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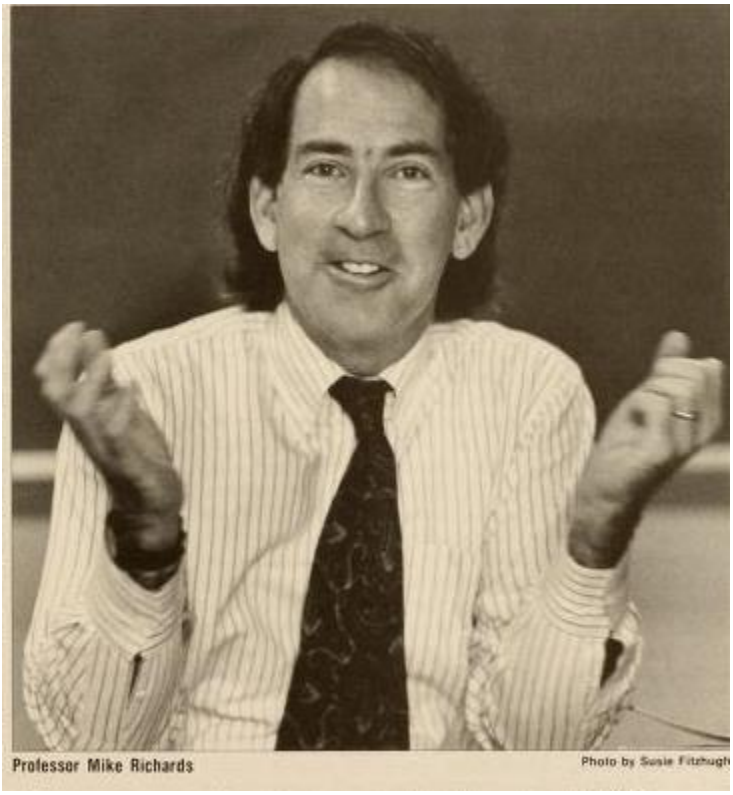
The Spring of Seventy at Sweet Briar

By Michael D. Richards



Professor Mike Richards Photo by Susie Fitzhugh

"The Spring of '70 at Sweet Briar" has something of a history of its own. I was asked to speak at the Alumnae Reunion '85; since that was the 15th reunion of the Class of 1970, it seemed an opportune time to take a look at the 1970 student strike. In addition to asking members of the class to set down their memories of the event and their thoughts on it 15 years later, I gathered what documentary evidence was available on campus. Particularly helpful was a file that Professor Glenn Van Treese had kept. (Symptomatic of something, I am not sure what, I had not kept anything from that period even though I am an historian with a long-standing interest in protest movements.)

The talk I gave seemed to interest not just the Class of '70 but other classes as well. Encouraged by this, I gave the talk, in different form, in the '86 Sweet Briar Faculty Lecture Series. The audience for the second lecture was composed mostly of students. For them the

events I described and analyzed had the quality of legend. I also found that I could not assume that they would recognize a particular name or understand a term commonly used in the period.

The lack of knowledge about the events of the '60s and the tendency to romanticize them are two important reasons for continuing to investigate the period. I have done this now on several occasions. During the 1982, 1984 and 1989 Winter Terms, I taught a course on the '60s with Professor Lee Piepho, a Renaissance man in more ways than one. Lee has been an invaluable source, especially when it comes to understanding the arcana of rock and roll. The summer of '86 I presented a modified course on the '60s to Sweet Briar's Elderhostel. Talking with people for whom that period was more nightmare than glorious party, was one of the most interesting experiences of my life.

All of these activities have figured in one way or another in the writing of this article. It is one of the first fruits of a research effort which I hope will eventually result in a book. It is also a very personal project: I am investigating a period that had tremendous influence on me and, in effect, composing a "portrait of the professor as a young man."

In the spring of 1970, students at Sweet Briar, like students at many other colleges, went out on strike to protest the incursion by the United States and South Vietnam into Cambodia and the killing of four students at Kent State. The strike is a subject of some controversy. I should make a couple of matters clear before saying anything more about these events. First, I am hardly an objective observer. I was an active though not particularly important participant in the events at Sweet Briar. St the time, I believed that we could hardly have done less than we did to respond to the situation as we saw it. I still think that way. If, however, I cannot be fully objective, I can at least avoid being judgmental. In the spring of '85, preparing to speak at Reunion, I asked members of the class of '70 to write or call to let me know how they had viewed events then. Some of those responding told of being hounded or ostracized for not sharing then-pre-vailing opinions. Some had since revised their ideas, others had not. The point of that testimony is that people saw the situation in different lights – perhaps an obvious conclusion but one that was not easy to see then. At the time I found it difficult to understand how people could not support the strike and other efforts to protest against the war. Now I have only respect for those who responded to the crisis, whatever the nature of their response.

