

Yours for the New Social Order:  
Student Radicals at Wesleyan University, 1929-1941

by

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## **Acknowledgments and Dedication**

In this thesis, I have observed the unfortunate disciplinary convention of avoiding any reference to myself, even when my own values and beliefs influence my interpretations. Nevertheless, it should be clear that I have a good deal of personal investment in the subject of radicals at Wesleyan. This thesis ultimately has its origin in discussions with activist and radical friends, in which it came out that we all wished we knew more about the history of activism at Wesleyan. Although I have avoided spelling out facile “lessons of history,” I hope we can learn as well as take inspiration from the experiences of these radicals and their encounter with history.

I could not have written this thesis without my advisor, Prof. Ronald Schatz, who kept me on track, provided invaluable critiques, and suggested the idea of writing about the 1930s radicals in the first place. I owe a great deal to the staff at Special Collections and Archives—Suzy Taraba, Valerie Gillispie, Linda Hurteau, and Rebecca McCallum—as well as the Interlibrary Loan staff for helping me find sources. Dean Marina Melendez and Prof. Judith Brown provided encouragement in moments of panic. Kalen Flynn helped me actually write the thing.

This thesis is dedicated to Wesleyan radicals, past, present, and future.

## **Glossary of Student Movement and Related Organizations**

American Student Union (ASU): An umbrella student movement organization formed by the union of the NSL and SLID in 1935-36. Although it professed a broadly liberal program, the ASU remained led by radicals until its collapse in 1940.

American Youth Congress (AYC): A broad coalition which organized huge annual pilgrimages to Washington in support of the American Youth Act, a bill that would have dramatically increased federal employment aid to students and youth.

Christian Association (CA): I follow the usage of the students themselves in referring to the Wesleyan chapter of the Young Men's Christian Association simply as the Christian Association.

Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA): An early New Deal agency which distributed economic aid, including the United States' first student work-study program.

Fellowship of Reconciliation: A leftist and pacifist Protestant organization involved with the Socialist Party; Norman Thomas was a leader.

League for Industrial Democracy (LID): A middle-class left-liberal organization, loosely affiliated with the Socialist Party. With the rise of the student movement, the student section went further left and became an independent organization, the Student League for Industrial Democracy, under the leadership of members of the YPSL. The LID merged into the ASU in 1935-36. I follow the students' usage in referring to the Wesleyan chapter as the LID; "Student LID" is the national organization.

National Student League (NSL): A student activist organization led by members of the YCL; merged into the ASU in 1935-36.

National Youth Administration (NYA): A New Deal agency founded in 1935 which provided work-study aid to college students as well as jobs to high school students and non-student youth, replacing FERA's youth aid programs.

Youth Committee Against War (YCAW): A pacifist student organization which split from the ASU when the latter embraced collective security in 1937-38.

Young Communist League (YCL): Youth affiliate of the Communist Party.

Young Peoples' Socialist League (YPSL): Youth affiliate of the Socialist Party, far to the left of the adult organization.

## Introduction

To judge from his credentials, Charles Britton Harris, Wesleyan class of 1935, was an ordinary ambitious college man, immersed in campus life and preparing for a career in business. A member of the Delta Upsilon fraternity, he chaired the student government committee that oversaw rushing and was on the editorial board of the campus newspaper and literary magazine.<sup>1</sup> Yet this ordinary college man unleashed impassioned polemics against capitalism in the pages of the school newspaper:

Roosevelt has not cured the depression, he has not offered a solution for the millions whose spirits are being broken in these times, he cannot materially alter the condition of the masses because capitalism could never bear the cost. ... He wants to defend and retain the very feature that makes honest people do cruel things—profit.

I cannot see human nature being perverted and directed into the worst conceivable channels, I cannot see people starving mentally, morally, and physically, I cannot see children who never have a chance for real existence, in short I cannot even live, without being human enough to be a radical.<sup>2</sup>

Harris was far from alone among students in the 1930s, for the era saw the United States' first mass student protest movement. Stimulated by the Depression and led by a small but dedicated cadre of student Socialists, Communists, and pacifists, students at working-class public schools and rich private schools alike rebelled against the conformity and conservatism of student life and organized against war, fascism, and social inequality. At the movement's peak, over half a million students participated in national student strikes against war—proportionally, more than any student protest

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<sup>1</sup> *Olla Podrida 1935*, (Middletown, Conn., 1935), 134.

<sup>2</sup> Britton Harris, "Let Freedom Ring," *Wesleyan Argus*, 29 October 1934, p. 3.

action of the 1960s and 70s.<sup>3</sup>

The bourgeois student culture against which the movement reacted was a recent phenomenon, rooted in changes in the class basis of American higher education. Forty years earlier, there could have been no student movement, for there was little active student life. Although today Northeastern colleges such as Wesleyan, Amherst, Williams, and Dartmouth are associated with upper-class students, in the nineteenth century they were local colleges of modest means, preparing the sons of farming families for careers as teachers or ministers. These relatively poor students ate and roomed off campus and spent their spare time studying or working to pay their tuition; their independence allowed no basis for student activities or a common student identity.<sup>4</sup> At Wesleyan, the tendency was especially pronounced. Wesleyan was an undistinguished denominational college affiliated with the Methodist Church, then one of the least prestigious of Protestant denominations. Fully three-quarters of students were poor enough that they taught school during the winter term to pay their tuition, and the average age at graduation was over twenty-four. Of the class of 1872, when the proportion of Methodist students at Wesleyan was at its peak, half became ministers. Between required daily chapel and an active YMCA chapter, religion dominated what student life there was.<sup>5</sup>

Beginning around 1900, however, Wesleyan, along with other Northeastern schools, reoriented towards urban capitalism, giving rise to modern student life. As capitalism developed into a more bureaucratic and planned system, business began to

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Cohen, *When the Old Left was Young* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), xviii; Eileen Eagan, *Class, Culture, and the Classroom* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981), 3.

<sup>4</sup> David Allmendinger, *Paupers and Scholars* (New York: Knopf, 1975), 8-9, 80-81.

<sup>5</sup> David Potts, *Wesleyan University, 1831-1910* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1992), 44-45, 111, 106-110.

hire more college graduates. Wesleyan alumni competing for jobs in New York and Boston grew concerned for the reputation of their alma mater and pushed for a change of name, loosening of ties with the Methodist church, and other measures designed to replace Wesleyan's parochial image with one suited to the urban professional class.<sup>6</sup> The class composition of the student body shifted: by 1910, the proportion of students who were sons of farmers had plummeted, while over 40 percent came from the bourgeoisie—that is, the urban upper-middle class, that class which coordinates the economy without controlling it.<sup>7</sup> These more affluent students established, and urban alumni funded, institutions of student life that linked students with the world of business—above all, fraternities and intercollegiate athletics. Wesleyan's fraternities built new houses, designed by prestigious New York architects in conscious imitation of the urban men's clubs where bonding, socialization, and friendship took place between businessmen. Intercollegiate sports taught the value of competition as well as raising Wesleyan's public profile, with matches played in cities before elite spectators and covered by the major newspapers.<sup>8</sup>

After the First World War, the change in student lifestyles that had begun at elite northeastern schools took hold across the nation. The hiring of college graduates in fields such as management and public relations expanded even further as white-collar work became the cutting edge of the United States' economy. College became a rite of passage for the sons of the bourgeoisie, for whom college was not so much a place of learning as an initiation into the values, culture, and skills of the business

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 169-71.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 197.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 178, 183-193-95.



world. It was in student life, not in the classroom, that students learned these.<sup>9</sup> In fraternities, athletics, and other student activities, male students learned the values of competition, conformity, and acceptance of hierarchy, acquired interpersonal skills and initiative, and made contacts that would serve them in their professional careers.<sup>10</sup> College life flourished, and although it was actually a highly structured form of socialization, college took on the appearance of a playground for bourgeois youth. At Wesleyan, the transformation from a Methodist institution was complete by the 1920s. Although the university did not completely break with the church until 1937, it was effectively no longer Methodist: daily chapel was a nondenominational Protestant service, and the college life in which students were absorbed, like at most schools, was secular.<sup>11</sup> The female students had been ejected in 1908 as part of this de-Methodization: although the Methodist church supported coeducation, male students and alumni felt that the presence of women detracted from the school's reputation and feminized the masculine campus culture of sports and fraternities they were creating.<sup>12</sup>

No political movement of the 1930s was more unexpected than the student movement, for the student culture of the 1920s and early 30s was highly apolitical. Completely absorbed in the social world of their own creation, students shunned those who maintained intellectual or political connections with the outside world.<sup>13</sup> There was little reason to expect the sons of the bourgeoisie to become involved in politics in an age when their class interests accorded with the very conservatism that

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<sup>9</sup> Eagan, 5-7.

<sup>10</sup> Paula Fass, *The Damned and the Beautiful* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 253.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>12</sup> Potts, 219.

<sup>13</sup> Fass, 157.

was then ascendant. But the economic, political, and international crisis of the 1930s shook even the most privileged students, prompting some to look critically on college life and to lend an ear to radicals. At Wesleyan, a group of liberals and Christian pacifists became interested in anti-war activism and social reform and began to look for an alternative to the apathy of college life; they found that alternative in the radical student organizations that emerged from New York's dynamic left milieu. They brought the movements against war, for workers' rights, and for economic relief onto the campus and put forth a different ideal of the college man which promoted intellectual inquiry and engagement with society.

The student radicals saw themselves as part of a national and international movement, and actively participated in the debates and factional splits of the left in the 1930s. Wesleyan remained a stronghold of uncompromising pacifism from the beginning of the movement to its end in the cataclysm of the Second World War, putting them increasingly in conflict with the rest of the student movement in the latter 1930s as the United States moved towards conflict with fascism and activists at other schools began to reevaluate their opposition to war. As political circumstances turned unfavorable to the movement and the shifts within the movement left pacifists isolated, Wesleyan radicals were unable to effectively organize for peace during the war crisis which they had so long predicted.

In spite of its significance as the first student movement in the history of the United States, historians have largely neglected the student movement of the 1930s, and in the popular imagination it has been all but forgotten.<sup>14</sup> This thesis attempts to

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<sup>14</sup> I am aware of only two scholarly books on the subject: Robert Cohen's *When the Old Left Was Young* and Eileen Eagan's *Class, Culture, and the Classroom*, both cited above. Most political

make a small contribution to the rediscovery of these radicals who, unafraid of controversy, brought critical engagement and political activism to the campus at a time when engagement and activism was sorely needed, and who, for a brief but fateful period, believed it was in their power to shape history.

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histories of the 1930s devote little attention to the student movement, and histories of higher education ignore or belittle it. On this historiographical neglect, see Cohen, xviii-xix.

## Chapter 1

### Student Life on the Eve of the Depression

A freshman entering Wesleyan in the late 1920s or early 1930s would likely be struck first and foremost by the preponderance of fraternities. At Wesleyan, like nearly every other school, the fraternity was the most important institution in campus life—socializing, networking, dating, and competition for campus power all took place there. In 1929, eighty percent of Wesleyan’s six hundred students were in one of the twelve fraternities.<sup>1</sup> Except for freshmen, nearly all members of a fraternity lived in the house, and all ate in the house’s eating club; there was no general dining hall. Living and eating among their brothers for all four years of college, students developed intense loyalties to their fraternities; the houses, not class years, were the most important divisions within the student body. Students’ identification with their house was often greater than their loyalty to Wesleyan itself: according to a 1930 poll, 71 percent of students thought that “fraternity spirit [was] generally greater than college spirit,” and 56 percent even admitted to having this “misplaced loyalty” themselves.<sup>2</sup> Old Wesleyan traditions that built loyalty among classes, such as the freshman-sophomore “scraps,” had fallen out of favor.<sup>3</sup> These customs dated from before the postwar enrollment boom, when to be in college was enough to be

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<sup>1</sup> “In The Editor’s Mail,” *Argus*, 18 February 1935, p. 2..

<sup>2</sup> “The Wesleyan Student Survey of 1930,” TD, James L. McConaughy Papers, Special Collections & Archives, Olin Library, Wesleyan University, Middletown, Conn., 7.

<sup>3</sup> Editorial, *Argus*, 24 April 1930, p. 2; Editorial, *Argus*, 4 May 1936, p. 2.

admitted to college life; now the student population had expanded and diversified such that it was necessary for fraternities to function as gatekeepers and to enforce conformity in order to keep the dominant student culture intact.<sup>4</sup>

Because there were so many fraternities at Wesleyan, almost any student who wanted to could be part of campus life, but he had to conform to the expectations of the fraternities. Wesleyan's early rushing system—freshmen pledged during their first week on campus—pressured incoming students to conform, at least outwardly; the qualities that fraternities looked for and incoming students tried to present were “attractiveness, expensive display, personableness, and extracurricular talents.”<sup>5</sup> From their first days on campus, students learned to dread being considered eccentric or unusual and to avoid concerns external to campus life such as politics or excessive studying, which would make them unacceptable to the fraternities.<sup>6</sup> During rushing, fraternities competed intensely for the incoming freshmen who appeared bound for athletic glory or campus leadership; rushing chairmen sometimes resorted to deception to convince desired freshmen to pledge to their house, and an elaborate set of regulations was necessary to ensure fair play.<sup>7</sup> The university helped fraternities target freshmen by providing the houses with postage-stamp descriptions of the incoming freshmen, including each one's race, financial condition, and high school scholastic and athletic achievements.<sup>8</sup>

Once men pledged, the fraternities did their best to make sure that they lived up to their potential, for their accomplishments contributed to the stature of the house.

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<sup>4</sup> Fass, 147-48.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 157.

<sup>7</sup> For a satirical account, see “Off the Cuff,” *Argus*, 28 September 1936, p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> “In The Editor's Mail,” *Argus*, 30 September 1937, p. 2.

The competition between houses for prestige and power was ubiquitous in campus life. The fraternities jostled to get their men on the varsity sports teams and into the student athletic managements, on student government committees, and, generally, into any situation in which they could conspicuously display their ability or gain status. Fraternity men were expected to compete in as many activities and athletics as possible—Wesleyan fraternities often forced their members into activities in which the house needed greater representation or in which votes were needed to swing a leadership election.<sup>9</sup> Brothers helped one another with athletic training and with studying, allowing them to devote even more time to extracurriculars.<sup>10</sup>

Students were not just competing for the prestige of their house—ambitious students competed for the personal glory of being one of the “big men on campus,” the men who seemed to be at the head of every activity and commanded respect for their displays of athletic and extracurricular prowess. A student striving for campus success might participate in two sports, the drama or glee club, student government, and the student newspaper (the *Argus*), yearbook (*Olla Podrida*), or literary magazine (*Cardinal*), and compete for leadership in at least one of these. Fraternity manipulation took place behind the scenes of nearly every contest for leadership. Yet, although no man succeeded on campus without the backing of his fraternity, it was widely believed that campus life was an open competition in which posts went to the most able, and that the men who were in the most leadership positions were the men of greatest merit. The ranking of students based on their achievements was quite explicit: the *Olla Podrida* awarded points to the members of each senior class based

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<sup>9</sup> “Student Survey of 1930,” 8.

<sup>10</sup> Horowitz, Helen Lefkowitz, *Campus Life* (New York: Knopf, 1987), 138-40; Fass, 163-66.

on the number and the prestige of the positions they had held. The hierarchy of merit was capped by the induction of each year's top seniors into the two honorary societies, the Mystical Seven and Skull and Serpent. Highly achieving students were not modest about their accomplishments: top athletes won the right to wear a conspicuous 'W' insignia, and the members of the senior societies wore hats to broadcast their status. All their names were printed in the *Argus* and in the freshman handbook.<sup>11</sup> This display made the competition all the more sharp, and the appeal of the senior societies was so great that there was a secret sophomore society, Theta Nu Epsilon, whose members colluded to elect each other to positions of leadership, with the goal of being "tapped" by one of the honorary societies.<sup>12</sup> Secret societies were strictly illegal, but they proved impossible to eradicate; the logic behind them was inherent in the competition of campus life.

The most underhanded competition on campus was over control of student government. Competition over seats in the Senate was forestalled by its structure—two senators for each house, regardless of size, plus two for the unaffiliated men—but this was more than made up for by the ferocity of the competition over control of the student government committees. These committees did the real day-to-day work of managing student life, and some were quite powerful, particularly the rushing committee. Committee appointments were the responsibility of the three-man cabinet of president, vice-president, and secretary-treasurer, who were elected by a vote of the entire student body. Fraternities, therefore, attempted to influence the election of the cabinet. Houses connived with one another at election time, secretly forming

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<sup>11</sup> "Wearers of the 'W'," *Wesleyan Hand Book 1931-32*, Olin Library, Wesleyan University, Middletown, Conn.

<sup>12</sup> "Gadfly," *Argus*, 7 December 1936, p. 2.

coalitions to elect a particular candidate, who would reward his supporters with committee appointments and exclude the other houses from the most powerful positions. Since a candidate's own house would invariably vote for him *en bloc*, the houses who did not have candidates in the election could decide it, and an enterprising candidate or behind-the-scenes manipulator would visit prominent members of other houses, attempting to strike a deal.<sup>13</sup> Such deals were illegal, and the *Argus* persistently campaigned against them; they violated the meritocratic ideology of college life. The temptation of prestige was too great, however, for interfraternity politics not to occur. Students seemed not to notice the contradiction between the idea of meritocracy in campus life and the fraternity system, which allowed men to maneuver themselves into positions regardless of their worthiness. (Still less did they note the contradiction between the idea of a hierarchy of merit in the business world and the reality of class privilege.)

Absorbed in extracurricular activities, Wesleyan students had little time to spare on academics. A student survey in 1930 found that the vast majority of Wesleyan men did not schedule regular study hours: the average student studied a mere 6.2 hours per week in the library, supplemented by 20.8 hours in his room, which was hardly guaranteed to be a quiet environment. College men everywhere did as little work as possible while relying on their fraternity brothers to help them pass their classes, from help with "boning up" before exams to more illicit aid.<sup>14</sup> Cheating was widespread at Wesleyan: a majority admitted to having witnessed violations of

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<sup>13</sup> "Don't Listen to 'Politicians'," *Argus*, 8 January 1940, p.1.

<sup>14</sup> Fass, 163-66.



the Honor Code in the 1930 survey.<sup>15</sup> Students continually looked for ways to improve their grades without effort: a typist's advertisement in the *Argus* slyly suggested, "Typed papers don't have to contain words of wisdom to get a good grade."<sup>16</sup> With no student work ethic to speak of, expectations were low: straight Cs was considered a perfectly good report card by students and faculty alike.<sup>17</sup>

Students felt secure in shirking schoolwork in favor of extracurriculars because they believed that the most important qualities for businessmen were self-motivation and self-confidence—the qualities of the “big man on campus”—rather than the ability to diligently complete assigned work. College men derided those “grinds” who devoted themselves to study. The *Argus* gleefully reported a survey showing that graduates with high extracurricular achievement made more money than those with high academic achievement.<sup>18</sup> Pursuing high grades was considered petty and selfish, since a fraternity brother who did schoolwork was choosing not to spend his time on activities which would count towards the prestige of the house, and it was assumed that students who displayed interest in academics and conversed with their professors were doing so for reasons of self-aggrandizement.<sup>19</sup> A satirical story in the *Cardinal* advanced this opinion through the inner monologue of a frustrated English professor questioning his students on a poem they have not read. One student who has read the piece tries to present himself as smart, incurring the professor's irritation:

See that damnable smirk on the young rascal's face as he catches my eye. He means to convey to me, of course, that he has felt our two souls touch in this

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<sup>15</sup> “Student Survey of 1930,” 12-13.

