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NICHOLAS VON HOFFMAN ON WOULD-BE PRESIDENTS

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THE ETHNICS V. THE SYSTEM

"I am born into a history not Anglo-Saxon and not Jewish...and thus I am privy to neither power nor status nor intellectual voice."

See page 44

14115

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Tom Powers

AUTOPSY ON OLD WESTBURY

The politics of free-form education

BY 1966 American college officials had sensed they were an *ancien régime* threatened by revolutionary discontents. In that year the State University of New York, hoping to avoid the troubles besetting her sister university in California, announced plans for a new four-year college with "an almost unrestricted opportunity for innovation" in which students would have "full partnership." In 1967 Harris Wofford, a former director of the Peace Corps in Ethiopia and a Kennedy civil-rights aide, was appointed president of the new college, to be called the State University at Old Westbury.

For nearly a year Wofford invited suggestions from students, academics, and prophets of the new youth culture, including four Diggers from San Francisco who stopped by on their way to the march on the Pentagon in October 1967. Wofford's ambitions for the school were high. "It shouldn't be called Old Westbury," he told one of the first people he hired, "because it's going to be a school of the world."

A fire on the original Old Westbury, Long Island, campus forced the school to move to a 409-acre estate in nearby Oyster Bay, a town of staggering affluence about an hour from New York City. In September 1968, the first eighty-five students arrived in Oyster Bay for two years of experiment before the "real" students, eventually to number 5,000, arrived at the "real" campus still under construction at Old Westbury. During the next eighteen months, while the academic world watched closely, the following entirely typical events took place:

- At a meeting the first night, the students spent four hours arguing whether all, some, or none of the school's bathrooms should be co-ed. No conclusion was reached.
- A girl spent one entire semester polishing a four-foot-high piece of bark.
- Perhaps one thousand proposals were met with the objection, "What's new about that?"
- A course on the oppression of women turned into an activist group that mothered the entire Women's Liberation movement on Long Island.
- Two campus buildings were burned, and bomb scares repeatedly emptied classrooms.
- All students received grades of "pass" or "no credit," but grades of "no credit" were not recorded.
- Students and faculty failed to agree on anything except the urgent necessity of Wofford's resignation.

This agreement was about to be formally voiced at an open meeting in the spring of 1970 when Wofford insisted on speaking first and then announced, with regret, that he was leaving. State University officials in Albany, picking up echoes of these events, appointed a five-man committee, named for its chairman, Clifford Craven, to assess the school's progress. The Craven Committee, whose members believed in courses, departments, and grades, spent two days on the Oyster Bay campus and then submitted a report that amounted to an academic counter-revolution. The result was a decision to close the college in Oyster Bay and start again this fall with a new president, John D. Maguire, a theologian, on the rebuilt campus in Old Westbury.

Wofford left to become president of Bryn Mawr. A black anthropologist was appointed acting president of the Oyster Bay campus for a final year, and the school became, for two brief semesters, one of the best undergraduate colleges in America, a fact not as widely recognized in academic circles as the now infamous piece of polished bark.

The State University at Old Westbury had been intended as a response to the discontent expressed in the Free Speech Movement slogan, "I am a student—do not fold, spindle or mutilate." It was not to be a "multiversity" turning out technicians for corporate America, but a "free" institution in which students would direct their own education in "relevant" subjects. Ever since the school was closed as a failure, the enemies of academic experiments have cited Old Westbury as reason for leaving things alone. In fact, however, the failure of the school had little to do with the experiments, and a lot to do with the divisions in American society.

Thomas Powers recently was awarded a Pulitzer prize for his national reporting for UPI. He is the author of Diana, *and is at work now on another book.*

HARVEY DINNERSTEIN

Symbol of white America

FOR A COLLEGE determined to face the American Crisis, locating itself on a Long Island estate that might have been Jay Gatsby's was surprising and, as things turned out, something of a mistake. The three main factions at the school—white radicals, hippies, and the Non-White Caucus—arrived on the campus in an apocalyptic mood, in the fall of a year dominated by assassination, riot, and street fighting. No one was prepared for the lush physical beauty of the environment where a rich marine insurance broker had spent forty years creating one of the finest arboretums in America. The geodesic domes that housed the school were surrounded by Siberian crab apple trees, Japanese maples, Austrian pines, purple beech, and Camperdown elms. Coe Hall, a Victorian-Gothic building named after the estate's former owner, was closed the first year, but students used to sneak in and wander admiringly through the enormous rooms.

