To Know Man as Man:
Progressive Dreams & Provincial Realities at Southwestern College in the Year of the Sanitation Strike

Christian Baum
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The Creed of the Alpha Tau Omega Fraternity
“To bind men together in a brotherhood based upon eternal and immutable principles, with a bond as strong as right itself and as lasting as humanity; to know no North, no South, no East, no West, but to know man as man, to teach that true men the world over should stand together and contend for supremacy of good over evil; to teach, not politics, but morals; to foster, not partisanship, but the recognition of true merit wherever found; to have no narrower limits within which to work together for the elevation of man than the outlines of the world: these were the thoughts and hopes uppermost in the minds of the founders of the Alpha Tau Omega Fraternity.”
-Otis Allan Glazebrook, ATO Founder, 1880

On Wednesday April 12th, 1967 nearly thirty students from Southwestern College at Memphis gathered outside of Gibbon’s Steakhouse on nearby Summer Avenue. They carried picket signs and were led by a tall African-American student named Lorenzo Childress. His sign read: “This is a Jim Crow excuse for a restaurant.” The week before, Childress and three white classmates had come to Gibbon’s for a steak and a beer. But when they arrived, restaurant manager Bill Taylor refused to seat Childress, and told him that he was being refused service because he was black. When Taylor pulled out a gun, the four friends decided to leave. The
Southwestern students marching behind Childress a week later had joined him in protest of the restaurant’s discriminatory policy. As the picketers marched slowly back and forth in front of the restaurant, a hostile crowd gathered in the parking lot next to them. This second group was also composed of mostly Southwestern students, and occasionally chanted and hurled insults at the picketers. Inside Gibbon’s a staff member of the student newspaper interviewed Bill Taylor about the Southwestern students protesting Gibbon’s policies: “It’s just a small clique of them. The majority of Southwestern students are not liberal or Communist indoctrinated. They sent ‘em down here.” As if seeking to reaffirm their non-communist credentials, the crowd that had formed in opposition to the picketers chanted, “Who do we want? Burch! How do we want him? Dead!” Jack Burch was a senior at Southwestern, and was among the students picketing Gibbons.¹ He ignored the threats from classmates and community members and continued to march. When Lorenzo Childress shouted at a group of Kappa Alphas that K.A. was the same as K.K.K., they shouted back “yes, and we’re proud of it!”²

By the spring of 1966 Southwestern College was on a collision course with itself. For more than the first century of its existence, Southwestern was a segregationist institution, whose community saw no contradiction between the college’s racial attitudes and its status as a Presbyterian college. In 1876, the year after the university added an undergraduate school in theology, Jefferson Davis visited Clarksville, Tennessee, which was the sight of the original campus. When Southwestern President John Shearer heard that Davis was in town, he cancelled classes for the day and led a procession of excited students downtown to meet the Confederate

¹ Almost a year later his great uncle, Lucius Burch would represent Martin Luther King Jr. in local court. He was the head of a legal team attempting to remove an injunction granted against King by the federal government. http://commaction.org/images/stories/Annual%20Report%202012LR%20FINAL.pdf
² “Campus Erupts Over Gibbons Ban,” Sou’wester, April 14, 1967, Vol. 48 No. 21
When the college moved to Memphis in 1925 the administration named the largest building on the new campus, Palmer Hall, after a Presbyterian theologian who used the bible to justify slavery. After World War II the all-white student body perused the western canon for values as part of the “Man in the Light of History and Religion” program, while the black laborers who worked on the campus grounds and in the school cafeteria were not allowed to drink from the same water fountains or use the same restrooms as everyone else on campus. Southwestern’s tradition of racist policy made it hypocritical, but far from exceptional. The school was founded in the antebellum South, and like many contemporary institutions its policies were consistent with the ubiquitous racial hatred of the region. As the decades passed though, the nation’s feelings about race began to change.

Southwestern could not deny black students entrance and go without challenge indefinitely. During the mid-fifties the Presbyterian Church of the United States started to pressure Southwestern to integrate. The school’s Board of Directors held out until 1963, when college president Peyton Rhodes informed them that the school’s segregationist policies made it ineligible to receive support from some of the country’s major granting institutions. In the fall of 1964 Memphians Lorenzo Childress and Coby Smith became the first two black students at Southwestern. The following year David Alexander, a young progressive intellectual, replaced Rhodes as president of the college. The civil rights movement of the late fifties and early sixties had created a student body that in general was less willing to accept the social mores of its

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http://d lynx.rhodes.edu/jspui/bitstream/10267/10554/3/Southwestern%20at%20Memphis%20by%20Waller%20Raymond%20Cooper.pdf.txt
4 Ibid.
parents’ generation, and fostered a minority of progressive students who sought to abolish or reform systems they saw as prejudiced. However, a significant portion of the students and alumni were still overtly racist, and had more than a hundred years of institutional inertia on their side. During the 1967-1968 school year the conflict between the two diverging visions for the college was dramatically realized in a controversy sparked by an event that was historically commonplace- the dropping of a fraternity blackball.