<sup>16</sup> Advertisement, *Argus*, 6 February 1933, p. 4.

<sup>17</sup> “Richard's grades are all good—C's—except German...” James L. McConaughy to Harold Andrews, James L. McConaughy Papers.

<sup>18</sup> “Yale Survey Shows Grinding Unprofitable,” *Argus*, 12 January 1933, p. 3.

<sup>19</sup> Horowitz, 138-40.

alien land, that for one brief, bright moment our souls have found complete, mutual harmony. Hogwash! I wish I could flunk him, but of course I can't when he answers all my examination questions.<sup>20</sup>

Students were no more interested in intellectual activity outside of class. A college man of an intellectual disposition might join the *Argus* staff or debate team, but most students were unwilling to show interest in concerns unrelated to student life. Less than twenty percent of students regularly attended the concert and lectures the college brought.<sup>21</sup> The *Argus*, which considered itself an outpost of intellectualism, tirelessly promoted such events, imploring students to expose themselves to “new ideas” and complaining that it was “tired of flaunting the banner of culture and artistry before an unresponsive, lethargic group of students,” but to no avail.<sup>22</sup> The one intellectual institution in campus life was the annual Parley, which brought prominent speakers to the school to discuss a common theme chosen on the basis of student interest, but even there it struggled for students' attention. “Government and Business” was the theme of the 1930 Parley, including discussion of government regulation, business ethics, and lobbying. The subject would presumably be relevant to a group of businessmen-to-be, but turnout was poor, prompting the *Argus* editors to call the student body “the student corpse.”<sup>23</sup>

Instead of intellectual activity, students found relief from the stresses of campus life in drinking and sex. Students devoted considerable energy to satisfying their awakening sexual appetites. Since Wesleyan was a men's school, in order to get women it was necessary either to go off campus or to import them. (Some students

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<sup>20</sup> W.R. Stewart, “Scene: A College Classroom,” *Wesleyan Cardinal*, December 1934, p. 3-5.

<sup>21</sup> “Student Survey of 1930,” 40.

<sup>22</sup> Editorial, *Wesleyan Argus*, 6 March 1930, p. 2. Editorial, *Argus*, 13 February 1930, p. 2.

<sup>23</sup> “Sixth Annual Parley Stresses New Business-Government Status,” *Argus*, 3 March 1930, p. 1; Editorial, *Argus*, 6 March 1930, p. 2.

doubtless participated in homosexual activity, but there is no record of it; homosexuality was not accepted in college life.) Wes men who had cars, or who had friends that had them, made frequent weekend visits to Connecticut College, Smith, and Mount Holyoke for parties, dances, and dates. The women of these schools did the same, and Wesleyan students seized the flimsiest of excuses to invite women to campus: even a meeting of the Esperanto Club could be “brightened by visiting Esperantists of the fair sex.”<sup>24</sup> The 1920s was a period of sexual awakening, and the new sexual mores sanctioned casual, irregular contact with numerous partners, facilitating long-distance dating and one-night stands.<sup>25</sup> Monogamy was not strictly expected, and men were aware that they might face romantic competition: an ad in the *Argus* giving the rates for phone calls to nearby women’s colleges pictured four men telephoning a fair young lady, with the reminder “Competition necessitates regular contact by telephone.”<sup>26</sup>

The most important events in student sex life were the dance weekends. Three times a year—midway through fall semester, after final exams in January, and during spring semester—the twelve houses held simultaneous, weekend-long parties, each accommodating dozens of women from out of town. Houses competed with one another to lure the most guests for the weekend, and the *Argus* would print a special issue which shamelessly objectified the women, listing all the guests’ names with statistics on which schools they attended, their states of origin, and other mindless information, under an overblown headline like “339 of Nation’s Fairest Girls Gather

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<sup>24</sup> “Expose Reveals Local Esperanto Club as Innocent Non-Fascist Organization...,” *Argus*, 22 May 1939, p. 1.

<sup>25</sup> Fass, 263.

<sup>26</sup> Advertisement, *Wesleyan Argus*, 14 March 1932, 4.

on Campus for Dances.”<sup>27</sup> During dance weekends, the pent-up sexual energy of men’s and women’s college students was released as the campus became a mass orgy. On Friday night the dances lasted until 3 A.M. Students and their companions roamed from house to house, looking for the best atmosphere, music, and drinks, and the houses competed to impress the guests, spending large sums on decorating their houses and hiring bands from as far away as Ohio.<sup>28</sup> After the dances, students and guests paired off, followed by late sleeping on Saturday, with the civilized entertainment of a seasonal sports match or a student-produced play that afternoon. Then students would dance from 8 P.M. to 2 A.M.; the earlier bedtime was because of the need to get up early for Sunday chapel. The next day was “Hangover Monday.” It was an exhausting ritual, and students would skip class the week before to rest up in preparation.<sup>29</sup>

Students by no means confined their drinking to dance weekends. In the mid-1920s, an ethic of heavy drinking had taken hold on the campus, with students aiming to get visibly smashed and parade their drunkenness.<sup>30</sup> Although illegal, alcohol was easy to get, and though the faculty was supposed to enforce the regulations against drinking, it usually ignored it.<sup>31</sup> Professors and their wives chaperoned the dances, with a couple of unlucky frat brothers assigned to distract them. The faculty usually cooperated; professors were not enthusiastic about supervising the nightlife of rowdy youth, as evidenced by a poll showing that the majority of the faculty supported

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<sup>27</sup> “339 of Nation’s Fairest Girls Gather on Campus for Dances”, *Wesleyan Argus*, 1 November 1929, p. 1.

<sup>28</sup> For instance, “Twelve Fraternities Prepare to Welcome Guests for Winter Dances,” *Argus*, 23 January 1930, p. 1.

<sup>29</sup> “370 Guests from United States and Canada...,” *Argus*, 19 April 1934, p. 1.

<sup>30</sup> Fass, 317.

<sup>31</sup> I found no reference in the *Argus* between 1929 and 1933 to any student or fraternity being disciplined for consumption or possession of alcohol.

transferring the responsibility of enforcement to the fraternities (who were responsible for virtually all the drinking).<sup>32</sup> Professors were responsible for other forms of student discipline as well—the office of dean of students was a recent creation, and there was nothing like today’s dense layer of student affairs staff. The faculty was responsible for attendance policies, academic discipline, and the scheduling of the dance weekends, Junior Prom, and other parties. The faculty left students a free hand in college life as long as their exploits did not interfere with class attendance, and, apart from the matter of compulsory chapel and the constant avoidance of schoolwork, the students felt no sense of conflict with the faculty or the administration.

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College life was an expensive endeavor. Tuition—\$400 per year—was only one of the costs of college life. Another was the cost of being in a fraternity: between room rent, board, dues, and “social taxes” to pay for dances, a fraternity member could expect to pay \$480 to \$550 per year to his house, though Delta Kappa Epsilon cost nearly \$600 owing to its high room rents.<sup>33</sup> On top of this, an average Wesleyan student in 1930 spent \$1275 a year on consumer goods.<sup>34</sup> College life required constant expenditure on food, drink, recreation, and tobacco, and in order to maintain his status, a smart student had to keep on top of fashion and trends.<sup>35</sup> Through their consumption choices, Wesleyan students aimed to project an image of upper-middle-class respectability, dressing well but not ostentatiously, smoking expensive brands of

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<sup>32</sup> “Student Survey of 1930,” 9.

<sup>33</sup> “Fraternity Expense Accounts for 1932-33,” James L. McConaughy Papers, University Archives, Wesleyan University Library, Middletown, Conn.

<sup>34</sup> “Student Survey of 1930,” 39.

<sup>35</sup> Horowitz, 136.

cigarettes, and reading highbrow magazines (the favorite was the *Saturday Evening Post*). Students had become a major consumer market in the 1920s, and companies relentlessly advertised on campus. Over a third of every four-page *Argus* was advertisements, including, invariably, a huge ad for one of the high-end cigarette brands (Chesterfields, Camels, or Lucky Strikes) taking up most of the back page. Local businesses, too, took advantage of students' desire to distinguish themselves through their possessions, with one Main Street shoe store proclaiming itself "The College Shoe Store" and reminding students, "Dances are only two weeks away!"<sup>36</sup>

Resources to help students pay the cost of college life were not abundant. There was no process for financial aid; Wesleyan's limited scholarship and student loan funds were distributed "at the discretion of the President."<sup>37</sup> There were some on-campus jobs—the fraternities employed their own members as waiters, who earned free board working 18 hours per week, and the library employed some students—but many students had to find work off campus.<sup>38</sup> The Christian Association, among its many campus services, ran an employment bureau to connect students with jobs in Middletown, while occasional *Argus* ads proffered employment, appealing to poorer students with extravagant claims of students paying their entire tuition by selling magazine subscriptions.<sup>39</sup> Many students were able to cover a portion of their own cost by working: on average, students who worked reported earnings of \$156 during the academic year and \$200 over the summer.<sup>40</sup> But it was

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<sup>36</sup> Advertisement, *Wesleyan Argus*, 21 October 1929, p. 4.

<sup>37</sup> *Catalogue of Wesleyan University* (Middletown, Conn., 1929), 142.

<sup>38</sup> "Questioning Downey House Wages," *Wesleyan Cardinal* 4 (May 1936): 1.

<sup>39</sup> "Notice," *Wesleyan Argus*, 14 October 1929, p. 1; Advertisement, *Wesleyan Argus*, 30 September 1929, p. 3.

<sup>40</sup> "Student Survey of 1930," 39.

enormously difficult to work one's way through college: of the 166 freshmen who entered in 1931 (the first year for which such data is available), only six managed to pay their own way through scholarships, loans, and work.<sup>41</sup> Whether his parents contributed or not, any student who needed to work long hours and economize would be unable to participate in campus life.

Unsurprisingly, most Wesleyan students were of bourgeois<sup>42</sup> families—the school was inaccessible to most others. An average Wesleyan man was white, Protestant, and a resident of a New York or Boston suburb, his father likely a corporate manager, independent businessman, or a member of one of the better-paying professions. A 1930 survey found that, among those students who were sure of their family income, the average was \$4430 per year. Among those who were “fairly sure,” it was \$6500; for those who guessed, the average was \$7540.<sup>43</sup> (Although the figures are imprecise, it makes sense that richer students would be less aware of how much, exactly, they had at their disposal.) For comparison, an average skilled production worker made \$1695 per year in 1929 before the stock market crash, while an average nonsupervisory worker in the banking, insurance, or real estate industry made \$2062 per year.<sup>44</sup> The total cost of Wesleyan to a student who fully participated in campus life was well over \$2000 per year, placing the school out of reach for most working-class and lower-middle-class families.

College, then, was an introduction to adulthood for the sons of the urban

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<sup>41</sup> “Freshman Class Drawn from Many Localities and Environments,” *Argus*, 28 September 1931, p. 3.

<sup>42</sup> Again, “bourgeois” is here used in the traditional sense of upper-middle-class, the class which manages the economy but is not ultimately in control of it.

<sup>43</sup> “Student Survey of 1930,” 39.

<sup>44</sup> Susan B. Carter and others, eds., *Historical Statistics of the United States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 2:279, 282.

professional class. In addition to the personality and skills necessary for a successful business career, college life taught the values of bourgeois society—the paradoxical combination of individualistic competition and group conformity, acceptance of hierarchy and striving for power.<sup>45</sup> In the minor industrial city of Middletown, students imitated, perhaps in an exaggerated version, the culture of bourgeois circles in New York, Boston, and Philadelphia. Wesleyan fraternities were designed by prominent New York architects with grand lounges and libraries in conscious imitation of the residences and clubs of the urban rich.<sup>46</sup> When the imitation grew tiresome, there was always the reality: students often took weekends in New York, two hours away by train. Ads appeared in the *Argus* for New York department stores and for “coffee-houses” in the city featuring dinner and dancing, suggesting that some men even took their dates to the city.<sup>47</sup> After Prohibition ended, one Middletown tavern attempted to capitalize on this tendency by affixing panoramic photographs of the New York cityscape to its walls, telling students, “New York is Here.”<sup>48</sup>

The twenty percent of students who were not in fraternities were excluded from this induction into the professional class. Most independents were not in fraternities because they could not afford the extra cost, or were too busy working to support themselves to take part.<sup>49</sup> For others, the reason was racial prejudice: of the few Jewish students on campus, nearly all were independent.<sup>50</sup> Many of them were commuters, but those who lived on campus found that the fraternities were openly or

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<sup>45</sup> Fass, 249.

<sup>46</sup> Potts, 193-94, 199.

<sup>47</sup> Advertisements, *Argus*, 24 October 1929, p. 3.

<sup>48</sup> Advertisement, *Argus*, 12 October 1933, p. 4.

<sup>49</sup> Horowitz, 176-79.

<sup>50</sup> Students who were black or of other races were so uncommon at Wesleyan that it is not meaningful to speak of them as a group, but both of the black students during the 1930s that I am aware of were independent.



tacitly opposed to Jewish membership.<sup>51</sup> Independents lived in the college dormitories or commuted from their parents' houses and ate cheap food at lunch counters. This saved them money, but cut them off from student life, most of which occurred directly through the fraternities: the dances and sex life, the competition for prestige, and the everyday peer fellowship which was perhaps the most important part of collegiate socialization. Instead of extracurricular performance, independents devoted themselves to scholarship—student life and its bourgeois culture of achievement were inaccessible to them, and moreover, men of the working or lower-middle class were more likely to value industriousness than brash displays of ability. They excelled at academics, even though many had to work long hours to pay their tuition: in 1928 and 1929, the Ivy Club, the organization for independents, beat all houses for the Jackson Cup, the prize for the house with the highest grade point average.<sup>52</sup> Fraternity men rarely thought of independents, and even though they were one-fifth of the student body, their issues were almost never discussed in the *Argus*.

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Most college men had few ideological commitments. The majority professed some form of Protestantism, but for most this was more a matter of affiliation with bourgeois culture than of personal faith. The university did its best to instill campus life with religious values; students were required to attend chapel every weekday and on Sundays, though upperclassmen were allowed some cuts. No longer officially Methodist, the ecumenical Wesleyan Church of Christ preached a generic Protestantism, consistent with the values of the urban bourgeoisie at the time and with

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<sup>51</sup> Austin M. Fisher, "Casus Belli," *Argus*, 18 February 1932, p. 1; "McConaughy Defines University Position on Jewish Question," *Argus*, 22 February 1932, p. 1.

<sup>52</sup> "Ivy Club Again Captures Jackson Scholarship Cup," *Argus*, 24 September 1929, p. 1.

the trend in student affiliation: the proportion of Methodists in the student body had been declining for decades, and the higher-status denominations of Episcopalianism and Congregationalism overtook Methodism in 1931.<sup>53</sup> Compulsory chapel was in part a crude instrument of social control intended to prevent students from leaving for the weekends, but it was also a sincere attempt on the part of the faculty at fostering religion among students. The students did not appreciate it—they often doodled, did homework, or slept in chapel, and periodically campaigned against the institution. This irreligion was common to campuses everywhere: youth had deserted religious practice *en masse* in the 1920s in favor of the “communion of peers” that campus life offered.<sup>54</sup>

All students were nominally members of the Wesleyan Christian Association, an affiliate of the Young Men’s Christian Association, but only a few were active. Like the YMCA nationally, the Christian Association had oriented away from evangelism and towards secular campus life; the CA described itself as “primarily an organization for campus service.” The group ran an orientation camp for incoming freshmen, brought speakers on religious, political and intellectual topics, ran the employment bureau, organized the Parley, maintained a cabin in the woods for student retreats, organized athletic rallies and “tea dances,” and maintained a reading room stocked with popular books and newspapers. The group financed these activities through an annual fund drive, the “Campus Chest,” which also included donations to charitable causes.<sup>55</sup> The CA’s freshman camp illustrates the degree to which the secular fellowship of college life had dislodged religious practice. A

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<sup>53</sup> “Freshman Class Drawn from Many Localities and Environments,” *Argus*, 28 September 1931, p. 3.

<sup>54</sup> Fass, 45.

<sup>55</sup> Campus Chest supplement, *Argus*, 5 October 1931.

pamphlet advertising the camp, inaccurately titled “The Meaning of Religion in College Life,” indicated in fact that the camp would deal primarily with the secular side of campus life, presenting it as a means for freshmen to become acquainted with college life so that they could thoughtfully approach decisions such as choosing which fraternity to pledge themselves to and how much time to devote to academic work.<sup>56</sup> The highlight of the camp was four speakers, each presenting on a different aspect of college life: academics, fraternities, extracurriculars, and finally “Man’s Inner Life.” There were also standard camp activities like swimming, canoeing, and singing college songs around the campfire, which would build secular, rather than religious, fellowship between students.

The Christian Association was the only organization on campus where a radically-minded student might receive some welcome. During the 1920s, college men were generally uninterested in political activity—the closest they came to a protest movement was a minor national campaign against compulsory ROTC spearheaded by college newspaper editors, who made it clear that their opposition stemmed from a distaste for rules and regulations, not pacifist sentiment.<sup>57</sup> Practically the only serious attempts at political engagement on the part of students in the 1920s had come from the YMCAs and associated organizations, many of which took pacifist pledges long before the Oxford Pledge became an international movement.<sup>58</sup> The radical element in the Wesleyan CA was Professor Cornelius Krusé of the Ethics department, a Christian socialist. Under his influence, the group

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<sup>56</sup> “The Meaning of Religion in College Life: Freshman Camp, 1933,” Christian Association vertical file, University Archives, Wesleyan University Library, Middletown, Conn.

<sup>57</sup> Fass., 340-42.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 334-35.

occasionally heard speakers such as the left-wing Yale professor Jerome Davis on the “medieval conditions” of West Virginia coal mines and perennially organized speeches by Kirby Page, a leader of the radical Protestant organization Fellowship of Reconciliation. However, it never organized any sustained political activity.<sup>59</sup>

The secular left had even less success than the religious left in appealing to students during the 1920s. The Young Communist League and the Young People’s Socialist League dismissed students, reasonably enough, as too privileged and self-absorbed to be interested in the plight of the workers. The League for Industrial Democracy, a left-liberal organization loosely affiliated with the Socialist Party and headed by Harry Laidler, Wesleyan class of 1907, had a student section, but it languished throughout the decade, and concerned itself mainly with organizing discussion groups.<sup>60</sup> There was no chapter of the LID on Wesleyan’s campus, in spite of a visit by Laidler himself in December of 1929. Speaking under the auspices of the Christian Association, Laidler attacked capitalism by appealing to the values of business, first arguing that capitalist production was irrational and wasteful (because of unemployment), and only then attacking inequality and working-class poverty. He gave the speech little more than a month after the great stock market crash, and he could have chosen this as a striking example of capitalism’s irrationality, but he chose not to, perhaps knowing that the growing economic crisis did not worry most college men. Nine students joined the LID on the spot after Laidler’s speech, but “nothing came of it”—it would take more than a speech by a famous socialist alumnus to

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<sup>59</sup> “Davis Describes Medieval Conditions of West Va. Coal Mines at C.A. Meeting,” *Argus*, 22 October 1928, p. 3.