I want to sketch in some background before discussing the events at Sweet Briar. The war in Vietnam, the central element of the protest movement, had been going on, with a few years of peace in the 1950s, since shortly after the Second World War. The Unites States had been involved in various ways almost from the beginning, but until 1962 its commitment in both men and materiel was limited. That year there were approximately 15,000 military advisors from the United States in South Vietnam. The following year Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which gave President Lyndon Johnson virtually unlimited power to wage

war without a formal declaration. By December 1965 troop strength had reached nearly 200,000. In 1966 it doubled to nearly 400,000. By early 1966 it seemed to have leveled off to approximately 540,000.

The Tet Offensive in January and February 1968 shocked American public opinion. Viet Cong penetrated the grounds of the American Embassy in Saigon and VC and North Vietnamese regulars attacked nearly every major city in South Vietnam. The Tet Offensive was carried out at great cost to the VC and North Vietnam. The United States and South Vietnam could legitimately claim a military victory. Psychologically, however, the effects were devastating. Numerous Americans had believed President Johnson and others who for several years had claimed to see the "light at the end of the tunnel." The Tet Offensive brought into question any previous claims that victory was near or that the South Vietnamese would ever be able to defend themselves. Even people within the Johnson Administration began to question in a serious way the likelihood that the war would be won.

As the war had widened, a peace movement had grown up alongside. The beginnings date back to 1965 with a series of "teach-ins, " efforts to acquaint Americans in colleges across the country with facts about the war and with reasons why the United States should not be involved in it. In October 1967 the protest against the war increased greatly in terms of visibility and press coverage with the March on the Pentagon, described in his usual charmingly egocentric was by Norman Mailer in *The Armies of the Night*.

The peace movement was divided. Some went so far as to favor the Viet Cong and to regard the protest against the war as their contribution to some sort of world revolution. The majority of American protested against the war as an activity that was misguided or counterproductive. Many, of course – those of draft age and those whose sons, brothers, livers, husbands or friends were of draft age – had personal stakes in the protest.

Nineteen sixty-eight was a crucial year. The Tet Offensive and conclusions that many in the Johnson Administration drew from it convinced President Johnson that it would be in his interest and in the best interest of the country not to seek another term. Over the next few months an extraordinary series of events occurred. The Assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr, in April was followed by a student strike and takeover of the administration building at Columbia. At Columbia, Tom Hayden called for "two, three, many Columbias" in imitation of the Cuban revolutionary Che Guevara who, a few years before, had talked of the need for "two, three, many Vietnams." The assassination of Robert Kennedy, a leading contender for the Democratic presidential nomination, seemed to many the final unbelievable event. However, it was easily topped by the August Democratic Convention in Chicago. American TV viewers were treated to a new spectacle: the "police riot." Young radicals were beaten senseless and bloody

in the streets of the city while the convention, meeting under tight security, nominated Hubert Humphrey as its candidate for president. The system seemed to be cracking under the strain.

One way of looking at the '60s entails seeing 1968 as a high point, a dramatic culmination of much that had gone on before. According to this thesis, the counterculture and radical politics began to lose momentum, to splinter. Certainly if one follows the disintegration of the SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) into the Weathermen faction, which moved in the direction of guerrilla- style campaigns and terrorism, or if one traces the way the counterculture folded back on itself and concentrated on drugs and rock music, it is difficult not to believe that whatever promise the '60s had, had disappeared by the late '60s and early '70s. To this idea of peaking and then disintegration, one might add the extent to which American commerce, ever alert to the possibility of making a buck, seized on elements of the counterculture and protest movement. A good example of this would be the Broadway musical "Hair," opening in 1968, supported by mostly middle-calls audiences paying good money to be shocked by flesh, profanity and references to drugs and deviant sex practices. By the 1970 appearance of a movie starring Elliott Gould and Candice Bergen, both the counterculture and radical politics had been turned into a commercial product.

There is much truth in the idea that many elements central to the '60s either disappeared or were distorted after the traumatic year of 1968. However, I would like to emphasize the persistence of protest against the war in Vietnam. This not only lived on: it reached a peak in '69-70 and only finally ceased when America's involvement in the war ceased.

It has taken me a long time to get to Sweet Briar, fall semester, 1969. Sweet Briar in this period is interesting because it demonstrates in a microcosm the ideas I have sketched. By '69 Sweet Briar had undergone many changes. It had greatly increased its size in the early '60s. It had challenged the prevailing interpretation of the will of Indiana Fletcher Williams and had begun to admit black students. Students generally were aware of and concerned about many of the issues being debated nationally.

While a *Sweet Briar News* story on the Self-Study in progress in 1969 cited, as a major conclusion of the study, student apathy as a serious problem, other stories from the paper furnish evidence to the contrary. "Tempo," a student-organized symposium, showcased avant-garde artists, writers and filmmakers in 1968. In '69 it brought a number of political activists, Tom Hayden among them, to campus. Finally, in the spring of 1970, it sponsored a symposium on the "Black Man in American." New dress regulations were introduced in 1969. The question of parietals was discussed. A Sex Information Committee (a most unfortunate acronym) was formed. Paint 'n' Patches staged "Viet Rock," a protest musical. A large crowd of students, faculty and staff turned out on 15 October (which happened that year to be Founder's Day) to

take part in the nationwide Moratorium, and event that had been organized as a dramatic expression of public opinion against the war.

