

**The Reserve Officers' Training Corps: Protests and
Perspectives on the University of Oregon Campus in 1969
and 1970**

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The Vietnam War era was an age of confusion, questioning, and outcry for many people across the country. It was a time of change in many ways, especially in the lives of college students and other campus community members. The University of Oregon, like other universities, became a hub for debate, protest, and activism. The Reserve Officers' Training Corps, a program designed to prepare college students for service in the Army, had been an issue of debate for decades. Opposition to the program and discussion of its place on a college campus became the focus of a student movement that culminated in the late 1960s and early 1970s on the UO campus.

It was a complex matter—there were not simply two groups, one supporting the program and one opposing it. The issue of ROTC and its presence at the university was one that stemmed from many different attitudes and ideas belonging to students, faculty, and administration. As the State Board of Higher Education described it in their Report on Student Unrest on the UO campus, “Opposition to ROTC on campus continues. Doubtless a variety of views underlie this opposition. Important among them is the view of many opponents that a continuation of ROTC on the campus of the University of Oregon is an expression of tacit support for the war in Indochina.”¹

As the State Board noted, protests against the ROTC were indeed the result of many different opinions, with the most obvious being that the program could serve as a local target for directing protests against the war in Vietnam, and sometimes against United States and its military in general. Other students who were involved in the opposition saw the program as a method of socialization and instilling obedience and

¹ Unrest at State System Institutions—A Progress Report; Student Unrest, Unrest at State System Institutions; Office of the President: Robert D. Clark, coll. UA16; Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403.

felt that the presence of ROTC on campus could not coexist with the free inquiry and exchange of ideas that were characteristic of a liberal arts education. Some supporters of ROTC believed that it was essential for maintaining civilian influence over the military. Others desired to retain the program as an extracurricular activity but to stop granting academic credit for participation. Some maintained that coursework in the program should be considered as legitimate academic pursuit.

The purpose of this paper is to explore these and other perspectives on ROTC and its place on college campuses in the Vietnam War era. In order to understand the atmosphere surrounding this issue, it will be useful to study the series of protests and debates that took place at the University of Oregon in 1969 and 1970, while examining the underlying ideas and the responses to such protests. This series of events is perhaps most valuable for interpreting the more visible and “radical” student opposition to ROTC—opposition that was often misdirected and ineffective. Other perspectives will then be explored as responses to the radical perspective.

Opposition to the ROTC program had been evident for quite some time, but it was in 1969 that student and faculty collaboration on the topic formally began. A 6-person student-faculty committee was appointed in response to several student votes that had taken place in February. University of Oregon students had voted 2,232 to 919 to keep ROTC; they had also voted 1,600 to 1,528 to continue the current practice of granting academic credit for ROTC courses.² The committee was created in June to study the question of ROTC on campus. In September of that year, President Robert Clark established the “Student-Faculty Committee to Study the ROTC Curriculum.” The

² Ibid.

group was charged with determining whether the program was “academically sound.”³ The findings of the ad hoc committee were presented months later, in a time of further elevated tension on campus. The campus newspaper, the *Emerald*, published an article covering the committee’s findings in April of 1970.

The 34-page document, developed to advise the faculty on the matter of ROTC curriculum, concluded: “Based on interviews and observations of the teaching of ROTC programs, the methods of presentation are generally comparable to the levels of teaching methods used in other courses in the University.” The six-member ad hoc committee also said that the Army and Air Force ROTC programs are “developed on the basis of sound educational objectives,” and that they have “acceptable, and in many cases, high levels of academic quality.”⁴

However, members of the committee commented on the importance of the scope of the group’s responsibility. Their job was to report on their findings about the ROTC curriculum. They admitted that they did not discuss the issue of whether the program belonged on campus. In an *Emerald* article published a week after the committee reported its findings, a student named Ralph Nussbaum “charged that the ROTC program here is ‘run like a military camp,’ and that its existence on a university campus is incongruous in an otherwise academically free institution.”⁵ Duane Conger, a student who served on the committee, said that it had failed by not allowing students to express their attitudes towards the ROTC program and by neglecting the issue of whether to continue or eliminate the program.⁶ This committee’s findings and student reactions to them surfaced towards the end of the school year. Presumably, the tumultuous months