Most Americans who went to college during the late sixties experienced some kind of campus conflict. Students all over the country aligned themselves in increasing numbers with movements that older generations saw as radical and destabilizing. Gender roles were brought under scrutiny as the women’s liberation movement gained momentum. The Civil Rights Movement won major legislative victories in 1964 and 1965, but segregation and unequal treatment for black citizens were still American realities. In Vietnam the death toll of American soldiers grew, as did the support for the antiwar movement at home. The specter of the draft provided an unusual incentive for male students to study hard and maintain their deferrals. For students across the nation, but especially those in Memphis, the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. was a traumatic, paradigm-shifting event. Tragedy and conflict did not mean the end of typical university life though. Freshman still relished new freedom and questioned where they would fit in. Students drank beer, crammed for tests, and worried about what they would do after graduation.

If a stranger walked around the Southwestern campus in the fall of 1967, it would have been easy to assume that the movements of the sixties had skipped the small liberal arts college. There were only about fifteen African-Americans enrolled, and only a few of them lived on
A few male students had the beards and long hair that would qualify them as ‘beatniks’ in the eyes of men like Gibbon’s manager Bill Taylor, but by and large the students looked like the children of conservative southern parents. Women still had to follow a strict no-shorts dress code, and men were required to wear suit and tie to dinner. The school enforced a curfew for its female students, held twice a week mandatory chapel, and a compulsory convocation in the gym. Attendance was checked, with negative consequences for those who did not attend. Of course, if the stranger happened to pick up a copy of the Sou’wester, the weekly student paper, or enter the refectory on a night when men satirized the dress code by wearing coat and tie but no shirt, they would realize that Southwestern was not as tranquil as it looked. In the late sixties Southwestern students pushed back against the policies of “in loco parentis”, and made demands about life at the college that were informed by the ascendant cultural values of the era.

Like all freshman who arrived to Southwestern in the fall of 1966, Larry Woodard had to deal with the enhanced tension of going to college during a turbulent time period. As one of the few black students on campus though, and the first African-American to live in the dorms, he experienced the racial tension at his new school in a far more personal way than most of his classmates. Woodard was born in Chicago while his mother visited her sister, but within ten days the two had returned to the family home at the corner of Carnes and Hilton in the Orange Mound neighborhood of Memphis. Larry’s father Robert Woodard worked as a guard at the post office on Front Street. His mother, Charlene Woodard, took care of him and his two brothers. When Larry was five, the Woodard family moved to a home in South Memphis on Waldorf Avenue.

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7 Larry Woodard, Interview by Christian Baum, Phone Interview, July 14, 2014
8 Student Biographical Data, Alumni Records 8/6/’66, Rhodes College
They would stay there for the rest of his childhood.

Woodard was a gentle child who excelled at school from an early age. He suffered from a medical condition that often left him severely dizzy during athletics, but he was incredibly talented musically. After the move to Waldorf Mrs. Woodard began taking the children to Bloomfield Baptist, which was the nearest church to their new home. The Woodard brothers never quite embraced the passionate spiritual worship that occurred at Bloomfield though. On occasion they even conspired to sit on their mother to prevent her from being taken over by the Holy Spirit, which they referred to as “getting happy”. When Larry was twelve he received an invitation from one of his middle school teachers to attend Parkway Gardens, an all black Presbyterian Church. His teacher picked him up that Sunday, and after the service Woodard decided to become a Presbyterian. About a year after Woodard started going to Church at Parkway Gardens, he finally convinced his father to give him piano lessons. Within another year he was being paid to play the piano at parties and teas around Memphis. He began to play at Parkway Gardens, and eventually took jobs at Bloomfield Baptist Church and with the Memphis Parks Commission. By the time he had graduated as salutatorian from George Washington Carver High School, Woodard was the co-director of music for the Parks Commission.  

Prior to the start of Woodard’s freshman year there was reservation in the administration about his prospects for successful assimilation into campus life. Rather than attempting to find him a roommate, Dean Charles Diehl gave the freshman a coveted single room in Bellingrath Hall that was typically reserved for upperclassmen. But Dean Diehl underestimated both Larry Woodard and the other students at Southwestern. Soon Woodard became one of the better

9 Larry Woodard, Interview by Christian Baum, Phone Interview, July 14, 2014
10 Larry Woodard, Interview by Christian Baum, Phone Interview, July 14, 2014
known and liked students on campus. Living on a nearly all white campus was often difficult, but that did not stop Woodard from becoming an important part of the Southwestern community. He was a social, outwardly cheerful person, who laughed often and took genuine interest in those around him. His freshman year he was elected to represent his class on the honor council, and became a star member of the campus choir and the madrigal society. He majored in music, and thrived under the tutelage of his Southwestern professors. By then an even more accomplished pianist, he became a fixture at Southwestern concerts and ceremonies. Despite his heavy involvement freshman year, Woodard was not a part of the single most important social organization at Southwestern.

The Greek system at Southwestern dominated campus social life. All but one of the fraternity chapters were established from 1877 to 1882, while the college was still located in Clarksville and known as Southwestern Presbyterian University. The first two sororities were established in 1925, soon before the school would make its transition to the current Memphis location. By the 1960’s these institutions had been around for decades, becoming more and more central to student life at the college. Of the nearly 1,000 students at Southwestern during the 67-68 school year, about 600 belonged to one of the eleven Greek chapters on campus. When individual students were referred to in the student newspaper, the Sou’wester, their Greek affiliation accompanied their name. At Southwestern, your fraternity or sorority was nearly as big a part of your campus identity as your major or year.

