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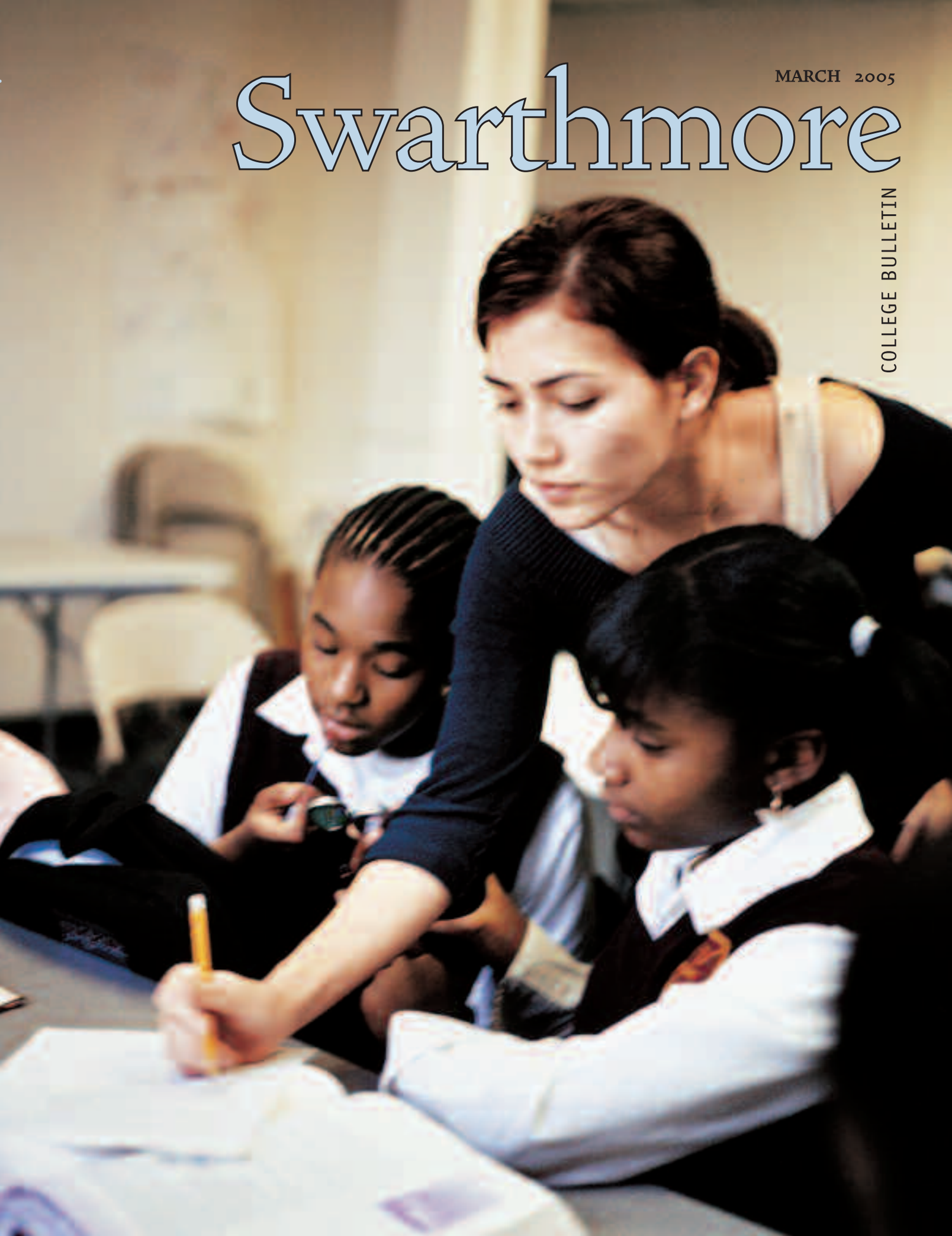
Swarthmore

COLLEGE BULLETIN



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The Crucible of *Character*

A PERSONAL ACCOUNT OF SWARTHMORE'S CRISIS OF 1969

By Clinton Etheridge '69

Thirty-six years ago, at around noon on Jan. 9, 1969, I led a group of black students into the Swarthmore College Admissions Office in Parrish Hall as part of a nonviolent direct action. I was chairman of the Swarthmore Afro-American Students Society (SASS). We were seeking to redress what we felt were legitimate grievances concerning black admissions at Swarthmore. Our action precipitated what came to be known in the history of Swarthmore College as "the crisis."

The Phoenix of January 10, 1969, captured the moment:

> As Deans Hargadon, Thompson, and Barr headed for lunch at Sharples, members of SASS appeared at the front door of the Admissions Office and motioned to Mrs. Mary W. Dye, Assistant in Admissions, who had just locked the front door, to open it. She informed them that the office was closed for lunch hour and proceeded to the back doors to lock them also. Clinton Etheridge, SASS chairman, walked around to the back doors where he met Dean Hargadon. Dean Hargadon asked him to please let the one remaining candidate for admission out. As Dean Hargadon opened the door for the candidate, Etheridge entered and walked towards the front door and let the remaining members of SASS in.

Once we were inside, there was no violence or destruction of property. The deans left on request, and the doors were padlocked. One of the most significant weeks in Swarthmore history was about to begin. When SASS left a week later, all the litter from our occupation and nonviolent direct action was removed. The admissions office was left undamaged and the files untouched. SASS had engaged in a disciplined, dignified, and nonviolent direct action.