³ *Emerald* article by John Lanier. “Group finds ROTC academically sound” in regard to the student-faculty committee’s findings. 2 April 1970. Series I: 1969-1970; Office of the President: Robert D. Clark, coll. UA16, Division of Special Collections and University Archives; University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon 97403

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Newcomb, Bob, “UO faculty sets stage for full-scale debate on ROTC issue,” *Eugene Register-Guard*, Eugene, OR, 9 April 1970, page 1B.

⁶ Ibid.

that had passed beforehand helped members of the campus community form their ideas and opinions.

In September of 1969, around the time that the aforementioned committee had been established, university students were opening the school year with protests and debates on that very issue. A dramatic example of this took place on September 25th, when demonstrators, led by local members of Students for a Democratic Society, held an evening discussion on the lawn of the university president. The newly revived SDS faction organized a meeting on campus, followed by a torchlight march towards the home of President Clark. There, a University of Michigan graduate student named David Shane stood beside the President on his front porch, and spoke to the group of 150 to 200 students and other onlookers about his reasons (and those of the SDS) for opposing ROTC. Shane declared that the ROTC, as “an oppressive program for training young men to commit murder,”⁷ should not be allowed to remain on campus. He said that by retaining the program, the University continued to act as “an accomplice to murder.”⁸ Furthermore, Shane “condemned ROTC as part of the ‘military-industrial’ complex” and claimed “the war in Vietnam would ‘end tomorrow were ROTC eliminated from college campuses.”⁹ This is a statement that meets with a certain amount of shock and disbelief from modern listeners and readers. Did members of the SDS, who were among the most powerful and influential student activists of their time, truly believe that abolishing a program for college students training to serve as Army officers could also end a major military conflict with deep roots in the Cold War mentality? It seems that

⁷ Myers, Ray, “ROTC Protestors march on U of O President,” Eugene Register-Guard, Eugene, OR, 26 September 1969, sec. B.

⁸ “SDS demonstrates against ROTC,” The Emerald, Eugene, OR, 8 October 1969, page 3.

⁹ Ibid.

Shane and his colleagues failed to see the flaws in their arguments, as well as their mistake in choosing where to direct their protests.

President Clark responded to Shane by saying that much of his speech was directed at the policies of the government-- what Shane called "Imperialistic United States policies"¹⁰— not of the university. He said to the crowd, "Most people have come to believe that the war in South Vietnam was wrong, but the presence of ROTC on this campus doesn't maintain the war... If this university, and all universities, eliminate the ROTC program on campuses, the Army will just go to another (method of training) its officers," a method that could turn out "more militaristic officers than the ROTC program could ever hope of doing."¹¹ When a girl in the crowd asked the President what the University could lose by eliminating ROTC, he responded, "I think the only thing we stand most to lose is the responsibility of civilian control over the military."¹² Clark would maintain his position that ROTC was "a liberalizing influence within the military"¹³ for months and years to come. Eventually, most of the students walked away from the President's lawn, some of them chanting, "we're not convinced!"¹⁴ A few remained to continue the discussion with Clark. One even invited him out for a beer. Later, the President told an Emerald reporter that the SDS's "position against ROTC represents an attempt to get at the military in general, not just ROTC."¹⁵ He said, "radicals are

¹⁰ Myers, Ray, "ROTC Protestors march on U of O President," Eugene Register-Guard, Eugene, OR, 26 September 1969, sec. B.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² "SDS demonstrates against ROTC," The Emerald, Eugene, OR, 8 October 1969, page 3.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Myers, Ray, "ROTC Protestors march on U of O President," Eugene Register-Guard, Eugene, OR, 26 September 1969, sec. B.

¹⁵ Smith, Steve, "SDS torchlight march: 'Robert Clark's first 'test,'" The Emerald, Eugene, OR, 30 September 1969, page 8.

simply striking at something closer to them.”¹⁶ This dramatic demonstration was among the more constructive and non-violent protests to take place during the 1969-1970 academic year since it centered on the exchange of ideas rather than such ineffective strategies as destruction of property. Nonetheless, it serves as an example of the sometimes misguided and misdirected opposition to ROTC on campus.

