

May, 1970: A Peaceful Protest Against the Vietnam War

*Moderate medical students and faculty
take up political action in response to the War
and destructive acts on Stanford campus.*

ONE AFTERNOON shortly after the Cambodian incursion last April, Jeff Brown, then president of the Stanford medical student government, called an unprecedented meeting of faculty, students, and administrators at the Medical School. The purpose of the gathering was to discuss steps the medical community might take in the face of a strike, demonstrations, and other antiwar activities which had been contemplated by various groups on the Stanford campus for the week of May 4.

The 24-year-old medical student considers himself an activist, he is against the war, but he is still determined to end it by working within the system. He had an air of earnestness that Sunday afternoon, the self-conscious candor of a man trying to handle a very delicate situation. Near the podium was Richard Atkins, a young second-year medical student with a ready smile, who had been involved in the organization of the campus events as a senate member of the Associated Students of Stanford University. Although Brown was unusually poised for his age, he fidgeted uneasily before the group, looking uncomfortable over what he had to say. For one of the reasons he had called the meeting was to warn that tensions among faculty and students over the war issue were high; that the Medical School, which had been spared when Stanford had experienced two of the worst nights of violence in its history, could be next if it failed to allow moderates to "cool" the situation.

Atkins, speaking for the ASSU, rose and began to relate in a soft voice that some faculty members of the German Department had voted to go on strike. He urged the medical students and faculty to join. Brown enumerated various activities that campus organizations had planned for the following week, and said he would entertain suggestions about actions the medical community might take. A proposal that medical students consider a class boycott got some unfavorable response. Richard A. Ilka, a first-year medical student, took issue with the assumption that everybody was opposed to President Nixon's decision to send troops to Cambodia. He said some students, including himself, agreed with the President and thought the action would speed up U.S. troop withdrawal from Vietnam. Secondly, he said no individual or group had the right

to impose its political solutions on others or to prevent students from attending classes if they wished to go.

At this point, Brown asked Dr. John L. Wilson, who had just returned from an emergency meeting on the campus, to discuss the University's posture on the "strike." The associate dean said the University administration did not question the impact of the Cambodian action on faculty and student opinion. But the University as an institution could not give official sanction to any political activity. "The general understanding," he said, "was that those who wished to engage in political actions as individuals would be given the opportunity, but those who preferred to continue with academic work would not be prevented from doing so." He emphasized that the business of the Medical School was to continue as usual.

The meeting ended a little before three o'clock to allow medical student representatives to participate at a University-wide student rally in White Plaza that afternoon. Before adjourning, however, the ad hoc group decided to hold a convocation at the Medical Center the following Monday to discuss the war issue, and organize action groups to demand peace in Southeast Asia. The convocation was to be held at 5:30 p.m., a time picked to assure maximum attendance and to prevent interference with patient care at the Medical Center. Organizational details for the meeting were left to a committee of students and faculty which included Dr. Henry S. Kaplan, professor and chairman of the Department of Radiology.

The very fact of Dr. Kaplan's selection to the committee as well as his presence at the meeting (he was one of two members of the Medical School's executive committee who could be reached by telephone that afternoon) was in itself significant; for those who know him well, or even slightly, share the impression that he is a reserved scholar, deeply absorbed in his research and clinical work, and though widely honored and influential in scientific circles, he is not addicted to the political games some physicians and scientists endlessly play. Dr. Kaplan has tended to picture himself, like most physicians, as relatively apolitical.

Nevertheless, over the previous year or so, he had become considerably concerned about the effects of increasing violence on the Stanford campus, political