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Age Old Questions Remain After Tragedy at Southern

THE CRISIS that has closed Southern University's main campus in Baton Rouge, La., was being carefully nurtured years before it spilled over into violence and the deaths of two students Nov. 16. In some ways it's a very contemporary crisis—black students seeking more control over the way their educations are programmed. But in other, very fundamental ways, it's just one more incident growing out of an age-old question that black communities everywhere have grappled with for more than 300 years without finding a satisfactory answer. That age-old question can be put very simply: What kinds of institutions equip young blacks best to face an environment that, for all the struggle to change it, is still very hostile?

For centuries, black Americans have debated answers to that question.

It was debated intensely at Southern University during the years of civil rights struggle in the '60s, years that saw state police and sheriff's deputies called to the campus time and again as students made demands concerning their education, and their treatment in the larger world outside their campus.

The small core of students who led this year's campus protest group, Students United, was pushing its own version of the answer. It went something like this:

Integration is not working. If it were, SU students would be getting funds equivalent to those received by students in the majority white Louisiana State University system. If it were, black schools would not still labor under all-white boards of education as Southern does. If it were, black soldiers and sailors would not be driven to physical protests over injustice; black unemployment would not be skyrocketing out of proportion to white employment; black high school students would not feel their culture wiped out in the name of integration.

Therefore (the argument continues) black institutions have a first responsibility to teach blacks all the special, unfair restrictions they will encounter, and how best to get around them.

The logic of this argument leads to the conclusion that black institutions must be kept as separate as possible, because the more that whites are involved, the better the chances that some of them will object to the program. And it presupposes, too, that the blacks who run black institutions should believe in that goal.

One student protest demand at Southern University was the resignation of the president, G. Leon Netterville, on grounds of "improper attitude." He wasn't committed enough to their views of what an almost entirely black school like Southern should be.

OBVIOUSLY questions of degree are involved, and the student protest leaders dif-

fer among themselves as to how much of the argument they will buy. But a number of the most vocal leaders at Southern acknowledge that they lean in the direction of that argument—which is one of the reasons they accused President Netterville of having "an improper attitude" when they demanded that he be fired.

Although it remains intensely controversial, this line of thinking has an old and honorable history among black Americans, who for more than 300 years have had constantly to invent new ways to circumvent the fates laid out for them by the people who always seemed to be in control. Author Ralph Ellison painted a magnificent portrait of the dilemma in the "Invisible Man." The book tells of a black student at a Southern college who



Hundreds gathered on the steps of the Capitol in Baton Rouge in memory of the slain students.

puts the school in jeopardy when he inadvertently angers a wealthy white trustee by showing him a neighborhood containing a kind of poverty and despair the trustee had not imagined existed.

The student painfully explains to the black college president that the trustee ordered him to drive someplace he hadn't seen.

"Dammit, white folk are always giving orders," the college president explodes, "It's a habit with them. Why didn't you make an excuse? . . . My God, boy! You're black and living in the South—did you forget how to lie? . . . The dumbest black bastard in the cotton patch knows that the only way to please a white man is to tell him a lie! What kind of education are you getting around here?"

Thus a generation ago, when segregated

schools were the law, the South had a lot of black institutions whose principals called and soothed their white trustees, while they quietly crammed the heads of their students as full of black history and tactical advice as they could. They knew they had to do it quietly, because they would be stopped if whites found out. A generation later, and largely because of what their elders managed to accomplish, the students at Southern University are trying to do it noisily.

They may have to. They don't have the power to bring about the changes they want. But what they are essentially saying is those old days are not yet gone.

Their argument gets support from a surprisingly wide spectrum of blacks.

Black students on many integrated campuses, North and South, are mixing ideas these days, eating at their own separate tables and even living in separate dormitories.

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in Louisiana has been publicly criticized by several prominent blacks for its support of a plan to merge mostly black Southern University with mostly white Louisiana State University.

The Sunday morning after the tragedy at Southern, Gov. Edwards told parishioners at Baton Rouge's largest, richest black Methodist church, Wesley United, that black and whites had to work together. But later, The Rev. L. L. Haines, Wesley's influential pastor, said he thought it was part of every black institution's job to retain as much black control as possible, so it could keep feeding in the special ideas that a people who are still oppressed need to have.

And Jesse Stone, the only black among five assistant state superintendents of education and a former dean of the Southern University Law School, said he thought protesting students "identified the problems very well." Students used to come to him constantly, Stone said, raising such questions as: Why does Southern continue to teach engineering in a traditional manner when the chances of a black engineer getting a job are so much lower than even the rather bad chances of a white engineer fresh out of college?

"I am an integrationist," Stone observes. "But it seems that integration is not going to happen for some time to come. Which means that for some time to come, part of the mission of any black institution will be to provide alternatives. I think black people in the country today are struggling with some of the questions that were really issues in the early '60s . . . We have to constantly search and look again."

"One time when I was growing up I really thought education might do it. One time it looked as if non-violence might do it. We thought black power might do it.

is in this frame that all institutions that concern black people must work and survive. They must provide alternatives. It is more than teaching reading or writing.

Two years ago, after an on-the-scene investigation, the private, non-profit Washington Research Project issued a study of school desegregation in the South, commenting that this was the first generation of young blacks to experience widespread desegregation, and if the process didn't improve that would probably not be a second generation to experiment with.

Ruby Martin, who coordinated that study, explained the comment by speaking at length of the disillusionment and disgust many black students were feeling about what was called desegregation in the South.

Some of her examples—the trophies and the fight songs, the demotions of black teachers and firings of black principals—are the same as those cited by Southern University students as proof that integration is simply another code word for white control.

“One of the most important aspects of this current issue can be couched in the phrase, an attack on black manhood,” said Dr. Joseph Johnson, chairman of the physics department at Southern, until he was fired by Dr. Netterville for encouraging student protest leaders. “Can black people control and shape the things that are important in their lives according to their own best instincts and knowledge?”

The way it is now, Johnson said, white power structure says to Southern’s administrators, “You give us the people in the black community who have the capacity for the greatest service, and we will tell them what they should do to serve.”