The winter months unfortunately brought on more violent, but not necessarily more successful protests. In one particular episode on January 6, 1970, animal blood was thrown on registration personnel as students attempted to register for winter term ROTC courses. President Clark responded by calling this “a juvenile act not worthy of college students.”¹⁷ Incidents such as this one drew attention to the movement opposing ROTC (and the Vietnam War), but they were not especially sophisticated methods of protest. In other words, they provide little insight to the perspectives behind them.

Although many of the students who opposed ROTC on campus preferred non-destructive and non-violent ways of protesting, the nature of the protests was slowly becoming more violent. On January 23rd, about 25 unidentified persons committed minor vandalism inside the ROTC building.¹⁸ Then, on February 15th, the University’s physical education building, which housed an ROTC storage area, was set on fire causing over \$350,000 in damages to the building and ROTC property.¹⁹ These and the other violent and destructive protests that took place on the University of Oregon campus did not serve to enact any sort of change. They only lowered the already

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Unrest at State System Institutions—A Progress Report; Student Unrest, Unrest at State System Institutions; Office of the President: Robert D. Clark, coll. UA16; Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

diminished opinion many people held of “radical” university students and their motivations.

As tensions mounted, the U of O faculty organized a debate to discuss the elimination of ROTC from campus. This provided a forum for members of the faculty to present their opinions, which varied as widely as did those of the students. Andrew Thompson, who worked at the university as a counselor at the Counseling Center filed a motion that called for:

...the UO faculty to recommend to President Robert Clark that both “Army and Air Force ROTC contracts be terminated... as soon as possible within the terms of those contracts.” A second point of the motion states: “That if the Army or Air Force indicate willingness to consider different relations with the university—relations comparable to those available to other employers—a committee be appointed to explore and develop suitable alternatives.”²⁰

Thompson told an *Emerald* reporter that he believed that this motion would prompt a faculty vote that would succeed in eliminating the ROTC program from the U of O campus. Apparently, faculty members did not all agree with Thompson’s position. An English professor named John Sherwood thought the wording of the motion inappropriate since:

...it defines the problem as the relationship between employer (the United States Government) and the institution... the motion says that if we can get (such) difficulties straightened out and get a more normal relationship, then all will be well and ROTC can continue. [The motion does not define] what this fascinating debate has been concerned about—the problem of Vietnam, genocide, and (the contention) that military training is evil and should not be tolerated on this campus. Let’s get clear what we’re voting against.²¹

²⁰ Newcomb, Bob, “UO faculty sets stage for full-scale debate on ROTC issue,” *Eugene Register-Guard*, Eugene, OR, 9 April 1970, page 1B.

²¹ Ibid.

The disagreement over what was seen as the main issue of debate is further illustrated in a letter written by Steven E. Deutsch, an associate professor, published in the *Emerald*, on April 15th, 1970, which was the day of the faculty vote to retain or eliminate ROTC on campus. In an effort to persuade his fellow faculty members to vote for elimination of the program, Deutsch presented what he called “the fundamental educational argument.”²² He wrote that the main issue was not civilian control of the military and not the humanizing influence of a liberal arts education on ROTC participants. His conclusion was that ROTC should be abolished “on the basis of the fundamental argument of the functions of a university and the inconsistency with the objectives, procedures, and substantive role of ROTC.”²³ The wide difference between the opinions of these three faculty members demonstrates the complexity of the situation.