<sup>60</sup> Cohen, 31-34.

overcome students' aversion to politics.<sup>61</sup>

Indeed, in 1929 there was no reason to expect that students would be interested in politics. Campus life absorbed the energies of eighty percent of the student body; these students were completely occupied with pursuing status in their own social world. The fraternities' culture of conformity discouraged involvement in political organizations, while a spirit of intellectualism that might have led some students to become interested in radical ideas was absent.<sup>62</sup> Most independents, meanwhile, were concerned with getting their degree and leaving, and even if they had political convictions, they were powerless to affect the direction of campus life. When pressed, most fraternity men would express generally conservative beliefs, and at election time, voted Republican with the rest of their socioeconomic class. In the *Argus*' 1928 Presidential straw poll, students gave Herbert Hoover a landslide victory with 80 percent of the vote; only 12 percent voted for Democrat Al Smith and 8 percent for Socialist Norman Thomas.<sup>63</sup> After the election, students returned to complacent disregard. After all, there was little in American politics that could have grabbed students' interest: the era was dominated by the quiet, plodding conservatism exemplified by the famously taciturn Calvin Coolidge, and after the collapse of Progressivism the left had waned, leaving the Socialist Party much diminished and the Communist Party a mere sect. College life itself was antipolitical, and there was little in political life that would have pulled students towards engagement.

Wesleyan students were so insulated by college life and by their own class

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<sup>61</sup> "Laidler Points Out Evils of Industry at Forum Meeting," editorial, *Argus*, 5 December 1929, p. 1, 2; editorial, *Argus*, 12 December 1931, p. 2.

<sup>62</sup> Fass, 157.

<sup>63</sup> "Argus Presidential Poll Gives Hoover a Six-to-One Victory," *Argus*, 5 November 1928, p. 1.

privilege that they seemed barely to notice the collapse of the world economy during the year 1929-30. The crisis did not immediately affect most students. If any were in financial danger, most were oblivious to it: an *Argus* article on the career plans of the class of 1930 indicated no worry about the job market—many men naively predicted that they would go into banking.<sup>64</sup> Only one direct reference to the state of the economy appeared in the pages of the student paper this entire academic year: a quotation from a *New Yorker* article satirically suggesting that the government could solve the unemployment crisis by properly enforcing Prohibition, since this would require hiring about one agent for every three citizens.<sup>65</sup> At the start of the Depression, the freedom to drink was a more pressing issue to most Wesleyan students than the plight of the unemployed.

Few collegians would have wished it otherwise, for college life—with its dances and proms, furious competitions, sports matches, trips to Manhattan, illegal drinking—seemed dynamic and exciting compared to the drab world of politics. The 1920s had been an exuberant decade for the college man, and in 1929, students saw no reason to expect that the next decade would be any different.

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<sup>64</sup> “Seniors Formulate Tentative Post-Graduation Plans, With Wide Choice,” *Argus*, 17 April 1930, p. 1.

<sup>65</sup> “What of It?,” *Wesleyan Argus*, 27 March 1930, p. 3.

## Chapter 2

### The Slow Political Awakening

Materially, Wesleyan University was not hit hard by the worst years of the Depression. For the first two years after the stock market crash, students barely noticed as the economy collapsed. Even during the nadir of the Depression, Wesleyan ran only a slight deficit and managed to expand its physical plant, with help from an industrialist's surprise gift.<sup>1</sup> Like Amherst and Williams, the university increased its revenue by expanding enrollment: even as college enrollments nationally decreased between 1932 and 1934, there were enough rich students to keep Wesleyan afloat.<sup>2</sup> Though some students were suffering, many others still had money to spend: the number of cars on campus increased, and a 1933 survey found ninety-nine radios and thirty-three Victrolas on the campus.<sup>3</sup> Students continued to hold their bacchanals; over three hundred feminine guests graced the fall 1931 dances.

But if the Depression itself barely hurt Wesleyan, the changed economic and political climate considerably affected the outlook of the students. With hardship all around them, students struggled to maintain college life against an increasing sense of guilt. Two weeks before fall dances, the College Body Senate resolved that, "since

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<sup>1</sup> "Depression Effects Are Slight," *Argus*, 29 February 1932, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> David O. Levine, *The American College and the Culture of Aspiration* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1986), 187-89; Potts, appendix.

<sup>3</sup> Editorial, *Argus*, 3 November 1932, p. 2; "99 Radios Aided by 33 Victrolas Fill Campus with Music," *Argus*, 23 March 1933, p. 2.

the evidence points to the fact that the present business depression will continue throughout the winter, and since many parents are making greater sacrifices than ever to send their sons to college,” fraternities should reduce social expenses, especially on “items such as music, decorations, refreshment, programs, and the like,” in order to prevent any house from “feeling that its social activities for the year must be eliminated or curtailed.”<sup>4</sup> Decency as well as political expediency mandated that students rein in the extravagance of college life—the Senate wished to avoid class divisions between the fraternities. The national convention of the Interfraternity Conference passed a similar resolution two months later.<sup>5</sup> College men could no longer ignore the world around them.

The houses received more pointed encouragement to cut costs from a campaign the *Argus* conducted against the junior prom, an all-college dance (in spite of the name) held every spring. In December of 1931, the editors pointed out that in spite of the Senate resolution, the prom committee had done nothing to cut expenses and had hired an expensive band, and called the entire prom unnecessary given the economic hardship the rest of the nation was facing. Unlike the seasonal dance weekends, which were “essential to college life,” the prom was “a fetish in the mind of a few socially minded juniors.”<sup>6</sup> In January the *Argus* repeated its condemnation of the prom and called on the Senate to overrule the prom committee.<sup>7</sup> Despite this embarrassing attention and an address by President James L. McConaughy which tactfully called on students to practice economy, the Prom Committee voted to

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<sup>4</sup> College Body Senate Minutes, 16 October 1931, Special Collections & Archives, Olin Library, Wesleyan University, Middletown, Conn., 281.

<sup>5</sup> “Fraternity Expense Reduction Is Urged,” *Argus*, 10 December 1931, p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> Editorial, *Argus*, 17 December 1931, p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Editorial, *Argus*, 7 January 1932, p. 2.



continue planning for a March dance.<sup>8</sup> In February the committee tried to compromise by cutting the budget by \$100 and announcing that profits would go to the city unemployment fund, but this could not save the prom: later that month, the committee announced that, due to lack of support from the students and the university, it could raise the funds neither for the prom nor for a substitute “unemployment dance.”<sup>9</sup> The fraternities were chastened by the combined effect of the appeals from the Senate, the *Argus*, and President McConaughy, and that winter’s dance weekend was restrained: only 275 guests attended, the smallest list in years, and several houses did not decorate. One house even played recorded music rather than hiring a band.<sup>10</sup>

For some students, thrift was not only a moral question, for they themselves were being squeezed by the Depression. Half of all enrolled students and sixty-five incoming freshmen applied for need-based scholarships for 1932-33, a one-third increase over the previous year, and the administration announced that it would reduce individual awards to accommodate all the applicants.<sup>11</sup> There was a shortage of jobs on campus, as well as of summer camp jobs, a common source of summer employment; in response, the Christian Association placed ads in the *Middletown Press* offering Middletown residents “a few needy boys” to help with housework, childcare, or tutoring in exchange for room and board.<sup>12</sup> Truly poor students, however, still could not afford Wesleyan. There were many students who worked

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<sup>8</sup> “Junior Prom Committee Considers Economy, but Votes to Continue Plans,” *Argus*, 11 January 1932, p. 1

<sup>9</sup> “Prom Committee Cuts Expenses; Dance Will Be Held as Planned,” *Argus*, 15 February 1932, p. 1; “Lack of Cash Forces Abandonment of Prom,” Editorial, *Argus*, 22 February 1932, p. 1, 2.

<sup>10</sup> “Semester Ends in Traditionally Colorful Week-end Revelries,” *Argus*, 4 February 1932, p. 1.

<sup>11</sup> “Scholarship Reductions Due to Increase in Applicants,” *Argus*, 26 May 1932, p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> Campus Chest supplement, *Argus*, 3 October 1932, p. 2; notice, *Argus*, 23 March 1933, p. 3.

long hours, but none of the extreme cases of larger schools, such as the University of Michigan students who lived in an attic on milk, crackers, and canned beans.<sup>13</sup>

As the Depression wore on, it touched the lives of more students. Frugality became the main theme of the *Argus* advertisements as students looked for ways to save money. The ads for inexpensive consumer goods, like tobacco and cinemas, were still there, but the expensive luxuries like flying lessons and New York department stores were gone. Taking their place were ads appealing to thrift: a shoe repair establishment advertised “Save Dollars—From Top to Bottom! ... We rebuild shoes that were seemingly useless.” A dry cleaner’s exclaimed: “Believe It or Not, you can have your suit dry cleaned and pressed for only \$.75!”<sup>14</sup> Even those who could afford to take weekends off campus were looking to cut their expenses: the Hotel Empire in New York promoted its low rates, urging students to “Consider your Depressed Allowance!” and come to the city to “beat the Old Man Depression.”<sup>15</sup> Even affluent students began to feel shaken as it became clear that they would likely be unemployed or forced to take less prestigious jobs after they graduated. The closing editorial of 1931-32 wished good luck to the outgoing seniors, hoping that college had provided them with the “spiritual stamina” necessary to survive the “sense of frustration” they were bound to encounter.<sup>16</sup>

The sharpened politics of the Depression became conspicuous at the beginning of fall semester 1931, when projectionists at the Middlesex Theater struck against wage cuts. Students frequently patronized the Middlesex—the average

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<sup>13</sup> Cohen, 17.

<sup>14</sup> Advertisements, *Argus*, 20 June 1932, p. 2.

<sup>15</sup> Advertisement, *Argus*, 25 February 1932, p. 4; Advertisement, 3 March 1932, p. 3.

<sup>16</sup> Editorial, *Argus*, 20 June 1932, p. 2.

Wesleyan student went to the movies four or five times per month—and many unthinkingly crossed the picket line, prompting a denunciation from the *Argus*.<sup>17</sup> Some students had more sympathy for the employer than the workers: one urged compassion for the proprietor in view of the “financial paralysis” which business owners faced, and claimed that the editorial had “served to increase rather than jeopardize the business of the Middlesex Theatre” and “aroused the sense of fairness of the undergraduates in protest at gross and uninformed criticism.”<sup>18</sup> A student who had walked the picket line with the strikers retorted that students were unaware of the details of the strike: the Middlesex had fired union employees without warning even after the theater workers’ union had voluntarily taken a pay cut over the summer.<sup>19</sup>

In spite of the immediacy of the Depression, however, the initial burst of student activism at Wesleyan was concerned with international issues. If students were financially insecure, they were also becoming increasingly aware of the insecurity of the global diplomatic situation, particularly since young men would be the first ones called upon to fight in case of war. Some students turned to the international disarmament movement, which aimed to prevent another world war by encouraging mutual disarmament. After the seemingly senseless destruction of the World War and the ferocious arms races that had preceded it, it appeared obvious that nations could be prevented from going to war if they had no weapons, and with the Geneva Conference on the Limitation of Armaments soon to take place in February of 1932, disarmament advocates were hopeful that an agreement could finally be reached. Perry Hill, editor of the *Argus*, and Carl Herron, a professor of religion and

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<sup>17</sup> “Student Survey of 1930,” 40-41; Editorial, *Argus*, 8 October 1931, p. 2.

<sup>18</sup> “In The Editor’s Mail,” *Argus*, 15 October 1931, p. 2.

<sup>19</sup> “In The Editor’s Mail,” *Argus*, 19 October 1931, p. 2.

faculty advisor to the Christian Association, attended a regional YMCA conference on disarmament, where delegates shared ideas on how to engage with the Geneva conference through education and study. Through informed advocacy, it was thought, students could encourage the nations to disarm.<sup>20</sup>

The Christian Association immediately began a program of education on disarmament. It created the Wesleyan Undergraduate Conference on Disarmament, a select committee of students who would “conduct an open-minded investigation of the disarmament situation” from the economic, political, and moral perspectives and publish a report on its findings. The commission also planned to conduct a poll on student attitudes towards war, a common tactic of student activists to involve the student body in the cause of peace.<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, the CA put up two bulletin boards in the library for the posting of “the latest material...dealing with the progress of disarmament propaganda in this country,” and, in cooperation with the librarian, created a reserve shelf in the library where students could find books on disarmament.<sup>22</sup> Disarmament was the subject of the Parley in fall of 1931. In an *Argus* column, the Parley committee explained that since governments represented public opinion, the most important task for advocates of disarmament was to create pro-disarmament sentiment through education, especially in the universities.<sup>23</sup> The committee showed an honest commitment to education, not propaganda: most of the speakers argued that disarmament was unrealistic, and only Harry Laidler advocated

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<sup>20</sup> “Wesleyan Delegates at Council Meeting,” *Argus*, 5 October 1931, p. 1.

<sup>21</sup> “Call Issued for Group to Study Disarmament,” *Argus*, 15 October 1931, p. 1; “Disarmament Group Begins Conferences with Prof. Dutcher,” *Argus*, 22 October 1931, p. 1.

<sup>22</sup> “Disarmament Reserve Shelf at the Library,” *Argus*, 26 October 1931, p. 1.

<sup>23</sup> “Informed Public Opinion Aim of Disarmament Parly Committee,” *Argus*, 23 November 1931, p. 3.

total disarmament.<sup>24</sup> Despite the skepticism of the speakers, however, the subsequent poll showed that students supported the disarmament movement: 86 percent of students supported “disarmament in general without any qualifications,” nearly half supported complete disarmament, and over 60 percent felt that the United States should “tak[e] the initiative in the reduction of armaments.” A poll at Amherst returned similar results.<sup>25</sup>

Under the editorship of Perry Hill, the *Argus* became a strong advocate of disarmament and other liberal causes. Hill, a member of the class of 1933, had barely known college life before the stock market crash, and making him less comfortable with the complacency of college life than his older peers. He could be breathlessly optimistic about the ability of students to change the world: in one editorial, he proclaimed that the conditions that had led to the World War were repeating themselves and that the future of students depended on the outcome of the Geneva conference. “Each one of us can take a stand,” he exclaimed, urging students to educate themselves on international issues and to write letters and petitions. “Every grain of sand contributes to the weight which will move the world!”<sup>26</sup> The editors also encouraged general intellectual engagement, instituting a column, aggressively named “Casus Belli,” intended to challenge campus opinion; the first installment sparked a controversy by accusing Wesleyan of discriminating against Jews in campus life.<sup>27</sup> No previous editorial board had been so persistent in raising political issues, and one student accused the board of “propaganda,” but for many others the

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<sup>24</sup> “Laidler Leads Round Table Discussion, Speaks of Necessity for Disarmament,” *Argus*, 7 December 1931, p. 1.

<sup>25</sup> “General Disarmament Favored, Poll Shows,” *Argus*, 14 December 1931, p. 1.

<sup>26</sup> Editorial, *Argus*, 22 October 1931, p. 2.

<sup>27</sup> Austin M. Fisher, “Casus Belli,” *Argus*, 18 February 1932, p. 1.

*Argus*' new seriousness was welcome.<sup>28</sup>

The student disarmament movement brought its voice to the Geneva Conference itself. In response to students' demand that youth be granted a representative, James Green, a Yale senior, was allowed to address the conference on behalf of English and American students. He presented to the delegates of the nations of Europe the results of dozens of student polls, including Wesleyan's, which demonstrated a general unwillingness to go to war, and declared that American students, unlike in 1917, no longer believed in the glamour of war and were "fighting for their lives."<sup>29</sup> But in spite of Green's urgent appeal on behalf of potential soldiers, the conference failed to produce an agreement. Subsequent talks bogged down as tensions grew in Europe, and the disarmament movement flagged.

The Wesleyan students who had been involved with the disarmament movement now turned to domestic politics, applying the same method of self-education and informed advocacy. The Wesleyan Progressive Club formed in March of 1932, a month after the Geneva conference. The club's mission was "to promote the introduction into modern society of thorough organization, education, and control in the interests of social welfare," an attitude which evoked the Progressives of a few decades earlier, but also the middle-class radicalism of the contemporary Socialist Party.<sup>30</sup> The founders of the club were intellectual college men such as Perry Hill, Britton Harris, an *Argus* staffer, and John Francis Porter DeWitt Tucker, a star of the debate team, students who at another time would have been content to release their energies on the more intellectual activities of college life. The club grew quickly and

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<sup>28</sup> "In The Editor's Mail," *Argus*, 5 May 1932, p. 2.

<sup>29</sup> "American Universities Have Representative at Geneva Conference," *Argus*, 11 February 1932, p. 1.

<sup>30</sup> "Campus Progressives Organize Under Field," *Argus*, 14 March 1932, p. 1.

immediately launched into a flurry of activity, conducting a series of discussion meetings on “the various radical political parties,” bringing a worker from an employee-owned canning factory to speak, sending delegations to a conference on student politics and a model Geneva armaments conference, and making resolutions on many political issues.<sup>31</sup>

The undergraduates of the Progressive Club were enthusiastic, but had little political experience; consequently, their actions sometimes lacked perspective. Some of the club’s resolutions addressed crucial policy questions, such as one which condemned a proposed national sales tax as regressive, but the club also fired off a statement of protest to President Hoover after he suggested that Americans buy new cars to stimulate the economy, arguing that it was inappropriate for the President to promote any one industry.<sup>32</sup> When the *Argus* leapt to the defense of Reed Harris, the *Columbia Spectator* editor who had been expelled for his criticism of the administration and whose case had become a *cause célèbre* for the budding student movement, the Progressive Club quibbled over wording, failing to pass a resolution of support for Harris until the next meeting.<sup>33</sup> This lack of focus attracted criticism from “Casus Belli,” which argued that the club’s project of sending policy suggestions to Washington was useless and arrogant.<sup>34</sup> The editorial page, of course, defended the club: “The external effects of the conclusions reached is only a drop in

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.; “Progressive Club Meets, Hears Talk by Mr. Miller on Employee Ownership,” *Argus*, 2 May 1932, p. 3; Henry F. Lerch, “Progressives Attend Political Conference,” *Argus*, 2 May 1932, p. 1; “Liberals Choose Six for Model Session,” *Argus*, 16 May 1932, p. 1.

<sup>32</sup> “Petition to Congress Condemns Sales Tax,” *Argus*, 21 March 1932, p. 1; “Progressives Knock Presidential Sales Promotion Speech,” *Argus*, 4 April 1932, p. 3;

<sup>33</sup> Editorial, *Argus*, 4 April 1932, p. 2; “Progressives Take No Stand in Harris Case,” *Argus*, 7 April 1932, p. 3; “Progressive Club Adopts Resolution,” *Argus*, 11 April 1932, p. 3.

<sup>34</sup> Austin M. Fisher, “Casus Belli,” *Argus*, 11 April 1932, p. 3.

the bucket, but the drops are what eventually fill the bucket.”<sup>35</sup>

None of the activism that had yet taken place at Wesleyan was particularly radical, but for students new to political activity, even activities as inoffensive as declaring political positions in resolutions opened the door to more radical ideas. Radicalism was taking hold in many sectors of the population at this time, as the combined economic and international crises suggested to many that capitalism was unjust, destructive, and obsolete. The Socialist Party began to grow again, and Christian socialism grew in religious circles: in 1932, the Northern General Conference of Methodists denounced the profit motive as “unchristian, unethical and antisocial,” and in 1934, the Council of Methodist Youth would officially endorse socialism.<sup>36</sup> Not even privileged Wesleyan students were exempt from this radicalization. Professor Krusé led interested students in a discussion group on Christian socialism, which he described as “Christian ethics applied to socioeconomic relations,” in support of production for use rather than for profit, but in opposition to the partisan politics, violence, and class hatred to which secular socialism was prone.<sup>37</sup> Kirby Page of the Fellowship of Reconciliation spoke again on campus, arguing that although the United States was called democratic, a couple thousand men at the heads of the largest corporations controlled most of the country’s wealth.<sup>38</sup>

In April 1932 Norman Thomas, leader and perennial presidential candidate of the Socialist Party, visited campus. Interest in the Socialist Party was widespread among politically minded students. The Socialist Party of the early 1930s appealed to

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<sup>35</sup> Editorial, *Argus*, 14 April 1932, p. 2.

