

KIM TOWNSEND

Civil Disobedience

A Question of Institutional Involvement

ON MAY 11, 1972, in protest against the Vietnam War, along with hundreds of others, John William Ward, the president of Amherst College, sat down in the road, blocked traffic going into Westover Air Force Base in Chicopee, Massachusetts, and was arrested. His act of civil disobedience was obviously among the most dramatic and controversial events in the history of the college. It also raised questions that every educational institution must address, questions about their aims and about their role in society. During the '60s and '70s, given the war in Vietnam and racial relations in America, institutions of higher learning confronted these issues head on. But none had to do so the way Amherst College did for the simple reason that none had a president who did what Ward did. If these questions are not so pressing now, if administrators administer and society is content with their doing that and only that, it means that for the time being the questions have been answered—if only implicitly—to most people's satisfaction. It does not mean that they have gone away.

At the time, everyone had an opinion about what Ward had done, everyone's reaction was relatively simple—pro or con. Ward's was not. In a long letter he spoke to an alumnus's question as to whether or not he was “absolutely certain” about what he had done:

I would be foolish indeed if I said that I was absolutely certain about almost anything, let alone my own motives . . . Since I am skeptical of others, I am skeptical of myself and would say that there is no doubt in my mind that particular moment, the context in which I acted, and a complex of personal feelings, especially frustration, both played a contributory part in my decision to do what I did.

Our response should not be simple either. We too should consider not only the most general and abstract concerns about the role of institutions of higher learning but also “that particular moment,” the historical context, and the “complex of personal feelings” of Ward himself. We ought to take all these factors into account before coming to any conclusions.



JUST BEFORE TAKING OFFICE, in an interview in the commencement issue of the Amherst College *Student*, Ward set forth the key issue with little sense of how important it would be. “The liberal fiction that one does not speak for the institution, but is still free to speak for himself does seem to me to be a fiction,” he said. Period. But then he went on to say, “I don’t intend to disenfranchise myself or become mute because I am President of Amherst College.” Rather than attempt to conjoin the two positions, though, he backed off: he said that whatever he thought or whatever he did before, as president he thought he would “probably be a little more careful in deciding matters like that. So there’s a problem in even speaking for myself.” He went on to say that the war and the fact of racism in America “mocked the values education professes to stand for: rationality and humaneness,” but he’d have to be “convinced that this really does affect the internal workings of this one particular institution before [he] felt that Amherst College bore the responsibility of taking a stand.” That might have been taken to mean that he would go so far as his predecessor, Cal Plimpton had, and sign a letter to Nixon—if he was really convinced. He ended by saying he didn’t want “to turn an educational institution into a social action agency or political lever,” yet he didn’t think one was “a neutral space with no responsibility to society” either and that, in sum, “this matter of institutional or collective responsibility” seemed to him to be “one of the most troublesome ones to try to define or speak sensibly about.” And indeed it would turn out to be just that. Though he would never arrive at an answer, he continued to speak and write sensibly—and often—about the question.

To begin with, he took pains to be clear about acts of civil disobedience, about what one was and about what justification there was for one. In his notes for a lecture on “The Meaning of Passive Civil Disobedience” that he delivered in the fall after his arrest, he listed six criteria. Such acts were: illegal and intentional, openly committed, nonviolent, conscious (i.e., not impulsive or thoughtless), within the rule of law, and intended to protest or frustrate a law or policy by the government or some of its officers. All were important, but subsequently he laid particular emphasis on the fifth. An act of civil disobedience was illegal, but the person who committed it accepted the rule of law, which meant he accepted the consequences of his illegal act. This was his way of answering those who said that in breaking the law he had made it difficult if not impossible to fault

those students who had disrupted classes. They were charged with “the grave offense of the violation of academic freedom,” he said, had done so believing some higher end was being served. If they were to be true to their “conscientious and thoughtful reasons for so doing,” they too had to “suffer the consequences” of their actions.