On April 15, 1970, the faculty held a vote to determine whether a recommendation that ROTC be removed from the UO campus should be made to the university president. The faculty voted 199 to 185 (a 14-vote margin) to retain the program.²⁴ Without delay, a group of people who were dissatisfied with this vote engaged in a destructive demonstration. The *Register-Guard* headline for the events that followed the vote that evening reads: “Angry mob struck twice against ROTC.”²⁵ After the incident began, President Clark and Dean of Administration Ray Hawk

²² Letters to the editor of *The Emerald*. “Letters: Readers Sound Off on ROTC,” Eugene, OR, April 15, 1970. Series I: 1969-1970; Office of the President: Robert D. Clark, coll. UA16, Division of Special Collections and University Archives; University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon 97403

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Newspaper article by Pearl Bakken and Clay Eals “On second ballot Faculty votes 199-185 to keep ROTC” in *The Emerald*, Eugene, OR, April 16, 1970. Series I: 1969-1970; Office of the President: Robert D. Clark, coll. UA16, Division of Special Collections and University Archives; University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon 97403

²⁵ O’Brien, Mike, “Angry mob struck twice against ROTC,” *Eugene Register-Guard*, Eugene, OR, 16 April 1970, sec. B.

decided, with reluctance, to call city and county police officers. Hawk said, “When property and people’s safety became involved, it left us no choice.”²⁶ The State Board Report described the incident as such:

... 50 to 100 persons, many of whom were students, entered the ROTC building. Furniture was overturned, windows, light fixtures and doors broken, papers scattered about. An attempt was made to start a fire... Later that evening several hundred persons gathered. A group estimated at fewer than 100, many wearing masks, threw rocks and burning torches at the building, and attempts were made to pour kerosene on it. The group was dispersed by the police with the use of pepper or tear gas.²⁷

Several of the students who were involved in the incident were charged with inciting a riot. Amnesty towards those who were arrested became a goal of other protestors in the days and weeks to come. The following day, on April 16th, demonstration organizers, namely the New Mobilization Committee, had planned a march against ROTC that was to begin with an 8 p.m. rally at the EMU. However, despite the urging of members of “New Mobe” to “go home and ‘cool it,’” protestors proceeded to the Eugene Jailhouse to demonstrate against what they believed was an unreasonably high \$25,000 bail that had been set for four students who were arrested in connection to the events of the previous night. At the site of the jailhouse, only a few yards separated the mob of approximately 700 protestors and a line of 35 police officers. According to an *Emerald* reporter, there were several persons present who attempted to de-escalate the situation, while at the same time, some students (and presumably a few non-students) seemed to want to escalate the situation. “The marchers massed on the

²⁶Newspaper article, “Officials defend using police against ROTC demonstrators” in *The Emerald* by Art Bushnell regarding the Administration’s reasons for calling police officials. April 16, 1970, Student Unrest, Emerald Clippings, 4-15-70, 1 of 2; Series I: 1969-1970; Office of the President: Robert D. Clark, coll. UA16, Division of Special Collections and University Archives; University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon 97403

²⁷ Unrest at State System Institutions—A Progress Report; Student Unrest, Unrest at State System Institutions; Office of the President: Robert D. Clark, coll. UA16; Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403.

opposite side of the street, and a stand-still ensued which included considerable shouting and several attempts by unidentified individuals to provoke incidents.”²⁸ At the same time, students who had organized the original march tried to de-escalate the situation by urging students to return to campus. Eventually, these New Mobe members met with Eugene Police Chief William Smith in order to comply with the demands of the increasingly angry crowd, though this conversation, and the resulting call to a judge, did not succeed in lowering the bail.

The order for academic amnesty towards those who were arrested, along with the removal of the ROTC program, naval recruiters, and law officials from the UO campus were the demands of 200 students who staged a sit-in at the University’s administrative building, Johnson Hall in late April of 1970. In a statement to the group of protestors, President Clark reminded the students that their demands were beyond his power to grant.²⁹ The president expressed in a news release that he viewed the sit-in as a protest against the Vietnam War. He warned that the protestors were in violation of the law, and that “If we [the Administration] are forced to take police action, we should take it reluctantly and in sorrow.”³⁰ The 30-hour demonstration ended when officers from the Eugene Police Department arrived to remove students from the building. Although

²⁸ Newspaper article, “In ROTC confrontations, Police arrest seven students” in the *Emerald* by John Lanier regarding the rally and march to the Eugene Jailhouse that took place on April 16. 17 April 1970, Student Unrest, Emerald Clippings, 4-15-70, 1 of 2; Series I: 1969-1970; Office of the President: Robert D. Clark, coll. UA16, Division of Special Collections and University Archives; University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon 97403