<sup>36</sup> Egan, 154.

<sup>37</sup> “Prof. Krusé Explains Christian Socialism,” *Argus*, 7 March 1932, p. 1.

<sup>38</sup> “Editor Page Speaks on Various Problems Confronting World,” *Argus*, 12 May 1932, p. 1.



middle-class progressives; having lost its revolutionary left wing to the Comintern in 1919 and most of the trade union and ethnic support it had commanded under the leadership of Eugene Debs during the conservative 1920s, the party had oriented towards progressive reforms. The party's left wing was regrowing with the general radicalization, but Thomas in 1932 represented the reformist center. A former minister, socialism was for him a matter of ethical conviction rather than class interest; he addressed his speeches to intellectuals more often than workers. Thomas was the only candidate who made an active effort to attract college men; the voting age was 21, so most students could not vote, but Thomas depended on them to staff his campaigns.<sup>39</sup> The centerpiece of Thomas's visit to Wesleyan was a chapel address on "The Duties of the College Man," in which Thomas, pointing to the crises enveloping the world, argued that that students and youth would "determine whether the approaching period of transition will be one of storm and strife, or one of gradual adjustment and constructive change." The message must have been encouraging to those students who had just discovered politics. The tireless orator also spoke before an economics class in support of public ownership of utilities, lunched with the Progressive Club, and spoke with students at a reception at Beta Theta Pi.<sup>40</sup>

Thomas' visit seemed to have an impact. In a straw poll of the outgoing seniors, Thomas came in second of all probable candidates, beaten only by Hoover. That fall, a group of students under the leadership of Professor Krusé formed a Thomas-for President Club, which met with great success in advocating for Thomas. In the *Argus*' straw poll that October, most students voted for the Republicans as

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<sup>39</sup> Cohen, 76.

<sup>40</sup> "American Economics Deplored by Thomas, Renowned Socialist," *Argus*, 7 April 1932, p. 1.

usual, but a surprisingly large segment of the Republicans' traditional base split to support Thomas. With 82 percent of students voting, Wesleyan gave Hoover 65 percent, Thomas 24 percent, and Roosevelt 10 percent, with one vote for Communist candidate William Z. Foster. Similar results came in at Amherst and Williams.<sup>41</sup> Thomas also did remarkably well in the national campus straw poll, getting 18 percent of the student vote, with Hoover receiving slightly less than 50 percent and Roosevelt getting the rest. Some historians have interpreted Hoover's victory in student opinion as evidence that there was no significant change in the politics of students in the 1930s.<sup>42</sup> However, this interpretation was not shared by students in 1932: the *Argus* was shocked that Hoover came short of a majority in the national poll and that Thomas' support was so much greater than in 1928.<sup>43</sup>

The Thomas campaign appealed to students who were disappointed by the major parties' response to the economic crisis. The Hoover and Roosevelt campaigns in 1932 spent most of their time squabbling over what had caused the Depression rather than advancing positive proposals. Early in the year, Elmer Schattschneider, a liberal professor in the Government department, had told students that the election would be "one without either ideas or issues," with both parties dependent on publicity stunts and tricks such as "hired rooters with electrical devices" to make fake shows of support for candidates.<sup>44</sup> The shallowness of the campaign was evident on campus: at the student Republican Club's rally, speakers argued for "the European origins of the Depression" and defended the Hawley-Smoot Tariff, which Democrats

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<sup>41</sup> "Hoover Sweeps Little Three Colleges Decisively..." *Argus*, 17 October 1932, p. 1.

<sup>42</sup> Levine, 204-6.

<sup>43</sup> "Country-Wide Survey Fails to Give Hoover Majority in Colleges," *Argus*, 31 October 1932, p. 1.

<sup>44</sup> "Election is Subject of Schattschneider," *Argus*, 14 March 1932, p. 1.

blamed for worsening the Depression.<sup>45</sup> Speakers at the Democratic rally, meanwhile, attacked Hoover on the tariff question and declared that every Republican president after Theodore Roosevelt had been corrupt.<sup>46</sup> The Socialist Party contrasted favorably with the failure of either major party to propose a response to the Depression. Since the Socialist Party was founded on an ideology rather than on particular candidates, its campaigns were more substantive. In a talk sponsored by the Thomas-for-President club, Devere Allen, an editor of *The Nation* and Socialist candidate for Senate in Connecticut, emphasized the constructive side of socialist ideology, referring to “socialistic orders already established” such as cooperatives to prove the feasibility of a socialist system.<sup>47</sup> Allen’s persuasive, intellectual demeanor and willingness to respond to questions and criticism from the audience attracted to students who were alienated by the major parties.

The national student movement grew larger and more radical after the election. Thomas’ strong campus support reinvigorated the Student League for Industrial Democracy and pulled it to the left by bringing in members of the Young Peoples’ Socialist League, who were generally on the far left of the Socialist Party and far more militant and versed in radical theory than most LIDers.<sup>48</sup> Under their influence, the Student LID turned towards student organizing. It was spurred on by competition from the National Student League, begun by Communist students in New York, which was growing quickly after organizing highly visible projects such as the national defense of Reed Harris and a delegation to aid striking coal miners in Harlan

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<sup>45</sup> “Six Hundred Attend Big Republican Rally in Gym on Wednesday,” *Argus*, 27 October 1932, p. 1.

<sup>46</sup> “Ayres Urges Defeat of Republican Party,” *Argus*, 3 November 1932, p. 1.

<sup>47</sup> “Devere Allen Gives Case for Socialism as Remedy in Crisis,” *Argus*, 27 October 1932, p. 1.

<sup>48</sup> Cohen, 77-78.

County, Kentucky.<sup>49</sup> Soon the two radical groups and the religious pacifists who had organized the disarmament campaign had a common project to organize around: three months after the election, Oxford University's debating society passed the famous motion that "this House will under no circumstances fight for its King and country." The "Oxford Pledge" invigorated students in Britain and America who were fearful of the next war, and the Americanized version of the pledge—"I will not support the United States government in any war it may conduct"—immediately began to spread across the US, promoted by socialists, communists, and pacifists alike.<sup>50</sup> (The curious wording of the American Oxford Pledge was the result of a compromise between pacifists and revolutionary Marxists. Communists and some far-left Socialists—and the left wing of the Socialist party was concentrated in its youth section—were critical of absolute pacifism, arguing that it could be necessary to fight a war to end capitalism, but since the pledge was not to support the *government*, the entire movement could unite behind the Pledge.<sup>51</sup>)

Nationally, the student movement appears as one continuous motion: the shock that the Depression caused to college men's consciousness allowed radicals to gain a following on campuses, and they led larger and larger protest actions until the movement collapsed in 1939. However, any local instance of a historical phenomenon is invariably more complicated than a sweeping narrative permits—there are always eddies in the current. After the election there was a lull in activism at Wesleyan. Although the support for Thomas indicated frustration with the established political system among a large minority of students, the Progressives did

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<sup>49</sup> Cohen, 53-61.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 79, 90.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 90; Eagan, 64.

nothing new to capture this frustration, instead continuing as a discussion group, passing resolutions, not all of great importance (they supported a drastic reduction in European war debts alongside an “Honor, Pass, Fail” system of grading), and hearing speakers on such electrifying subjects as “the English College and its curriculum.”<sup>52</sup> The club briefly tried the new approach of petitioning the faculty to resolve not to implement military training in the event of war, but dropped the matter after the faculty decided that the issue was beyond their jurisdiction.<sup>53</sup> The Progressive Club did nothing around the Oxford Pledge, in spite of a peace poll conducted by the *Brown Daily Herald* which showed that a significant minority of Wesleyan men were willing to commit to pacifism: 75 said they would not fight in any war and 119 would fight only if the United States were invaded.<sup>54</sup> (The new, apolitical *Argus* board “condemn[ed the poll] heartily as an absurd waste of time and energy.”<sup>55</sup>) In the absence of new tactics or forms of outreach to capture the sympathy that the election had revealed, the Progressive Club stagnated and slid into inaction.

Wesleyan students could ignore the growing movement, but they were nonetheless affected by the changed political climate. Though most students opposed Roosevelt, references to the New Deal found their way into the campus vocabulary. In his fall 1933 matriculation address, President McConaughy urged good study habits with a metaphorical “Recovery Code” for the campus, including a forty-hour workweek and Saturday classes. (The metaphor wore thin rather quickly—the *Argus*

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<sup>52</sup> “War Debts Subject of W.U.P.C. Vote,” *Argus*, 19 December 1932, p. 2; “Marking System is Condemned by W.P.C.,” *Argus*, 14 November 1932, p. 1; “Progressives Hear Thomson,” *Argus*, 23 March 1933, p. 3.

<sup>53</sup> “Faculty Cannot Agree on Progressives’ Query,” *Argus*, 29 May 1933, p. 3.

<sup>54</sup> “Poll Shows Pacifist Tendency on Campus,” *Argus*, 27 April 1933, p. 1.

<sup>55</sup> Editorial, *Argus*, 27 April 1933, p. 2.

humor column suggested that Wesleyan would become “the Methodist Sweatshop.”)<sup>56</sup> Dance weekend attendance recovered that semester; the *Argus* printed the usual guest list under the headline “Dance List Indicates Return of Prosperity to Campus; Blue Eagle Hovers Over Greatest Number Seen Here,” referring to the decal displayed by businesses which conformed to the National Recovery Administration’s employment quotas.<sup>57</sup> It may have been sarcasm, but students were optimistic that the Depression would end soon, agreeing with Roosevelt that “Happy Days are Here Again.” They forgot their earlier restraint and brought back the Prom the following spring, with Wesleyan men bringing eighty-three dates for a dance that lasted until 2 A.M.<sup>58</sup> The *Argus* editors did not raise a hint of criticism. The good cheer was furthered by the repeal of Prohibition in 1933.

The New Deal itself came to campus in spring 1934 in the form of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration’s new work-study program, the United States’ first federal student aid program.<sup>59</sup> The president of Williams high-handedly refused to accept FERA funds, arguing that “what appears to be needed is not more college graduates, but fewer and better ones,” but McConaughy quietly accepted the money, despite having publicly expressed his fear that Roosevelt would try to take control of the universities.<sup>60</sup> The funds created some seventy jobs, mostly in the library or as

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<sup>56</sup> “President Outlines Code for Colleges at Matriculation,” “Gadfly,” *Argus*, 25 September 1933, p. 1, 2.

<sup>57</sup> “Dance List Indicates Return of Prosperity to Campus...,” *Argus*, 2 November 1933, p. 1.

<sup>58</sup> “Eighty-Three Women Invade Campus Friday to Participate in Festivities,” *Argus*, 15 March 1934, p. 1.

<sup>59</sup> Levine, 197.

<sup>60</sup> “President of Williams Refuses Funds Offered by FERA For Collegiate Aid,” *Argus*, 19 November 1934, p. 1; “New Jersey Alumni Hear Prexy, Clee,” *Argus*, 1 February 1934, p. 1.

departmental assistants, each paying fifteen dollars per month.<sup>61</sup> The jobs were much needed: the following semester the FERA committee received 178 applications for 84 jobs. According to the chair of the committee, “so far it has been possible to assign work to every boy who has come to any member of the committee personally and made the necessity clear.” Although there was more financial assistance available than in the past, students in need literally had to beg for it.<sup>62</sup>

The Depression prompted a subtle shift in values. The rationale for college life itself was challenged: the business jobs that college men had previously expected could no longer be taken for granted, and for some, the collegiate ideology of peer fellowship and anti-intellectualism began to make less sense. Students across the country became more academically serious in the 1930s as it became clear that grades were important for success.<sup>63</sup> President McConaughy suggested that students would have to “think of new lines of employment in the less glamorous opening that surround us,” and suggested that students put their intellectual training to work by entering public service.<sup>64</sup> “Casus Belli” pointed out that the federal government offered an enormous reserve of jobs, but that in order to take advantage of these opportunities, college men would have to shed their disdain for politics.<sup>65</sup>

Doubts began to appear about the value of fraternity life. A 1934 *Cardinal* story recounts, from the perspective of a frat man, the story of Brad, a “grind” who does not smoke, drink, or dance, admitted to a fraternity only “to improve its

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<sup>61</sup> “Report of F.E.R.A. Work,” TD, 20 November 1934, James L. McConaughy Papers, University Archives, Wesleyan University Library, Middletown, Conn.; Notice, *Argus*, 26 April 1934, p. 3.

<sup>62</sup> J. E. Cavelti to J. L. McConaughy, 11 December 1934, James L. McConaughy Papers.

<sup>63</sup> Horowitz, 114-17.

<sup>64</sup> “President Addresses Wednesday Assembly,” *Argus*, 9 November 1933, p. 4.

<sup>65</sup> Austin M. Fisher, “Casus Belli,” *Argus*, 25 February 1932, p. 2.

reputation on campus and in the eyes of the faculty.”<sup>66</sup> After using him for his academic ability, the brothers of “Beta U” attempt to teach Brad to be a college man, getting him a blind date for the junior prom. To the brothers’ dismay, his date, Mary, turns out to be as studious and inoffensive as Brad; the two develop a close relationship, and Brad withdraws from the house even further. In response, at another dance the brothers trick Brad into getting extremely drunk in front of the dean. Mary, though hurt, nurses the ashamed and sick Brad; her devotion contrasts sharply with the superficial friendships the narrator has made in fraternity life: “No girl had ever held my head in my lap like that... Most of the guests had left. They passed through the door without noticing me—without even saying goodnight.” Another short story describes a brother with poetic tendencies who has been growing alienated from his house, feeling that the frat is stifling his individuality: “Ralph was hurt. He shouldn’t have said anything. The guys in the house were beginning to think him sentimental, sort of moon struck.... They greeted him loudly, with the affectation of fraternity brothers. He hated them with their invariable ‘Well—if it isn’t Brother —!’”<sup>67</sup> In the end he goes with some brothers to a show he hadn’t wanted to see, realizing that staying home with the rest of the house would be even less enjoyable.

The conflicts in the minds of Wesleyan men—the political awareness and apathy, the anxiety and complacency, the abortive rebellion—found expression in the *Hermes*, an anonymous newspaper that vexed and entertained the campus briefly in 1933. The paper printed a variety of material, including ordinary college humor, such as a satire of the required Physical Education classes and an ode to “Beer Foam,” as

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<sup>66</sup> William Stewart, “Brad,” *Cardinal*, October 1934, p. 1-5.

<sup>67</sup> Waldo Beach, “Chopsticks,” *Cardinal*, October 1934, p. 14.



well as tidbits of salacious gossip, like the information that certain unnamed undergraduates frequented a brothel.<sup>68</sup> It also printed serious articles, most notably an exposé of secret fraternity deals in the competitions for leadership in football, the *Argus*, the drama club, and other groups.<sup>69</sup> To keep their identities secret, the editors communicated only by letters written on *Argus* stationery under the penname “Edward Yardley Elmhurst” and hired unemployed men of Middletown to sell the paper on campus. According to one of the editors, the paper aimed “to attack the apathy and hypocrisy on campus, and centered on the *Argus* as the height of apathy and the Administration as the height of hypocrisy.”<sup>70</sup> (The name was an unkind reference to the myth in which Hermes slew the Argus.) But it was little more than a game: the editors lacked a clear idea of what they meant to challenge, and in spite of all the things in Depression America they could have critiqued—for instance, they could have followed Reed Harris in critiquing the class elitism inherent in college life—by the third issue the editors faced a “lack of crusading material” and folded.<sup>71</sup>

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By 1934, the worsening diplomatic situation and the rise of fascism began to force students to pay attention to world events. In an exchange in the *Argus*, students debated the occurrence of atrocities against Jews in Germany, while Professor Paul Curts of the German Department, a Nazi sympathizer, told students that Hitler’s supporters were “staid, sober Germans,” in contrast with the Communists, who were

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<sup>68</sup> “‘Phys Ed’ Committee Makes Report Known,” *Wesleyan Hermes*, 21 February 1933, p. 1; “Rancheros,” “Beer Foam,” *Hermes*, 21 March 1933, p. 2, 3.

<sup>69</sup> Editorial, *Hermes*, 8 March 1933, p. 2; “Fraternities Continue With Deals, Rackets,” *Hermes*, 21 March 1933, p. 1.

<sup>70</sup> “The Memoirs of Edward Yardley Elmhurst,” *Wesleyan Cardinal*, October 1933, p. 17.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

“part of the Bolshevist government rather than Germans.”<sup>72</sup> Speaking in chapel, Reinhold Niebuhr took Hitler as an example in arguing that the times were plagued by evil of a spiritual nature—the desire to be a demigod.<sup>73</sup> Self-exiled Italian Count and Harvard Professor Gaetano Salvemini, speaking at Wesleyan, predicted the collapse of European democracy due to upper-class support of fascism, but declared that Italian fascism would collapse like Bonaparte’s empire.<sup>74</sup> Although the subject of the 1934 Parley was “Race Relations,” it focused on international issues, including the situation of the Jews in Germany—featuring an awkward exchange between Nazi educator Friedrich Auhagen and New York rabbi Louis Newman—and Japan’s escalating conflict with China.<sup>75</sup> Meanwhile, left-leaning students grew increasingly sympathetic to Stalin’s Russia, and the Progressive Club petitioned for the diplomatic recognition of the Soviet government.<sup>76</sup> The USSR’s continued economic growth under what seemed to be rational planning could not but contrast favorably with the stagnation of capitalist economies during the Depression.

In spring of 1934 the *Argus* editorial board swung back to the left, orienting towards the growing student movement. The new board, including Progressive Club veteran Britton Harris and pacifist Edward King, demonstrated its willingness to raise challenging new issues in its first editorial, on a recent incident in which the Coast Guard Academy basketball team had refused to play Connecticut State University

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<sup>72</sup> “German Atrocities Denied in Declaration Sent to Local Student by Munich Friends,” *Argus*, 24 April 1933, p. 1; “In The Editor’s Mail,” *Argus*, 27 April 1933, p. 2; “Prof. Curts Speaks to Worcester Alumni,” *Argus*, 16 May 1932, p. 1.

<sup>73</sup> “Doctor Niebuhr Offers Views of Modern Evils,” *Argus*, 26 February 1934, p. 3.

<sup>74</sup> “Professor Salvemini Talks on Democracy,” *Argus*, 13 February 1933, p. 1.

<sup>75</sup> “Change in Hitler’s Jewish Policy Hailed by Newman as Parley Opens,” *Argus*, 12 February 1934, p. 1.

<sup>76</sup> “Progressives Consider Current Farm Problems, To Circulate Petitions,” *Argus*, 8 May 1933, p. 1; “Tucker on Russia,” *Argus*, 18 May 1933, p. 2.

unless the latter removed a black athlete from its team. The editorial attacked both the Academy's demand and Connecticut State's compliance with it, and hoped that "should complications arise, [Wesleyan] will have the courage to sacrifice a meet or game rather than deny that the negro is as much a part of Wesleyan as the white."<sup>77</sup> The editors criticized campus anti-intellectualism, decrying the "intellectual constipation" indicated by the poor attendance at the Parley on Race Relations.<sup>78</sup> They attacked the mainstream press, from the conservative Hearst media empire to the *New York Times*, for misrepresenting student radicalism: "The truth of the matter is that [*Times* publisher Adolph] Ochs' bread is buttered on the same side as Mr. Hearst's, and that they both must do their best to discredit and discourage anything that savors of Socialism."<sup>79</sup> The radical board's style, much sharper and more partisan than that of the liberal Hill board, reflected the militancy of the movement that had developed while Wesleyan looked elsewhere.