Frank Miata, a leader of the white radicals, was stunned the first time he saw the campus. Miata, who spent a year as an SDS regional organizer in upstate New York before he came to Old Westbury, had grown up on Long Island's South Shore, where affluence is paid for on time, and the Ruling Class, for those who believe in it, is an abstraction. At Old Westbury, Miata discovered that the Ruling Class lived next door. He saw its members coming home from Wall Street in the evening in rented helicopters. He passed their gate cottages and their long tree-lined driveways. In 1969 Miata married another Old Westbury student, Pat Sweeney, in Coe Hall. When Pat and her father, a working man from Chicago, drove up to the campus he asked, "What is this? A forest preserve?" A friend of Pat's, Deborah Leavy, did a research project on the membership of Oyster Bay's 100-year-old Sewanakah-Corinthian Yacht Club. What she found was a corporate world as tightly bound by blood, marriage, and money as the city-states of Renaissance Italy. White radicalism at Old Westbury was not weakened by the knowledge that the Coe estate was once *one man's home*.

The effect of the school's location was equally arresting to other students. The hippies took one look and decided that Old Westbury ought to be a liberated zone where youth culture could flourish in magnificent isolation. A distinct minority, they spent their days in a dreamy state known as "grooving in the grass." The bark-polishing devotee, a former high-school cheerleader, later designed a course that she called "Poetry of Life" and described as follows:

> *Now I hear beautiful music. Then I paint a mind picture. Later I walk in the wood. Reverently I study my wood, know it. Converse with a poet meaningful to me. Make Love.*

Tom Powers

AUTOPSY ON OLD WESTBURY

For the hippies, Old Westbury was the Enchanted Wood. In their spiritual enthusiasm, they neglected to remember that eventually the State University would give them B.A.s in Life Poetry and send them back to Queens and Brooklyn. They wanted to retreat from the society collapsing around them, a notion that brought them into immediate and continuing conflict with the rest of the school.

For the Non-White Caucus, the Oyster Bay campus was final proof that America was indeed two nations, separate and unequal. Blacks were regularly reminded that they were new to the town of Oyster Bay, and not altogether welcome. When one black girl tried to cash a state check at a local bank, the teller refused. She produced a driver's license, an Old Westbury student card, and other identification. He still refused. She asked why. "Well," he said, "you could have stolen it." The bank finally accepted the word of a school administrator. Oyster Bay was a hostile *white* environment, and black students responded by depending on each other. Black-white couples were resented, and political cooperation between the races was cautious, when it occurred at all. While the white radicals saw Old Westbury as a living reminder of the Class Enemy, and the hippies saw it as a refuge, the Non-White Caucus saw it as a symbol of everything white America had reserved for itself. Black students did not altogether trust the motives of those who had brought them to Old Westbury, and were determined not to forget the reality of the world they had temporarily left behind.

No paths to moderation

THE FIRST (1968-69) ACADEMIC YEAR at Old Westbury was intensely political. The three factions had definite ideas about how to save America and were inclined to view disagreement, much less resistance, as reactionary obstructionism. Everyone felt time was running out, and was correspondingly short-tempered. Nobody gave anybody the benefit of the doubt. As a result, all disputes created a maximum of bitterness.

The sharpest fight of all naturally centered on who was in charge. Students understood "full partnership" to include everything, not only the free election of courses but determination of what courses the school would offer, the hiring of faculty to teach them, the sort of grades to be recorded, the allotment of money for field projects, even the overall purpose of the school. At the same time, they did not want to limit the right of students in later years to decide the same questions all over again.