However, like most of the outside press, the *Delaware County Daily Times* in their Jan. 10, 1969, edition gave a simplistic, stereotyped view of our action with the screaming headline: "Twenty Militants Seize Offices at Swarthmore." Little did that newspaper know that one of those "militants" would become chairman of the Maryland Public Utilities Commission (Russell Frisby '72, who attended Yale Law School). Or that another "militant" would become one of the nation's top black lawyers (according to *Black Enterprise*) and a senior partner with the multinational law firm of Holland & Knight (Marilyn Holifield '69, who attended Harvard

"The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy."

—Martin Luther King

ROMARE BEARDEN, *THE DOVE* (1964); CUT-AND-PASTED PHOTOREPRODUCTIONS AND PAPERS, GOUACHE, PENCIL AND COLORED PENCIL ON CARDBOARD, 13 3/8 X 18 3/4 INCHES; BLANCHETTE ROCKEFELLER FUND (377.1971); THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK, N.Y., U.S.A.; DIGITAL IMAGE © THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART; LICENSED BY SCALA/ART RESOURCE, N.Y.

Law School and also served on the College's Board of Managers).

Over the years, I've come to the conclusion that stereotypes are a substitute for critical thinking about new or challenging aspects of human beings. Stereotypes conceal the complexity of the human condition.

Although we may not expect critical thinking and the absence of stereotyping from the outside world and its press, we certainly should expect it from the Swarthmore community. In this connection, the student-run *Phoenix* performed an invaluable service during the crisis with its balanced, nuanced daily coverage of a complex story, capturing for posterity the most detailed factual record of the events of that momentous week at Swarthmore.

On the surface, the crisis was about black admissions at Swarthmore. However, at a deeper level, it was really about the relationship of Swarthmore College to black America and to the American dream. In the 36 years since, I have thought long and hard about our nonviolent direct action—and what it meant for me, SASS, and Swarthmore. It was a watershed event and defining moment for us all. Crisis is the crucible in which character is tested.

In our own small way, members of SASS were trying to do at Swarthmore what Martin Luther King was doing at the national level. Dr. King was striving to make the American dream as relevant and meaningful to black Americans as to white Americans;

SASS was trying to make Swarthmore as relevant and meaningful to black students as to white.

Samuel DuBois Cook, the first black professor at Duke University and a Morehouse College classmate of Martin Luther King, said the following about his former classmate: "The social and political philosophy of Dr. King was built on the solid rock of the existential character of the American liberal, humanistic, idealistic, and democratic tradition, with its capacity for growth, renewal, and extension to the world of higher possibilities and more inclusive realities. He believed the resources and potential of that tradition were mighty. He had profound and abiding faith in the creative and redemptive possibilities of the land he loved."

During the 1960s, with the civil rights movement burgeoning and the divisive Vietnam War raging, conservatives such as John Wayne used the injunction: "America—love it or leave it!"

More recently, the black conservative talk-show host Ken Hamblin wrote a book called *Pick a Better Country*.

Unlike Wayne and Hamblin, Martin Luther King wanted to make America the best possible version of itself. Professor Cook said, "Dr. King believed that racism was defiling American democracy and keeping it from achieving the ultimate ideal as the grandest form of government ever conceived by the mind of man. Dr. King saw this as the black man's redemptive mission in America."

At the time of Swarthmore's crisis, there were conservatives—both white and black—who said that SASS should be grateful for the relatively few black students who had been admitted to the elite inner sanctum of Swarthmore. At some level, these voices were saying: "Pick a better college" or "Swarthmore—love it or leave it!"

Instead, like Martin Luther King at the national level, SASS had high expectations of the College, with its strong Quaker heritage of social justice. And in many ways, the efforts of a few have yielded benefits for many. Compared with 1969, today we can see a better version of Swarthmore with, as Cook wrote, its "growth, renewal, and extension to the world of higher possibilities and more inclusive realities."

SASS helped create a climate on campus that embraces greater diversity in the student body, in the faculty, and in academic offerings—including a concentration in black studies. This is the "existential character of the American liberal, humanistic, idealistic, and democratic tradition" in action at Swarthmore.

Moreover, the Black Cultural Center, the Gospel Choir, the Sophisticated Gents male a cappella group, and the Sistahs female a cappella group flourish as part of the legacy of SASS. None of these Swarthmore institutions, which enrich contemporary College life, existed before the crisis of January 1969.

SWARTHMORE HAS COME A LONG WAY SINCE 1905—a century ago—when it denied admission to a light-skinned black student whom it had unknowingly accepted. According to the memoirs of Charles Darlington '15, he learned of the incident from former Dean of Men William "Alee" Alexander. As Darlington recounts: "When he arrived, it was found that he was a Negro boy. His picture was shaded in such a way that this fact had not been obvious. The college was in an embarrassing quandary. No Negroes had ever been admitted. As Alee said, 'It just wasn't done.' After much heart searching by the College administration and probably some members of the Board, the boy and his parents were told that an error had been made. The College was very sorry, but he could not be permitted to enter."

