

Unity and the Duke Vigil:
Civil Rights Challenges at Duke University

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Racial discord characterized Duke University in 1968, reflecting the protests that swept the nation during this period. The Duke Vigil, a week-long non-violent display of sympathy for civil rights, was a consequence of this climate. In gathering at university president Douglas Knight's home, and later on the quad, Duke students undertook to achieve higher wages for Duke's black employees¹ while attempting to unite the Duke community to gain social equality in Durham and beyond.² However, although the Vigil left an impression on the wider world, drawing both support and criticism, its attempt to unify the university was ultimately unsuccessful. In particular, the Vigil failed to join the faculty, administrative, and student bodies, with controversy arising from the protest's "disruptive" tactics.³ Furthermore, many black students viewed the Vigil disinterestedly,⁴ undermining its attempt to break down racial barriers. As such, the Vigil's long-term effects are mostly felt in the impressions made upon its participants, many of whom were new to activism. Yet the Vigil is also a case study for the difficulties of the larger civil rights movement: bringing together whites and blacks, practitioners of different activism styles, and those in power and not in power. Therefore, the Vigil's legacy is one that underlines the challenges faced by civil rights leaders in uniting a divided populace.

Although racial tension and conflict had simmered in Durham for some time, the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., brought the tension to a boil. While cities rioted, several hundred white Duke students drew up a list of demands to present to Knight. Prominent among these was the demand that Knight sign an advertisement commemorating King for publication in a Durham newspaper. Hoping to underline the university's support for civil rights, the students

¹ Bridget Booher, "Remembering the Silent Vigil." *Duke Magazine*, March-April 1998, 2-3.

² David Pace, "Vigil ignites hope for blacks. . . . racial cooperation may occur." *The Duke Chronicle*, April 29, 1968, 6, box 5, Duke Vigil Collection, Duke University Rubenstein Library.

³ Statement by a Concerned Student, undated, box 1, folder 21, Duke Vigil Collection, Duke University Rubenstein Library, a, f.

⁴ Pace, "Vigil ignites hope for blacks." 6, e.

also asked that Knight terminate his membership in a segregated country club. However, the students' motives ran deeper than merely demonstrating symbolic support in the wake of King's assassination; their list of demands concluded with a petition for better treatment of black Duke workers, including a pay raise to the federal minimum wage and collective bargaining for the workers' union.⁵ These latter demands seem to indicate the students were interested in something beyond offering the black community emotional support, and were hoping to work with blacks to achieve equality. Nonetheless, the students' motives, along with their protest methods, quickly became a point of contention between the very groups they had hoped to unite: blacks and whites and the students, faculty, and administration of the university. This divisiveness undermined the Vigil's ability to present a united front to a world already divided on civil rights.

The Duke Vigil's inability to unify the university showcased some of the challenges faced by the national civil rights movement. Among these was the fact that distrust between blacks and whites had been a mainstay of American society for centuries. In this sense, the Vigil magnified not only Duke's divided nature as a southern liberal university, but also the hope and frustration faced by blacks seeking to work alongside whites to eliminate poverty in Durham.⁶ The division between blacks and whites, therefore, is the first significant aspect of the Vigil to examine. Following the Vigil's conclusion, *The Chronicle* noted that black participation had been surprisingly limited, and offered two explanations for this: first, that the Vigil was motivated by white guilt at King's assassination, something that blacks did not possess; and second, that black students found the Vigil too mild to be effective.⁷ This sentiment was echoed by a black student a year after the Vigil had concluded. While acknowledging that the protest had given him hope in white people, he accused the protesters of being "naïve and stupid"

⁵ Booher, "Remembering the Silent Vigil." 2.

⁶ Pace, "Vigil ignites hope for blacks." 6, e.

⁷ *Ibid.*

concerning social problems.⁸ Thus, a portion of the black community of Duke, though acknowledging the dedication of the white protesters,⁹ felt a measure of ambivalence towards what they considered a misguided and merely symbolic and ineffective protest. However, in spite of black students who questioned the white protesters' motives and methods, other members of Duke's black community fully supported the Vigil. This was true of Dr. Samuel Cook, the university's single black faculty member,¹⁰ whose April 10 address expressed delight at the students' determination to carry on the civil rights movement using King's non-violent methods.¹¹ Nevertheless, Dr. Cook's support for the Vigil highlights another aspect of the movement's divisive nature: though some other faculty members also favored the Vigil, as is demonstrated by their statement of support,¹² the Duke community as a whole was unable to reach consensus. Two further areas of division existed: one between different segments of the student body, and another between the student protesters and university administration, whose attempts to placate the students possessed undertones of indifference concerning Duke's workers and the black community.