The struggle for control of Old Westbury was sharpened by the experience of some of the students on field projects in New York City. Wofford and his planners had decided that part of the year would be spent in urban field work, a plan immediately opposed by some blacks, who objected that they had just *left* the city, and by most of the hippies, who liked sitting around on the grass. That fall, during New York City's prolonged teachers' strike, the white radicals decided to take sides with the community and teach in Bedford-Stuyvesant, one of the country's worst ghettos (a decision reached only after a week of agonized argument about the propriety of crossing picket lines). Students who began with the idea of creating a Brooklyn "Summerhill" of loving spontaneity were shocked by the poverty and what it had done to the kids they were trying to teach. The daily contrast between Bedford-Stuyvesant slums and Oyster Bay elegance did nothing to encourage political moderation.

In some ways Old Westbury relived in a matter of months the history of political activism in the Sixties, which began with the rediscovery that rich and poor live side by side in America. The classic effect of such an experience is radicalization, the willingness to take extreme measures to correct social wrongs. There is no morally valid argument why the rich should be happy in Oyster Bay and the poor miserable in New York. That morality is beside the point is a truism learned only over a period of time. Old Westbury radicals did not know what to do about the things they saw during second semester field projects, but they returned to Long Island in May with an angry determination to do *something*.

Another issue that split the school still further was a proposal to bring the faculty and student body to an even 50-50 balance between blacks and whites, a proposal eventually defeated in a referendum. Even before the referendum, however, Wofford had announced that he would veto the 50-50 plan no matter how many people favored it. This and other arbitrary acts focused the prevailing discontents on the question of campus control, which resulted in a struggle for power as bitter and resolute as if a nation had been at stake. On May 19, 1969, the school began a two-week "evaluation session" to sum up the Old Westbury experiment thus far. The session opened with a picnic to which white radicals pointedly brought two large cakes in celebration of the birthdays of Ho Chi Minh and Malcolm X.

A collision was rapidly approaching. When Mrs. Annabelle Bagdon, Wofford's secretary, left the president's office that day, she wondered whether she ought to lock the files. She hesitated, then decided, "That's not what Old Westbury is all about," and left them open.

Wofford formally opened the evaluation session in the old carriage house, with a lofty speech quoting Robert Frost and Gandhi. Most of the students sat in stony-faced silence. Finally Frank Miata got up and said, "This is obscene. We've been listening and listening. I'm not going to listen anymore." He turned, stumbled over a chair, and marched out, followed by the rest of the white radicals and most of the Non-White Caucus. The ensuing one-week sit-in ended any real possibility of reconciliation, particularly after the white radicals went through Wofford's files and learned that a lot of people had been making a good thing out of Old Westbury. A consultant, for example, had apparently been paid in advance for 150 days of consulting at $100 a day but had yet to do any consulting. The range in salaries also came as a shock. One hardworking secretary was paid only $4,700 a year, while a professor made $22,000.

The disenchantment extended to Wofford himself. The public Wofford was a man of passionate intellectual idealism. His correspondence suggested to the radicals that he was still concerned with questions of political power and position—as might well be expected of any former associate of the Kennedys. And the possibility that Wofford might have political ambitions of his own struck the radicals as somehow deeply improper. None of them ever called him by his first name again.

During one period, Miata and Wofford had often discussed their political differences. Wofford freely admitted what he hoped Old Westbury would do to young radicals like Miata. "I really believe in this system," Wofford told him one day, "and I want to co-opt you into it as far as I can." When Miata finally turned against the school, it was with a sense of having been almost personally betrayed. By the time the sit-in ended, the white radicals had decided Old Westbury was as corrupt as the rest of the country. The promises had all turned out to be lies, they felt, and the ideals a sham. They were even beginning to suspect that Old Westbury had been founded principally to isolate radicals from the rest of the State University system.

While making a final break with the administration, the white radicals also cut themselves off from much of the rest of the student body. On the first day of the sit-in they announced to the large group of students crowded into Wofford's office, "There are people here who are not our friends." The nonfriends were expelled. If this is not quite Stalinism, it is not exactly participatory democracy, either. Politics, in short, was allowed to discredit the educational experiment at Old Westbury.