In his *Revolt of the College Intellectual*, another former dean, Everett Lee Hunt, gives us a peek at Depression-era Swarthmore black admissions:

> In 1932 a Negro from a Philadelphia high school decided to apply to Swarthmore. He was a prominent athlete; had a good background in classics, his major interest; was president of the student government and popular with his fellows; and except for his color, was a logical candidate for an open scholarship. The admission of colored students had never been approved by the Board of Managers, and so the Admissions Committee referred the application to the Board. After a long discussion it decided by a large majority that Negro students could not yet be admitted to a coeducational college like Swarthmore. Their admission would raise too many problems and create too many difficulties.

These 1905 and 1932 admissions incidents are offensive to the sensibilities of most living Swarthmoreans. In 2005, it is difficult to fathom how liberal, well-educated Swarthmore people of good will could make those racist admissions decisions. Sadly, the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow segregation produced a racism that contaminated most whites with a belief, conscious or unconscious, that blacks are inferior or substandard. Subconscious beliefs and attitudes can have a strong hidden influence on behavior. As Malcolm X said toward the end of his life, "The white man is not inherently evil, but America's racist society influences him to act evilly."

It also offends sensibilities to learn that, as late as 1965, Swarthmore asked prospective white roommates of incoming black freshmen whether they were comfortable rooming with a "Negro." This policy suggests that, even at the height of the civil rights movement, Swarthmore was more solicitous of the opinions of its white students than its black students—an example of the tacit second-class status of black students back then. (This 1965 skeleton in the College's racial closet was revealed by Marilyn Allman Maye '69, in an interview in the May 1994 *Bulletin*.)

On the surface, the crisis was about black admissions. At a deeper level, it was about the relationship of Swarthmore to black America and the American dream.

Thus, when I arrived at Swarthmore in fall 1965, the College was a social organism ripe for reform on black admissions. As Richard Walton put it in *Swarthmore College: An Informal History*: "It is puzzling that a college founded by Quakers, among the most fervent of the abolitionists and devoted to equality, should have been so slow to admit blacks at all and so slow to admit blacks in significant numbers.... It is generally agreed that Swarthmore had not conducted a vigorous campaign to obtain more black applicants, had not done enough to raise scholarship funds for them."

Part of the puzzle can be explained by the observation that, pre-crisis, black students were "invisible" at Swarthmore, to use Ralph Ellison's metaphor. As the nameless narrator declares in the prologue of Ellison's *Invisible Man*: "I am an invisible man. I am invisible ... because people refuse to see me.... When they approach me, they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me."

By the mid-1960s, blacks were "invisible" at Swarthmore because there were so few of us and because it was assumed that we were "just" Swarthmoreans—albeit swarthy Swarthmoreans. The only times black students were not "invisible" were when we sat together in Sharples Dining Hall or when our all-black intramural touch-football team—the Black Grand-Army-of-the-Crum—went undefeated for the season, even beating the Delta Upsilon team that had some real football players on it.

With the perspective of time and the long view of history, the case can be made that the nonviolent direct action SASS took in 1969 pushed Swarthmore to do what was in its enlightened self-interest in terms of affirmative action and diversity. But this notion was controversial 36 years ago.

Dr. King was striving to make the American dream as relevant and meaningful to black Americans as to white; SASS was trying to make Swarthmore as relevant and meaningful to black students as to white.

WAS THE SASS NONVIOLENT DIRECT ACTION NECESSARY? Yes. At the time, I believed that the SASS nonviolent direct action was necessary, and, 36 years later, I still believe that.

As Martin Luther King wrote in *Letter From Birmingham Jail*: "Nonviolent direct action seeks to create a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored.... Actually, we who engage in nonviolent direct action are not the creators of tensions. We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive. We bring it out in the open, where it can be seen and dealt with."

Swarthmore's crisis brought the hidden tension about black admissions out into the open so the Swarthmore community could see it and deal with it. What was the hidden tension on black admissions that the crisis brought to the surface? In a nutshell, racial insensitivity.

The genesis of the crisis was a report on black admissions that Dean of Admissions Fred Hargadon prepared for the faculty Admissions Policy Committee (APC) during summer 1968. President Courtney Smith asked Hargadon for the report when it became known that only eight black freshmen would be entering the College in fall 1968 as part of the Class of 1972. (I was one of 19 black freshmen who enrolled in fall 1965 as part of the Class of 1969.) Given Swarthmore's checkered past and tenuous track record on black admissions, eight black freshmen in 1968 seemed a retreat to tokenism.

To SASS, it appeared that blacks were to be further marginalized at Swarthmore, even before we could enter the mainstream. SASS felt it had to sound the alarm.

To that end, Don Mizell '71 and I, as SASS vice chairman and SASS chairman, respectively, wrote a letter to Dean Hargadon, which was published in the Oct. 1, 1968, *Phoenix*, questioning the College's commitment to black admissions in light of the small number of black students in the freshman class.

On Oct. 10, the APC released Dean Hargadon's report and also placed it on general reserve in McCabe Library. Dean Hargadon invited all black students to a meeting on Oct. 14 in Bond Hall to discuss the report. We quickly discovered that the report included personal data on individual black students, including SAT scores and grades as well as data from financial aid applications showing family income and parents' occupations. Although specific black students were not named, nevertheless SASS thought that the publication of personal data on black students—and its placement in McCabe Library—represented an invasion of privacy. Our concern about invasion of privacy was legitimate. Because of the small number of black students on campus—just 47 at that time—SASS believed that individual black students could be identified and potentially embarrassed by the report.

