to nullify punishments against a small group of black students for misbehavior and minor property damage during previous protests. And as Jones writes, explaining his anti-takeover vote: "Hadn't we already won the university's agreement to launch a Black Studies program, and wasn't that the really crucial point, more important than some judicial decision against students who had in fact done the things the administration accused them of doing?"

In the years leading up to the takeover, >





Jones had generally taken moderate stances within Cornell's Afro American Society (AAS) and favored working within the system—to the extent that some peers derided him as “Uncle Tom Jones.” But once he agreed to participate in the occupation, he says, he was all in. “I felt I needed to have solidarity with this group,” he explains. “We needed to be a unified community.”

And what of the guns? The rifles—which had been stockpiled at AAS headquarters on Wait Avenue and brought into the Straight for self-defense following an incursion by Delta Upsilon fraternity brothers—instantly transformed what would have been just another Sixties-era building takeover into the fraught subject of national headlines. A half-century later, how does Jones reflect on the decision to bring them in? “I put it in context, which is that America was an extremely violent society,” he says. “We didn’t create that. This is the world we lived in.” In the year preceding the takeover, he notes, Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy were assassinated; there were bloody confrontations on the streets of Chicago during the Democratic National Convention; race riots broke out in American cities. “In many black communities across the country,” he says, “there was this arming that was occurring, personified by pictures of the Black Power movement with their military arms.”

As Jones notes in his memoir, when the occupation ended—when the students filed

Fifty years later, Jones doesn't shy away from the iconic image of himself leaving the Straight—right hand clutching his rifle, left fist raised in triumph.

HONORING PROGRESS: Jones speaking on campus at the Perkins Prize award ceremony in 2013.

out of the Straight that Sunday afternoon—he and his best friend, Homer “Skip” Meade '69, purposely left last, forming a “rear guard.” In their negotiations with the University, the occupiers had agreed to remove the ammunition—but insisted on carrying their weapons. “We understood the symbolism of it,” he says. “As this was coming to a head, I was actually very hopeful. I thought, Who would imagine that something like this would happen at a major white university, an Ivy League school—that black students would be doing this? These pictures are going to reverberate across the country and maybe the world. This is a powerful statement. So maybe we’ve done something really significant.”

Fifty years later, Jones doesn't shy away from the iconic image of himself leaving the Straight—right hand clutching his rifle, left fist raised in triumph. To the contrary: it's on the cover of his memoir. In his home office, a framed blow-up—which graced a wall until the house was rebuilt and Addie redecorated—is close at hand, tucked under his desk. And in the quintessential homage of the digital age, that vintage photo is on Jones's iPhone home screen. He got the idea from his younger daughter, who'd put it on her own cell phone. “She had never said anything about it, and it surprised me,” he recalls. “Then I said to myself, That's not a bad idea. It's a constant reminder of where you were, and where you've come from.” ■