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11 Bill Short, Interview by Christian Baum, Memphis Tennessee, April 2013
12 Carrie Fowler, Interview by Christian Baum, Phone Interview, July 2014
13 Southwestern at Memphis,1967 Lynx Student Annual, Rhodes College Archives
14 Cooper, Southwestern at Memphis
http://dlynx.rhodes.edu/jspui/bitstream/10267/10554/3/Southwestern%20at%20Memphis%20by%20Waller%20Raymond%20Cooper.pdf.txt
15 Rhodes College Historical Enrollment Data
The characters and reputations of the separate Greek institutions depended upon whom the groups were composed of, but the various groups had similar functions. Fraternities organized intramural leagues and hosted parties. Each year older members taught a new crew of freshman the lore of their chapter and national organization, and aimed to give their members an elevated sense of belonging and friendship. A few students from each chapter also lived in their fraternity house. The sororities held parties as well, and did occasional charitable work. Off campus parties hosted by Greek organizations frequently featured black musicians from Stax Recording Company, and other recording labels, but as of fall of Fall 1967 there were no black students in any of the Greek organizations. In fact, several of the organizations had “white clauses” in their national constitutions, which were put in place to prevent the pledging of African-American students. Even as Southwestern tentatively opened its doors to black students, the campus’s Greek organizations largely did not follow suit.

Before he got to Southwestern, Larry Woodard decided that he had no interest in going Greek. His older brother had joined a fraternity at Lemoyne Owen College, and the stories of hazing Larry heard were enough to discourage him from participating in the Southwestern rush process his freshman year. Over the course of that year though, Woodard began to spend a significant portion of his time with members of the Alpha Tau Omega fraternity. It was not a conscious decision: They were the kids who lived in his dorm, who he gravitated to in his classes, in his music society the Madrigals, and on the honor council. The ATO’s had a reputation for being a scholarly and engaged fraternity. They had the highest cumulative GPA among the Greek houses, their members were heavily involved in student government and other campus organizations, and of the Greek organizations they were the most progressive politically.

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16 Barron Boyd, Interview by Christian Baum, Memphis Tennessee, April 2013
They were natural friends for Woodard. By the end of the year many of Woodard’s closest friends were “Taus”.\textsuperscript{17}

In the spring of 1967, the faculty attempted to set the college on a path towards reform. After a joint meeting they asked the president of the college, David Alexander, to appoint a committee to “study the whole problem of the fraternities and sororities at Southwestern, and make recommendations to the faculty” and recommended to him that there be no campus groups that practiced racial discrimination\textsuperscript{18}. The faculty’s recommendation was not the first time Alexander had given the matter of discrimination within the Greek system thought. There had been rumblings for several years that the federal government might begin withholding funds from universities whose student groups had racially discriminatory policies like the white clauses in the national constitutions of several of the Greek organizations at Southwestern.\textsuperscript{19} Alexander was a Southwestern alumnus, and had been a Sigma Nu as an undergraduate.\textsuperscript{20} His Greek loyalties did not stop him from supporting the inquiry though. Meeting potential federal anti-discrimination demands made good fiscal sense and coincided with Alexander’s broader racial politics. The young president had grown up in Kentucky in a well-educated family with liberal feelings about race.\textsuperscript{21} After graduating from Southwestern Phi Beta Kappa in ’53, he had gone on to receive a Rhodes Scholarship, and teach at San Francisco Theological Seminary.\textsuperscript{22} By the time he took over the Presidency of Southwestern from Peyton Rhodes in 1965, he was committed to equal treatment for black Americans.\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{17} Larry Woodard, Interview by Christian Baum, Phone Interview, July 14, 2014
\textsuperscript{18} “Tower Scrutinizes Fraternity System,” \textit{Sou’wester}, September 29, Vol. 49 No. 02
\textsuperscript{19} Jim Lanier, Interview by Christian Baum, Memphis, TN, July 2014
\textsuperscript{20} Southwestern at Memphis,1953 Lynx Student Annual, Rhodes College Archives
\textsuperscript{21} Jim Lanier, Interview by Christian Baum, Memphis, TN, July 2014
\textsuperscript{22} http://www.rhodes.edu/barret/23375.asp
\textsuperscript{23} Jim Lanier, Interview by Christian Baum, Memphis, TN, July 2014
News of the faculty inquiry began a campus and community conversation about the Greek system that only intensified the next fall. In October Alexander presented the faculty’s recommendations to the Board of Directors. Together they formed the Greek Evaluation Committee, which was headed by Alexander and composed of three professors, four students, and three board members.\textsuperscript{24} The committee was tasked with a yearlong review of the Greek system, and if necessary was to suggest reform measures. After news of the potential changes reached the alumni community, donors began to threaten to withhold funds from the college if integration in the Greek system was enforced.\textsuperscript{25} The Greeks began planning to reinstitute a dead tradition known as Help Week, in which various organizations combined their efforts to accomplish a local service project. Some of their peers saw the revival of the program as a thinly veiled effort to improve their image before formal evaluation by the administration’s special committee.\textsuperscript{26} Despite the unknown fate of the Greek system, rush still occurred in the weeks before school began. Even though he had become closer with the ATO’s and was even rooming with a junior ATO named John Kennedy, Woodard did not participate. He was still wary of the hazing and of the Greek system in general.\textsuperscript{27} After a month of rush parties, handshakes, and schmoozing, 236 out of 329 new freshmen were pledged into the fraternities and sororities on campus.\textsuperscript{28} The presence of the evaluation committee caused tension in the Southwestern community, but the early days of the 1967-1968 school year were a relatively sleepy beginning to what would be one of the most tumultuous years in the college’s history.