Therefore, as SASS chairman, I telephoned Dean Hargadon on the evening of Oct. 10 to request removal of the report from McCabe Library and its reissuance without the personal data. After consulting with the APC, he declined the SASS request. SASS considered this an act of racial insensitivity. It appeared that black students had no right to privacy concerning personal data that a Swarthmore administrator needed to respect.

If the College was going to marginalize black students and invade their privacy concerning personal data, we were not going to acquiesce in the process. Therefore, SASS decided to stage a protest and walk out at the Oct. 14 APC meeting on Dean Hargadon's report. At that Oct. 14 meeting in Bond, I read a SASS statement protesting what we thought was the report's invasion of privacy and declaring our refusal to cooperate with the APC "until the report is reworked, revised, and rewritten." Then, 35 of the 45 black

students present walked out. Subsequently, the APC members and the 10 black students who remained concluded that Dean Hargadon's report should be removed from McCabe Library because of the personal data it contained. This was done.

Following this failure of communications between SASS and Dean Hargadon, the College's designated interlocutor, we were even more concerned about the prospects for black admissions in particular and the status of black students at Swarthmore in general.

We just couldn't stand by and see the situation go from bad to worse. Therefore, SASS formulated four demands, which were sent to the APC on Oct. 16 and published in *The Phoenix* the same day. The demands were the following:

- Dean Hargadon's report not be returned to McCabe Library, and SASS and APC rewrite the report for publication
- The Swarthmore faculty and administration form a Black Interest Committee to work with SASS
- The College recruit a high-level black administrator
- The SASS Recruitment Committee work with Dean Hargadon and the APC to enhance black recruitment and admissions

Although SASS believed its demands were reasonable, we also thought we were not getting an appropriate response from Dean Hargadon and the APC. Therefore, SASS decided to try to make progress on another front. On Nov. 8, a SASS delegation visited the Student Council meeting to present our case for the council voting to endorse the SASS demands. Student Council voted 10 to 1 with two abstentions to endorse the four demands, an action that prompted an angry letter from Dean Hargadon criticizing the council's haste and lack of consultation with the APC.

After the Nov. 8 Student Council endorsement of the SASS demands, there were several desultory meetings and discussions on black admissions. But no substantive progress was being made. However, probably sensing a deteriorating situation, President Smith began to get involved indirectly and asked for clarification of the SASS demands. Ironically, he did not ask the SASS leadership for this clarification; he went to the Student Council president and to Michael Fields '69, an "independent" black student —not a member of SASS—who had written an open letter to the College community on Nov. 13 endorsing the SASS demands.

This was a tragic situation with almost theater-of-the-absurd overtones. Everybody was clarifying the SASS demands except SASS itself. SASS was ready, willing, and able to discuss its own demands, but no one in power seemed to want to hear what we had to say. The sad irony is that SASS was "invisible" at Swarthmore with respect to its own demands. It appeared there were no effective channels of communication through which SASS could address its concerns about black admissions and black student privacy.

In the mid-1960s, blacks were "invisible" at Swarthmore because there were so few of us. It was assumed that we were "just" Swarthmoreans—albeit swarthy Swarthmoreans.

With the perspective of time, I see that there were additional complicating factors beyond the failure of communications between SASS and Dean Hargadon.

First, before our nonviolent direct action in January 1969, the College had difficulty sorting out the message from the messenger on black admissions. Unlike today, there were no black administrators at Swarthmore and only one black faculty member, the African anthropologist Asmarom Legesse. It is one thing for an adult to receive a message from a kid—particularly one perceived as obstreperous—and another for an adult to receive the same message from another adult who is a respected peer or colleague. Unlike other Swarthmore student groups, SASS had no built-in constituency in the faculty or administration that provided a channel of communication. The problematic Dean Hargadon was the closest person SASS had to an official administration liaison.

No one will ever know how the history of the crisis might have been different had black administrators or black professors also been the messengers—or at least the interpreters or translators—of the message SASS was trying to deliver on black admissions.

Second—not unlike today—Swarthmore in 1968 to 1969 was basically governed through a Quaker-style process of decision making by consensus. Yet reaching consensus rests on certain key assumptions—primary of which is discussion among and between equals, peers, or colleagues. This process could not work for the black admissions question because consensus would need to have been reached between those in a superior position (Swarthmore administrators) and those in a subordinate position (black students). And asymmetric power relationships, between a superior and a subordinate, tend to be more coercive than consensual.

The dearth of black faculty and black administrators at Swarthmore was one factor. The inability to reach a consensus among equals was another factor. But, unfortunately and tragically, the failure of communication between SASS and Dean Hargadon was probably the most important factor in the crisis. When Dean Hargadon wrote his report during summer 1968, he not only included personal data on black students—which were at least factual and objective—he also wrote *obiter dictum* comments about alleged SASS "militant separatist" inclinations, which were stereotypically inaccurate.

