

New Role For College Presidents In Student Unrest

The campus dissension that erupted over the Cambodia issue and the Kent State University slayings led to a new role for university presidents last week as spokesmen for the students in their strained dialogue with the Government.

Delegations of university presidents not only wrote to President Nixon, but also paid a personal visit to the White House to warn of possible dangers in the developing rebellion of the young.

"We implore you to consider the incalculable dangers of an unprecedented alienation of America's youth and to take immediate action to demonstrate unequivocally your determination to end the war quickly," was how an appeal from 37 college and university presidents put it. The impassioned appeal was authored by Dr. James M. Fester of New York University, who normally appears and acts with an establishmentarian's unemotional calm and thus underscored the nature of the campus crisis.

The invasion of Cambodia and the fatal shooting of four Kent State University students brought the campuses to a state of despair mixed with rebellion. And the 37 university presidents were able to say, without the usual academic hedging: "We share these apprehensions."

Cordier's Speech

At Columbia University, president Andrew Cordier, aged 69, spoke to an outdoor rally of the kind that normally is dominated by student radicals and, with his voice breaking, said that the war must be brought to an end and the troops brought home so that the country can deal with festering domestic issues.

Appeals by academic leaders to the Federal government are, in themselves, not without precedent. But in the past, the acad-

emic leaders tended to turn to Chief Executives in an effort to support the Federal Government's actions. Now, perhaps for the first time and certainly on so massive a scale, the university administrators are taking their stand, if not with their student's most radical dissent, then neverthe-

less as a force determined to make the President listen and to dramatize the seriousness of the campus break with the government.

The symbolic climax last week was the meeting of eight university presidents, led by Harvard's Nathan M. Pusey, with Mr. Nixon and their appeal to him to understand the "deep and widening apprehensions."

The fact that the bloodiest incidents of the present crisis have taken place in Ohio—not just at Kent State but earlier at Ohio State—adds another dimension to these events. These are not the elitist institutions of the Eastern seaboard or the radical enclaves of California; these are the campuses of Middle America.

Last week, it became evident that the university leaders were acting from a variety of motivations. Understanding these motivations is important to any appraisal of the future of the American universities.

The least complicated and most human of these motivations was the shock reaction to Cambodia and Kent State. The university presidents had generally felt relief in recent months

over the soothing effect of the troop withdrawals from Vietnam.

Now—quite apart from their personal view—the university leaders realized that the most explosive campus issue had returned, with a vengeance. And the spectacle of soldiers firing into crowds of students—their students—may well have done to college administrators what the sight of the violent police action in 1968 in Chicago did to students.

All this happened after many of these same university presidents, with varying success, had spent an inordinate amount of their time and energies keeping their campuses cool, establishing new communication lines with their students and winning the majority of antiwar students away from the violent fringe of the revolutionary New Left.

Many university presidents

now are confronted with the decision whether they ought to jeopardize all those gains in order not to jeopardize what they consider another vital principle—university neutrality. They appear to be trying to find a workable compromise by speaking out as personal leaders, not as institutional spokes-

men. The line is admittedly thin and blurred.

But this does not eliminate the concern of the university presidents to prevent the universities themselves from being turned into political institutions.

National Symbol

For example, Kingman Brewster Jr., Yale's president, has become a national symbol of the administrator with concern for, and rapport with, students in search of peace and social justice. Yet, he spoke out against a strike that would close the university. He described the Washington policies as "dreadful," but added that a national student strike would merely be a symbol of frustration and that there must be a better way to demonstrate distress than by "curtailing education."

And at Princeton, Robert Goheen endorsed a proposal to give students two weeks' time in the fall to go out and be involved in the pre-election work in support of the issues and candidates who, they felt, could best help to turn the country onto a course more responsive to their ideals.