\textsuperscript{24} “Committee Assays Merits of Greeks,” \textit{Sou’wester}, November 10, 1967, Vol. 49 No. 08
\textsuperscript{25} Sou’wester Cody Editorial February
\textsuperscript{26} “Scrambling Greeks Bewitched,” \textit{Sou’wester} November 10, 1967, Vol 49. No 8
\textsuperscript{27} Larry Woodard, Interview by Christian Baum, Phone Interview, July 14, 2014
\textsuperscript{28} Sou’wester September 22\textsuperscript{nd} Volume 49 No #1
The faculty and administration’s attempt to combat segregation on a systemic level roughly coincided with the ATO’s attempt to do so on a personal one. At some point during the fall semester they decided that they wanted to pledge Larry Woodard. He was not initially receptive to the idea, but his friends in the fraternity persisted. After all, they said, he was pretty much already an ATO anyways. Woodard eventually agreed to become a part of the spring pledge class, but with one proviso. He would not walk through the Kappa Alpha house during the formal rush process. There was a giant Confederate flag inside, the brothers had a reputation for being racists, and he had sworn to himself he would never step foot into the house.

Woodard’s friends within ATO agreed, and he underwent the rush process.²⁹ The ATO national organization had removed its “white clause” two years before, as they put it in a national publication, relieving pressures “from many chapters that were or might soon be in trouble with an integration-minded administration” and clearing the way “for the fraternity to accept expansion opportunities that otherwise would not have been offered.”³⁰ Regardless of motivation, the removal of the clause meant there was no longer any legal obstacle to pledging Woodard.

Admittance to the fraternity was governed by an anonymous voting method known as the single blackball system. In a meeting to decide what potential new students would become part of the new “pledge class”, the fraternity members discussed potential pledges. Once everyone had said what they thought about the potential pledges, they passed around a box. By placing a white marble into the box, they signified their acceptance of the new pledge. A single black marble dropped by an active meant that the potential pledge had been “black balled”, and could not join

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²⁹ Larry Woodard, Interview by Christian Baum, Phone Interview, July 14, 2014
³⁰ Harry L. Bird, *The ATO Story: On To The Centennial*, (Fulton: The Ovid Bell Press, 1968), 313
the fraternity. It did not escape Woodard’s notice that in the Greek system black was the accepted color of condemnation.  

The ATO’s met to vote on the first act of integration in their chapter’s history on a cold night in late November. Rutledge Tufts, a senior and the president of the fraternity, acted as the presiding officer. Before the box was passed around, Tufts followed the tradition of asking the fraternity to voice their opinions on the potential new member. The formal discussion was more ritual than anything else. By that point the friends assembled in the chapter room had been discussing the matter of pledging Larry Woodard for some time. It was considered a done deal. When it came time to vote, his friends spoke up for him. After everyone had had their say, Tufts passed the box around. When it reached him again, he opened it up ready to announce that his good friend Larry was officially accepted as a pledge in the ATO fraternity. But mixed in with the forty white marbles was one small black sphere. According to national bylaws, no discussion was permitted after the votes had been cast. Tufts was so shocked and upset that he asked what happened. They had talked about Larry. No one had said one bad thing about his character. A junior named Eric Wilson spoke up. A Memphis native, Wilson was a star on the golf team and one of the fraternity’s most recognized athletes, “I had a blackball for him.” The room went quiet. Tufts turned to Wilson and asked him why. Wilson’s response: “I can’t call a nigger my brother.”  

For many of the students assembled, Wilson’s shocking statement was not an acceptable answer. Having already broken the rules by asking who had dropped the blackball, Tufts and the rest of the fraternity continued off script. They felt that Wilson’s decision forced them into racial

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31 Larry Woodard, Interview by Christian Baum, Phone Interview, July 14, 2014
discrimination, and asked him to deactivate so that they could have the vote again and pledge Woodard. Wilson agreed to do so. They conducted the vote again, and Woodard was pledged.\(^{33}\) After the meeting the members told Woodard he had been accepted into the fraternity. They did not mention what had occurred with Eric Wilson. Woodard ended the semester believing that Wilson, whose dorm room was right next to his, was his friend. He had no reason to believe otherwise.