Dean Hargadon's "militant separatist" allegations, which questioned our legitimacy at Swarthmore, did not endear him to some members of SASS. As for the "militant" part of Dean Hargadon's allegation, I say again that stereotypes conceal the complexity of the human condition; they substitute for critical thinking about

new or challenging aspects of human beings. Instead of grappling with the new and challenging aspects of SASS, as *The Phoenix* did, Dean Hargadon seemed to act as if we were still in the pre-SASS days at Swarthmore, when blacks were unorganized and "invisible." Although *The Phoenix* was able to pierce the veil of the "militant" stereotype and recognize the essence of SASS concealed beneath, Dean Hargadon was not. Given our commitment to nonviolent direct action, the question could have been posed to Dean Hargadon: How "militant" were we in SASS compared with Martin Luther King?

As for the "separatist" part of Dean Hargadon's allegation, I had white roommates at Swarthmore my freshman, sophomore, and junior years. (I roomed alone my senior year in Palmer.) I was a member of Kappa Sigma Pi fraternity during my sophomore year.

Moreover, contrary to the stereotype of many SASS members, I was neither "angry" nor "alienated" nor "lonely" at Swarthmore. I enjoyed a wide circle of friends and acquaintances, both black and white. This group included my white roommates and fraternity brothers and my fellow engineering students. At the same time, I was also "comfortable in my own skin" as a black student on a white campus; I took my leadership roles in SASS seriously. I considered myself pro-black and not anti-white, pro-SASS and not anti-Swarthmore. I simply believed circumstances needed to be reformed for the better; I believed Swarthmore needed to live up to the ideals of its Quaker heritage of social justice.

I knew Dean Hargadon personally and liked him. He and I would greet each other in Parrish Hall during my freshman and sophomore years and talk about subjects like the novels of James Baldwin. He told me how he grew up in an integrated working-class suburb of Philadelphia and how he went to Haverford on the GI Bill after serving in the Army as a military policeman. Given those halcyon days, no one could predict that Dean Hargadon and I would be linked as antagonists through the crisis—that he and I would be face-to-face at the admissions office door at high noon on Jan. 9, 1969.

Dean Hargadon had a good reputation as an admissions officer and went on to distinguished careers in undergraduate admissions at Stanford and Princeton. After leaving his Swarthmore admissions post, he subsequently served on the College's Board of Managers for several years. Also between admissions stints at Stanford and Princeton, he served as a senior executive with the College Board in New York for a brief period. However, in the pre-crisis days at Swarthmore, Dean Hargadon apparently was not prepared to accept constructive criticism and input from SASS on black admissions policy. After I graduated in June 1969, I was told that he became more receptive to SASS input.

By Christmas 1968, the College had ignored the Oct. 16 SASS demands—and SASS itself. Without consulting us, Dean Hargadon and the APC finished a second report on black admissions on Dec. 18. Apparently, in the view of Dean Hargadon and the APC, SASS had forfeited any consultative role in formulating black admissions policy. Why? Was it because SASS had refused to acquiesce in the invasion of black student privacy through the publication of personal data in the first Hargadon report?

Out of this maelstrom came a new set of SASS demands on Dec. 23, 1968. SASS thought that the dean of admissions, in questioning the organization's legitimacy, was denigrating black students and the black perspective SASS tried to represent at Swarthmore. While Martin Luther King had been striving to make the American dream as relevant and meaningful to black and white, many in SASS viewed black admissions at Swarthmore as a "dream deferred," using the metaphor of the Langston Hughes poem:

> What happens to a dream deferred?
> Does it dry up
> like a raisin in the sun?
> Or fester like a sore—
> And then run?
> Does it stink like rotten meat?
> Or crust and sugar over—
> like a syrupy sweet?
> Maybe it just sags
> like a heavy load.
> Or does it explode?*

I viewed our new demands as a desperate cry in the wilderness for recognition and respect by an "invisible man." Thus, in a last-ditch effort to get the attention of the College, I sent the following cover letter, along with a set of "clarified" demands, to President Smith on Dec. 23, 1968:

Merry Christmas!

Enclosed are the "clarified" SASS demands you requested some time ago. If you fail to issue a clear, unequivocal public acceptance of these non-negotiable demands by noon, Tuesday, January 7, 1969, the black students and SASS will be forced to do whatever is necessary to obtain acceptance of same.

Here is what the new set of demands asked for:

- The acceptance and enrollment of 10 to 20 "risk" black students for the next year and the provision of support services for them
- A College commitment to enroll 100 black students within three years and 150 black students within six years

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Unlike other Swarthmore student groups, SASS had no built-in constituency in the faculty or administration that provided a channel of communication.

**From* The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes, *Vintage Books, New York, © 1995. Reprinted with permission.*

The Crucible of *Character*

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• The appointment of a black assistant dean of admissions and a black counselor, subject to SASS review

• That Dean Hargadon be replaced by Sept. 1, 1969, "unless present admissions policies change or unless the actions of the current Dean of Admissions change"

If I knew then what I know now, I would have written the cover letter differently. Many times during the last 36 years, I have studied this letter carefully. This was very strong language with which to communicate the essential message of SASS. In "Requiem for Courtney Smith," Paul Good's article on the crisis (May 9, 1969, *Life*), J. Roland Pennock, chairman of the Political Science Department, conveyed the reaction of President Smith: "He was confronted with non-negotiable demands and rhetoric that did great offense to him.... This hurt him bitterly. But he never let himself be moved to anger." (The *Life* article was reprinted in the March 1999 *Bulletin* and is available in the magazine's Web archives at www.swarthmore.edu/bulletin.)