The anti-war campaign was the driving force behind the student movement, and it was anti-war activism that finally brought organized radicalism to Wesleyan. Radical movements do not arise automatically as a reaction to hard times; social and political circumstances may provide the opportunity, but people with clearly articulated radical ideas and strategies have to provide the impetus. A few Wesleyan students had been jolted into action during the first years when the Depression became evident on the campus, but the Depression alone was not enough to propel the Progressive Club to further action, and its members soon settled back into college life. Nor did any agitation come from the independents, unlike in New York, the

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<sup>77</sup> Editorial, *Argus*, 1 February 1934, p. 2.

<sup>78</sup> Editorial, *Argus*, 15 February 1934, p. 2.

<sup>79</sup> Editorial, *Argus*, 26 February 1934, p. 2.

hotbed of the nationwide student movement, where student radicalism had been brought to City College and Columbia by working-class and Jewish commuter students immersed in the city's dynamic left subculture.<sup>80</sup> The student peace movement, however, brought to politically-minded Wesleyan students a clear critique of militarism and a strategy for how students could prevent war.

Just how far behind the times Wesleyan was in political organization became clear from a student anti-war conference held at Smith College in February 1934. Wesleyan did not send delegates, but a college journalism conference happened to be at Smith the same weekend, and the editors had the *Argus* delegate attend some meetings of the anti-war conference.<sup>81</sup> The *Argus* reprinted the conference's platform. In contrast with the earlier disarmament movement's disinterested treatment of international conflicts, the anti-war conference's manifesto took sides:

5. We are opposed to the militaristic program of the United States government as manifested directly in the 570,000,000 dollar Vinson Naval Construction Bill...
6. We oppose the policy of American imperialism in the Far East, in Latin America, and particularly in Cuba; and we oppose all forms of intervention whether by arms or by political and economic means.
- ... 10. We pledge ourselves to support the peace policies of the Soviet Union for total and universal disarmament...<sup>82</sup>

After the failure of the Geneva conference, student activists had abandoned the idea that the problem of war could be solved through international negotiations, asserting instead that it was not an absence of treaties but the militaristic policies of powerful states, including the US, that caused war. But the biggest difference at the Smith

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<sup>80</sup> Cohen, 23-25.

<sup>81</sup> "Argus Representative Attends Smith Press Meeting, Anti-War Conference," *Argus*, 26 February 1934, p. 1.

<sup>82</sup> "Students Adopt Fourteen Points at Smith College Anti-War Conference," *Argus*, 8 March 1934, p. 3.

convention was in the strategy the delegates proposed. They would no longer be content to quietly and respectfully voice their opinions, instead affirming that they could act directly to end war: “We resolve not to rely passively on international disarmament conferences, but to support their stated objective and supplement their activity by all we ourselves can do against war.” The Oxford Pledge was the mechanism by which students would organize against war. If young people refused *en masse* to fight, the government could conduct no war, and a pledge of mass non-participation could prevent a war before it started. To organize student resistance to war, the Smith delegates endorsed a national Student Strike Against War to be held April 13th. The strike, which had already been jointly called by the NSL and Student LID, would be a visible demonstration of student power, a “dress rehearsal” for the disobedience that students would carry out the moment war was declared.<sup>83</sup>

At the time, Wesleyan’s campus intellectuals were distracted, absorbed in a debate with the administration over compulsory chapel (former Progressive Club leader John F. P. Tucker led the charge). But word reached the campus on Friday, April 13th, when 15,000 students on six New York City campuses and another 10,000 elsewhere walked out of class simultaneously to rally against war. Although not quite the national event the organizers had hoped for, the protests were groundbreaking: never before had there been coordinated student protests across campuses, and the student strike was a galvanizing and original tactic.<sup>84</sup> Upon hearing the news from New York, Wesleyan students hastily organized an “anti-war gathering” the following Monday in the ’92 Theatre. Though not billed as a “strike,” it took place

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<sup>83</sup> Cohen, 91.

<sup>84</sup> Cohen, 92.

during class time. The rally brought together advocates of liberalism, pacifism, and socialism. With Tucker presiding, anti-war students heard pacifist professor Carl Herron denounce the Connecticut munitions industry and Cornelius Krusé, the Christian socialist, urge students to act: “We must get rid of the idealism of glory. We must study ways to make war unnecessary. We must take the profits out of war. We must be well informed of peace movements, not only well wishers. We need pitiless publicity.”<sup>85</sup>

The “gathering” unleashed a torrent of anti-war activity on campus. A student-faculty committee founded the Peace Action League, which announced its plans to organize opposition to war among the voters of Middletown. The group secured James Green, the Yale graduate who had spoken at the Geneva conference, to speak in chapel; he argued that in the event of war, “democracy would collapse,” and pacifists needed to work for an end to arms races, international governance, and “an adjustment of economic conditions... so that these factors could not lead to a future war.”<sup>86</sup> As an organizing tool, the League circulated a poll on war issues developed by the editors of the *Brown Daily Herald*. The *Argus*, to encourage students’ pacifist sentiments, printed interviews with several faculty members about their horrific experiences in the World War. One described training Wesleyan men to fight with bayonets: “He remembers the hours spent in practice on dummies, the snarl a man was taught to utter to rouse the worst of the ferocious passions, the command of ‘Discharge the gun and twist’ that was followed in the case of the blade’s sticking in

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<sup>85</sup> “Anti-War Gathering Held This Morning,” *Argus*, 16 April 1934, p. 1.

<sup>86</sup> “J. F. Green, Pacifist, Is Speaker in Chapel,” *Argus*, 17 May 1934, p. 1.

the body, and the grim fact that only two percent of bayonet wounds are curable.”<sup>87</sup>

The poll results, published on the front page of the *Argus*, demonstrated that the peace activism had struck a chord. A full third of respondents “would refuse to take up arms against another country under any circumstances,” and a majority “would refuse to fight any war unless the United States were invaded,” while only one-fifth of the respondents “would support the President of the United States in any declaration of war.”<sup>88</sup> Overwhelming majorities supported the nationalization of the arms industry and an end to arms exports, trade embargoes against belligerent nations, and Senate investigation of the munitions industry.

The radical movement had finally come to Wesleyan. It had taken new organizers—the national coalition of communists, socialists, and pacifists—and new tactics to mobilize the latent progressive and anti-war sentiment created by the Depression. A group of radicals came together at Wesleyan, consisting of college men who had been members of the Progressive Club or disarmament campaigners, whose ideology was influenced not only by the Marxism of the national movement but also by Christian socialism from Professor Krusé and others. The origins of Wesleyan’s radical coalition would have a lasting impact: for the duration of the movement, radicals at Wesleyan would mainly be fraternity men, unlike many other schools where the radical student leaders were independents, and would remain steadfastly pacifist while other sections of the movement drifted away from pacifism.

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<sup>87</sup> “Professors Snow, Hewitt, Arnold and Mr. Herron Contribute Memoirs of War,” *Argus*, 3 May 1934, p. 1.

<sup>88</sup> “Peace Action League Poll Reports Wesleyan is Two-Thirds Pacifistic,” *Argus*, 7 May 1934, p. 1.

### Chapter 3

#### Student Radicalism at Its Peak

Wesleyan activists wasted no time in bringing the radical politics and energy of the national movement to Wesleyan. At the beginning of 1934-35, the former leaders of the Progressive Club, including John F. P. Tucker and Britton Harris, now seniors, organized a chapter of the Student League for Industrial Democracy. The founding meeting attracted twenty-three students.<sup>1</sup> The founding of a chapter of a group well known to be radical caused a mild stir, and the *Argus*, to clear up the “considerable puzzlement and misinformation on the campus as to just what the L.I.D. represents,” printed excerpts from the clearly socialist national platform: “we... must work for the social ownership of our natural resources, of the means for production and distribution, and the elimination of the all-[pervasive] profit motive as the ruling principle of our social system.”<sup>2</sup>

Any doubt that the new group would be more radical than the old was dispelled by Britton Harris’ new regular *Argus* column, “Let Freedom Ring.” The editors explained that the column represented student radicals, a group which “although it may not have increased appreciably in numbers in the past year or two, has certainly increased in determination.”<sup>3</sup> To a far greater extent than earlier

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<sup>1</sup> “Student L.I.D. Club Organized on Campus,” *Argus*, 18 October 1934, p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> “L.I.D. to Hold Open Meeting This Saturday,” *Argus*, 25 October 1934, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Editorial, *Argus*, 11 October 1934, p. 2.



activists, Harris directly attacked what he saw as the apathy and hypocrisy of college life. In one column, he provided a sarcastic tour of campus for the benefit of dance weekend guests:

This is a Fraternity House. The Campus Radical says that the Fraternity House is a Den of Iniquity and a Conservative Institution besides. But the campus Big Shot swears nasty words at the Radical and offers to bet his last bottle of rye that this is not so...

This is a Class Room... The Professor is worried because the college has put Fifty Men in his class. This shows Great Interest in Social Problems, and even the College President thinks this is a Good Thing. But the Board of Trustees votes Republican and likes to spend money on Education that prepares for a Career...

When the New Squash Courts are finished, Wesleyan will have the Prettiest and Finest Recreational equipment of any college of its size. If there is any Money left the College may buy the Poor Government Professor a New Pencil Sharpener.<sup>4</sup>

Most Wesleyan students had never before seen such an open challenge to the anti-intellectualism and anti-radicalism of college life. Harris, a self-described “communist with a small c,” published expositions of socialist principles and diatribes against capitalism alongside his critiques of college life, setting a more radical tone for student activism.<sup>5</sup>

Between Harris’ columns and the December 1934 Parley on Political Philosophies, the campus was replete with radical ideas. The slate of speakers at the Parley was skewed considerably leftwards. Max Eastman, poet and independent communist, presented communism as the only rational solution to the economic crisis: “We will do what the Russians did, but do it better.” Students also heard from writer, activist, and Communist Party member Scott Nearing, as well as Norman Thomas and Harry Laidler. Defending capitalism were Colonel Henry Breckenridge

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<sup>4</sup> Britton Harris, “Let Freedom Ring,” *Argus*, 18 October 1934, p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> Harris, “Let Freedom Ring,” *Argus*, 15 November 1934, p. 3.

and conservative New York Congressman Hamilton Fish.<sup>6</sup> The simultaneous visit if so many prominent radicals had such an invigorating effect on the campus left that decades later, Norman Kelman, a pacifist and socialist when he was at Wesleyan, reminisced about “the pink tint that suffused the campus” after the Parley, the best-attended in Wesleyan’s history.<sup>7</sup> Not only did radicals outnumber conservatives, but the radicals were more articulate and more intellectual—students were unlikely to be impressed by Fish’s violent red-baiting. Tucker, leader of the Parley Committee, insisted that the committee had approached dozens of prominent conservatives, but none were available to speak; one socialist student suggested to the *Argus*: “Does not the refusal of the Conservatives to come imply to some extent lack of a program?”<sup>8</sup> Many students agreed. A poll conducted after the Parley showed that the radical ideas presented there resonated widely: out of 319 students voting, 40 percent reported that their views had shifted leftwards as a result of the speeches, while only 6 percent went rightwards. A whopping 47 percent of students ended up somewhere to the left of the New Deal, while only 30 percent supported “individualistic democracy.” Students overwhelmingly voted Thomas, Eastman, and Nearing the “most impressive” speakers.<sup>9</sup> (Fish, perhaps irritated by his cool reception, shortly afterward named Wesleyan one of the ten most radical colleges in a speech denouncing campus radicals.<sup>10</sup>)

In this favorable new environment, the Wesleyan LID launched into action,

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<sup>6</sup> “Communism and Democracy Featured as Eleventh Annual Parley Opens,” “Thomas and Breckenridge to Speak Tonight as Parley Ends Second Day,” *Argus*, 6 December 1934, p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> Class of 1936 50th Reunion Book, Class Reunion Books Collection, Special Collections & Archives, Olin Library, Wesleyan University, Middletown, Conn..

<sup>8</sup> Editorial, “In The Editor’s Mail,” *Argus*, 10 December 1934, p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> “Argus Poll Indicates Trend to Radicalism as Result of Parley,” *Argus*, 17 December 1934, p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> “Fish Calls Wesleyan One of Ten Leading Radical Universities,” *Argus*, 10 January 1935, p. 1.

carrying out a series of popular campaigns. The group published regular legislative bulletins, informing students, faculty, and Middletown residents about pending bills on labor and peace issues.<sup>11</sup> The group also campaigned against the screening of Hearst newsreels at Middletown theaters, part of a national student campaign against the Hearst media empire, which student activists considered a source of militarist and right-wing propaganda. Although anti-Hearst campaigns succeeded in removing the newsreels from theaters at Amherst and Williams, the manager of the Middlesex Theater refused to cancel his contract with Hearst.<sup>12</sup> Before the LID could pursue the matter further, a more pressing issue came up: a state bill that would have required all teachers and professors to take an oath of allegiance. Arguing it was a precursor to censorship and eerily suggestive of fascism, the radicals began a campaign against the bill which the rest of campus soon joined. The *Argus* editorialized against the bill, and the student Senate, at the radicals' request, passed a statement against the oath and sent student government President Gilbert Clee, along with McConaughy, to represent Wesleyan at the bill's hearing.<sup>13</sup> McConaughy testified against the bill before the legislators, while Clee made a sharp statement to the press: "This innocent-looking bill would make all teachers feel as if they must be careful not to offend the existing government... The students of Wesleyan certainly have a right to express an opinion whether their professors are going to be chosen by the Hitler method."<sup>14</sup> The bill failed, and Wesleyan radicals could claim success in having persuaded the student

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<sup>11</sup> "Position on Impending Bills Explained by L.I.D.," *Argus*, 28 March 1935, p. 2.

<sup>12</sup> "Middlesex Theatre Manager Says News Censorship Impossible," *Argus*, 14 March 1935, p. 1; "Williams Anti-Hearst Campaign Is Attacked," *Argus*, 9 May 1935, p. 1; "Hearst News Strike Succeeds at Amherst," *Argus*, 16 May 1935, p. 1.

<sup>13</sup> Editorial, *Argus*, 18 March 1935, p. 2; "Senate Opposes Oath of Allegiance Bill," *Argus*, 25 March 1935, p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> Press release, Wesleyan University, 29 March 1935, James L. McConaughy Papers.

body to take a stand. Wesleyan activists again supported academic freedom when they demonstrated alongside students from twelve other schools against a ban on discussion of ROTC at Connecticut State College, intended to prevent student antimilitarists from organizing there; the Senate again endorsed the protest.

Wesleyan activist Joel Leighton spoke at the rally alongside James Wechsler, a leader of the National Student League, which has organized the protest.<sup>15</sup>

The radicals had already done more in less than a year than the Progressive Club had over its entire existence, but they had even greater success in capturing the radical potential in the air with the 1935 Strike Against War. When the NSL, LID, and several other student Christian and pacifist groups jointly called another strike, Wesleyan radicals jumped at the chance to organize, for majority support was practically guaranteed: in a “peace poll” that February, 62 percent of Wesleyan students said they would refuse to take up arms in a war in which the United States was the invader.<sup>16</sup> The LID cast as broad a net as possible for support, obtaining the endorsement of more than two dozen professors and the isolationist President McConaughy, as well as the Peace Action League, the International Relations Club, and the Christian Association.<sup>17</sup> The faculty supported the strike by shortening classes, allowing students to demonstrate without cutting class.<sup>18</sup> The *Argus*’ new editorial board, headed by the President’s son, James L. McConaughy Jr., also supported the strike, printing essays by professors in support of student peace

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<sup>15</sup> “Wesleyan Senate,” *Argus*, 13 May 1935, p. 3; “Students Flock to Storrs in Protest,” *Argus*, 16 May 1935, p. 1.

<sup>16</sup> “Poll of Campus Shows Wesleyan Pacifistic,” *Argus*, 11 February 1935, p. 1.

<sup>17</sup> “To Stage Anti-War Demonstration Here Tomorrow Morning,” *Argus*, 11 April 1935, p. 1.

<sup>18</sup> “Campus Demonstration Against War Planned,” *Argus*, 25 March 1935, p. 1.

demonstrations in the weeks leading up to the demonstration.<sup>19</sup> The radicals moderated their rhetoric to attract more students: the announcement for the demonstration, carried in the *Argus*, claimed that it would use “the method being followed by students of . . . North and South America on April 12th” and that Wesleyan students would “show our active determination not to be made victims of another senseless war,” but did not mention the mass disobedience in the event of war for which the strike was supposed to be preparation.<sup>20</sup>

The strike was an enormous success at Wesleyan and nationally. Four hundred students—the majority of the student body—packed into the '92 Theatre to attend Wesleyan's demonstration (moved from the steps of North College due to rain). The meeting opened with “America the Beautiful,” then the last year's football team captain introduced the speakers. Local pastor R.A. Christie provided a connection to Middletown, and Gaylord Douglass, Wesleyan class of 1900 and an organizer for the National Council for the Prevention of War represented the national movement. The final speech was by Hornell Hart, a professor at the Hartford Theological Seminary, who urged students to be “architects of a vast and new civilization” that would overcome nationalism and work for international cooperation.<sup>21</sup> That inexperienced students could organize such a successful event testified to the extent of radical sympathies at Wesleyan after the Parley, as well as to the energy that participation in the a national movement brought to radical activists.

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<sup>19</sup> “Professor Hill Maintains That Campus Peace Demonstrations Are of Value,” *Argus*, 25 March 1935, p. 1; “Chanter Favors Peace Demonstrations for Effect on Generation in Power,” *Argus*, 28 March 1935, p. 1; “Colleges Perform Important Function in Peace Preservation, Says Professor Bell,” *Argus*, 11 April 1935, p. 1.

<sup>20</sup> “10 A.M., April 12,” *Argus*, 11 April 1935, p. 3.

<sup>21</sup> “The Great Student Strike,” *Student Outlook*, May 1935, p. 5; “Peace Demonstration Held in '92 Theatre; Three Talks Given,” *Argus*, 15 April 1935, p. 1.

Nationally, the strike had been a giant leap forward for the movement, with some 175,000 students demonstrating at dozens of campuses. The knowledge that they were standing in simultaneous protest with thousands of others was enormously inspiring to the students who participated, most of whom were attending their first demonstration.<sup>22</sup>

Not all students were pleased with the increased presence of radicals on Wesleyan's campus. As Harris' columns suggested, this active radical organizing was far more of a challenge to the ingrained conservatism of college life than the Progressive Club's discussion meetings had been. The critics were not particularly articulate; like the Harvard students who disrupted the pacifists' rally by singing war songs and giving the Fascist salute, they were motivated more by intolerance and suspicion than serious political critique. One student, irritated by an anti-ROTC poster, wrote to the *Argus* that "this low class of humanity [anti-war activists] is trying to find a means of hiding their utter cowardice as regards War by creating an atmosphere in which they can be shown as slackers with no adverse criticism."<sup>23</sup> When a pair of freshmen inaccurately accused "Comrade Harris" of promulgating "the entire doctrines of the Communist Party" and suggested that he start his own paper, four letters defending Harris appeared in the next issue, all from students who were not radicals but attacked the freshmen for their narrow-mindedness.<sup>24</sup> (Harris, for his part, suggested that opponents of radicalism form a "Reactionaries' Club" and include in their program higher prices at the Wesleyan Store, lower wages for

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<sup>22</sup> Cohen, 93-94; "Many Colleges Hold Anti-War Meeting," *Argus*, 15 April 1935, p. 2.

<sup>23</sup> "In The Editor's Mail," *Argus*, 12 November 1934, p. 2.