Progressive students saw Woodard’s acceptance into ATO as a positive step, but one that was only a small part of a much larger cultural change that the campus had yet to undergo. Much of the turbulence of the sixties stemmed from groups questioning and opposing the roles that wider society had selected for them. Through the feminist movement women began to reject preordained gender roles. By opposing Vietnam the youth of the country demanded that they be in charge of their own bodies and lives. Through the civil rights and black power movements, African-Americans demanded social and economic equality. At Southwestern an increasing number of students were influenced by these ideas, and were demanding changes all across campus life that reflected these influences. However, the racial disparities present all over America were particularly exaggerated in the Southern society that Southwestern was a part of. These disparities were clearly reflected on campus, and took center stage during the second half of the school year.

A few days after Woodard was pledged, an anonymous editorial appeared in the *Sou’wester*. The author approved of Woodard’s entrance into the fraternity, but pointed out that only one-eleventh of the Greek System had shown positive action away from racial discrimination. There was still a troubling lack of acceptance regarding the African-Americans

\(^{33}\) “Interview With Harmon Wray.”
students on campus. The writer further noted that while the campus staff was technically integrated, black workers only occupied positions that paid lower wages and involved physical labor, like janitor and cafeteria worker. Intentional or not, the racial issues outlined in the editorial were a microcosm for those confronting wider society. The severe economic disadvantages for African-Americans created by systemic racism would soon be highlighted locally by the sanitation strike, and would put issues of discriminatory wage rates and job type at the center of Memphis and national news. Despite federal legislative victories, African-Americans around the country were still intentionally excluded from good jobs, fair loans, and other institutions that could give them more economic leverage. The editorial’s conclusion was more prophetic than its author probably would have liked: “Yes, Southwestern is making progress against racial discrimination- but it should not break its congratulatory arm patting itself on the back. Not just yet.”

When Christmas break arrived Woodard and Wilson had a much shorter trip home than the most of their peers. Woodard returned to his house on Waldorf Avenue in South Memphis. He played the piano and caught up with his brothers. His father continued his work as a security guard at the post office on Front Street, and his mother took care of the house. Wilson returned to his family on Dallas Street. At some point over the break he contacted a local representative for the national fraternity, and told him that he had been forced out of the chapter and that his fraternity rights had been violated. Later in the break, a representative from the national fraternity contacted the chapter to inform them that ATO nationals would not be honoring Wilson’s deactivation or Woodard’s membership.

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34 Student Biographical Data, Rhodes College Alumni Office
The beginning of 1968 was a tense time for Southwestern students. They returned to campus after Christmas break only to be greeted by final exams. For several weeks social life ground to a halt, and students focused on getting through their first tests of the year. Even the ever-dependable *Sou’wester* stopped printing. Outside of Southwestern the world continued to spin. In Vietnam American soldiers the same age as Larry Woodard and Rutledge Tufts enjoyed a few days of rest during the truce declared out of respect for the Vietnamese lunar holiday, Tet. In the early morning of January 30th, these same soldiers woke to a massive coordinated surprise attack by the North Vietnamese. Two days later in Memphis, Echol Cole and Robert Walker were crushed to death by a malfunctioning garbage truck while they worked for the city’s sanitation department.

While what was going on outside the campus gates provided a charged backdrop for daily life, the ATO’s still had to deal with the controversy in front of them. On the night of February 5th, they gathered at the fraternity house for their weekly meeting. Joining them was ATO province chief Jon Boyden, who graduated from the University of Mississippi as an ATO in 1956.36 As the local representative of the ATO national organization, he was there to make sure that Eric Wilson was reinstated and that a second vote be had in regards to the pledging of Larry Woodard. Wilson had told Rutledge Tufts earlier that day that if he came to the meeting, he intended to blackball Woodard. Wilson showed up, and the vote was conducted again. Tufts inspected the contexts of the box, and found one black marble. At that time Tufts told the chapter he would not honor the vote. He and Woodard were close personal friends, and Woodard had

become his “little brother” in the fraternity. He further refused to honor the blackball system as a method for acquiring new members.37

Tufts’ refusal to de-pledge Larry Woodard initiated a generational clash between the old guard of the national organization and the progressive undergraduates in the Southwestern ATO chapter. In the days after the February 5th meeting a high ranking national ATO executive came through the area from out of town, and summoned Tufts, junior Bill Michaelcheck, and several other officers of the fraternity to meet him at his hotel in West Memphis, Arkansas. The group piled into a car and drove across the Mississippi to meet him. As soon as they got to the national officer’s hotel room though, he went on a racist diatribe and berated them for trying to bring Woodard into ATO. The officers found the whole experience bizarre, and the older man’s bigotry only made them more determined not to capitulate to nationals. 38 On February 7th the chapter held a special called meeting. Jon Boyden and a man named Gil Brandon attended the meeting as well.39 Brandon had been an ATO at Duke in the early forties and had stayed involved with the organization after graduation. By 1968 he was the president of the ATO High Council, which was responsible for bringing internal charges against members of the fraternity. Despite the presence of the national representatives, the chapter discussed the possibility of “going local”. This would have freed them from the oversight of the national organization but would have led to the loss of their fraternity house. A vote was taken on the matter, but the proposal was defeated.40 Tufts still refused to accept Woodard’s exclusion from the fraternity or the blackball system in general. In response, Eric Wilson asked Boyden to file charges with

38 Bill Michaelcheck, Interview by Christian Baum, June 2014
39 February 9th
40 “Administration Note Freezes ATO Hassle, Status Quo Governs,” Sou’wester, February 16th, Vol. 49 No. 14
ATO nationals against Tufts for violating the national fraternity constitution. When the meeting ended there was no resolution to the conflict. There was however, a new focus. As long as Tufts maintained this stance the national fraternity would seek to remove him from office.