As incredible as it seems now, I and some other black students expected the College to ignore these demands just as it had ignored our demands of Oct. 16. To me, the production of the second black admissions report on Dec. 18, without reference to the SASS demands of Oct. 16, only dramatized how "invisible" we were at Swarthmore. The College had consistently refused to recognize the reality and legitimacy of SASS. We were left to conclude that the system at Swarthmore was unresponsive—and perhaps even hostile—to the SASS perspective on black admissions and our concern about the invasion of black student privacy. By Christmas 1968, it was clear that SASS had to move forward, even at the risk of failure, because of the moral imperative of our cause. If necessary, "we would present our very bodies as a means of laying our case before the conscience of the community," as Martin Luther King suggested in *Letter From Birmingham Jail*.

I learned of the impact of the cover letter and demands when I returned to Swarthmore from my home in New York City on Dec. 31. That was the day I first met Courtney Smith face-to-face.

I went by Parrish Hall to check my mailbox. To my surprise, I found a reproduced copy of the Dec. 23 SASS cover letter and demands in my mailbox—and learned that it had been placed in the mailbox of every student. President Smith had distributed the SASS cover letter and demands to the whole College community, along with his own response.

When I had typed our demands on my mechanical typewriter, I kept only a poor-quality carbon copy. With today's ubiquitous personal computers, scanners, faxes, and e-mail, it is easy to forget (or not know) how primitive 1969 office technology was by comparison. In those days, students typed papers and letters by typewriter—usually not electrical—with no memory capability. Papers to be reproduced were typically typed on a mimeograph stencil and copies made on an inky mimeograph machine. In 1969, photocopying machines were rare and expensive.

Therefore, because the College had multiple clean copies of the Dec. 23 SASS cover letter and demands—and I did not—why not ask the College for extra copies? It was not so simple. When I went to the reproduction office on the first floor of Parrish and asked for extra copies of the SASS package, a tight-jawed, scowling lady told me that she could only release extra copies with the permission of the President's Office. The next step was to climb the stairs of Parrish Hall to President Smith's second-floor office.

When I walked into the president's outer office, his secretary immediately recognized me. I politely asked her for extra copies of the SASS package. She quickly retreated into President Smith's private office while I patiently waited in the antechamber. The secretary returned shortly and informed me that President Smith wished to see me.

Courtney Smith was a living legend at Swarthmore—one of the great presidents in College history and the American secretary of the Rhodes Scholarship. To many Swarthmore students, me included, Courtney Smith seemed aloof and patrician—yet quietly charismatic in his Brooks Brothers suits. Although I merely wanted extra copies of the SASS package, I had climbed Mount Olympus and was about to be ushered into a private audience with Courtney Smith. I was psychologically unprepared and a little bit overwhelmed and intimidated. But as I stepped into his private office, I realized there is nothing to be afraid of if you believe the cause for which you stand is right and just.

I was about to be ushered into a private audience with Courtney Smith. As I stepped into his office, I realized there is nothing to be afraid of if you believe the cause for which you stand is right and just.

Despite our differences of race, age, and style, President Smith was cordial and gracious to me that day. I reciprocated his cordiality and treated him with the utmost respect and courtesy—even though my Dec. 23 cover letter did not communicate that. In the informal intimacy of his private office, President Smith told me in so many words that he wanted to discuss the SASS demands as two human beings in search of a human solution to a human problem. I very much wanted to do that too. But, at the same time, I was only the chairman of SASS and therefore only a

spokesman for the other black students—the "executive of their will." Without discussing any of the substantive issues of the SASS demands, he and I agreed to a second meeting with a delegation of SASS members on Jan. 6, 1969—the first day of school after Christmas vacation. After 10 minutes, with no further business to conduct, Courtney Smith and I shook hands like gentlemen and parted company.

Some may ask why I did not talk with President Smith about the demands. First, as SASS chairman, I took my spokesman role seriously. It was not lip service. I was consultative and collegial; I viewed myself as "first among equals" with respect to the other SASS members and the "executive of their will." Second, we in SASS valued group solidarity. We were sensitive to the "divide-and-conquer" tactics that had been used all too often in American history to separate blacks from their leaders. It would have been a mistake for me as SASS chairman to negotiate one-on-one with President Smith on Dec. 31 or at any other time or place. Hence, the meeting with a SASS delegation on Jan. 6 was the appropriate next step. Third, I was skeptical whether President Smith had an open mind about the SASS demands—and subsequent information confirmed my skepticism. In the *Life* article, author Paul Good quoted from a letter President Smith sent Dean Hargadon around the time in question: "I want to underline my dismay at the inappropriateness and lack of justification in SASS's remarks that concerned you and your work in admissions, including Negro admissions. I count on your knowing that I regard your work at Swarthmore as one of the great strengths of the college."

President Smith's letter did not surprise me. Regardless of his personal thoughts on the SASS position, politically Courtney Smith had to stand by his admissions dean.