HARVEY DINNERSTEIN

Given a student body deliberately recruited for its interest in educational experiment and social change, power conflicts were inevitable, especially since the "full partnership" idea was never well defined. Power seemed to be there for the taking, and everybody reached at once.

Old Westbury's problems can be traced back to Berkeley where the Free Speech Movement in 1964 gave birth to organized student activism. In 1966, shortly before Old Westbury entered its planning phase, the slogan "Student Power" was adopted by the SDS at their national convention in Iowa. (The group was fascinated by the phrase "Black Power," which Stokely Carmichael had coined during the Meredith march through Mississippi in early June.)

There has been a tendency to tar all educational experimentation with the brush of student excesses. In fact, the SDS frankly considered student power solely as an organizing tool; they

did not really plan to take over schools, and quickly abandoned educational issues for larger political questions. By the end of 1967 the SDS had turned against student power as evasion of the real problems of American society, which it was beginning to see in traditionally Marxist-Leninist terms. In the meantime, however, other elements in the university community sensed that higher education was on the verge of breaking down. Educators realized that something had to be done to give students a sense of participation in their own lives, and one of the tentative solutions proposed was to give them a voice in running the schools they attended.

On its surface, student power in this sense had considerable appeal. It seemed a simple extension of the democratic process in a country that prided itself on democracy. At the same time, student power evoked immediate opposition by academics jealous of their power over appointments, curriculum, grades, and related matters. This was not simply old fogeyism, but a reflection of genuine doubts about how scholarship would fare under the control of passionate laymen. Old Westbury was only one of many attempts to resolve these dilemmas.

At Old Westbury, as on many other campuses, there were two broad factions: a group of what might be called disciplinarians, who sought academic excellence and felt that teachers, the presumed experts, are entitled to exercise a certain authority over students; and a group of libertarians, who believed that learning thrives in conditions of freedom and teachers are there to guide students toward the things they want to learn. Old Westbury's educational struggle was colored by Wofford's admiration for the Great Books program at St. John's University in Maryland, which, in effect, put him in the camp of the disciplinarians. He envisioned a school centering on what he considered to be the three great divisions of Western intellectual life: law, medicine, and theology. One of Old Westbury's original student planners, more sensitive to the times, said that would be fine as long as it meant crime, disease, and heresy.

Few students or teachers took any interest in Wofford's experiment. He had a real love for Greek intellectual ideals, he believed in Socratic dialogue as mental exercise, even as a way of life. If the dialogue did not answer pressing questions, well, answers might come later. Students at Old Westbury were suspicious of large ideas that tended to overlook the actual state of things. The central experience of their generation, after all, had been that American democracy in theory and in fact were two quite different things. During one seminar Wofford spoke eloquently about law as the fundamental principle of human society. A skeptical black student asked, "But what about the laws that let big corporations evade taxes?" "That's not the kind of law I'm talking about," Wofford answered. Old Westbury students, however, were interested in exactly that sort of law. Wofford's set of the Great Books remained in his office, rarely used, while the rest of the school pursued a fiercely contemporary course of study.

The passionate struggles for control of Old Westbury and the effort to involve students in the problems of their time were barely alluded to in the Craven Committee's report. The committee was primarily concerned with standards, of which it found few during its two-day study of the school. This did not necessarily mean that nothing of value was taking place at the school, but it did mean that the results were difficult to evaluate. In its report, the committee diagnosed the problem this way: "There appears to be a philosophy at Old Westbury which deliberately seeks to guard against the possibility that the quality of a student's work as a whole might jeopardize his status." In other words, it was impossible to *fail.*

The school's badly outnumbered disciplinarians, openly doubtful if not contemptuous, objected to nonacademic courses like "The Craft of Sewing," "Candlemaking," "Guitar Country Blues," "Afro Dances," and "Verbal and Non-Verbal Conversation." They believed in standards: in right and wrong answers, in good and bad work, in valid and invalid arguments.