As to when or why one would commit an act of civil disobedience, at Ward’s request, professor George Kateb wrote a short piece, “A Word on Civil Disobedience,” that appeared in the summer issue of the alumni magazine. In it he updated what he had said in defense of the moratorium in 1970. More than opposition to a policy was at stake. “Without consulting Congress, and in the absence of any specific authorization, [Nixon had] further extended an undeclared war.” He had acted unconstitutionally; his administration was ignoring the people whom it existed to serve. “But a minority refuses to abdicate its judgment; it will not grant automatic obedience.” “Civilly,” as responsible citizens, a minority had disobeyed the law. To have been obedient would have meant “the end of democracy, not conformity to its moral principles,” Kateb concluded.

And it would not go without Ward’s saying that his was an act. Soon after his arrest, he prepared two statements, one titled “Civil Disobedience,” the other, justifying his action, titled “The Demands of the Office of President.” In the former, he called on action to speak louder than words, and more, “to be a symbolic and tutelary word, that is, educational, to remind people that civil implies ‘civilized,’ and to recall anyone who would listen to a standard of civilized behavior I fear has been forgotten if not lost.” He had his Thoreau in mind, Thoreau who in his “Civil Disobedience,” had pointed out that there were “thousands who are *in opinion* opposed to slavery and to the war, who yet in effect do nothing to put an end to them.” “There are nine hundred and ninety-nine patrons of virtue to one virtuous man,” he wrote. Words, letters, petitions, high-mindedness were ineffective. “Even voting *for the right thing* is *doing* nothing for it.” So Thoreau went to jail for not paying his taxes—i.e., for not helping to finance the Mexican War. Seeing that doing nothing meant allegiance to his government, the effect of which was, in turn, to support its policy in Vietnam, Ward got arrested. “Action from principle—the perception and the performance of right—changes things and relations,” Thoreau said. In the fall Ward gave a freshman seminar, titled “A Majority of One,” on Thoreau. It was the only course he gave after he became president.



LIKE THE THREE BEFORE IT, the spring of 1972 was tumultuous. Though the forms they took and the degree of urgency of each obviously differed, the issues were the same, and the same as they were at colleges and universities across the land: the war in Vietnam, and on campuses, black-white relations. At Amherst there were also questions of whether or not the college should become a college for both men and women and questions of authority and representation. In the springs of 1969 and 1970 the college called off classes for short periods of time to discuss and debate these issues—moratoriums, they were called. But as the spring of 1972 wore on, it was Vietnam—Vietnam consuming thousands of lives, making a mockery of America as a democracy, even posing the threat of nuclear war—that provoked the most anger and vehement calls for radical change. “No outside standard guided us, no national coordinating center dictated our course of action, even informally,” the college newspaper proclaimed in late April. “This year found us suddenly undivided as a college and as persons.”

One reason was impossible to ignore: Amherst College was in the flight pattern of planes the size of a football field that regularly flew over the Pioneer Valley. They were B-59s going in and out of Westover Air Force Base in Chicopee, a little over thirty minutes away, transporting heavy equipment to Vietnam. You couldn’t miss them, you saw and heard them regularly; when you did, you were likely to stop whatever it was that you were doing, and whatever your thoughts they inevitably turned for a moment to the war. There would be marches in New York or Washington, protests on various campuses and around the valley, protests that took the form of blocking traffic on the bridges that cross the Connecticut River, for example—thirteen demonstrations between April 21 and May 11, resulting in 450 arrests, to be exact. But no one needed a “national coordinating center” to tell them how to register their opposition to the war most dramatically. There were plenty of alternatives around the Valley; the most obvious was to block traffic going in and out of Westover Air Force Base.