The story of what had occurred within ATO was perfectly situated to blow up on campus. The faculty had asked for a review of the Greek life specifically because of racism within the system, and all year there had been rumblings over the matter from the student body. This time around there was no effort to keep Woodard from learning of the controversy. As a pledge Woodard was not present for the fraternity meetings, but John Kennedy and Woodard’s older friends in the fraternity kept him informed of the developments. After the February 9th issue of the Sou’wester ran with the headline: “ATO Blocks Tufts Anti-Discrimination Effort”, everyone on campus knew what had happened in ATO. Greek detractors had argued all year that fraternities and sororities were inherently elitist and racist. Woodard’s exclusion from ATO was seen as the confirmation of these suspicions. Despite the strong tradition of Greek life at Southwestern, many students involved in the system feared that a liberal administration might put it on the chopping block. It was easy to view that administration’s response to the Woodard controversy as a barometer for future policy decisions about Greek life, which only increased the campus focus on the ATO’s internal proceedings.

For Larry Woodard navigating a nearly all white world as one of the few black students on campus was already difficult. But in a few short days he had been thrust into the center of a campus wide controversy centered on race because of the actions of someone he had called a friend. The situation was disorienting, and tinged with a certain level of irony. Several days before the controversy began he had started considering dropping the fraternity because of

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41 Sou’Wester February 16th
42 Larry Woodard, Interview by Christian Baum, Phone Interview, July 14, 2014
potential hazing. Within a week of the first *Sou’wester* headline, the Commercial Appeal and the Press Scimitar began covering the story. After Woodard woke up one morning he left his dorm to find reporters from the Associated Press and United Press International waiting for him outside. He turned around, walked directly to his room, and went back to bed.\textsuperscript{43}

ATO was a remarkably close-knit group, but the controversy was divisive. Some members started deactivating when it became clear that the national organization would continue to demand Wilson’s reinstatement and the depledging of Larry Woodard.\textsuperscript{44} They felt that staying made them complicit in blatant racial discrimination against their friend. Many had experienced misgivings in the past about the inherent elitism of Greek life, and the controversy hit so close to home that they could no longer ignore those feelings.\textsuperscript{45} Plenty of those who stayed sympathized with Woodard but loved the fraternity experience too much to give it up. Greek life was the center of the Southwestern social experience, and leaving it meant wading into uncertain waters. They believed that they could be a part of reforming the system from within, and in mid February the local chapter sent a letter to the national fraternity asking to be included on the committee that was set to review the blackball system.\textsuperscript{46}

The national organization kept up its pressure on Rutledge Tufts. On February 8\textsuperscript{th} he received a long distance phone call from the ATO national president Stuart Daniels. Daniels initially attempted to convince him to resign his position. When it was clear that Tufts had no intention of doing so, Daniels told him that he would soon be receiving an official letter

\textsuperscript{43} Larry Woodard, Interview by Christian Baum, Phone Interview, July 14, 2014
\textsuperscript{44} “Administration Note Freezes ATO Hassle, Status Quo Governs,” *Sou’wester*, February 16\textsuperscript{th}, Vol. 49 No. 14
\textsuperscript{45} “Administration Note Freezes ATO Hassle, Status Quo Governs,”
\textsuperscript{46} “Administration Note Freezes ATO Hassle, Status Quo Governs,”
notifying him of his removal from office. According to Daniels refusing to honor the ATO blackball system was clearly outside the bounds of the constitution.

The college administration attempted to defend Tufts and Woodard from the national fraternity. After the officers of the fraternity informed Dean Charles Diehl about ATO national’s interference with the chapter proceedings, the dean was so furious he threatened to kick all the Greek organizations off campus.\footnote{Bill Michaelcheck, Interview by Christian Baum, June 2014} Diehl had been an ATO during his own undergraduate years at Southwestern, but like President Alexander he was far more concerned about the rights of Larry Woodard as a student that Eric Wilson as a fraternity member. On February the 12\textsuperscript{th} Tufts received a letter from Dean Jameson Jones. The administration had mandated a freeze of ATO activities until his dispute with ATO nationals was resolved. Because the controversy involved the possible breaching of the rights of one of the pledges, no elections, pledgings, or depledgings were to be conducted. That night Jon Boyden and Gil Brandon returned to the chapter meeting intending to force the chapter to hold an election for a new president. They threatened to remove Tufts unilaterally if the chapter did not do so. Tufts then read Dean Jones letter mandating the cessation of ATO elections, and temporarily prevented the vote from going forward.\footnote{“Administration Note Freezes ATO Hassle, Status Quo Governs,” }

