



At the founding convention of the National Student Association, in September 1947, delegates gathered outside the student union of the U. of Wisconsin at Madison.

COURTESY OF EUGENE G. SCHWARTZ

## Paging the Activists

A new book chronicles the rise of the student movement after World War II

BY ERIC HOOPER

**T**WO DECADES BEFORE flower power bloomed at American colleges, student leaders seeded higher education with big ideas. One of them was that students should have a louder voice in campus, national, and global affairs.

So, in 1947, a group of young activists founded the National Student Association, which would quickly help transform campus culture, from Cambridge, Mass., to Berkeley, Calif. Their story appears in a new book, *American Students Organize: Founding the National Student Association After World War II* (American Council on Education/Praeger, 2006).

The anthology describes how members of the so-called GI Bill generation promoted academic freedom, social justice, and student self-governance during a pivotal period in academe's history, when millions of war veterans went to college, doubling national enrollments and jolting the collegiate status quo.

Todd a half-century later, the tale of the nation's oldest and largest student group traces the emergence of a contemporary ideal: the college student as a highly engaged engine of civic action.

Part time capsule and part narrative, this whopping compilation weighs in at 1,200 pages and contains the personal accounts of 85 former student leaders. The contributors

include six former college presidents and chancellors as well as more than 20 former deans and professors.

Eugene G. Schwartz, the book's editor and a former vice president of the association, started the anthology nine years ago. The project required the help of two dozen volunteers, who recruited the authors, combed the archives of more than 150 colleges, and raised some \$400,000 in donations.

That may seem like a lot of trouble just to publish personal descriptions of what dozens of septuagenarians did in their 20s. But Mr.

The same message became clear to the 25 Americans who attended World Student Congress of 1946, which brought student leaders from 38 nations together in Prague.

There, delegates from various organizations spoke on behalf of the students in their respective nations. The United States had no analogous group.

Inspired, the Americans returned to their campuses with a plan to form an independent organization that could represent American students nationally and internationally. In 1947 they held a founding convention at the Uni-

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Schwartz, 80, treated each of their stories like a small treasure.

He believes that the snapshots of student life at the beginning of the atomic age fill a historical void—and that the book also holds lessons for contemporary student leaders.

"To the extent that there's a sense of despair, defeat, and alienation," he says, "we hope what this will show is that even in the most trying of circumstances, you can organize and get something done."

vernity of Wisconsin at Madison, drawing about 700 delegates, many of them war veterans, from 351 colleges. The keynote speaker, Homer P. Rainey, who was president of Stephens College, urged students to "tough off the protective shell of ivory towers of learning and mix in with the realistic, hard-bitten world...."

Clifton R. Wharton Jr., a black student who was then studying at Harvard University,

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STUDENTS

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ly, helped organize the convention. He recalls standing on the stage and facing the melting-pot audience: the lanned Californians, fast-talking New Yorkers, and dry-witted "Mainiacs" (from Maine): "The diversity was a phenomenal representation of what American youth looked like."

Yet the gathering's diversity threatened to unravel the nascent association before it even began. Delegates from black colleges and white Southern universities clashed over a difficult question: What stand would the group take on campus segregation?

The challenge was to support civil rights without alienating an entire region of students. After much nerve-shredding debate, Mr. Wharton and other leaders delivered a compromise: a carefully worded po-

sition that opposed racial discrimination but also acknowledged the "limitations imposed" by state laws in the South. A majority of delegates approved the language, which prevented the group from splintering.

After the vote, applause erupted, and "the Southern-Yankee conflict," said a Wisconsin press release from that year, "was whiffed away completely when the large New York delegation broke into the singing of 'Dixie.'"

Mr. Wharton says learning to mold such compromises helped prepare him for his future jobs as president of Michigan State University and later as chancellor of the State University of New York.

"We had just ended the war, the needs of students were not being satisfactorily met, and there was an

element of idealism and very strong sense of civic responsibility as we thrashed about these issues," he says. "It aided my ability as a president to relate to students and to understand what they were doing."

At the convention, the associa-

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tion drafted a "Student Bill of Rights," which stated that every student had a right to a college education, to conduct research freely, and to publish without threat of censorship, among other things. In an era of *in loco parentis*, when colleges

closely regulated students affairs, the document declared that students deserved greater deference and respect from administrators.

**'RADICAL IDEAS'**

Later the association worked to

strengthen student governments, most of which did not yet control their own budgets.

"It was a pretty radical idea," says Allan W. Ostar, who was the association's public-relations director in the late 1940s. "Before

the war, all student governments did was put up signs saying not to walk on the grass. After, when we thought we weren't getting adequate food, we would organize and complain."

The association's constitution prohibited the group from participating in direct political activities. Mr. Ostar, a former president of the Association of State Colleges and Universities, says the group's early aversion to extreme ideological positions helped attract a wide range of students: "There was always polarization, but also a lot of gray in between."

But the group could not possibly avoid politics, nor did it maintain its independence. In the early 1950s, its leaders blasted McCarthyism and drew criticism from both the left

and the right. They also accepted a secret offer by the Central Intelligence Agency to finance the association—allowing government agents to monitor student leaders from other nations—and to influence its positions. The arrangement remained a secret until 1967, after which the group cuts its ties to the CIA and struggled to regain its credibility.

During the 1960s, the group supported the efforts of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and Students for a Democratic Society. The association, which opposed the Vietnam War, increasingly embraced left-wing views and earned a mention on President Nixon's infamous enemies list in the early 1970s.

In 1978 the association merged with the another student group to form the nonpartisan United States

Student Association, which has lobbied in Washington for greater support for higher education and has organized campus activists in opposition to student fee increases.

The bulk of *American Students Organize* explores the association's early, golden years and the groundwork it laid for social changes, both on and off the nation's campuses. Mr. Schwartz, the editor, says he is happy to have spent most of his 70s compiling the volume, with its vast set of cross-references and appendices.

He did not imagine that his efforts would produce a tome as heavy as a brick. It just happened that way.

Assembling the book, he writes in an afterword, took him "back to an age of hope and promise and to the rediscovery of vision for a world without hate. . . ."



The 1947 convention, diverse as the delegates were, threatened to break up over a difficult question: What stand would the group take on campus segregation?

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