<sup>24</sup> "In The Editor's Mail," *Argus*, 5 November 1934, p. 2; "In The Editor's Mail," *Argus*, 8 November 1934, p. 2.

working students, and “the installation of the R.O.T.C. with practice throwing tear gas bombs at any Middletown workers who want more than fifty cents pay a day.”<sup>25</sup>) The critics of Harris nevertheless had their way: after just two months, Harris retired his column and resigned from the editorial board “due to the marked increase in the cancellation of subscriptions by alumni.”<sup>26</sup>

A much greater controversy erupted that May over the LID’s support of a strike. Workers at the Colt firearms factory in Hartford were on strike after the company refused to negotiate in good faith with the union.<sup>27</sup> Wesleyan’s LID resolved to “lend support to the strikers in every way possible,” and began canvassing the student body for donations to the strike fund as well as producing a report on the issues of the strike, which they read aloud at fraternity meetings and sent to professors. Most controversially, twenty-five students (two-thirds of whom were not members of the LID) left Wesleyan at 5:30 in the morning to join the workers on the picket line. They did the same the next week, joined by delegations from radical groups at Connecticut State, Yale, and other schools across New England.<sup>28</sup> The scene at the factory gate was raucous, with dozens of students joining hundreds of picketing workers, chanting and yelling at scabs to boost the strikers’ morale. The purpose of the student delegations was to convey widespread public support for the strike, and the group proudly sported their Wesleyan sweaters.<sup>29</sup>

The picketing provoked considerable animosity on campus. Critics accused

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<sup>25</sup> Harris, “Let Freedom Ring,” 25 October 1934, p. 5.

<sup>26</sup> Joel Leighton, Autobiographical essay from 1935 SLID summer school, Joseph Lash Papers, Franklin Delano Roosevelt Presidential Library, Hyde Park, N.Y.; online at <http://newdeal.feri.org/students/slid05.htm>.

<sup>27</sup> “Strike Is Called at Colt’s Plant Beginning Today,” *Hartford Courant*, 13 March 1935, p. 1.

<sup>28</sup> “Student Sympathy for Strike Shown,” *Argus*, 29 April 1935, p. 3; “Colt Factory Strikers Joined for Second Time by Wesleyan Students,” *Argus*, 6 May 1935.

<sup>29</sup> Cohen, 198; “In The Editor’s Mail,” *Argus*, 2 May 1935.

the picketers of creating a bad impression of the school. The *Argus* editors blamed “the meagre group of strike-supporters” for attracting the undeserved and undesirable label “Wesleyan, the Radical College.” The 1934 student body president objected to the picketers’ display of the Wesleyan name, claiming that it damaged the school’s image in the eyes of potential students and even prejudiced the business world against Wesleyan graduates. A recent alumnus who worked in the factory bolstered this argument, telling of a Colt draftsman who was considering sending his son to Wesleyan: “This morning as this man came into the plant one of the students in the Wesleyan group called him a (s— of a b—).”<sup>30</sup>

This criticism represents only the most articulate opposition to the picketing; most students probably rejected without a second thought the idea that Wesleyan men could walk a picket line. Wesleyan students held a great deal of class and ethnic prejudice; the *Argus* frequently made fun of working-class people. One intrepid reporter took a cross-country bus trip for the novelty of it and wrote humorous a story recounting the “dope fiends, miners, and Swedes” and other low-class people he met.<sup>31</sup> Another article described an appearance of a famed boxer Primo Carnera before Middletown’s Sicilian community, mocking the broken English of the boxer and the fawning adoration of the Middletown teenagers.<sup>32</sup> The paper printed a fake letter from “Alex Wrczissizc,” full of misspellings and grammatical errors, complaining about how the noise of the dance parties shook his tiny apartment and kept his wife and children awake; the author was too busy laughing to notice that the

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<sup>30</sup> “In The Editor’s Mail,” *Argus*, 9 May 1935, p. 2-3.

<sup>31</sup> “Argus Conducts Research on Bus Travel, Noting Dope Fiends, Miners, and Swedes,” *Argus*, 12 April 1934, p. 5.

<sup>32</sup> “Da Preem, W. Snow, Goo-Gooless Penner Thrill Middletown’s Saint Sebatians,” *Argus*, 25 February 1935, p. 1.



complaint might be legitimate.<sup>33</sup> Most college men had no contact with working-class people other than the cooks and maids in their fraternity houses, and preferred to keep it that way.

The response from students and the administration to the picketing was mild compared with other schools. On many campuses, anti-radical administrators banned anti-war meetings, disciplined and expelled student radicals, reported on radical activities to the FBI, and even encouraged violence against student protestors. At the City College of New York, President Frederick Robinson expelled dozens of activist students and attacked a group of antimilitarist demonstrators with his umbrella.<sup>34</sup> In contrast, the politically conservative but restrained McConaughy declined to weigh in directly on the picketing issue. In his matriculation address the following fall, however, he urged new freshmen not to be taken in by radicalism. McConaughy compared college to a circus: if study was the “main tent,” then “solving the ‘ills of society’” and pacifism were mere “sideshows,” distractions from more worthwhile activities.<sup>35</sup> His son, editor of the *Argus*, picked up the theme, arguing that student participation in “the peace side show” was unlikely to make a difference and that “college athletics, fraternities, and clubs appear to be activities yielding seemingly greater values for the college undergraduate who is at all realistically inclined.”<sup>36</sup> Though relatively mild, the rebuke from the student body was clear. There was a strict limit to how far left radical activity could go and still be regarded as a legitimate part of student life.

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<sup>33</sup> “In The Editor’s Mail,” *Argus*, 3 May 1937, p. 2.

<sup>34</sup> Cohen, 99, 106-7, 110.

<sup>35</sup> “McConaughy Places Emphasis on Study,” *Argus*, 23 September 1935, p. 1.

<sup>36</sup> Editorial, *Argus*, 26 September 1935, p. 2.

In a letter to the editor, the radicals defended their support for the strike by attacking the conception of the “College Man” that excluded such activity. In response to the argument that the picketing had impaired Wesleyan’s recruitment, they advanced a different idea of the kind of student Wesleyan should be recruiting, accusing the student recruitment committee of being “preoccupied with superficial methods of attracting good material to the college, superficial scholastic achievement, and a superficial approach to problems which such men as the picketers are attacking more directly.” They argued that, even though labor politics did not seem to be an issue of immediate student interest, their activism was perfectly consistent with “the ideals for which Wesleyan is supposed to stand: liberalism, active discussion, and penetrating scholarship.” The authors—Harris, Leighton, Robert Ball, William Stephenson, and William Stewart, all fraternity men—signed their letter “Yours for the new social order.”<sup>37</sup> The juxtaposition of revolutionary sentiment with the formal closing common to letters to the editor was perhaps sarcastic, but it reflected the radicals’ attempt to reconcile radical politics and the collegiate identity.

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The radicals newfound organizing drive was grounded in a new set of more radical ideas which they shared with the national student movement. They were the most politically articulate members of the student body, and they promulgated their views tirelessly. The radicals lost their hold on the *Argus* after the 1934 editorial board left office; Joel Leighton was a member of the new board, but according to Leighton, chairman McConaughy was “supported by five fraternity brothers who [were] all conservative if not reactionary.” The radicals found a new platform in the

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<sup>37</sup> Editorial, “In The Editor’s Mail,” *Argus*, 9 May 1935, p. 2-3.

*Cardinal*, the campus literary magazine, which they took over and began publishing political editorials and essays alongside the usual creative writing.<sup>38</sup>

These radicals were much further left than the members of the old Progressive Club. They still supported the Socialist Party, but now were closer to the party's revolutionary left wing. Norman Kelman founded a chapter of the Young Peoples' Socialist League within the campus LID; the YPSL at this time was unabashedly revolutionary.<sup>39</sup> For Wesleyan's radicals, socialism was the necessary response to the failure of capitalism to properly use society's resources in the Depression, as well as a moral imperative: Harris argued in the *Cardinal* that socialist society did a better job of fulfilling human nature than capitalist society.<sup>40</sup> In keeping with their socialist politics, the student activists followed developments in labor closely, keeping their classmates informed of the debate over industrial and craft unionism then being fought in the American Federation of Labor.<sup>41</sup> Harris wrote a column supporting a labor party as a transitional measure to a mass socialist party.<sup>42</sup> Joel Leighton got firsthand experience of labor organizing in summer of 1935, when he attended a six-week LID field school in New York where participants received intensive political education as well as performing field work with unions.<sup>43</sup> The radicals also supported consumer co-operatives as an analogue to labor unions in the consumer sphere, and campaigned unsuccessfully to make the College Store a non-profit, student-owned

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<sup>38</sup> Joel Leighton autobiographical essay.

<sup>39</sup> "In The Editor's Mail," *Argus*, 18 May 1936, p. 2.

<sup>40</sup> Britton Harris, "Is Collective Society Consistent With Human Nature?," *Cardinal*, April 1935, p. 2.

<sup>41</sup> Robert M. Ball, "The Committee for Industrial Organization vs. the American Federation of Labor," *Cardinal*, April 1937, p. 22.

<sup>42</sup> Harris, "Let Freedom Ring," *Argus*, 5 November 1934, p. 3.

<sup>43</sup> Lewis M. Cohen, "A Socialist Training School," *Student Outlook*, October 1935, p. 6.

cooperative.<sup>44</sup>

At the root of this radicalization was the revisionist critique of the World War. Rather than viewing the war as a failure of international cooperation, as had the disarmament movement, student radicals blamed the disaster on the militarist policies of the governments involved, including the United States. Militarism, in turn, was rooted in the needs of capital: Kelman argued in an *Argus* letter that war was “the embodiment of economic forces which can no longer restrain the logic of profit competition.”<sup>45</sup> He went on to argue that fascist and capitalist states were not so different as they might appear: “Fascism is the reaction of a capitalist country unable to compete with its capitalist colleagues... Our increased naval and military budgets bear striking resemblances to Germany now girding herself for war.”<sup>46</sup> Radicals also blamed profiteering by international arms manufacturers for contributing to the war: a *Cardinal* article accused arms manufacturers of actively encouraging arms races, plotting against disarmament conferences, and selling to both sides in the diplomatic conflicts leading up to the World War.<sup>47</sup> The radicals argued that the war had eroded democracy at home, with the government using a deluge of propaganda to encourage blind obedience and to obscure the fact that that soldiers were fighting and dying in a war that was solely, in Kelman’s words, “in the interests of privileged industry.”

Particularly disturbing to radical students was the role that universities had played in the war. The Student Army Training Corps program had militarized American universities in 1917-18, converting them to training grounds for Army

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<sup>44</sup> Editorial, *Cardinal*, December 1935, p. 1.

<sup>45</sup> Egan, 25-26.

<sup>46</sup> “In The Editor’s Mail,” *Argus*, 18 May 1936, p. 3.

<sup>47</sup> H. E. S. Marks, “Bloody Traffic,” *Cardinal*, December 1935, p. 5.

officers.<sup>48</sup> In the fall of 1935, Thomas Bodine, a Quaker, published a meticulously researched essay in the *Cardinal* describing the SATC's effects on Wesleyan.<sup>49</sup> To Bodine, Wesleyan's experience in the World War illustrated what another war would be like: "If a few more of us realized what happens to the college man when his country goes to war... we would not talk so glibly... about the increase in armaments and war sentiment throughout the world, nor shrug our shoulders so comfortably when pacifism is called a sideshow." Indeed, his description of Wesleyan at war made such a lasting impression that the *Cardinal* reprinted it four years later.<sup>50</sup>

Bodine described with dismay how the war distorted the normal functions of the college. The majority of students joined the college's newly-organized ROTC unit, overseen by professors. "Prof. Curts of the German Department and Prof. Hewitt, now Dean of Freshmen, went off to Plattsburg to learn how to teach Wesleyan men the craft of plunging a bayonet into a man's belly." The article was accompanied by a photograph of Wesleyan's officers-to-be drilling on Andrus Field, led by professors wearing swords. Another photo showed students digging model trenches behind the Chapel. "Friday the battalion will probably get training in going 'over the top,'" the *Argus* cheerfully reported. Student life was refocused on the war: athletics were done away with because all athletes enlisted, and the *Argus*, printed only once a week due to low staff, was heavily censored and required to print items from the "Patriotic News Service." He argued that in the curriculum, intellectual inquiry as a value in itself was eliminated. Instead, the English Composition course

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<sup>48</sup> John R. Thelin, *A History of American Higher Education* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 199-201.

<sup>49</sup> T. R. Bodine, "Wesleyan Enters the War," *Wesleyan Cardinal*, October 1935, p. 1-4, 20.

<sup>50</sup> T. R. Bodine, "Wesleyan Enters the War," *Cardinal*, December 1939, p. 5-7, 22.

taught “preparation of military reports and other army paper work” and Public Speaking was dedicated to the “training of voice necessary for Army officers.” Many new courses were created, such as “Fire Control,” “Meteorology and Physiography,” “Military Law,” and “Issues of the War,” while the departments of History, Psychology, and Ethics were virtually eliminated.

Bodine was disturbed by the toll the war took on the collegiate spirit of critical inquiry. He claimed that enthusiasm for the war was such that students enlisted without a second thought, and “most of the pre-war pacifists became militarists with everybody else.” He quoted a 1918 chapel address by President Shanklin to illustrate how even academics disseminated mindless propaganda:

In its soul of souls, [the war] is religious. It is a war between Odin and Christ. America never did a more Christlike thing than when she went to war April the sixth, 1917... It is a war to prevent the worship of force, uncontrolled by the Hohenzollerns, with their fit heraldic device of a black bird of prey with bloody beak and claws, on a field of gold. ... We know that the whole future of mankind depends on the outcome; that whether the civilization of the future is to be that of the brute and the machine, or whether it will be the free spiritual life of nations following ideals of righteousness, depends on whether or not the Allies crush the might of Germany and hurl from power the fiends who have planned and plotted the immense tragedy being enacted in Europe.<sup>51</sup>

Shanklin was far from alone among academics in viewing the entire war as the fault of Germany and German imperialism as uniquely brutal; the country’s most prominent professors supported American involvement in the war.<sup>52</sup> For Bodine, such uncritical support illustrated how war betrayed the liberal mission of the university. Anti-war activism, far from being a “sideshow,” was the university’s defense.

It is fitting that Wesleyan’s radicals framed their activism in terms of

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<sup>51</sup> The first ellipsis is Bodine’s; the second is mine.

<sup>52</sup> Eagan, 25-26.

collegiate ideals. In spite of their critiques of the conservatism of college life, most still participated in it—nearly all were in fraternities and involved with other, non-political activities, and many were athletes. Most had been involved with student life before becoming radical. Joel Leighton, for example, was a typically bourgeois Wesleyan student (his father was a manager for a movie distribution firm) who had been a writer for the *Argus* and had no definite political ideas until he was recruited by Harris, his fellow newspaperman and fraternity brother.<sup>53</sup> (It is also fitting that Kelman, the leader of the campus YPSL, was an independent—even radical college men remained somewhat wary of involvement with non-student organizations.) Wesleyan radicals rejected the conservative tendencies of college life, but not college life itself; they adopted the more intellectual and critical elements of the ideal of the university in asserting a new vision of what it meant to be a college man.

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The success of the student movement on many campuses prompted a drive for unity between its two largest organizations, the NSL and the Student LID. The Young Communist leadership of the NSL, under the influence of the Comintern's global Popular Front strategy, began to make overtures to the LID. Under the Popular Front the Communist parties, prompted by the USSR's need for allies, dropped their revolutionary agitation and formed electoral alliances with social-democratic and liberal parties. In the United States, this meant uncritical support for the Democratic Party, and for the student movement, it meant that the Communists advocated the formation of a broad student liberal group that could bring in the thousands of non-radical students who had participated in demonstrations organized by the radicals. As

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<sup>53</sup> Joel Leighton autobiographical essay.

part of the campaign for unity, Celeste Strack, a Young Communist and NSL field organizer, visited the Wesleyan LID to suggest a union of all liberally inclined students on the campus, including “all manner of Christian, peace, and study clubs.” She argued that the new organization would represent all students, not just one political faction, since every student was concerned with “financial insecurity, reactionary measures, and war preparations that menace him. The fact that many students do not see it thus... does not mean that they can always neglect these problems.”<sup>54</sup> The argument made sense to Wesleyan radicals, who saw students increasingly interested in liberal politics—at the 1935 Parley on Labor relations, for instance, students heard debates on labor parties, industrial versus craft unionism, and the Wagner Act. It seemed like an auspicious moment for the radicals to build a new organization that could involve a much wider layer of students.<sup>55</sup>

The merger of the NSL and Student LID into the American Student Union was in part an attempt to reconcile political activism with college life, a goal which must have appealed to Wesleyan’s radicals. College life had recovered from the Depression and was back in full swing—dance attendance hit a new record in fall of 1935 with 396 guests, which was beaten the following spring with 436.<sup>56</sup> After the success of an Armistice Day peace meeting, Wesleyan radicals must have been optimistic that they could put the Colt strike dispute behind them and expand the appeal of campus activism.<sup>57</sup> The ASU founding convention was that December in

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<sup>54</sup> “Union of Wesleyan Liberals Advocated,” *Argus*, 10 October 1935, p. 1.

<sup>55</sup> “Arthur G. Hays and Granville Hicks Speak at Opening Parley Sessions,” *Argus*, 5 December 1935, p. 1.

<sup>56</sup> “396 Guests from 23 States and 54 Colleges...,” *Argus*, 17 October 1935, p. 1; “436 Dance Week-End Guests...,” *Argus*, 17 April 1936, p. 1.

<sup>57</sup> “Peace Meeting Held Friday in Rich Hall,” *Argus*, 11 November 1935, p. 1.



Columbus, Ohio, with Wesleyan LIDers in attendance. The following February, the *Argus* printed an announcement of the founding of an ASU chapter at Wesleyan. Declaring the ASU “a broad student organization” that would advocate for a student voice in college affairs, the announcement summarized the ASU platform, which boiled down to the four points of “Freedom” (including both academic freedom and opposition to fascism), “Equality” (comprising equal access to education and the elimination of race discrimination), “Peace” (the Oxford Pledge) and “Security” (economic relief legislation). Twenty undergraduates signed the announcement, mostly former members of the LID, but also members of the Peace Action League, the International Relations Club, and of the Christian Association, and some unaffiliated liberals—precisely the campus Popular Front that Strack had suggested.<sup>58</sup>

The announcement pointed to an inherent contradiction in the ASU’s self-conception. The ASU presented itself as a broad, nonpartisan organization which fought in the interest of all students, in keeping with the Communists’ Popular Front strategy for alliance with liberals. Yet, while there was a substantial contingent of unaffiliated liberals at the founding convention, Socialists and Communists continued to hold most of the leadership positions. Although the radical leadership had dropped much of its anti-capitalism to produce a platform that would have broadly appeal, the program was still unmistakably that of a left-wing organization—few would understand the Oxford pledge and anti-fascist activism as non-political causes that were unquestionably in the American student’s interest. This contradiction would come to a head in the national organization in the coming years, playing into the conflict over collective security that arose between Communists and Socialists. For

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<sup>58</sup> American Student Union founding statement, *Wesleyan Argus*, 20 February 1936, p. 2.

the moment, however, the conflict was submerged by enthusiasm for the new organization.