1971–72 was the first year of Ward’s presidency. He had been a professor of American studies and history for seven years and had been named president by the trustees in some large measure because of his comportment during the crises of the previous years—especially as a member of the Committee of Six, the faculty’s executive committee, when black students occupied several buildings in the spring of 1970 and then that

summer, as a member of a “commission” that sought to democratize the way the college was run. He had been opposed to the war for years; and he could back up his opposition with much more authority than most. “I have been opposed to American policy in Vietnam before,” he wrote the summer after his arrest, “but at least since 1964, when I organized a course on American foreign policy which concluded with eight weeks on our involvement in Vietnam.” That was an introductory course in American studies; in the spring he turned the Vietnam segment into a full semester’s study of Vietnam; it was then that he came to the conclusion that it wasn’t just “the bloody and wasteful war” itself, or the senseless fear of a Communist takeover that he objected to, it was the fact that America’s policy in the region was just plain wrong. He realized that what we were fighting for—the freedom of the North and the South to choose their governments in internationally supervised elections—was precisely what had been set up in the Geneva Accords in 1954 and then sabotaged by the United States (which had not been a party to the agreement), because Eisenhower and Dulles feared that the Communists would win such an election in the South and then—it was their theory—one country after another would fall into the hands of the Communists like dominoes. We installed puppet regimes instead, regimes that “would not stand a month without our armed presence.”

Ironically, Ward had argued for Nixon’s election in 1968 because he thought “as a new hand” he had more freedom to change the direction of American policy in Southeast Asia. He applauded Nixon’s “attempt to build peaceful bridges” toward both China and the USSR. Recognizing that France’s long involvement in Vietnam was a failure, de Gaulle had protected French troops by withdrawing them. Perhaps Nixon would do the same. But no. The war went on, and now, “after eighteen years of bloody war, the waste of life and treasure, we still seek what we threw away at the start,” with the proviso, though—still—that the government in the South had to be non-Communist. Now he was adamantly opposed. As a professor in charge of an American studies course on America’s foreign policy, and then a course on Vietnam, he had analyzed and discussed and criticized American foreign policy in Vietnam. He had been an especially effective—and popular—educator.

As a citizen, as far back as the spring of 1966 he had taken part in Sunday morning vigils on the Amherst Common that were sponsored by the Mt. Toby Friends Meeting in the nearby town of Leverett. But contemplating what he was doing only intensified the “frustration” that he spoke of in

his letter to the alumnus. It was like writing your congressman, he told a student audience that spring. You do it, “knowing full well, as your hard-headed friends are only too glad to point out, that it is not going to change anything.” And what was worse: “You know yourself, and so suspect yourself of sheer self-indulgence and the private pleasure of feeling virtuous.” Up until the spring of his first year as president, then, all he had done in opposition to the war was talk and stand silently.

Early in the spring of '72, the campus was relatively quiet. What agitation there was, as had been the case in the fall, was over the issue of coeducation. There seemed to be nothing to prevent Ward and his wife Barbara taking the vacation that they had been planning for a year, so in mid-April they joined a group of Amherst alumni on a chartered flight to Paris.

On Sunday, April 16, with an election coming up in the fall, Nixon ratcheted up the war by ordering the bombing—“the devastation of”—Haiphong, the major port in North Vietnam, and Hanoi, the capital. No place in Vietnam was off-limits to bombing raids, he declared to the North Vietnamese. Meetings and protests sprung up all across the country. At Amherst, the *Student* called for what was possible, Amherst being so small, and had occurred many times before in comparable circumstances—an all-college meeting in the chapel the next night. The meeting, attended by between 400 and 500 students and a few faculty and staff members, lasted about two hours. It began with a slide presentation of the automated electronic air war in Vietnam and ended with the students voting overwhelmingly for a two-day “strike” at the end of the week, one that would be voluntary for both faculty and students. In the meantime, on Wednesday afternoon, there was another meeting, this time outdoors, in front of Chapin Hall, with Charles Trueheart, the editor of the *Student*, presiding. A variety of activities during the strike were proposed: fasting, campaigning for peace candidates, going to the rally that would take place in New York City on the 22nd, boycotting companies that manufactured war weapons, a midnight vigil in front of the library with a coffin draped in black, and of course, “sitting-in” at Westover. Nothing was ruled out, but “If you have only one thing to do, do Westover,” the *Student* said in its announcement of the alternatives. The dean of the faculty, Prosser Gifford, said he would call the president “to inform him of the latest developments.”

