

The Finest Moment

By Gary Smaby

In the fall of 1969, the dawning Aquarian Age seemed only to shed harsher light on the deeply divisive issues confronting our nation. The prior spring, I had been elected as student body president on a platform of disruptive change. Upon returning to the Hill, I was apprehensive about how to marshal a cadre of talented classmates to translate our collective existential angst into action. I settled on the Tom Sawyer approach. And it worked.

Ole historian, Dr. Joseph Shaw would later call our approach an “oligarchic style of leadership”. My role was not so much to lead but rather to gather like-minded classmates with the requisite skills to swiftly tackle whatever issue surfaced.

With my co-disruptors recruited, I kicked off my inaugural chapel talk by attacking many treasured but antiquated traditions, arguing that “it was time for the faculty to give up many powers that it had unjustifiably assumed. . . recognizing that their role is to teach not to preach”.

I had thrown down the gauntlet but I knew I had a passionate coalition behind me.

We first declared the Parliament obsolete; setting in motion a plan to create of a student/faculty community assembly that reported directly to the Board of Regents. By mid-April, President Rand had approved an early draft. The faculty gave its thumbs up on May 4.

In a cruel twist of fate, the Kent State massacre occurred on that very day. Taken together with the secret war in Cambodia revealed the week earlier, the events spontaneously ignited campus protests nationwide. Our campus was no exception.

On the evening of May 6th, in the first ad-hoc test of the concept, more than 2,000 students and faculty crammed into Women’s Gym. After two hours of respectful debate, the assembled community voted 1,172 to 762, by secret ballot, to call a campus-wide strike.

Shaw later characterized that gathering as “a new and memorable phenomenon . . . the major symbol of the rare spirit of unity generated during that period . . .”, quoting a campus leader as calling it, “St. Olaf’s finest moment”.