

## **The Legacy of Activism at Cornell: An Archive, a Website, and a Locus of Continuing Activity**

THE LEGACY OF ACTIVISM AT CORNELL is a multifaceted, ongoing project aimed at collecting materials on the history of Cornell as a site of political activity and then linking that work to ongoing issues and events as they arise on campus. The project now consists of an interactive website and a narrative; it will become an online archive, with a core of faculty, staff, and alumni responsible for maintaining the sites and planning educational events that link current concerns to a living historical context.

**Background.** The project grew out of a photo exhibition, set up in the Willard Straight Library in April 2006, with an accompanying catalogue that functioned as a preliminary, rough sketch of the history of activism as a field of study. The exhibit ran concurrently with a film showing, a visit by Father Daniel Berrigan, and a conference on the Divestment Movement of the 1980s. The aim of the commemorations was to capture for contemporary audiences some of the very rich history of political engagement on this campus since the 1950s, a narrative typically omitted from official university histories and often overshadowed by the institutional tendency to single out the Straight takeover of 1969 as the one significant moment in Cornell's activist history. In our research we were not surprised to learn of the wealth of material on the Straight takeover, much of it housed in the Rare Books and Manuscript Collection of the library; we were surprised to learn of the variety and volume and imaginativeness of other extra-curricular political activities on this campus. Yet our informal surveys confirmed that even such massive events as the four-year Anti-Apartheid Movement are unfamiliar to contemporary undergraduates. These realizations led naturally to the idea of constructing a permanent collection of historical materials.

**Scope.** In defining the subject, we found a logical starting point in the University's (equivocal) resistance to the McCarthyite inquisition of the 1950s. We also realized that the word "activism" cannot be limited only to massive, public confrontations—against American foreign policy or against a Cornell administrative policy. Such an emphasis understates the extraordinary variety of forms of political engagement at Cornell. Activism can be and typically is painstaking, laborious, and long-term; it includes agreements peacefully arrived at, programs established, position papers

written and revised. It includes the struggle over Redbud Woods but also the Kyoto Now! agreements; the occupation of Carpenter Hall in 1972 but also the community organizing programs of the 1960s and the founding of the Women's Studies Program. It may be that the Morrill Land Grant Act and Ezra Cornell's aims as founder of his institution are among the earliest instances of activism in our history.

This flexible definition, obviously, raises questions about limits. In deciding what is truly activist and what is better described as outreach, our approach is to include events and programs on a case-by-case basis rather than to adopt a hard and fast rule. In general, we focus on events that were by nature or origin critical, oppositional, and risky, and that contained an element of public witness. In nearly all cases, these were activities of the political left.

In documenting events, our aim is not to judge or approve them; that's the work of scholars and readers. We do assume that activism should be an important part of a Cornell undergraduate's moral and political education, and that some knowledge of its history on this campus a no less important part.

**Aims.** As suggested above, our primary aim is the preservation of memory. Ultimately, the archive will consist of personal papers, oral interviews, publications, memos and fliers, newspaper articles, photographs, and other materials. These materials should produce and ultimately naturalize a conception of a tradition at Cornell that is as important as any exclusively scholarly legacy, since activism is among other things a form of intellectual debate—a way of thinking, arguing, and imagining that complements the work done in classrooms and laboratories. Ideally, the archive would serve as a source through which generations of activists can learn from their predecessors. Students today should realize that if they fail to participate in this tradition, they will have missed out on an opportunity Cornell richly provides.

**Uses.** To achieve this aim, the archive also needs to be large and comprehensive enough to function as a research source. It should be useful to scholars and available to teachers assigning research projects. It will include some materials already housed in the Rare Book and Manuscript Collections and so in that sense will supplement those collections, but it will do so through a system of clear and full cross-referencing system. (Library materials are often difficult to locate under the rubric of “activism” or indeed under any single rubric.)

**The archive and the website.** “The Legacy of Activism at Cornell” will include an online archive housed in DSpace, the database for publications by Cornell faculty and staff maintained by the library and free to all Internet users. Accompanying the DSpace project, which is essentially a classified collection of materials, is a website that will form the basis for an ongoing, interactive archive of materials and recollections in the format of Wikipedia. This forum will permit alums, students, and researchers to contribute material, make queries, submit memoirs, and in other ways create an informational space that is both a conversation and a collection. Right now, you can go to <http://cornellactivism.org/bin/view/Legacy/WebHome> and download the project’s first publication, *Looking Back at Politics: Fifty Years of Activism at Cornell* by Brian Eden and Paul Sawyer.

**The advisory board.** The Archive project will also consist of a core of faculty, staff, and alums willing to join us in designing the project and advise us in supervising the sites and planning annual events that will keep the project an ongoing activity rather than simply a record of the past. For the moment, we expect to sponsor a conference each spring, beginning next year, devoted to a topic of urgent interest, pertaining either to campus affairs or the political life of the nation.

Our most immediate steps are to raise funds for a research assistant to begin digitizing the material on hand, to publicize the project, and to solicit former Cornellians for materials in their possession. Since we go back fifty years, it’s crucial that materials be gathered now and interviews be conducted with participants in some of the older actions. In due time, the core group may become a convenient place to coordinate progressive activities and information on campus.