That evening the Committee of Six met, its deliberations nicely summed up in a statement that Gifford wrote:

I hope that the next two days will encourage constructive concern and commitment in opposition to a brutal war which now again has been senselessly extended. Individual students and members of the faculty who wish to participate in political or moral action will, I trust, be free to act on their consciences. I am sure many join with me in supporting serious activities of protest which do not prevent others from continuing to teach and learn on Thursday and Friday if they wish.

About 150 students fasted, subsisting on milk and juices for five days, the vigil was observed, the New York march joined, a statement was issued calling on the college to divest itself of securities in ten of “the top 36 prime military contractors in the aerospace industry,” and among the one hundred demonstrators who were arrested at Westover on Friday morning were twenty-two Amherst students—arrested, fined ten dollars, and released with suspended sentences. (Before May 11, when Ward got arrested, there would be fifteen demonstrations at Westover, many of which were joined by Five College faculty and students. On that May Day the arraignments of the hundreds who were arrested were postponed because of the backlog of the nearly 500 cases that had come before the court since mid-April.) On Sunday the 23rd, at a relatively sparsely attended third all-campus meeting, the “strike” was officially declared over.

The campus seemed to have settled down. There was one discordant note, however. The following week small groups of students interrupted about twenty classes and demanded that their opposition to the war be heard. Some professors consented—in a few classes the war was folded into the class’s discussion—and some did not. A disciplinary process involving the dean of students and the judicial board that would hear seven students’ cases began (more cases might follow, the dean said); after much debate about that process, the students’ cases were dismissed. The cases and what they signified would not be forgotten, but for the time being, what *Amherst*, the alumni magazine, said that summer was true enough: “a casual visitor to the campus would not have known that a ‘strike,’ or any other activity for that matter, was in progress.” But having decided to return, Ward arrived back in Amherst—alone—on Monday, April 24.

Soon after, another item appeared on the college’s agenda. As they declared the “strike” over, those who had attended the third meeting also voted to call on the president and the trustees to examine the college’s investments not only in corporations that furthered the war effort but in those that did business with countries that oppressed minorities. About a

hundred students, mostly black students from Mount Holyoke and Smith Colleges as well as Amherst, but some white students as well, responded by picketing in front of Converse Hall in protest against financial investments in South Africa. Ward responded by addressing a college meeting on May 4 on the subject of “The Ethics of Investment.” All of which escalated (the word was in the air) into the faculty’s declaring, as its resolution had it, “that Tuesday, May 9, 1972, is a Day of Concern at Amherst College for a discussion of the issues raised by the Afro-American Society. All regularly scheduled activities will be suspended for that day.”

That very day Nixon announced that he was ordering the mining of Haiphong Harbor, as well as other harbors and inland waterways, in an effort to cut off supply routes to North Vietnamese troops fighting in the South and to prevent supplies of any kind from entering North Vietnam itself—and a call went out from a “coalition” of students for another all-campus meeting. That night while Ward was at one of the meetings set up by the Afro-Am society, a student called Ward’s house and left word with his wife that he and other students hoped that he would write a letter—a letter, presumably like the one Cal Plimpton had sent to Nixon at a climactic moment during the 1969 moratorium, a letter which said that unrest on American campuses would continue “until you and the other political leaders of our country address more effectively, massively, and persistently, the major social and foreign problems of our society.” When he got home he tried to write one.

Wednesday afternoon an estimated 800 people crammed into the chapel. Ward had not called the meeting but he opened it, opened it with a statement that he had told no one about—no one, not even his wife, who heard what he had to say for the first time that afternoon—“for fear of cautionary advice,” he later said. His statement was radically different from Plimpton’s letter, but two days later it too would be reprinted on the editorial page of the *Times*.

“Let us begin where we are,” he said. “Let us make this place . . . as good and decent and humane a place as we can.” He began, in other words, as the president of Amherst College. It was the voice his audience wanted to hear, the voice, in any case, that they had heard many times before. But admitting to being “tense and uneasy with the act of dividing [himself] in two,” he said he would also speak in his own voice. From the start, he had not wanted that voice to be silenced: “My hope, as president, has been not to lose myself in the role, the office, to retain a sense of my own self while still president.”