The national fraternity eventually decided to proceed regardless of the sanctions placed on the chapter by the college administration, and issued a press release claiming their action was purely because of the constitutional violations that had occurred in the chapter. On February 18, Boyden and Brandon were finally able to compel the remaining members of the fraternity to hold an election for a new president. Woodard’s and Tufts’ strongest supporters had already deactivated in protest, and the national representatives maintained that they would enforce the
results of a new election even if it was only conducted by two members. For those who had chosen to stay, they could either participate in the election or allow the future of their fraternity to be decided by others. Junior James McElroy, a friend of Woodard’s, was eventually elected to replace Tufts. The ATO’s interviewed afterwards by the *Sou’wester* emphasized that they felt trapped between the freeze of the administration and the demands of the national organization. By participating though, they had defied the freeze order. The administration responded by suspending the ATO chapter indefinitely. The fraternity house was padlocked, a dance was cancelled, and the members were barred from participation in intramural events. President Alexander released a copy of the letter he sent to the ATO national president to the press, and cited the “unprecedented defiance of the freeze order” as the reason for the suspension.

The administration’s padlocking of the ATO house functionally ended chapter proceedings for the year, but the campus debate surrounding the Greek system continued to intensify. The members of ATO who had resigned were frequently at the center of the conflict. The experiences of the past few months had a dramatic effect on some of the ATO’s. When they decided to pledge Larry Woodard, they viewed his entrance into the fraternity as the moral victory and a step the campus needed to take. Over the course of the controversy though they came to see the entire Greek system as inherently and irreparably flawed. Successfully pledging Woodard would do nothing to change discrimination in the system as a whole. Arbitrary exclusion was at the heart of the Greek system, and was inconsistent with the values of the college. Soon a significant minority of like-minded students in other fraternities and sororities began to drop out and join in with the deactivated ATO’s and independents in criticism of the

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49 “ATO Directors Bust Tufts, Defy Administration Freeze,” *Sou’Wester*, February 23rd, Vol 49, No. 16
50 “Tower Padlocks Local ATO Following Banned Election” *Sou’Wester*, March 1st, Vol. 49, No. 17
system. The campus conversation played out in dorm rooms, in the *Sou’wester*, and in the student government. At one point there were even dueling picket lines outside Haliburton Tower. At a student senate meeting on February 20th, Rutledge Tufts presented a resolution to the student Senate for “the immediate abolition of the Greek System at Southwestern.” The body had no power to enact the ruling, but over 200 students gathered to watch the debate surrounding the motion. Even a local television crew from WMCTV was present. Despite the attention the proceedings received, the final vote was 24 to 1 in opposition of Tufts resolution. Almost the entire student senate was composed of active Greek members. After the student senate vote the editorials in the *Sou’wester* continued, and students continued to deactivate and de-pledge from Greek organizations. Both sides maneuvered for support, but ultimately they had to wait for the administration to act on the recommendations of the Greek Evaluation Committee.

The Greek controversy dominated campus conversation for much of the winter and spring, but as the sanitation strike grew progressed it took up more student attention. On April 2nd Memphis city mayor Henry Loeb spoke in front of hundreds of Southwestern students gathered for weekly convocation and reiterated what he had now been saying for weeks. He contended that city, state, and federal employees did not have a right to strike in the field of health or safety, and that the matter was a labor and not a racial issue. For Woodard, who had felt the sting of discrimination and heard a similar argument advanced by ATO nationals, this was probably not a convincing argument. Woodard had not been involved in the movement, but had worked at Centenary United Methodist Church where James Lawson was the pastor.

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51 “Interview With Harmon Wray.”
52 “Senate Smashes Resolution Favoring Greek Abrogation,” *Sou’wester*, February 23rd. Vol 49. No. 16
Lawson was the ministerial head of the movement behind the sanitation strike and was viewed by Martin Luther King and others as one of the world’s leading experts in nonviolence. Lawson asked Woodard to perform at Mason Temple on the night of April 3rd. Woodard agreed, and his college friends Bruce Lindsey and Debbie Sale drove him to the church. Lindsey had helped convince Woodard to pledge ATO, and dropped the fraternity when it became clear that his friend would not be allowed to become a member. The three sat together and listened to the last public speech Martin Luther King ever made. The night after King’s historic speech at Mason Temple, he was assassinated by James Earl Ray at the Lorraine Motel.

The days that followed at Southwestern were chaotic. Rioting broke out in neighborhoods near the college, and students looking out dorm room windows could see fires all over the city. The National Guard rolled past the college in tanks and armored personnel carriers, and enforced curfews in the area. Several students who were caught off campus at the wrong time were Maced. Parents feared for their children and tried to reach them constantly. Dean Diehl instructed the male dorm leaders to check their residents’ dorm rooms for weapons. When ex-ATO Harmon Wray found one of a residents and a group of the resident’s fraternity brothers drinking in a room on his floor, they were just drunk enough to admit that they had three guns in the room. When Wray asked them what they had doing that night they replied that they had been riding around the town looking for “uppity niggers”. President Alexander was gone when the news of King’s assassination became public, and Dean Jameson Jones had stepped in to run Southwestern in his place. After being prompted by other members of the administration,

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54 Larry Woodard, Interview by Christian Baum, Phone Interview, July 14, 2014; Jim Lanier, Interview by Christian Baum, July 2014

55 Bill Michaelcheck, Interview by Christian Baum, June 2014

56 “Interview With Harmon Wray.”
Dean Jones spoke personally with student and black power advocate Coby Smith to ensure he was not going to burn down the school. After intense outside pressure, Jones made the decision to shut down the college a few days before the scheduled spring break.