The divide within the student population (and, to some extent, the faculty) highlighted a second challenge faced by the larger civil rights movement: uniting individuals who favored different methods of enacting change. In the case of the Vigil, dissent came from several students and faculty members who expressed displeasure with the protesters' tactics. In particular, the Vigil's class and dining hall boycotts were deemed "disruptive,"¹³ "militant," and

⁸ Vigil Recollections, 1969, box 1, folder 21, Duke Vigil Collection, Duke University Rubenstein Library, a, e, h.

⁹ Pace, "Vigil ignites hope for blacks." 6, e.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Transcript of Address of Samuel Dubois Cook, Apr. 10, 1968, box 1, folder 7, Duke Vigil Collection, Duke University Rubenstein Library, c, e, g.

¹² Statement of Duke Community Support, undated, box 1, folder 18, Duke Vigil Collection, Duke University Rubenstein Library, c, g.

¹³ The Mounting Anarchy at Duke, Dec. 28, 1968, box 1, folder 39, Duke Vigil Collection, Duke University Rubenstein Library, c, f.

“intimidating.”¹⁴ Interestingly, the opposition to the Vigil seems to have focused less on the protest’s motivations or causes, instead attacking its controversial methodology. One student voiced such an idea by suggesting an alternative means of activism, challenging the protesters to not sit on the quad, but to volunteer for voter registration drives.¹⁵ These expressions of dissent concerning protest tactics underline the difficulties faced by the national civil rights movement, which occasionally found itself divided into sects practicing non-overlapping pacifist, black power, and even black separatist methods.

Additionally, disagreement between the protesters and administrators highlighted the larger challenge of uniting those in power and those not. The ambivalent feelings of the administration are evident in an April 10 statement that addressed the Vigil’s demands. The statement cited “evidence” that the university cared about its black employees’ financial security; however, with its warning of increased tuition to cover higher wages, it lacks the sincerity of Dr. Cook’s statement of support.¹⁶ Underlining the true feelings of the administrators is Knight’s 1998 interview with *The Chronicle*, wherein he described how the senior administrators’ lack of full support for the Vigil was attributed to him, and how he was forced to nurse private sympathies while struggling with other powerful individuals “who felt we should pay [those employees] as little as we could . . . [and] didn’t care whether Martin Luther King lived or died.”¹⁷ This indifference from the administration and trustees contributed, along with a lack of consensus concerning the effectiveness and controversial nature of the students’ protest methodology, to the Vigil’s inability to present a united front to the wider world. This made the

¹⁴ Statement by a Concerned Student, a, f.

¹⁵ I am not a supporter of the vigil, undated, box 1, folder 21, Duke Vigil Collection, Duke University Rubenstein Library, a, f.

¹⁶ Statement to Students of Duke University, Apr. 10, 1968, box 1, folder 7, Duke Vigil Collection, Duke University Rubenstein Library, b.

¹⁷ Booher, “Remembering the Silent Vigil.” 4-5, b, i.

Vigil's causes vulnerable to attack from the outside, as occurred when the protest began to impact the nation.

The Vigil had both immediate and long-term impacts upon the nation and the smaller communities of Duke and Durham. First, the short-term effects of the Vigil were to draw attention to the issues of union rights and the treatment of black workers, in addition to the more concrete achievement of winning higher wages for the Duke employees.¹⁸ The Vigil's immediate impact is apparent on the national level in the way that it demonstrated the benefits of King-style non-violent civil rights protest, particularly to whites who did not participate in activism. One telegram of support that came from outside Durham noted this, stating, "Your challenge to the values of the white middle class is a shining beacon of hope in our rapidly polarizing society."¹⁹ Nevertheless, the national coverage of the Vigil also drew criticism, as some, like the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* of Richmond, Virginia, felt displeased at the students' moral challenge despite acknowledging that the issue of wages was "more complex" than the students' desire to "dictate morality."²⁰ In the short term locally, the Vigil's demonstration of commitment also sparked a wave of interest in civil rights at Duke and in Durham. While perhaps not as dramatic as the Vigil, the flyer campaign to avoid shopping in downtown Durham in support of black rights²¹ and the election of a black person to Duke's Academic Council²² indicate that the basic principles of the Vigil continued to inspire activism months after the protest had ended. Therefore, in the short term, the Vigil's primary social impacts on a national and local scale were

¹⁸ Pace, "Vigil ignites hope for blacks." 7.