The disciplinarians frequently cited Luis Camnitzer, a South American artist who was reluctant to tell students what he wanted them to do. As a result, they often did nothing. Occasionally, however, he would set problems for the class, such as asking them to create something that would change their psychological environment. The class finally made a huge papier mâché boulder and hung it over the entrance to the dining hall. Everyone agreed that it added an air of doom to the campus. On another occasion, Camnitzer's class cut eye holes in paper bags and put them on. The students drew faces on each other's bags (which the wearer, of course, could not see) and then carried on conversations that seemed significant because of the contrast between the speaker's mask and what he was saying. The disciplinarians did not view this sort of thing as education, and more than a few students found that Old Westbury's freedom left them confused and depressed. Everything was so indefinite; by the time a class had decided

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what to study and how to study it, the year might be half over.

Next to educational anarchy, the disciplinarians most disliked educational polemics. There was, naturally, an extensive offering of courses on Marxism, the Cuban revolution, the war in Vietnam, American foreign policy, and similar subjects. The Craven Committee cited a course in "Domestic Imperialism" that consisted entirely of movies about welfare agencies, OEO projects, SDS community organizing, and other attempts to solve American social problems. The description of the course in the 1970 *Spring Curriculum* said students would receive only two credits, "because for the first eight weeks we will be simply sitting in our ivory tower, gasping at American atrocities in America." The Craven Committee clearly felt that two credits were two too many.

Relevance is hard to assess

THE LIBERTARIANS ARE READY to admit that Old Westbury never found a way to measure its progress, but they insist it was an educational success anyway. Donald Bluestone, who left Roosevelt University in Chicago because he wanted a freer relationship with his students, invited open discussion at Old Westbury. Although he was singled out for criticism by the Craven Committee, which apparently felt his course in nineteenth-century American history amounted to an anti-American bull session for credit, there was, in fact, a reading list of thirty books; Bluestone's students were conscientious, and the seminar generally stuck to the point. If the tone of the course was critical, that was because it centered on slavery and Reconstruction, not exactly happy themes in American history. Short of attending the course, however, there was no way for the Craven Committee to have known what it was really like. Bluestone admits the committee might have formed a different impression if he had graded his seminar students or given an A-plus to one particularly brilliant paper by Pat Sweeney. On the other hand, Bluestone feels, giving grades would have made his seminars cautious and dull, and if Pat Sweeney had been more interested in an "A" than in her argument, her argument inevitably would have suffered.

The question of grades was not taken lightly at Old Westbury. The disciplinarians were convinced that nothing else could keep students honest. Libertarians like Bluestone felt that grades interfered with learning, and were painfully aware of a grade's relationship to a student's standing in the draft. Zonia Krassner, who taught a tightly organized course in the life sciences, wonders how grades could have recorded what *she* learned. Her students, for example, convinced her that eugenics could never be neutral, that every conceivable standard for the control of human breeding would inevitably contain racial and cultural biases. This kind of exchange makes education a human process, Mrs. Krassner feels. The Craven Committee failed to take note of it.

Another thing the committee did not assess was Old Westbury's attempt to provide an education that students would find socially and politically relevant. Wofford's paradigm of the Peace Corps was predictably out of phase with the harsher student radicalism of the late Sixties, but the students experimented with other techniques of social change that had real effects. The Young Lords, an activist party of Puerto Ricans in New York's Spanish Harlem, grew out of discussions that began at Old Westbury.

Radicals also point to a course in the oppression of women organized by students in the fall of 1969. At the end of the first semester, students at a local high school invited members of the course to speak on Women's Liberation. When the Old Westbury students also handed out leaflets, including one on "The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm," the high school's principal protested and the incident was reported in local papers. The result was a steady stream of invitations from other Long Island high schools and colleges.

That spring the group held a conference on Women's Liberation that led directly to the organization of more than twenty other groups. When the Cambodian invasion and the Kent State killings in May 1970 sparked a nationwide student strike, the women's group used its extensive contact list to organize the strike throughout Long Island. The success of the course in moving beyond academic subjects to an active role in society is indisputable, but the State University's response was naturally ambivalent. Radicals argue that it was successes like these which led Albany officials to close Old Westbury.