In the days following the assassination President Alexander returned to Memphis and publicly took several positions that were seen as liberal by many people in the area. The first was his decision to preside over the Memphis Cares movement. The goal of the program was to encourage racial reconciliation within Memphis, and present an image to the world different than the violence and bloodshed that the city had experienced in the few weeks before. The second action was his long awaited response to the Greek system controversy. On April 24th and 25th, President Alexander finally presented the findings of the Greek Evaluation committee to the college’s Board of Directors. After the presentations the board approved four mandates placed on the Greek system, three of which were designed to prevent fraternities and sororities from discriminating against black Southwestern students. The new regulations legalized restrictive clauses, abolished the single blackball system by stating that membership systems could require “no more than an affirmative vote of ninety percent of the active chapter”, and declared that membership could “not be contingent upon recommendations from persons outside the active membership of the chapter”. None of the policies could definitively prevent the Greek organizations from racially discriminating in their membership, but they made the process of discrimination slightly more difficult. As long as they provided written evidence of their intent to change, the Greeks were given a year grace period to institute the new policies.

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57 Smith’s humorous response: “The school’s made of stone Dean Jones. I couldn’t burn this place down. I’d have to blow it up!”
58 Jim Lanier, Interview by Christian Baum, Memphis, TN, July 2014
Alexander’s progressive actions in the month of April came with political consequences. Many conservative alumni were opposed to Alexander’s attempt to integrate the Greek system and to his leadership in Memphis Cares. A subset of wealthy sorority donors was particularly incensed that Alexander had cut them off from the sorority selection process. The board of directors had approved his new Greek system policies, but when the pushback came from alumni they wavered. Some members believed that Alexander had taken them too far too fast. The young president realized that if he stayed at Southwestern accomplishing what he wanted to would be increasingly difficult. He had previously declined the chance to interview for the presidency of Pomona College in California, but after his troubles with the board at Southwestern he took the interview and eventually the job. The spring semester of 1969 was Alexander’s last at Southwestern.  

The Legacy of the 1967-1968 Greek Controversy

Institutions frequently choose to remember stories that support the image that they have of themselves in the present day. Many Rhodes students and professors know the story of the kneel-ins that took place at Second Presbyterian Church in the early sixties. After college president Peyton Rhodes chose not to censure students who were participating in the kneel-ins, Donors began to threaten to withhold money from the college. The president’s response : “This college is not for sale.” This story of student activism, and especially Rhodes’ response, has rightfully become a part of college lore. However, if this college seeks to be honest with itself about what it is and has been, it cannot allow its institutional memory to be limited to moments of pride. After the late date in which black students were admitted into the college, they were barred from organizations officially recognized by the institution. ATO’s discrimination against

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60 Jim Lanier, Interview by Christian Baum, July 2014
Larry Woodard became a story rather than a statistic only because the chapter no longer had a white clause, and was composed of an exceptional number of morally serious college students. And despite the effort of Woodard’s friends in ATO, the end result was that he was excluded from the organization. Discrimination in the rest of the Greek groups ranged from a key pillar of organizational identity to an uncomfortable reality that was accommodated because students valued their Greek experiences. While David Alexander tried to improve the situation, the simple anti-discriminatory policies he enacted infuriated school alumni and contributed to his early departure.

There is still a clear tension between Rhodes’ goal of providing a welcoming place for all students, and the reality within the college gates. The school is no longer exclusively southern, but the majority of the college’s students still come from a region that has a thoroughly documented and trenchant history of discrimination against minority groups. The Greek system still dominates campus social life, and remains a sight for Rhodes students to safely discriminate against their peers. By now each Greek organization has had at least one black member over the course of its history, but every fall students are excluded from these officially sanctioned college organizations because of race, sexuality, and perceptions of sexual promiscuity. While there have been many progressive efforts by the current administration to make Rhodes a more accepting place, discrimination within the Greek system seems to be an issue which college leadership either cannot or will not address. The reform measures enacted by David Alexander are no longer in place, and current administration does not track the membership methods of fraternities. The single blackball system still exists on the Rhodes campus, and membership in several campus Greek groups depends on individuals outside of the chapter.
In an editorial published in the February 16th, 1968 edition of the Sou’wester, alumnus Michael Cody wrote: “The Presbyterian Church and Southwestern have taken an unequivocal position that discrimination is morally wrong and should not be practiced in Church institutions. The fraternity system at Southwestern is an organic part of the college. Discrimination by the fraternity is discrimination by Southwestern. The principle and practice must be made consistent regardless of pressures—economic or otherwise.”

Rhodes is no longer seen by most of the community it serves as a church institution, but the Greek system remains an organic part of the college. When students are repeatedly and predictably discriminated against by campus organizations, the responsibility for that discrimination lies with the entire Rhodes community.

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61 “Letter to the Editor,” Sou’wester, February 16th, Vol. 49 No. 14