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# An Open Letter to the Faculty of Swarthmore College

From: Asmarom Legesse

During the crisis of the past week I came to believe that this academic community has committed itself to making a fundamental re-examination of its relationship to Black people and to Black students and that it would do so with a greater sense of justice than any other institution known to me. During the last hours of the crisis, however, I heard so many veiled threats and so many unjust statements by members of this community that my faith in Swarthmore was shaken.

It would be a grave error to attribute the President's tragic death to the student protest as if the students had control over the lives of their fellow human beings. Even the most oblique reference to this idea is deeply offensive to our sense of common morality.

It is not SASS but individuals outside the college community who resorted, on at least three occasions, to violent threats. If SASS did jeopardize anybody's life, it now appears that they jeopardized their own.

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. It would be self-defeating if we allowed the College's good name to be marred by speaking of violence where there was none.

By association with recent events in other parts of the country (Columbia, Brandeis, San Francisco State...) the Press has accused our students of violence. 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 "non-violent" only when we use them to direct attention to grievances elsewhere, but cease to be legitimate when they are directed at our own institution? Even if we were to believe that our administrative and academic traditions are above criticism -- which they are not -- I fail to see the rationale by which we read belligerent intent into the actions of SASS. We should not forget that Black students exhibited extraordinary restraint and discipline throughout the crisis.

Whether or not I agree with the language and substance of all of the "SASS demands" -- and I do not -- I feel that the college's present mood is not in keeping with its traditional commitment to reason. If the grievances of a few Black students at Swarthmore were valid enough to claim our undivided attention last week, they are no less valid to-day.

It was imperative that SASS abruptly end the dialogue which they so forcefully initiated in the entire community. I sensed this need and expressed it unequivocally. It now becomes equally imperative that the faculty take the initiative to address itself to these grievances with a heightened sense of urgency. We should condemn the future use of force by acting positively and creatively outside the crisis situation. Repressive legislation will accomplish very little. If, on the other hand, we relegate the resolution of the conflict to some future date, our action will demonstrate to the Black members of our community that the College has little right to claim their loyalty and trust and that in acting with

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I, for one, choose to believe that Swarthmore will emerge from this crisis and tragedy with a greater commitment to justice and an undiminished commitment to academic excellence.

*Asmaron Legesse*