Wesleyan's ASUers, however, faced a practical problem at the outset, for the chapter was immediately forced to decide whether it was to be a "student interest" or a political organization. Less than a week after the founding announcement appeared, one of the signers, George van Lengen, introduced a resolution in the College Body Senate to the effect that the Senate endorsed the ASU and would officially form a chapter of the organization, making the ASU an official institution of campus life, alongside the likes of the *Argus* and the Glee Club. The ASU was to be recognized and funded by the student body, and therefore also accountable to it.<sup>59</sup> Van Lengen's motivation was the campus' repudiation of the Colt picketing—he wanted to be sure that the ASU could claim to represent the entire student body, not just one faction. The Senate voted 13-10 in favor of the motion, and, accordingly, Ainslie Slodden, College Body President, called a mass organizational meeting of the ASU for the following week.<sup>60</sup>

The response from the campus was uproar. Many students still regarded the radicals with suspicion after the Colt incident, and opposed any left-wing organization on the campus. Three Senators collected 150 signatures on a petition to reconsider the decision. One of them, Thomas Broker, claimed in a letter to the *Argus* that not only was the motion contrary to student opinion, it also overstepped the Senate's authority to endorse the ASU. He also inflamed interfraternity tensions

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<sup>59</sup> "Senate Approves American Student Union at Meeting This Morning," *Wesleyan Argus*, 24 February 1936, p. 1.

<sup>60</sup> "American Student Union To Be Discussed Tomorrow at Meeting of Student Body," *Wesleyan Argus*, 27 February 1936, p. 1.

by pointing out that eleven of the signers of the founding announcement were members of Delta Kappa Epsilon, the richest house on campus.<sup>61</sup> The *Argus* editors were no more sympathetic to the ASU, but they supported the motion, arguing that although the Senate could not control whether an ASU chapter existed on campus, by officially recognizing the ASU it would make the group responsible to the college body as a whole, and would have the authority to prevent another debacle like the Colt strike support.<sup>62</sup> Van Lengen, in support of the editors' argument, stated in a letter to the *Argus* that "we want the sanction of the college body in order that the college body Senate may keep the organization in accord with the true spirit of undergraduate opinion," and argued that the ASU was not really radical—it would mainly be interested in the peace campaign.<sup>63</sup> In response to the controversy, the Senate called an open forum to discuss the question.

In the meantime, Slodden had cancelled the ASU organizational meeting hours before it was to take place. Word of the cancellation evidently did not reach all the houses—or else some ASUers deliberately flouted it, for about thirty students from four houses showed up, signed membership cards, and elected an executive committee, with peace activist Robert Cushman presiding in Slodden's absence.<sup>64</sup> These students came into the public forum convinced that the Wesleyan ASU had already been officially established, and were determined to keep it in existence, whether official or not. Slodden declared the ASU's earlier organizational meeting illegal, but the executive committee had already called a second meeting for the

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<sup>61</sup> "In The Editor's Mail," *Argus*, 24 February 1936, p. 2.

<sup>62</sup> Editorial, *Wesleyan Argus*, 27 February 1936, p. 2.

<sup>63</sup> "In The Editor's Mail," *Wesleyan Argus*, 27 February 1936, p. 2.

<sup>64</sup> "Status of A.S.U. on Campus is Doubtful," *Argus*, 27 February 1936, p. 1.

following week.

At the forum, the ASUers defended their organization against the attacks of conservative students. Many ASUers, still hoping to recruit a broader membership, denied that the organization was radical: *Cardinal* editor William Stephenson claimed that “nine-tenths of the college body would agree with the platform of the ASU,” inverting the opposition’s claim that eighty percent of the student body was opposed to the ASU. John Kaltenbach, a far-left Christian socialist, probably did not help this argument with his statement that “if Wesleyan is going to be ashamed to associate itself with [strike support], then we ought to be ashamed of Wesleyan,” and his classification of “the reactionary attitude displayed... by the opposition” as “evidences of the Hearst-inspired march toward Fascism.”<sup>65</sup> The discussion revealed a discrepancy in the attitude of the ASUers present with that of van Lengen, who did not attend. Van Lengen had apparently not been authorized by the rest of the ASU to claim that an endorsement would enable the Senate to exercise control over the ASU, for Stephenson and Norman Kelman both emphatically denied that the ASU would be controlled by the Senate, stating that it would be “a democratic organization, with every member having one vote.”<sup>66</sup> They wanted the support of the student body—but they wanted to obtain it by convincing students to become involved with radical causes, not by limiting themselves to expressing what students already believed.

By admitting this, Stephenson and Kelman scuttled the plan to make the ASU official, since the strongest argument for it—that the ASU would be representative of

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<sup>65</sup> “Outside Senate Power to Endorse A.S.U., Shaw Says in Attack,” “Cry of ‘Red Herring’ is Raised at Meeting,” *Wesleyan Argus*, 2 March 1936, p. 3.

<sup>66</sup> “Kelman Calls van Lengen Letter Misrepresentation,” “Cry of ‘Red Herring’ is Raised at Meeting,” *Wesleyan Argus*, 2 March 1936, p.3.

student opinion—was invalidated. The Senate, in a special session, declared that the matter would be settled by a vote of the entire student body. In the referendum, students took the suggestion of one of the anti-ASU Senators that they “make it clear to the world that the organization doesn’t represent the college”: 276 voted against making the ASU official, with 91 for and 73 indifferent. The majority of students, associating the ASU with the Colt picketing, again rejected the idea that radicalism could be made part of campus life.<sup>67</sup> Before the poll results were in, however, the ASU held its second meeting, where it planned a campaign to raise the wages of student workers at the Wesleyan Store. The ASU was established, whether students liked it or not—but it still bore the stigma of a radical organization.<sup>68</sup>

The ASU got its revenge on the campus establishment by reviving the *Hermes* for a special issue, exposing a secret election coalition that had cost Thomas Bodine the student body presidency. Publishing secretly, the radicals accused outgoing President Slodden of having engineered the victory of another candidate. They described backroom deals in the melodramatic vocabulary of a crime novel:

At various intervals mysterious cloaked figures would enter silently.... When they were all gathered together, the bickering began... But Slodden kept his head. Firmly he exacted promise after promise, pledge after pledge. When it was mentioned that certain members of a supposedly loyal house might defect, Slodden’s eyes blazed. ‘Just wait until they apply for proctorships,’ he snapped.<sup>69</sup>

The radicals’ edition imitated the design and style of the old *Hermes*, using the same fonts, the same masthead of John Wesley thumbing his nose, and even some of the more memorable headlines from the first issue. The radicals situated themselves in a

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<sup>67</sup> “House Vote Settles Question of A.S.U.,” *Wesleyan Argus*, 5 March 1936, p. 1.

<sup>68</sup> “A.S.U. Elects Officers, Considers Store Wages,” *Wesleyan Argus*, 5 March 1936, p. 1.

<sup>69</sup> “Slodden Wins Election, Beach Named Prexy,” *Hermes*, 24 March 1936, p. 1.

collegiate tradition by carrying on the *Hermes*—even as they attacked an aspect of college life, they were attempting to gain acceptance. The radicals did not get the last word, however, for the students they had attacked put out an opposing edition of the *Hermes* just three days later. Headlined “Losers’ Election Plans Exposed,” the two-page issue detailed the promises Bodine had supposedly made to cement a four-house coalition (including the John Wesley Club, the new all-independent organization) which had nevertheless failed to win him the election.<sup>70</sup> Under “staff,” this edition printed the names of the men—all ASUers and former LID members—who had produced the previous edition. The paper mocked the left-wing politics of the radicals, claiming that the proceeds from the *Hermes* went “to our Moscow War Chest as an aid in combating the powerful Hearst-inspired march towards fascism.”<sup>71</sup> Having been rejected in the referendum, the radicals were now made fun of before the entire campus, leaving them perhaps more isolated than before.

After the debate over van Lengen’s motion and the *Hermes* affair, the Wesleyan ASU attempted to prove itself to the campus by taking up fairly uncontroversial issues. Following the lead of the national ASU, the Wesleyan group advocated for students’ economic well-being, briefly mounting a campaign to raise the wages of student waiters at the dining hall in Downey House, the new campus center (the campaign was abandoned when it was discovered that Downey House waiters were not, in fact, underpaid relative to fraternity eating club waiters).<sup>72</sup> They also supported the American Youth Act, a bill which would have dramatically

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<sup>70</sup> “Losers’ Election Plans Exposed,” *Hermes*, 27 March 1936, p. 1.

<sup>71</sup> Editorial, *Hermes*, 27 March 1936, p. 1.

<sup>72</sup> Editorial, *Cardinal*, May 1936, p. 1; “Editorial Comment,” *Cardinal*, January 1937, p. 26.

increased funding for work-study employment and a national priority for the ASU.<sup>73</sup> But the most important form of activity for the Wesleyan ASU continued to be anti-war work.

With the 1936 Strike Against War, the ASU considerably overreached itself, provoking yet more opposition. The organizers and put forth a more militant message than in the past, for the first time referring to the demonstration as a “strike” and publicizing the statement of Joseph Lash, national leader of the ASU, that the strike was “planned as a dress rehearsal for what we expect will happen if the United States ever goes to war.”<sup>74</sup> The ASU secured faculty support by convincing the faculty to substitute the strike for a normal chapel period, but did not publicize this, and when the crowd of students, large as usual, showed up to the strike, they were surprised to find professors taking attendance and counting those students who had no interest in attending a peace rally as absent from chapel. Professor Krusé, the Christian socialist, spoke first, declaring that student peace demonstrations had “the fullest support of the faculty and of all university authority.” The attendees then heard the usual speeches, with a New Haven Methodist minister accusing the US of militaristic moves that undermined the progress of disarmament. This time, however, the organizers were determined to spur the students to action, not just talk, and after the speeches, chair Alvin von Auw opened the floor to resolutions. Stephenson put forth a resolution to the effect that the students of Wesleyan University wished their presence at the strike to be considered “representative of their resolve not to support the government in war”—in short, the Oxford Pledge. The resolution carried by a

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<sup>73</sup> “A.S.U. Elects Officers, Discusses Peace Strike,” *Argus*, 17 April 1936, p. 6.

<sup>74</sup> “Peace Strike to be Held This Wednesday in Nation-Wide Demonstration Against War,” *Argus*, 20 April 1936, p. 1.

small majority in spite of the objection it was improper for the meeting to speak for the entire student body.<sup>75</sup>

To opponents, the ASU appeared to have again pretended to represent Wesleyan forced students to attend its peace meeting, then indoctrinated them with radical propaganda and manipulated them into supporting the Oxford Pledge. The *Argus* reversed its support for the strike, asking “why... was attendance at an affair sponsored by the A.S.U., an organization which is not officially recognized by the University, compulsory?” Many objected to the politics of the meeting: one student wrote, “the sponsors decried propaganda, and still the meeting reeked of propaganda. It seemed almost as if they (the sponsors) were not so interested in promoting peace as they were in associating peace with Socialism and war with Capitalism.”<sup>76</sup> Again Wesleyan’s radicals were reminded that, in spite of the ASU’s hopes of expanding the appeal of political involvement, radical politics remained unpalatable to many.

The radicals had not intended to misrepresent the students in making a motion that spoke for the entire Wesleyan student body. Instead, they had again attempted to bring politics into college life by identifying Wesleyan with a greater cause. The radicals were not content to remain marginalized by the apathy of mainstream college life, and their goal of creating a more politicized version of the collegiate identity underlay all they did. The opposition between radical politics and student life remained tense, however, and the way the student movement would react to this tension would determine its the success and failure at Wesleyan and nationally in the coming years.

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<sup>75</sup> “Peace Strike Held Yesterday Morning as Part of Country-Wide Movement,” “In The Editor’s Mail,” *Argus*, 23 April 1936, p. 1, 2.

<sup>76</sup> Editorial, “In The Editor’s Mail,” *Argus*, 23 April 1936, p. 2.



## Chapter 4

### Popular Front and Movement Decline

In the 1936 Presidential election, a student liberal bloc emerged, strengthening the position of the Communists and Popular Front supporters in the ASU. Both the Landon and Roosevelt campaigns made an active effort to recruit students. At Wesleyan, the campaign was fraught with misadventure—Landon’s “Victims of Future Taxes” tour failed to show up, and Roosevelt’s planned parade down High Street was abruptly rerouted when Secret Service agents discovered that students had bedecked the street with Landon posters, were flying Soviet and Nazi flags, and were planning to set off firecrackers as the President passed.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, students had the impression of participating in the campaign much more than in 1932, and the *Argus* straw poll showed none of the alienation that had swelled the Socialist vote in 1932. Landon, of course, came out ahead, but Roosevelt won 24 percent of the student vote, a great improvement from his 1932 showing of 10 percent, while only twenty-two students voted for Norman Thomas and two for Communist Earl Browder.<sup>2</sup> Nearly identical results came in at Amherst.<sup>3</sup> With Roosevelt running a rhetorically left-wing campaign that attacked financial elites and upheld the role of

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<sup>1</sup> “Gadfly,” *Argus*, 26 October 1936, p. 2; “In The Editor’s Mail,” *Argus*, 30 October 1936, p. 4; Ronald Schatz, “The Fall of the Barons of Middletown” (Paper presented at the Labor and Working-Class History Association Conference, Chicago, May 28-30, 2009), p. 32-33.

<sup>2</sup> “Governor Alf M. Landon Victorious in College Body Presidential Poll by Decisive Three-to-One Majority,” *Argus*, 22 October 1936, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> “Landon Gains Overwhelming Margin in Poll at Amherst,” *Argus*, 15 October 1936, p. 1.

the federal government in ending the Depression, the left-leaning students who would have supported Thomas in 1932 voted for Roosevelt this time. Wesleyan radicals did not campaign for Thomas, perhaps because of the ASU's liberal orientation and official nonpartisanship, which amounted to tacit support for the Democrats. Although personally they voted Socialist or Communist, they accepted student support for Roosevelt as progressive.

A wrench was thrown into the unity in the student movement when the Spanish military rebelled against a republican government led by a Socialist and Communist coalition, precipitating civil war. The defense of the Spanish Republic captivated radicals everywhere and spurred furious debate in the student movement about the role of foreign intervention. Everyone was opposed to the "fascists" (as the Spanish right-wing forces were called), but the war prompted many activists to wonder whether non-intervention was always a good thing—the Neutrality Acts had forced the United States to declare an embargo against the Republic, hampering its effort to get arms and war materials. The justice of the Republican cause seemed irrefutable, and the romance irresistible—especially when American student radicals volunteered to fight for the Republic in the International Brigades. The Communists in the ASU forcefully advocated that the United States sell arms to the Republic, and they won over more and more unaffiliated liberals as well as previously anti-interventionist members of the national ASU leadership. In spite of the opposition of pacifists and Socialists, who from the beginning had feared that Communists would support a war that was in the interest of the Soviet Union, the student movement's opposition to war was beginning to wither. The platform of the 1937 peace strike

took no position on the issue of arms for Spain because several pacifist organizations were cosponsors, but the ASU published a statement of its own that supported the sale of arms.<sup>4</sup>

Wesleyan's radicals, however, refused to accept the new pro-intervention line of the ASU leadership. One "Decimus," writing in the *Argus*, quoted a portion of the statement on Spain, which he declared "jingoistic rot": "The people of Spain have been *compelled* to use force; they did not select the weapons. But they are fighting so that future generations may be saved from the conflict which they must endure." For pacifists, war was war, and the ASU was betraying its principles in advocating US government involvement in a war: "Where have we heard this before? Somehow it is more than faintly reminiscent of people who urged the use of force 'to make the world safe for democracy.'"<sup>5</sup> The Wesleyan ASU was, of course, sympathetic to the Republican cause, hosting David Mackenzie, one of the first British volunteers, who was on a national ASU tour to raise funds for the International Brigades.<sup>6</sup> The group balanced this, however, with a speech from Jeff Campbell, a field organizer for the Fellowship of Reconciliation and one of the ASU's most vocal opponents of arms sales. Campbell's speech illustrated the difficult ideological predicament of the pacifists: starting from the basic pacifist premise that war was the breeding ground of fascism, he argued that, although the ongoing Spanish revolution against military rule "deserve[d] the sympathy of other freedom-loving people in the world," any effort to

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<sup>4</sup> Cohen, 143; Eagan, 176-77.

<sup>5</sup> "In The Editor's Mail," *Argus*, 4 March 1937, p. 2. The same Decimus anticipated US entry into war on the side of Britain, arguing in the *Argus* that the ubiquitous newsreel coverage of the coronation of King George VI was nothing more than English propaganda intended to capture American support for the war England knew was coming: "In The Editor's Mail," *Argus*, 24 May 1937, p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> "David Mackenzie to Talk on Spanish War," *Argus*, 15 April 1937, p. 1.

send arms or otherwise aid the Republic would prolong the war and potentially cause it to develop into a second World War, “which condition would strengthen, not weaken Fascism.” Despite their opposition to aid, the radicals’ support for the Republic was passionate: following the speech, Campbell and members of the audience debated Professor Bell, a conservative Catholic who supported Franco’s forces, well into the night.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps in response to the national ASU’s support for Spanish aid, Wesleyan activists redoubled their pacifist propaganda, employing innovative new methods. The ASU and Christian Association presented many anti-war films, from *Dealers in Death*, an attack on the munitions industry edited together from newsreels, to *Broken Lullaby*, a drama about a French veteran who travels to Germany to apologize to the fiancée of the soldier he killed in the World War.<sup>8</sup> The student drama club, in which ASU president Alvin von Auw was heavily involved, hosted on Armistice Day a travelling performance of *Bury the Dead*, a black comedy about a group of dead soldiers who stand up at their funeral and refuse to be buried. According to the *Argus* reviewer, the play was devastatingly effective at portraying the human waste of war; such plays and films could be far more effective in stirring up anti-war sentiment than speeches or posters.<sup>9</sup> The drama club also presented the blatantly radical *Waiting for Lefty* during fall dances—an unusual choice, probably made for political reasons.<sup>10</sup>

Apart from their peace advocacy, the radicals renewed their campaign in

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<sup>7</sup> “Campbell Discusses Spanish War Menace,” *Argus*, 30 April 1937, p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> “Film on War Atrocities Is Shown in Rich Hall to Help Cause of World Peace,” *Argus*, 22 October 1936, p. 1; “‘Broken Lullaby’ to Be Presented by ASU,” 27 May 1937, p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> “Irvin Shaw’s Drama Read in ’92 Theatre Last Night Under P. and P. Sponsorship,” *Argus*, 12 November 1936, p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> “Excellent Direction and Acting Marks Paint and Powder Club Play, ‘Waiting for Lefty,’” *Argus*, 2 November 1936, p. 1.

support of the ideals of “liberalism, active discussion, and penetrating scholarship,” but in a less confrontational way than before. To foster discussion and critique of campus life, the ASU sponsored with the Christian Association a series of “Monday Morning Forums” at which students debated the merits of fraternities, dance weekends, and other institutions of college life.<sup>11</sup> Unlike the Spain issue, here the Wesleyan group had the support of the national ASU, which encouraged its chapters to shed their radical image and to campaign on campus issues.<sup>12</sup> The Wesleyan ASU was continuing its project of creating a more engaged form of campus life, but it was doing so in a less confrontational and radical manner. The Wesleyan radicals had not lost their ability to mobilize—they traveled to New Haven to join a mass protest in support of Jerome Davis, a leftist professor at Yale Divinity School who was being fired, they alleged, due to pressure from conservative alumni and business—but they were less inclined to take controversial action.<sup>13</sup>

The ASU’s efforts to make itself more palatable paid off when one of its members was elected student body president in 1937. In a six-man race rife with illegal deals, Clifton Davenport somehow came out ahead despite being a socialist and an independent.<sup>14</sup> Davenport was an outsider to campus life. He was attending Wesleyan on a full scholarship after spending a year in the Civilian Conservation Corps because he could not afford to go to school—his father had been bankrupted in the stock market crash and was unemployed. Davenport devoted his time at school to

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<sup>11</sup> “Forum Told Pro and Con of Fraternities,” *Argus*, 12 April 1937, p. 1; “Forum Spell-Bound by Cotter and Grubb,” *Argus*, 10 May 1937, p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> Eagan, 201.