He then went back to the student's phone call and now answered it by exclaiming: "Write a letter! To whom? One feels like a child throwing paper planes against a blank wall." Had he written a letter he might have been cheered, been thought to be "a pleasant and sympathetic fellow." "But the mines are laid," he said; and then he went on to rail against "this bloody war" that had gone on for eighteen years. He quoted what he had said on Parents' Day three years before about this "cruel and foolish mistake, that we got into . . . on a false ideological premise." But "voices louder than his had been saying as much for a long time," he pointed out. "What are we protesting?" he asked, and then went on to answer his own question, to answer it as "Bill Ward, self and citizen," noting again that, "as I said when I took this office, I do not intend to disenfranchise myself or lose my rights as citizen because I am president."

The harbors had been mined; Nixon had ruled out withdrawal, saying the only way to get to the negotiating table was to apply more and more force; Kissinger had been reported as saying "nuclear confrontation is an acceptable risk, preferable to the present land war in South Vietnam," if the blockade failed. But what was done was done, Ward said. What he protested against was what might come next, but he had come to the conclusion that there was no way to do that, which was to say,

What I protest is there is no way to protest. I speak out of frustration and deep despair. . . . I do not think words will now change the minds of men in power who make these decisions. I do not. Since I do not, I do not care to write letters to the world. Instead, I will, for myself, join in the act of passive civil disobedience at Westover Air Force Base.

Everyone stood up and cheered—or so it seemed.

After everyone was seated once again, the member of the coalition who was chairing the meeting asked for responses to the fact of the blockade. One student said he felt the pressure of conflicting demands on him—as a citizen, a student, a person. He was "aware of the problems, and yet [was] powerless to do anything about them." He asked two members of the faculty, one an authority on Russia, the other on foreign policy generally, what they thought were the likely consequences of Nixon's recent escalations. But before either could answer, Professor Leo Marx, emerging from the front of the audience into the aisle, declared, "For the first time in my knowledge, the president of a college has offered to lead us in an act of civil disobedience. I don't know what we are waiting for. I assure you, if nothing else it will get national publicity."

Another professor, Bob Romer, then stood up and, concurring with Marx that Ward's action would be national news, urged that the demonstration take place the next day rather than Sunday, as had been planned: the mines had been laid; they were to be activated at 6:00 in the morning. One of the faculty members called upon to predict what might happen as a result of the blockade got to speak. Ward spoke again, saying this time that "as president" he would "preserve a space of freedom for people in the college." There was to be no coercion, no attempt "to force people to act the way you think they should act." Gifford read a letter that he had written to Nixon that began, "Your remarks on the night of May 8, 1972 reveal assumptions which were thread-bare and self-deceptive five years ago. Without consultation with Congress you have again brought us to the edge of despair and big power confrontation," a letter he said anyone who wanted to should sign. Everyone was worked up, there was no order in the house. All that was clear was that scores and scores of people from the college would be going to Westover with Ward in the morning.

Right after the meeting, the faculty met and adopted a motion that said that it believed that President Nixon's actions had created "a global crisis"; students would be allowed to take whatever political action they saw fit after they had made arrangements with their professors for completing their course work.

Word quickly traveled to the other institutions in the valley. Estimates vary as to how many hundreds went to Westover early Thursday morning to sit down in the road and thus block the entrances through the two main gates of the air base. It was a fine spring day. Barbara Ward joined her husband, as did Gifford, five members of the Committee of Six (an immediate family member of the sixth was dying), about twenty other professors, including some from UMass and Hampshire, and, it is safe to say, well over 250 students. The atmosphere was heady, and so nearly carnivalesque that at one point Marx, who had been arrested with five colleagues the week before, on the second anniversary of the shootings at Kent State, at what had been a very solemn demonstration, felt compelled to remind everyone that people were dying in Vietnam. Ward himself was harder to read. "Sitting there in that circle, I didn't really know what to do," he later said. "What a crazy world this is." Eventually (less than the "nearly two hours" that the *Times* reported) the demonstrators were led into buses (a few had to be dragged) and driven to the Chicopee jail, where they milled around in the yard until the court officials, already overburdened by the many previous demonstrations, decided to postpone

their arraignments and released them. (A fund was later set up by a handful of faculty members to help the city of Chicopee defray the costs of the Amherst contingent's actions.)

