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Death on the Campus

The shooting to death of two young black men in a campus confrontation with state police and sheriff's deputies in Louisiana provides unneeded new evidence of the dangers involved when get-tough sloganeering replaces administrative skill and judgment in the maintenance of public order.

Governor Edwards' own explanation of the decision to force an armed showdown with student demonstrators at Southern University makes it difficult to divorce the ensuing tragedy from the widespread disposition of government officials to read the election returns as a mandate for banishing "permissiveness" in all forms.

The Governor is a moderate with an excellent past record of promoting racial conciliation. Yet, in a news conference after the slayings, he coupled his acknowledgment that the fatal shots might have resulted from a deputy's error in substituting buckshot for tear gas with an over-all appraisal of the episode that made Mr. Edwards sound more like an opinion pollster than the chief executive in charge of determining state policy. Noting that he had been criticized as too lenient for not cracking down sooner, the Governor assessed public reaction after the clash as one of regret over the killings but also of insistence that "authority had to prevail."

The trouble with all such formulations is that the eight years since the original student upheavals at Berkeley have taught the country that the preservation of healthy, orderly relations between campus administrators and undergraduates involves factors far more complex than the establishment of stern academic discipline backed up by outside police power. Many universities, black as well as white, have made substantial progress toward easing tensions and promoting a climate conducive to study by giving students a larger voice in many areas affecting their own immediate affairs and the conduct of the university itself. The conflict at Southern University stemmed from weeks of agitation by students there to win reforms of this type.

Outsiders cannot judge the reasonableness of the students' specific demands, much less the provocation, if any, for the increasingly disruptive tactics they employed. Yet there is little reason to doubt the state might have performed a useful function—and helped to avert last week's confrontation—if it had acted long ago to call in skilled mediators with a sense of urgency about composing the differences along constructive lines. The National Center for Dispute Settlement of the American Arbitration Association, for one, has brought peace and stability in many parallel situations.

Now that blood has stained the Baton Rouge campus, there is need for a swift and impartial inquiry to assess the fault. Questions of the kind left poorly answered after Kent State must not go ill-answered again. The test for Federal and state governments is to create an investigative machinery of sufficient independence and representativeness to have credibility and assure justice.