²⁹ Incident Report. “4-23-70 Johnson Hall Sit-In (event summary).” April 23, 1970. Student Unrest - Report on Student Unrest II (1 of 4). Series I: 1969-1970, Office of the President: Robert D. Clark, coll. UA16: Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403. Also available in the digital collections at the following URL: <http://boundless.uoregon.edu/cgi-bin/docviewer.exe?CISOROOT=/clark&CISOPTR=303>

³⁰ News Release, “Statement by President R.D. Clark, 4/23/70,” in regard to the Johnson Hall sit-in. April 23, 1970. Student Unrest - Report on Student Unrest II (1 of 4). Series I: 1969-1970, Office of the President: Robert D. Clark, coll. UA16; Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403. Also available in the digital collections at the following URL: <http://boundless.uoregon.edu/cgi-bin/docviewer.exe?CISOROOT=/clark&CISOPTR=300>

the demonstrators finally seemed to be peacefully dispersing from the area, the National Guard had arrived and proceeded to use tear gas to evacuate the area. An administrative event summary of the Johnson Hall sit-in concludes with the following sentence. “The action Thursday night climaxes a week of violence and dissention at the University—a week which has witnessed extensive vandalism at the ROTC offices on the campus, arrest of disruptors, rallies, and demands by dissenting students.”³¹

As the month of April came to a close, student protestors and concerned faculty members declared a strike on all university business. In the 4-page declaration of this strike, the nine demands were described in detail. In part, the declaration read:

We, the University community, declare a strike of all classes until the following demands are met:

1. That amnesty be granted to all who have been arrested in campus demonstrations, and that President Clark and the administration formally press city officials to drop all charges.
2. That all police and National Guard be immediately and permanently removed from campus.
3. That ROTC be removed from this campus and that all University ties with the military be immediately discontinued.
4. That a faculty-student senate be formed with equal representation from both faculty and students and that this senate have full authority over all aspects of the University.
5. That there be no \$75 deposit required to reserve a student’s place at the University before registration.
6. That there be open admissions for all minority and poor white students.
7. That House Bill 1880 be repealed.
8. That the proposed “disruption” clause not be added to the Student Conduct Code.
9. That there be no enrollment ceiling at this University, or either in-state or out-of-state students.³²

³¹Incident Report. “4-23-70 Johnson Hall Sit-In (event summary).” April 23, 1970. Student Unrest - Report on Student Unrest II (1 of 4). Series I: 1969-1970, Office of the President: Robert D. Clark, coll. UA16: Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403. Also available in the digital collections at the following URL: <http://boundless.uoregon.edu/cgi-bin/docviewer.exe?CISOROOT=/clark&CISOPTR=303>

³² 4 page declaration of strike beginning with 'On Strike!' No date. Student Unrest - Report on Student Unrest II, #9 Series I: 1969-1970, Office of the President: Robert D. Clark, coll. UA16: Special Collections and University

This document sheds light on the question of ROTC on campus as a part of a much larger web of student movements and causes. In the section that further details the ROTC issue, the declaration reads:

The university through its various ties with the military contributes to the policy of oppression and destruction waged by the U.S. in South East Asia and throughout the world. The removal of the military from this community is a significant step in dismantling the military machine. ROTC, military recruiting, and all related war research must be abolished.

President Clark responded publicly to the nine strike demands. On ROTC, he repeated the stance that he had held all year long: he favored the retention of the program, and that “he alone does not have the authority to abolish such programs.”³³ Clark’s claim that the decision was out of his hands could be interpreted as reluctance to recommend to the State Board of Higher Education the elimination of the program. Otherwise, this statement seems to function as encouragement to student activists to direct their protests towards more appropriate authority figures.