Ward's arrest was indeed—immediately—national news. Countless newspaper accounts of antiwar protests and demonstrations and actions across the land consistently began with a reference to his action at Westover, either that or ended with one. Ward later claimed to be surprised by the reaction to what he had done—“flabbergasted by all the commotion,” as he put it.

Although they were by no means of one mind, on the whole the students were supportive and proud of what Ward had done. In his commencement issue, *Student* editor Charles Trueheart wrote a long appreciation of Ward's first year titled “The Blooming of the President.” In it he focused on what he called Ward's “personal confusion with his roles.” It had been evident in the fall, at the outset, when Ward had had Copland's *Fanfare for the Common Man* played—or blasted out, would be more like it—at his inauguration. Immediately after he had said—somewhat disingenuously—“I always wondered what a fanfare was.” It was evident in his performance in the chapel on the afternoon of May 10: “He walked from the room, his chin on his chest, much the way he had begun his term of office, shy. He left Johnson Chapel the extraordinary man Amherst College, albeit unconsciously, had been waiting for.” Ignoring what Ward had in fact said about his audience's expectations (that it was not Bill Ward but the president of the college that they wanted to hear), Trueheart wrote, “It was Bill Ward we wanted to hear all along, because if it is Bill Ward who is heard, then it was also each individual in the community, rather than the Professor, or the Dean of Students.” Trueheart asked rhetorically, as did Ward, what if all of us had “lost our precious right to act as human beings,” but went on to say what Ward would not have said of himself: “The question is moot of, course. John William Ward did not answer it, and by raising it becomes extraordinary.” At Westover, that was the issue: had he acted as the person, the citizen, John William Ward, or as the president of Amherst College? He would insist that the two were separate. The students, according to Trueheart, were glad they were not. In sum, it was good that Ward confused the two.

Of course, for a variety of reasons, not all of the faculty approved of what he did. Among those who went to Westover, some went more in support of him than to register their approval of what he had done. Professor Benjamin DeMott wrote a controversial account of Ward's arrest

in *Change* in which he reduced Ward's act of civil disobedience to his way of maintaining his authority on campus. In an earlier piece on the 1970 moratorium that he published in the same magazine he had it that Plimpton had been forced to send the letter (which in fact Gifford had written) to Nixon by the faculty, and had thereby lost his authority. Professor Hadley Arkes and others maintained that by breaking the law, Ward had made it more difficult to prevent unlawful behavior on campus. Witness what had happened to the cases of the students who had disrupted classes. Most persuasively, professor Hugh Hawkins, Ward's colleague in American studies and history, objected to what had transpired at the Wednesday afternoon meeting. The atmosphere, the loss of control by those who had called and chaired the meeting—more specifically, the effect of the exhortations of so influential a figure as Leo Marx—"were diametrically opposed to the spirit that we should seek at this college." The same was true of the faculty meeting immediately after, one that began with somebody's announcing that the president had just received a "unanimous standing ovation," and then went on until dinnertime, with "students audibly and impatiently waiting outside." Going back to Ward's oft-stated determination to protect the institution from "an excess of passion," Hawkins later wrote Ward, "As I see recent events, you have increased passion and weakened the opportunity for free exchange of ideas within the College." As for Ward's claim to be speaking in the second half of his statement as Bill Ward, private citizen, given the occasion, an all-college meeting in the chapel, he asked: "How could your action not be that of 'the President of the College?'" And then he asked another, disarmingly simple question: "If your conscience told you that you must perform an act of civil disobedience, why could you not do so without making a previous announcement?" In his objecting to the coercive nature of the afternoon meetings Hawkins cited three examples of students whose work had been sidetracked as a result of the sit-in, the most telling example being that of the student who was told that the oral examination of his thesis was to be postponed because some of his readers had gone to Westover—especially telling because his thesis was on the potentially coercive effect of acts of civil disobedience. When Hawkins repeated his objections at a noon-hour assembly meeting in the fall, Ward's response was, simply, "Then I'd have to say that that was not Amherst's finest moment."