¹⁹ Statements of Support, Apr. 8, 1968, box 1, folder 29, Duke Vigil Collection, Duke University Rubenstein Library, d, g.

²⁰ Richmond Crinkley, "Duke Student Faction Seems Resolved to Dictate Morality." *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, April 28, 1968, box 1, folder 32, Duke Vigil Collection, Duke University Rubenstein Library, d.

²¹ Black Days in Durham flyer, Sep. 1968, box 1, folder 10, Duke Vigil Collection, Duke University Rubenstein Library.

²² The Mounting Anarchy at Duke, c, f

to raise awareness of civil rights issues and initiate several months of advocacy for blacks, respectively.

Conversely, the Vigil's long-term effects were less notable than its short-term ones. This may have been due to the fact that the university remained internally divided on the movement, and thus its concrete victories were not supported by the unity of the Duke community. *The Chronicle*, while acknowledging the significance of the Vigil's success in gaining higher wages for university employees, nonetheless cautioned that "one Duke Vigil is not going to heal these scars [of racial bitterness]."²³ As if fulfilling this prophecy, the racially-tense climate at Duke remained unaltered following the Vigil, and the continued interest in non-violent civil rights activism that had resulted from the protest was not enough to prevent the forcible 1969 seizure of the Allen Building by disgruntled black students.²⁴ Indeed, Professor John Tate Lanning, writing late in 1968, described the ongoing disruption of the university and threats to shut it down by protesters still displeased with the racial atmosphere and unsatisfied by some of the local short-term changes described above.²⁵ Consequently, the primary long-term effects of the Vigil lie not in its concrete accomplishments, but in the impressions it made upon its participants. One student stated in 1969 that the Vigil had made him "aware of the need for concern for [other] people."²⁶ Another student, Sarah Harkrader Brau, reminisced from 1998 and claimed that, while she was not a Vigil participant, a "yearning to right some wrongs finally after remaining silent too long" led her to political work in Washington, D.C.²⁷ Therefore, although the Vigil was unable to

²³ Pace, "Vigil ignites hope for blacks." 7.

²⁴ Plain Talk about Our University, Mar. 2, 1969, box 1, folder 39, Duke Vigil Collection, Duke University Rubenstein Library, c.

²⁵ The Mounting Anarchy at Duke, c. f.

²⁶ Vigil Recollections, a.

²⁷ Booher, "Remembering the Silent Vigil." 8, a, i.

effect total change in the race-relations structure of Duke University, it left an impression on its participants, some of whom used the experience as a springboard towards other activism.

The Duke Vigil provides an important study in civil rights history due to the difficulties in uniting the Duke community that the protest faced. The divide between black students and white students, students favoring different protest tactics, and those in power and not in power, reflected the challenge of unifying individuals of all demographics in order to bring about social change in the national civil rights movement. Although successes in the national struggle for equality occurred in the face of opposition, such as the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the lack of consensus on the Vigil's causes dampened its local effects somewhat, even indirectly leading to the violent seizure of university property. Furthermore, the hope with which black civil rights activists in Durham met the Vigil indicates that unity was considered an ideal. According to activist Howard Fuller, "The Duke Vigil represented the last hope of the black people and white people to work together for the betterment of the black people and society."²⁸ Therefore, the Vigil magnified race-relations issues not only on campus, where blacks remained skeptical of the protesters' motives and methods, but also in Durham, where the races struggled to work together to eliminate poverty. These conflicts, along with those between student factions and students and administrators, led to the protest's inability to present a united front to the wider world, and may have contributed to the short-lived nature of the easing of racial tension on campus. However, though racial issues still simmered at Duke following the Vigil, its impact is strongly felt in the recollections of participants, many of whom were introduced to activism by the Vigil. Thus, the Vigil, though ineffective in some ways, was not futile, and prepared students for work on the national stage of often-divisive civil activism.

²⁸ Pace, "Vigil ignites hope for blacks." 6, e.

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