The least discussed part of the Old Westbury experiment was the attempt to recruit black and Puerto Rican students from ghetto schools. Cultural differences between the races emerged immediately. The white students had a sentimental regard for the blues-singing Southern Negroes of the early civil-rights movement but felt distinctly uneasy around loud-talking ghetto blacks in leather caps and chartreuse pants who stayed up until three in the morning. A more important, but even less freely acknowledged, cause of

black-white tension was white fear of black violence, a fear not entirely unfounded. During one heated argument at an open student meeting, a frustrated black suddenly grabbed a white by the throat and shouted, "You're stalling us! We've been stalled for three hundred years!" When a white student broke a ban on drugs by giving LSD to an unprepared Ethiopian student, blacks threatened to "ice" him if he ever returned to Old Westbury. He conferred with a dean (off campus) and transferred to another school.

By Old Westbury's third and last year, relations between white and black students relaxed. The Non-White Caucus was never formally disbanded, though it ceased to function. Luis Elisa, a black student who was active in running the school, found race at Old Westbury comparatively muted after several semesters at New York Community College, where a professor had once stated that black Africans had never made a single contribution to Western civilization. At Old Westbury, Elisa found, teachers were prepared to accept blacks as people. He doubts whether he could have graduated from any other school.

Never any compromise

OF THE FOUR EXPERIMENTS at Old Westbury, only one, "full partnership," was a clear failure. The attempt to include blacks was, in the end, a success; the concern with urban problems was a partial success; the granting of near-total academic freedom was, at worst, inconclusive. Old Westbury's freedom and sense of community, even when it was a community at war with itself, were both unique. The school was something new in the world, and everyone connected with it fears that it may be gone for good. The State University is committed to going ahead with a reorganized school on the new campus, but the old willingness to take a chance may no longer be there.

Old Westbury had the bad luck to open at a moment when political passions throughout the country were unrestrained. In retrospect, disputes at the school are generally described in terms of lofty principle, but, at the time, they were touched with passionate irreconcilable animosities. Hippies called radicals fascists, blacks called whites racists, faculty members called each other anarchists and reactionaries. It was even argued on one occasion that student control of faculty appointments meant (if carried to its logical limits) the end of Western civilization. The bomb scares during the school's second year and a steady rise in thefts at the student-run bookstore helped reinforce such fears. Few now like to remember the time when hundreds of thumbtacks were carefully set out point up on a stairway in the administration building, or the morning when a secretary discovered human feces smeared across her desk.

The struggle for power at Old Westbury did not end until the State University announced the closing of the school. The effect of that decision was an instant clearing of the air. Meetings, for the first time, began coming to the point, ending before midnight and reaching conclusions. Factions began to blur and bitterness faded. Few of the experiments at Old Westbury were incompatible with a strong central administration exercising clearly defined powers for a clearly defined purpose. If any lesson can be drawn from the whole chaotic experience, it was probably this: campus conflict is inevitable as long as the question of ultimate control remains open. Old Westbury proved that students could be granted enormous freedom in choosing what they wanted to study. It also proved that running a school and getting an education are not easily reconciled, although President Maguire's administration fervently hopes to avoid the pitfalls of the past.

The final graduation party was held at the very height of spring, on May 22, 1971, when the air was heavy with the scent of flowering trees and new-mown grass. The school's impending death naturally put everyone in an elegiac mood. Wofford was only a memory, and the old battles, lost and won, no longer made any difference. Students and faculty who had left a year or two before returned to see friends and former enemies a final time. Don Bluestone read a poem and Russell Ellis, who came all the way from Berkeley, spoke about the unique bond that joined people who had both loved and hated each other. Students presented a well-liked administrator with a plaque that read, "In the beginning God created Old Westbury and it was good." If there were sharp words, they were all directed at state officials in Albany. Nevertheless, some of those present felt that it had been not the state, but they, who had killed the school.

Along with the good feelings, inevitably, there were reminders of the way things had been. Two unpopular professors came but left after a few awkward minutes. Some people only nodded. Certain subjects were not discussed. Three years of struggle had taught people to be delicate with each other. On its final day in Oyster Bay, Old Westbury practiced the one virtue it had always lacked—forbearance. □

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