In a letter in which he reviewed Ward's first year as president (a review that Ward had requested), professor Bruce Morgan, who had moved on to become the dean of Carleton College that summer, described Ward's

act of civil disobedience as “one of the highest principle and courage as well as sound rational judgment.” “I went,” Morgan wrote, “partly because I wanted to support the President in what I knew was going to be a difficult situation, but also I went as an act of conscience, given moral support by a person I admired and who simply, at that point, seemed to have more courage than I.” He didn’t think his own academic freedom had been “violated by anything [Ward] did or said,” but he added that he did “run into a considerable amount of flack from some very fine seniors in my class the afternoon of the sit-down.”

The response of the alumni was mixed. In a list of what they had been confronted with in just the last two or three years, a list contained in a memo to the college’s top administrators from the alumni office, Westover was the next to the last straw. (The last, the sixth, would not be placed on their backs until the fall.)

1. Moratorium
2. 1969 letter to President Nixon from President Plimpton
3. 1970 “black takeover”
4. 1971 election of non-alumnus, former faculty member, as president of the college
5. President Ward’s Westover arrest
6. President Ward’s recommendation for coeducation at Amherst College.

Being well aware that the annual alumni fund drive was suffering, Ward wrote a letter to the class agents in the fall, thanking them for their work on behalf of the college and acknowledging that he had made their work a lot harder. And indeed the fund did suffer. But later, by the alumni office’s calculation, alumni defended him—two to one, pro to con. You don’t have to be a sociologist to predict the breakdown: many sympathizers came from men in education, the ministry, and medicine, very few from businessmen and lawyers. More men that graduated in the ’30’s, ’40’s, and ’50’s disapproved than approved of what Ward did, but the difference was not nearly so great as the reverse among the men who graduated in the ’60’s (135 to 11), those at Amherst at the time (25 to 1), and (a nice statistic) those from classes that graduated between 1888 and 1909 (9 to 1).

The most interesting response that came from an alumnus was that of Stansfield Turner, who wrote Ward saying that he had a problem with what he took to be Ward’s “black and white distinction,” and that he was “trying to make up [his] mind on where [he stood] on this issue as an Amherst

alumnus.” His response was the more interesting because at the time he was president of the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island. (He would later be head of the CIA.) He asked Ward to come down, a day would be set aside for a symposium on “Why Students and Faculty Oppose the Vietnam War,” and Ward did, accompanied by six faculty members and five students. It was an undramatic occasion—much to the disappointment of some among the Amherst delegation.

The reaction of the trustees was, Ward told Morgan, “remarkably good.” Ward had called the chairman, Oliver Merrill, after his arrest, told him what had happened, and said that though he knew that it would be nearly impossible for the media “to keep clear my distinction between the President of Amherst College and [him]self,” he had and would continue to “do [his] utmost to maintain it.” He said he knew he was taking a risk but that “he had decided in fairness to his own conscience” that it was one he had to take “as an individual.” Merrill responded by saying he thought that “the decision was for him to make and that he should do what his conscience and judgment deemed best.” The trustees met soon after to discuss what Merrill nimbly referred to as Ward’s “indiscretion” and to agree on the wording of what would be the “Statement of the Trustees of Amherst College.” It said the trustees respected Ward’s right to make “these personal decisions and the deep sincerity of his motives,” and that “Their high regard for and confidence in President Ward continue[d].” It also made the following points: it was the policy of the college not to take a position on political questions; every member of the Amherst community had a right to express his opinion and to take what he thought was appropriate action, and this included the president, though of course it was “more difficult for him to dissociate himself as an individual from his office.” Nobody gave a second thought to professors’ getting arrested; a college president, theoretically committed to defending the neutrality of the academy, was something else. When Ward met with the trustees, for two and a half hours there was “vigorous and sharp give-and take,” he said, but no suggestion “that they had second thoughts about my being president. I was even braced for that!” His session with the trustees must have been sobering, but firing him for protesting against the war in Vietnam? One can not imagine their doing anything but standing behind him. On the other hand, one does not imagine that they ever got over what he had done.