In many important ways, Sweet Briar shared national interests and concerns. It reflected the increasingly vocal opposition to the war, an opposition that had lost some ground when some of its supporters wanted to use it as the basis for a revolution and that had lost additional ground while it gave Nixon a chance. The events of the spring of ’70 can only be understood in the context of an intense national debate on American involvement in Vietnam, a debate in which a large number of Americans stood firmly against the war.

On April 30, 1970, President Nixon announced that American and South Vietnamese forces had attacked communist sanctuaries in Cambodia. A few days later, Americans were stunned to hear that National Guardsmen had killed four students and wounded several others at Ohio’s Kent State University. The May 8 *Sweet Briar News*, the last issue of the year as it turned out, ran a front-page article on the National Student Strike. Over 300 colleges had gone on strike. The debate at Sweet Briar, to strike or not, was just beginning. On May 7, a Thursday, about 100 students and a couple of faculty had a meeting in the Quad. Those at the meeting agreed to hold a teach-in Monday afternoon and a community meeting that evening to decide on whether to strike.

More than 700 people attended the Monday, May 11 evening meeting. Most of those speaking favored suspension of classes with no penalty for students who did not wish to complete course work or take finals. The vote at the meeting was 517 in favor, 198 against and 3 abstentions. A letter sent by the Steering Committee to parents to explain the strike and its purposes emphasized a moderate, constructive approach. “We stress the need for reform within the system.”

The faculty met the following day to consider its response to the results of the community meeting. After much debate, it agreed that no student would receive an automatic “F” on the final exam for failing to take it. It was left to the judgement of the individual faculty member to determine the basis for a student’s grade in the course. Many faculty let it be known that a student could accept whatever grade she currently had if she wished to participate in the strike movement. Some felt it imperative that students fulfill all the requirements connected with a particular course. The decisions that had to be made were not easy ones. Faculty had to set the obligations of their profession against what some saw as the extraordinary needs of the moment.

It was not an easy time for students, either. Some, of course, regarded the strike as a party, and unexpected early vacation. Others, whatever their political sympathies, felt that they had to finish their course work. A large number plunged into the frenetic activities associated

with the strike. Like most other '60s movements, the strike movement at Sweet Briar featured committees and the production of a great quantity of propaganda. Committees ranged from the "Sweet Briar Movement for New Congress" to the "area Action Committee" to the "Give-Nixon-a-Chance Committee." Those at the center of the strike went from committee meeting to the typewriter or ditto machine and back to another meeting.

The intensity of those few days can be seen in the partial schedule for May 14:

9:30 a.m. Area Action Committee: Facts on Vietnam: Intensive Discussion in small groups

12:00 p.m. Chapel: Poetry of the Music of Anguish

3:00 p.m. "Canvassing, Lobbying and Campaigning: Ethics and Methods"

7:30 p.m. Area Action Workshops – Approaches in Amherst County

8:45 p.m. Lantern Bearing

In addition to protest against the incursion in Cambodia and the killings at Kent State, the strike had two important objectives. One was to begin organizing for a grass roots effort in the fall to help elect peace candidates to Congress. A second was to provide information on the war to residents of Amherst County.

To some the events at Sweet Briar seemed only a pale imitation of events elsewhere or, more sinister, some kind of conspiracy put together by outsiders working with a few radical students and faculty. These are judgments that cannot be dealt with in any definitive way. Sweet Briar was about a week behind many other colleges and universities in going on strike. Students from Princeton apparently had some influence on the course of events. Yet some of those active from the start believe that it was an indigenous movement. …Sweet Briar's own response to national events. Clearly, some of the hotbeds of radicalism in academe had taken the lead. The Sweet Briar community had followed, but in its own way.

The efforts to reach the wider community of which Sweet Briar is a part were not successful. Amherst County residents who came into contact with Sweet Briar students that May were unfailingly polite but equally unconvinced by earnest endeavors to enlighten them. The next fall a relatively small number of students took part in the attempts to elect peace candidates to Congress. It was not much different elsewhere in the United States. Massive acts of public protest had done about all that they could do to change the nature of American politics.

The fact that results limped far behind expectations in 1970 should not lead us to regard the strike at Sweet Briar and elsewhere as a failure. That Sweet Briar staged a strike is one

indication of just how far challenges to authority and new ideas had permeated the fabric of American life. Sweet Briar was not as far behind in terms of its ideas and opinions as many of us, in our despair, thought. The various currents at work across America were active at Sweet Briar, too.

For a brief period of time that May, those of us at Sweet Briar and many others in colleges nationwide experienced something quite rare: the feeling that we were a part of a momentous historical development. That what developed turned out to be not so momentous, that whatever the ‘60s are as a period in history turns out to be a mosaic of developments, most of them less dramatic and stirring, takes nothing away from that moment of high crisis and common response.