

ROTC Building Occupation at ASU, April 23-25, 1969

In February of 1963 the Arizona Chapter of the American Association of University Professors passed a resolution calling for the elimination of compulsory ROTC at Arizona universities. "Military Science" or ROTC training was required of male freshman and sophomores since the earliest years of ASU. The AAUP resolution endorsed a Defense Department plan to begin a voluntary two year program offered on a merit scholarship basis. Discussions regarding the place of ROTC at ASU continued for several years.

In April 1968 the Arizona Board of Regents voted 4-3 to retain compulsory ROTC, rejecting a proposal unanimously approved by the students, faculty and administration of ASU and the University of Arizona. However, sustained pressure from students induced university presidents Durham and Harvill to reintroduce the proposal at the October ABOR meeting. The proposal was adopted at the November meeting and a voluntary ROTC program replaced the requirement in the fall semester of 1969.

But early in the afternoon of Wednesday April 23 1969, an "unorganized group of demonstrators" began a hunger strike on the upper landing of the outdoor staircase at the ROTC building (now the University Club), calling for the complete elimination of ROTC programs. An Air Force colonel told the group they could stay on the landing as long as they did not block access to the building, interfere with classes or violate any university regulations. A crowd of students and observers assembled, and that night eggs were thrown at the demonstrators who in turn armed themselves with bed slats for protection.

Over the next two days several students, sympathetic or opposed to the demonstration, attempted to engage the demonstrators in discussions to end the occupation. Demonstrators frequently inquired with campus security chief John Duffy and other administrators if their presence was lawful and not in violation of the Student Code of Conduct, and they were repeatedly and consistently told it was. A crowd gathered on the lawn to watch the demonstrators; the number of observers varied from a few dozen to as many as three hundred. Small groups within the crowd appeared eager to start trouble.

On Thursday night rumors were heard that the students opposed to the demonstration would soon be "reinforced" by large groups of fraternity men, ROTC members, veterans, athletes or motorcycle gang members. Several times the crowd surged up to the line of security men stationed at the base of the building, more eggs were thrown. ASU football players Bob Johnson and Bill Puluti engaged the demonstrators in further discussion and they were able to disperse the crowd. Demonstrators and observers later testified that they felt the worst of the tension had passed.

The next day university officials discussed the events with Bill Oldham, the student body president. They felt a major riot had been narrowly averted and they expressed concerns about the potential for violence on Friday night. A Blue Key carnival and a public lecture regarding campus disorders were scheduled in the vicinity of the ROTC building that night. The administrators and Oldham agreed that the demonstrators should be removed before Friday evening. Shortly before 5PM chief Duffy arrived at

the landing and informed the demonstrators they could leave voluntarily, or they would be arrested on the charges of “rout” and sedition for displaying a flag bearing the image of Che Guevara. Twelve demonstrators withdrew and the remaining ten were arrested. University administrators later asserted the demonstrators were arrested for their own protection.

The arrests ignited a series of additional protests, debates and discussions through the month of May. A faculty fact-finding committee produced a report detailing the events, some students and faculty claimed the students’ civil rights were violated, and university administrators held public meetings explaining their actions. Requests to drop the charges against demonstrators were declined by President Durham, who indicated the charges could only be dropped by the prosecutors and that the matter was most properly handled by the court.

Questions to consider:

- Were the demonstrators’ civil rights violated? Was this a peaceable assembly or freedom of speech?
- Does the university have a right to stop protests that disrupt instruction, research or university events?
- Did equal protection under the law occur? Did the demonstrators or the observers incite the near riot on Thursday night?
- “Rout” refers to a disturbance of the public peace by three or more persons acting together in a manner that suggests an intention to riot. Can this be consistently distinguished from peaceable assembly?
- Did the display of a flag bearing the image of Che Guevara constitute an act of sedition or constitutionally protected free speech?
- How is this 1969 event similar to or different from actions of and responses to the Occupy Movement today?