The destructive demonstrations in mid-April and the peaceful sit-in of late April used very different methods of protest and were probably not propagated by the same group of students. The former serves as evidence to support the claims of a faculty member and an ROTC cadet, respectively, that students who opposed ROTC were

Archives, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403. Also available in the digital collections at the following URL: <http://boundless.uoregon.edu/cgi-bin/docviewer.exe?CISOROOT=/clark&CISOPTR=228>

³³ Register-Guard article by Lloyd Paseman. “Clark answers student demands” in regard to the President’s statements in response to the strike. April 26, 1970, Student Unrest, Official Statements and Reactions from 4-15-70, Series I: 1969-1970, Office of the President: Robert D. Clark, coll. UA16: Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403. See also: “Clark Responds to Strike Demands,” from The Emerald, April 27, 1970.

“young punks”³⁴ whose approach to protest were “immature” and “ridiculous.”³⁵ The latter example, although a more respectable and sophisticated method of activism, was not generally seen as a success.

As the 1969-1970 academic year came to a close, Ival McMains, a Robert D. Clark Honors College student and a participant in ROTC, was preparing to submit his undergraduate thesis, “Socialization and ROTC,” to the Honors College. This document provides insight from students whose opinions were not quite as visible as those of the so-called radical student activists—supporters of ROTC.³⁶

As the extent and violence of these movements increases, I feel it is natural for the ROTC student to be forced more strongly to make his choice. Will he leave the ROTC program to avoid the measures of being part of “the system,” or will he hang on? ...most of all, the ROTC student has come into the spotlight as an extension of the defense establishment and the war... I am a firm believer in ROTC as a liberating factor upon the Army and I do not like to see this effect neutralized.³⁷

In general, it seems that McMains was one of the students who happened to agree with President Clark. In an article printed in the May 3, 1970 edition of the *Emerald*, seven ROTC students spoke out about what they called their side of the story. Students strived to get the point across that the elected officials who control the United States government are the ones responsible for the war in Vietnam, not the Army and not the ROTC. The cadets said, “the Army is merely a “tool” of the civilian government radicals ought to direct their protests to elected officials, not ROTC or the Army.

³⁴ *Emerald* article by Pearl Bakken. “Student protests on ROTC bring varied faculty opinions” in regard to faculty reactions to the destructive protests against ROTC in mid-April. Student Unrest, *Emerald Clippings* 4-15-70, 1 of 2. Series I: 1969-1970, Office of the President: Robert D. Clark, coll. UA16: Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403.

³⁵ “ROTC: Seven cadets tell why they support the program at U of O.

³⁶ McMains, Ival. *Socialization and ROTC*. Eugene, OR, 1970

³⁷ *Ibid.*

While Ival McMains and some of the other ROTC students were capable of getting their opinions across gracefully, some chose to criticize the stereotypical student radical, claiming that he is unable to hear other people's opinions, "Some of the objects of the radical's wrath, say he is a hypocritical, immature sore loser who is alienated from society, starved for attention, and constantly, searching for someone." Although the cadets who were interviewed could see the potential improvements to be made to the program and the way it functioned, they seemed to disapprove of the methods that were taken by some radical activists. Some of the criticism maintained that students who opposed ROTC were hypocrites for having attempted to reach their goals through the use of violence. This, is slightly ironic, considering that the plan of the military is often exactly that. The ROTC students maintained that "the Army is merely a "tool" of the civilian government and radicals ought to direct their protests to elected officials—not ROTC or the army."³⁸ So it turns out that ROTC cadets and the University President agreed on this subject—they both believed that opposition to the program was largely unsupported and misdirected.

This paper was meant to give a basic understanding of the many protests and perspectives on the Reserve Officers' Training corps and the question of its place on college campuses. As previously mentioned, this was not a black and white matter. It is not so easy to decide who was right and who was wrong. It was an issue of complexity and collaboration. The student protests that took place on the U of O campus and the ensuing debates and faculty ballots were symbolic of a time known for its questioning of society and authority. As we have

³⁸ Frake, Jim. "Seven cadets tell why they support the program at U of O." Eugene Register-Guard, May 3, 1970

seen, the perspectives of the concerned groups in 1969 and 1970 often proved to be misguided, despite the motives of positive social and political change.