JUST AFTER HIS ARREST, Ward received a copy of a book on Gandhi by Louis Fischer, who had been a colleague at Princeton. It was a gift from his son. In thanking him, Ward said that his father had been “much in [*sic*] my mind the past weeks.” The day he got arrested, he said,

I remembered a day many years ago when students at Princeton rioted and, late at night, I went a roundabout way to avoid the mob and went safely home. Louis was deeply disappointed with me, that I would not with my presence act for what I thought was right. All of which is to say that Louis himself and Gandhi, because of Louis’ words, were much on my mind as I came to the decision to present my body and not just my words in opposition to policies I abhor.

And then to add to “the complex of personal feelings” that Ward had to have been experiencing at the time, there was, finally, Ward’s impulsiveness. One of the six criteria he listed in his notes for his lecture on “The Meaning of Passive Civil Disobedience” was that it be “conscious (i.e., not impulsive or thoughtless).” His act had surely been preceded by plenty of thought—and then it was impulsive. Ward’s was the kind of impulsiveness he once wrote about in a piece titled “Anarchy and Authority in American Literature.” His action was like the one that occurs in that seminal moment in American history and literature, that moment when Huck Finn declares, “All right, then, I’ll go to Hell”—the moment when he too becomes “a majority of one.”

In the final *Student* interview, Ward said it was naive of him to think that people would understand. *He* knew what he was doing but taken by surprise, others wouldn’t—though they would immediately jump to conclusions. But when he was asked if he would do again what he had done, he said yes, but that it would have been harder, that he would have moved “much more prudently.” Just what else he might have done, or how differently he might have done what he did, he didn’t say.

Another man might have alerted the trustees of his intentions and handed in his resignation (which they would not have been likely to accept), but not Ward, not the man who made so much of maintaining his personal identity while serving as president. There is at least one plausible answer, one that Hawkins put forward and that Morgan did too in his letter to Ward: “From the stand-point of the institution,” he wrote, “it appeared to me later that you could have achieved a greater degree of freedom as a person if you had gone to Westover without announcement and it had

become known after the fact.” Let’s imagine: Ward tells no one, slips away, and gets arrested—on his own. When he is booked, it turns out that he is the president of Amherst College, he pays whatever penalty is imposed on him, and returns to campus. He would have left and been arrested as Bill Ward and returned to assume his role as the president of Amherst College. Word would have gotten out almost immediately; the news would probably have been the more compelling given the circumstances. The distinction between his roles would have been clearer to others and possibly to himself as well. He might have been clearer about how he felt when he got arrested. But standing at the podium in the chapel of Amherst College he was who he was—undeniably Bill Ward but undeniably too the president of the college, the latter, under the circumstances, being the more obvious.

Yet the circumstances were extraordinary. Arguably, constitutional democracy had broken down. And so the ideal citizen had no choice but to defend it by committing an act that asserted his individual freedom—the foundation on which democracy in American had been founded. One had to rebel against the rule of its law as it presently stood—or in protest against its absence—in order to restore it to its original state.

In getting arrested, Ward in his person did just that. That, and yet more, as more. He also did it as an educator, as a teacher, which is how he often defined himself as president. He had said many times that Amherst should not inspire students with ideals and then just leave them thinking that there was nothing that they could do to bring them into being or to defend them when they were threatened. Now, more specifically, if a man was convinced that the ideals on which the constitutional democracy of his country was based were not only threatened but violated, he had to have the courage to defend them with his disobedience. Convinced that that time had come, Ward acted.

In stating his intention to do so on that Wednesday afternoon in the chapel, Ward said he was speaking first as the president of the college, as the person he assumed the students wanted to hear, and then as Bill Ward, the private citizen who was going to act. He insisted on the distinction and would continue to do so ever after. The moment, the times, were hardly conducive to clear thinking, but in retrospect we can say that he was not giving himself enough credit. The students *had* come to hear the president, though neither they nor anyone else in the room had ever heard a president like him before.

And the president *was* the man they heard, from his first word that day to his last.