The next and last time I met President Smith was Jan. 6, 1969, along with a delegation of 15 SASS members and a handful of other Swarthmore administrators. Compared with the informal intimacy of my Dec. 31 private meeting, the Jan. 6 meeting, although civil, was more formal and tense. SASS restated its demands of Dec. 23. President Smith restated his position from his cover letter of Dec. 31 to the Swarthmore community, which accompanied the public distribution of the SASS demands. President Smith expressed sympathy for the underlying concerns of the SASS demands, which he asked that we recast as proposals. At the same time, he said he could not act unilaterally on the SASS demands even as proposals, because they involved basic policy issues for the Swarthmore faculty and Board of Managers. With the two sides agreeing to disagree, the meeting ended without any substantive progress or resolution.

TWO DAYS AFTER THE JAN. 7 DEADLINE AND WITH NO SATISFACTORY response to the demands of Dec. 23, SASS engaged in nonviolent direct action by occupying the Admissions Office. We had crossed the Rubicon, and Swarthmore would never be the same.

We had crossed the Rubicon, and Swarthmore would never be the same again. Time stood still for a week—or so it seemed.

Then, time stood still for a week—or so it seemed.

As Richard Walton wrote:

> The SASS sit-in set off a frenzy of meetings by students and faculty. The students, as well as *The Phoenix*, generally supported SASS's goals but criticized its tactics. The faculty, often meeting late, night after night, took a similar position. Over a period of several days, the faculty adopted resolutions meeting most of the SASS demands, noting that they were acting not because of duress but because many of the demands were justified. President Smith said it went without saying that he was "prepared to use the full influence and prestige of his office to win Board approval" of the resolutions adopted by the faculty. Despite the inevitable confusion, the situation appeared to be moving toward resolution."

During the crisis, Asmarom Legesse, the African anthropologist, was a faculty liaison to SASS. Years later, *The Phoenix* quoted him as follows on the crisis: "The Admissions Office was boarded up. On one occasion, I had to climb through a window in order to talk to them. It was incredibly intense to be inside—they had developed a degree of maturity and a sense of purpose. There was the kind of vision about what they were doing that I never saw again."

After Swarthmore got over the consternation of the initial "non-negotiable" SASS demands, the controversial cover letter, and the dramatic occupation of the Admissions Office, the College found us to be basically reasonable and responsible negotiators. Once the negotiations were joined, we constantly appealed to the sense of morality and decency of the faculty and administrators on the other side of the table—and they seemed to respond. At the time, Professor of Anthropology Steve Piker suggested that SASS had effected "a resocialization of the Swarthmore community." Despite the SASS pre-crisis rhetoric and political language—which we were forced to use as "invisible" men and women—what we wanted was to make the system work better, not break the system.

Then, eight days into the SASS nonviolent direct action, President Courtney Smith died suddenly of a heart attack at age 53. Although I did not know him well, our one, short, private meeting on Dec. 31 gave me some sense of Smith as a man. I, like everybody in the Swarthmore community, was shocked and saddened by the news of his unfortunate death on Jan. 16. That same day, SASS ended its action and issued the following statement:

> In deference to the untimely death of the President, the Swarthmore Afro-American Students' Society is vacating the Admissions Office. We sincerely believe the death of any human being, whether he be the good President of a college, or a black person trapped in our country's ghettoes, is a tragedy. At this time we are calling for a moratorium of dia-

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

I had prostate surgery in July 2003, which appears to have been successful in dealing with early-stage prostate cancer. I never had surgery or a major illness before, but this illness brought me face to face with my own mortality. Coming at age 55, it made me realize that I am closer to the end than the beginning of my life—and to the "unfinished business" I still need to do. Writing this article was one piece of "unfinished business."

Besides prostate surgery, I've come to realize that if you don't write your own history, someone else will write it for you—and they may or may not get it right. Since 1969, there have been several articles and pieces written about the crisis at Swarthmore—but none by black students directly involved. Although I am not an official SASS historian or a current spokesman for SASS or Swarthmore blacks, past or present, I believe my recollections and viewpoint on the crisis can make a contribution to the historical record.

I hope my historical memoir is the beginning, not the end, of a serious new assessment of one of the most significant events in the history of Swarthmore College. I urge others to pick up where I leave off.

—Clinton Etheridge '69

logue, in order that this unfortunate event be given the college's complete attention. However, we remain strong in our conviction that the legitimate grievances we have voiced to the college remain unresolved and we are dedicated to attaining a satisfactory resolution in the future.

The Phoenix weighed in with thoughtful editorial comments: "President Smith's unexpected death has unfortunately tended to obscure the restraint and rationality of the events which preceded it.... However we strongly believe that every effort should be made to dissociate his death from the preceding events of that week. It was an unforeseeable accident that should not be considered the consequence of any action."

Professor Legesse addressed the question of "violence" a week after the death of President Smith:

> Senior members of this community have suggested that the actions of SASS were acts of "violence." I can only understand this indictment as a response to grief.... Can we plausibly admit such guilt and interpret a sit-in and a hunger-strike as acts of violence? Are we to believe that these instruments of peaceful protest are legitimate and "nonviolent" only when we use them to direct attention to grievances elsewhere, but cease to be legitimate when they are directed at our own institution? ... We should not forget that black students exhibited extraordinary restraint and discipline during the crisis.

It was public knowledge that President Smith was in his last year as Swarthmore's president. In July 1968, he had announced his intention to leave the College in June 1969, to become president of the Markle Foundation. He had been a trustee of the New York–based foundation since 1953, the same year he became president of Swarthmore.