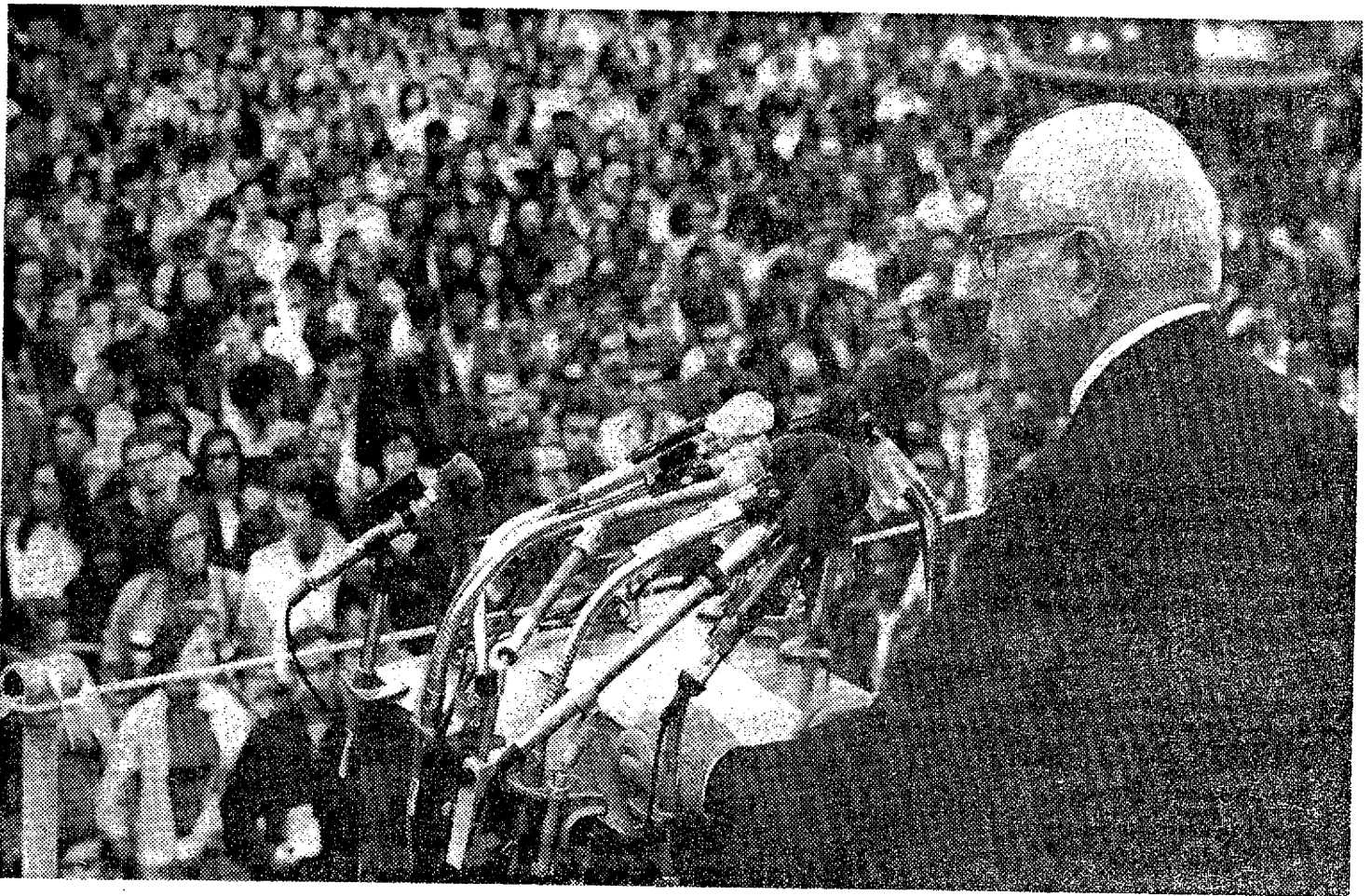
At Princeton, and hundreds of other campuses, such efforts failed to prevent an immediate shutdown. But the weakness

of campus closings as a demonstration of protest is that it is virtually impossible to tell the goal and the intent of the action. Some campuses are being shut down by their administration merely to prevent further violence; others are being closed by the students who thereby want to show their opposition to national policy, their sorrow over the deaths in Ohio and their anger over the anti-student statements by some political leaders.

For all of these reasons—and not the least of them the saving of the campuses from a permanent state of turmoil—the university presidents last week played their new role of speaking to Washington on behalf of their students.

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5-10-70 NYT



The New York Times (by Michael Evans)

Andrew W. Cordier, president of Columbia University, addresses an antiwar rally on the campus last week. He and scores of other college presidents, assuming a new role, sided with alienated students in criticizing President Nixon's policies.