However, at the time of his death, it was not public knowledge that he had a pre-existing heart condition. In their authorized biography of President Smith (*Dignity, Discourse, and Destiny: The Life of Courtney C. Smith*, Associated University Presses, 2003) based on records, documents, and archives of the College and the Smith family, authors Darwin Stapleton '69 and Donna Heckman Stapleton disclose: "A postmortem examination conducted the same day [of Courtney Smith's death] but never made public showed his heart had suffered a hemorrhage of the right coronary artery, and that he had 'severe atherosclerosis of both coronary arteries ... the caliber of both coronary arteries was considerably reduced in diameter so that only a small probe could be put through them.'" The Stapletons conclude, "Unknown to all, and least of all himself, Smith had been living with serious heart disease for some time."

THERE WAS AN INTENSE BACKLASH AGAINST SASS from outside the College after the death of President Smith. I received hate mail for weeks from many parts of the country. Years later, I came across a quote from Horace that captures how I felt in the aftermath of the crisis: "The man who is tenacious of purpose in a rightful cause is not shaken from his firm resolve by the frenzy of his fellow citizens clamoring for what is wrong."

I cannot speak for any other member of SASS at the time, but I considered myself psychologically prepared to face the consequences of our nonviolent direct action. I believed in our cause so strongly that I was personally prepared, if necessary, to be expelled from Swarthmore, to be beaten by the police, to be killed. Fortunately, none of that happened to me or any other SASS member. But neither I nor anyone else was prepared for the untimely death

of President Smith.

Although many Swarthmoreans then and since have disagreed with SASS over the use of nonviolent direct action in January 1969, most have agreed with and embraced the changes in black admissions that SASS was seeking. I see this as evidence of the ambivalence of the white moderate that Martin Luther King discusses in *Letter From Birmingham Jail*:

> ... the white moderate who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action."
>
> Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will.

My decision to become SASS chairman in spring 1968 had been a difficult one. The late Sam Shepherd Jr. '68 was graduating. Sam was a founding father of SASS and the SASS chairman. I was vice chairman and the logical consensus candidate to take the chairmanship. Yet I was a shy, soft-spoken, ambivalent engineering student. Sam used the Phil Ochs song "When I'm Gone" (from *Phil Ochs in Concert*) to persuade me to succeed him as SASS chairman. The song, which rhapsodizes on the importance of making your contribution while you are "here," has two lines that particularly hit home for me: "Won't be asked to do my share when I'm gone." "Can't add my name into the fight when I'm gone." I agonized over the decision to become SASS chairman, but when I finally made it, I was totally committed—come what may.

I came to realize that sometimes you must lead by being led. This was a leadership principle of Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi. In a 1963 article, Dr. King quoted Gandhi: "There go my people, I must catch them, for I am their leader." This was particularly the case with "Seven Sisters" of SASS, who were frequently the "power behind the throne." Marilyn Holifield, Marilyn Allman Maye, Aundrea White Kelley '72, Janette Domingo '70, and others kept my feet to the fire of "blackness."

During the crisis, Don Mizell was the SASS vice chairman. Don and I worked well together, and we had complementary styles. Don was charismatic, a good public speaker, and more comfortable with the glare of media publicity. Reserved, understated, and unflappable, I somehow projected as SASS chairman what some people described as "strength of character." This reaction surprised me. In many respects, I was an unlikely leader, yet I was the man history selected for this role.

Although Swarthmore generally nurtured me as a critical thinker, the crisis was where my real education came during my college years. To quote Herbert Spencer, the 19th-century British social philosopher and biologist: "The great aim of education is not knowledge but action." As a reluctant, unlikely leader, I was forced to stretch myself, to grow in ways that I would not otherwise have grown during those years. There were times during the crisis when I had to dig deep down inside myself and pull out qualities I didn't know I possessed.

The crisis was a defining moment that shaped the rest of my life. Most human beings are given relatively few opportunities to make a difference or a contribution to their world— to leave a legacy.

For example, during my first public presentations during the crisis (to the outside press, Swarthmore faculty, and Swarthmore student body), I had to overcome stage fright. I had no choice; it was a "do-or-die" situation. What propelled me forward, what helped me reinvent myself, was a compelling sense of duty and devotion to the moral imperative of our cause. I could not break faith with the legacy of my forebears and others, like Martin Luther King, who had made so many sacrifices for me, the black race, and America. It was now my turn to stand and deliver—to the best of my ability—at Swarthmore.

The crisis was the greatest challenge of my youth and a defining moment that shaped the rest of my life. Most human beings are given relatively few opportunities in their lives to make a significant difference or make a real contribution to their world—to leave a legacy. The crisis was such an opportunity for me.

The most important lesson I took from the 1960s and the Swarthmore crisis is that, whether we know it or not, whether we like it or not, America and its black citizens—and Swarthmore and its black students—are, in the words of Martin Luther King, "caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny." We must all strive to validate "the existential character of the American liberal, humanistic, idealistic, and democratic tradition, with its capacity for growth, renewal, and extension to the world of higher possibilities and more inclusive realities."

This is the wellspring of the American dream. Despite the inevitable difficulties and frustrations from the lingering pernicious effects of racism, there is no escaping our mutual destiny. For black and white, there is no viable alternative to the American dream.

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