<sup>13</sup> “In The Editor’s Mail,” *Argus*, 6 May 1937, p. 2.

<sup>14</sup> “Beach Rules Today’s Election to Be Valid,” *Argus*, 22 January 1937, p. 1; “Davenport Is Chosen College Body President; Grubb Vice President,” *Argus*, 18 January 1937, p. 1.

furthering educational opportunity and social justice: in addition to his involvement with the ASU, he was secretary of the student-faculty committee that oversaw work-study employment, which was now provided by a dedicated federal agency, the National Youth Administration. As a student in the Honors College, Davenport did research on the National Youth Administration and “The Philosophical Postulates and Implication of Christian Socialism.”<sup>15</sup>

The election of the first independent president in Wesleyan’s history startled the student body. Independents had been playing a more active role in college life after the creation of the John Wesley Club and the Downey House campus center, but no one had expected this. The *Argus* editors wondered, “Have [fraternities] outlived their purpose, their usefulness? Do they now work more evil than good? The mere raising of such questions perhaps foreshadows the ultimate death of the fraternity system here.”<sup>16</sup> But more common than such reflection was pure defensiveness, especially after Davenport also accepted the presidency of the ASU. The *Argus*’ humor column mocked his leftism, and the outgoing editorial board printed a joke front page in which Davenport executed a coup d’état, combining the offices of ASU president and student body president while his ASU minions seized the CA’s Campus Chest funds and sent them to Moscow, as Davenport watched “from his perch on the balcony of the Delta Kappa Epsilon fraternity house.”<sup>17</sup>

The new president and ASU leader immediately embarked on a campaign for

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<sup>15</sup> Class of 1938 50th Reunion Booklet, Class Reunion Books Collection, Special Collections & Archives, Olin Library, Wesleyan University, Middletown, Conn.; Honors College booklet, James L. McConaughy Papers.

<sup>16</sup> Editorial, *Argus*, 18 January 1937, p. 2.

<sup>17</sup> “Red Flag Waves as A.S.U. Tears Loose,” “Mrs. Williamson Puts 18th Century in Nutshell Again at Monday Club,” *Argus*, 5 February 1937, p. 1.

the American Youth Act. The AYA was a bill that would have dramatically increased funding for federal youth and student aid; its main support came from the American Youth Congress, a broad coalition which annually organized mass conventions in Washington to lobby for the bill.<sup>18</sup> The national ASU leadership, in its pro-New Deal, Popular Front mode, supported the Youth Congress with all its might, and under Davenport's leadership, the Wesleyan ASU joined the advocacy. Davenport personally circulated a petition for the bill, collecting the signatures of nearly all the students employed by NYA funds and brought them to the pilgrimage. In an open letter to Wesleyan's NYA employees he conveyed the good news that, although Roosevelt had refused to commit to the Youth Act, he had promised to make the NYA a permanent agency, allaying students' fears that the agency would die when its funding expired at the end of that semester.<sup>19</sup> Davenport missed a Senate session to attend the convention, and the *Argus* criticized Davenport's advocacy, suggesting that he was placing the interests of "an unrecognized organization" (the ASU) below his duties to the student body.<sup>20</sup> Davenport replied in his report that the trip was consistent with his presidential duties because he was representing the one-sixth of the college body employed by the NYA.

After the controversy subsided, the Davenport presidency proved productive, and the ASU appeared less threatening. Davenport reformed student government elections to make political deals more difficult.<sup>21</sup> On Davenport's motion, the Senate officially recognized the ASU; the favorable editorial declared that the ASU was "a

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<sup>18</sup> Cohen, 189-92.

<sup>19</sup> "In The Editor's Mail," *Argus*, 25 February 1937, p. 2.

<sup>20</sup> Editorial, *Argus*, 22 February 1937, p. 2.

<sup>21</sup> "Senate Passes New Election Regulation," *Argus*, 10 May 1937, p. 1.

liberal, not radical” organization which had proved its value to the campus through speakers, films, the peace strikes, and its cooperation with the CA. In retrospect, the earlier controversy appeared “a tempest in a teapot”—recognition for the ASU merely entailed receiving yearbook points and a space in the freshman handbook. Indeed, the editors felt so little threatened by the Wesleyan ASU that they suggested that it was in danger of making itself a supplemental CA.<sup>22</sup> The ASU, increasingly under the influence of the national organization’s moderation, was becoming more acceptable to the campus.

In organizing the 1937 Peace Strike, the ASU continued its moderate tone. Chastened by the response to the strike the previous year, the organizing committee, led by ASUer John Philip Trinkaus, announced early on that attendance would not be mandatory and that any student could submit a resolution beforehand; all resolutions would be printed in the *Argus*.<sup>23</sup> The only resolution, submitted by the committee itself, was relatively moderate, resolving only “to keep America out of war.” It quoted from the official strike platform, a lukewarm compromise between pacifists and supporters of Spanish aid: “While advocating stringent neutrality legislation, we recognize that it may be inadequate.... Only by co-operation of the people of the world can permanent peace be established.”<sup>24</sup> Thomas Bodine, chairing the peace demonstration, stated that no “strike” was necessary because the administration supported the movement, but added “that the demonstration was being held to express the determination to maintain Wesleyan as a college and not as a military camp.” The urgency of the message was increasing: speaking for the students, John Kaltenbach

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<sup>22</sup> Editorial, *Argus*, 12 April 1937, p. 2.

<sup>23</sup> “Committee Outlines Strike Against War,” *Argus*, 12 April 1937, p. 3.

<sup>24</sup> “Notices,” *Argus*, 19 April 1937, p. 1.



declared, “the eleventh hour of Europe is approaching,” and Gaylord Douglass, the pacifist alumnus who had spoken at the 1935 strike, reminded anti-war activists “that information must be accompanied by action.”<sup>25</sup> Wesleyan’s pacifists opted for information alone, however: they followed up the strike by convincing the college to offer an interdisciplinary course on “The Problem of War.”<sup>26</sup> As they made their rapprochement with the campus, the radicals were losing their ability to organize active opposition to war.

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The opening of the 1937-38 school year marked Wesleyan fraternities’ worst rushing season in over a decade, prompting worry from the campus establishment. Only 65 percent of the largest incoming class in the school’s history pledged.<sup>27</sup> The *Argus* blamed the fraternities’ poor showing on the “improved social conditions for unaffiliated students” and on “general non-fraternity interference” during rushing week, such as reading tests, football practice, and classes.<sup>28</sup> Other college traditions appeared to be losing popularity as well. An attempt to revive “the old traditional bonfire and torchlight procession” the night before the Amherst football game failed; according to the editorial, students were too concerned with “the pressing problems of sociology, economics, and campus pseudo-radicalism” to support their team. The paper gave sarcastic suggestions for athletic rallies suited to the times, including “one of those all-campus peace strikes against Amherst and fascism” and “conducting a

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<sup>25</sup> “Hart, Krusé, Dutcher and Douglass Speak on Value of Peace in Nation-Wide Student Anti-War Demonstration,” *Argus*, 23 April 1937, p. 1.

<sup>26</sup> “Course On War to Be Presented Next Year,” *Argus*, 6 May 1937, p. 1.

<sup>27</sup> “Fraternities Pledge 141 Freshmen as Formal Rushing Period Ends,” *Argus*, 27 September 1937, p. 1.

<sup>28</sup> Editorial, *Argus*, 27 September 1937, p. 2.

poll in order to find out just how many people really do want to beat Amherst.”<sup>29</sup> The accusation that the radicals were to blame for students’ newfound seriousness was made explicitly in the humor column, which implied that “the head of Wesleyan’s Popular Front” had tried to set the incoming freshmen against fraternities in his welcome address.<sup>30</sup> The increase in studiousness was more likely due, however, to the sharp economic downturn that had occurred over the summer.

In fact, the student movement was beginning to decline as the world situation turned against pacifism and students grew pessimistic about the possibility of avoiding war. No Wesleyan student could ignore the movement towards war. Fred Fowler, a Wesleyan exchange student at Lingnan University in south China, told students in an *Argus* letter how the Japanese invasion and bombing of China forced him to evacuate, describing the smoking ruins of Shanghai and the air battles he witnessed on his trip down the Yangtze.<sup>31</sup> Germany, too, was increasingly warlike. When German exchange student Paul Jahn had told students at public talks the previous year that student life in Germany was rather like that in the United States and that the Nazi student groups resembled Wesleyan fraternities, smart students realized that he was propagandizing for the Nazi government, which knew a war was coming.<sup>32</sup> The *Argus* joke issue conveyed the darkening mood with its report of a fascist coup against the elected student government, featuring an eyewitness report of a mass execution of political opponents at the squash court.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Editorial, *Argus*, 25 October 1937, p. 2.

<sup>30</sup> “The Gadfly,” *Argus*, 27 September 1937, p. 2

<sup>31</sup> “Wesleyan Student Describes Drama and Horrors of Chino-Japanese War Scenes,” *Argus*, 11 October 1937, p. 1.

<sup>32</sup> “Jahn Finds German Student Opinion on Sports and Good Fellowship Like Ours,” *Argus*, 19 November 1936, p. 1.

<sup>33</sup> “Fascist Forces Gain Control of College Body Government,” *Argus*, 4 February 1938, p. 1.

Most painful for the radicals was the situation in Spain: with Franco's forces besieging Madrid, Wesleyan's pacifists felt helpless to aid the Republic. After the Wesleyan ASU heard Ralph Bates, another International Brigades leader on a national ASU tour, Clifton Davenport hastened to make clear that Bates did not represent the opinion of the Wesleyan ASU. Davenport admitted that the pacifists did not quite know what to do:

Should we as a group continue supporting the Oxford Pledge? Should we favor giving material aid to a legally constituted Spanish government occupied in suppressing a rebellion and a virtual invasion by Fascist powers which seems seriously to threaten world peace? Should we try to promote a boycott against Japan? I wish I knew the answers. These questions are some of the most troublesome ones which constitute a basis for pre-Convention discussion in the A.S.U.<sup>34</sup>

Pacifism no longer provided the clear guidance that it had when the Oxford Pledge first became popular. Indeed, many student radicals elsewhere had already abandoned pacifism in favor of collective security, the idea that the United States could check Fascist aggression and prevent war through arms sales, embargoes, and alliances with anti-fascist powers. Collective security presented a more benign image of the United States' military power as a potential force for democracy, in contrast with the pacifists' argument, implicit in the Oxford Pledge, that the United States military was inherently imperialistic. It was pushed hard by the Communists, who hoped for an alliance between the US and the USSR, but it quickly won the support of liberals who had supported aid to Spain, to whom it seemed a positive response to the problem of fascist aggression in contrast with the negativism of the pacifists.

The pacifists were in a weak position going into the American Student Union's December 1937 convention, which was the decisive contest between

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<sup>34</sup> "In The Editor's Mail," *Argus*, 8 November 1937, p. 2.

pacifism and collective security. The national leadership was split on the issue—Britton Harris, now a member of the Young Communist League and a worker in the ASU’s New York office, furiously debated pacifists at staff meetings—but most chapters had already swung behind collective security.<sup>35</sup> Although the pacifists vigorously presented their case in a drawn-out debate, the convention voted 282 to 108 to drop the Oxford Pledge and embrace collective security. Nine Wesleyan delegates witnessed the reversal firsthand.<sup>36</sup> In a report for the *Argus*, Davenport framed the foreign policy resolution as a “compromise” because the endorsement of collective security came with a condemnation of high military budgets and a demand for withdrawal of American troops abroad, but these points would have been adopted anyway if the Oxford Pledge still reigned.<sup>37</sup> Most opponents of collective security left the ASU immediately after the convention to form the Youth Committee Against War, giving the Communist-Liberal Popular Front coalition undisputed control of the ASU. The Wesleyan pacifists, however, remained in the ASU, leaving them isolated in the organization. They were increasingly isolated on campus, too, as radical pacifism fell out of favor. In a debate with student pacifist Oliver Stone on the Oxford Pledge, the liberal Professor Wilbur Snow repeated the arguments ASUers had heard at the convention, calling the Pledge “futile and negative” in contrast with collective security.<sup>38</sup>

To make matters worse, students generally were less interested in political engagement. The *Argus* ceased to be a progressive or critical voice. While earlier

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<sup>35</sup> Cohen, 171.

<sup>36</sup> “A.S.U. Will Hold Its National Convention,” *Argus*, 9 December 1937, p. 1.

<sup>37</sup> “Wesleyan Delegates to A.S.U. Convention Give Reports at Organization’s Meeting,” *Argus*, 10 January 1938, p. 4.

<sup>38</sup> “Negative Spirit Shown by Oxford Pledge, Says Snow,” *Argus*, 14 February 1938, p. 4.

boards had opposed “hell week,” during which fraternities sent their new initiates on exhausting and humiliating tasks, this year the paper published a diverting article on the “amusing and difficult” tasks the freshmen had to perform.<sup>39</sup> Thomas Bodine, in a letter to the editor, called the paper “worthless drivel” for its failure to take on serious issues of campus life such as dirty elections. However, the *Argus* was but a reflection of a general mood of apathy.<sup>40</sup> In this unsympathetic environment, the Wesleyan ASU performed a series of sporadic activities, without focusing on anything in particular. Roy Wilkins of the NAACP spoke, calling for lynching to be made a federal crime.<sup>41</sup> Oliver Stone ran for college body president to succeed Davenport, but lost.<sup>42</sup> Delegates from the Smith College ASU visited the campus for a joint meeting, and the president of the Christian Association at Smith spoke in chapel on “the means to insure peace.”<sup>43</sup> Nothing the group did attracted much attention.

With the 1938 Strike Against War, activists reasserted radical pacifism against the apathy on campus and the ASU’s rightward turn. The standard peace-strike ritual was becoming routine and losing momentum: although the Senate approved the strike by a close vote, some senators questioned “the worth of the movement to the Wesleyan college body.” In response, the radicals sought to bring back the militant spirit of the early anti-war movement. The Senate attempted to tone down the event, calling it a “Peace Demonstration” rather than a “Peace Strike,” but the Strike

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<sup>39</sup> “Fraternity Freshmen Undergo Varied Amusing and Difficult Hell Week Trials,” *Argus*, 21 February 1938, p. 1.

<sup>40</sup> “In The Editor’s Mail,” *Argus*, 7 March 1938, p. 2.

<sup>41</sup> “Ray Wilkins Speaks at A.S.U. Gathering,” *Argus*, 9 December 1937, p. 1.

<sup>42</sup> “Seven Nominees Seek Presidential Post in Tomorrow’s Election,” *Argus*, 13 January 1938, p. 1.

<sup>43</sup> “Peace Organizations of Smith College to Send Group Here This Week,” *Argus*, 8 November 1937, p. 2.

Committee refused to follow the Senate's change of name.<sup>44</sup> Writing for the Strike Committee, ASUer and CA member W. A. Winslow argued that the name "strike" was integral, conveying that "the Strike against War is more than a demonstration of pacifist sentiment; it is this plus a practical illustration of what this country may expect from its college students if it once again undertakes a foreign war," and claimed that the student strike was "the one practical technique so far developed" for putting student pacifist sentiment into action.<sup>45</sup> The *Argus*, however, opposed the name "strike":

The term strike carries in this country at the present time a stigma of violent, irrational, uncontrolled action. This demonstration... rather, should be a calm, deliberate, intellectual consideration of the problems connected with war and peace. If the people and the representatives of government feel that student demonstrations in favor of peace are nothing more than outlets for childish emotions, the whole intent and purpose of the student peace movement will be irretrievably lost...<sup>46</sup>

Against the radicals' incitement to militant activism, the editorial returned to the idea of informed advocacy that had been popular in 1932. Rather than resisting war, the editors argued, students should attempt to influence government policy through rational argument.

At the strike itself, the speakers upheld militant pacifism, but it did not resonate with the audience. Chair Joe Brown told the two hundred students assembled on the North College steps "that... the strike was to be a practical expedient in case of war," and speaker Jeffrey Campbell asserted that student Christian groups should "actively strike against war instead of passively carrying out a policy of isolation" and work to defeat rearmament bills and to transform the

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<sup>44</sup> "Report on Petition Heard by Senators," *Argus*, 7 March 1938, p. 1.

<sup>45</sup> "In The Editor's Mail," *Argus*, 21 March 1938, p. 2.

<sup>46</sup> "The Peace Strike," *Argus*, 21 April 1938, p. 1.

economic system.<sup>47</sup> Speaking at a forum afterward, Campbell rejected the idea that the capitalist government of the United States could promote peace, but not everyone was convinced, for several students argued in response that democratic nations should engage in economic sanctions against aggressors.<sup>48</sup> Wesleyan's strike was one of the few that maintained pacifism in defiance of the official ASU line, but the subsequent poll showed that it succeeded neither in promoting pacifism among isolationist students nor in preempting support for collective security.<sup>49</sup> Although nearly all of the only 170 students who responded to the poll still opposed direct military intervention, only 28 supported the Oxford Pledge, and half supported economic sanctions and other elements of collective security.<sup>50</sup> These results echoed the latest national student poll by the *Brown Daily Herald*, which indicated widely divergent opinions on Spain and Japan, support for the naval expansion bill then under consideration, and little support for the Oxford Pledge.<sup>51</sup> Student interest in peace issues was declining—spring dances overshadowed coverage of the strike in the *Argus*.

While the Wesleyan chapter tried to reassert radicalism, the national ASU was moving in the opposite direction. As the political tide turned against the far left, the ASU depoliticized itself, adapting itself to college life rather than challenging it. The contradiction which had been present in the ASU since its founding—the conflict between political activism and broad student appeal—came into play as the ASU

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<sup>47</sup> “Campbell Addresses 200 Peace Strikers,” *Argus*, 29 April 1938, p. 1.

<sup>48</sup> “Dr. Hornell Hart and Jeffrey Campbell Lead Discussions of Peace Attainment,” *Argus*, 29 April 1938, p. 1.

<sup>49</sup> Cohen, 181.

<sup>50</sup> “Peace Poll Results Show Campus Opinion,” *Argus*, 5 May 1938, p. 1.

<sup>51</sup> “Brown Daily Herald Poll Discloses Facts Concerning Student Opinions on Peace,” *Argus*, 25 April 1938, p. 1.

adopted the image of a group of ordinary college men and women and dropped any reference to leftist politics. At the 1937-38 convention, delegates participated in a mass football-style rally and sang the “Campus Stomp”: “From CO2 to Pi R Square / From the Great Garbo to Fred Astaire / From Kalamazoo to anywhere, / Everybody’s doin’ it, A\*S\*U’ in it.”<sup>52</sup> The message was that the ASU was a student organization first and a political organization second, if at all. As part of a national ASU tour, the famed burlesque dancer Sally Rand visited Wesleyan to deliver a speech in support of labor unions peppered with show-business anecdotes.<sup>53</sup> It was a perfectly good speech, but the national ASU’s choice of Rand rather than a labor leader or activist indicates the shallowness of its new image. With the Popular Fronters at its head, the ASU was giving up its own ability to militantly mobilize in favor of acceptance into college life. This rightward turn of the national ASU came at the worst possible time for Wesleyan’s pacifists—on the eve of a war crisis.

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By 1938, the United States had entered a conservative period that put a decisive end to the wave of radicalization on campus and off. After the defeat of Roosevelt’s “court packing” plan in summer 1937 and the economic downturn immediately afterward, the President lost the political momentum that had allowed him to institute sweeping reforms, and with the “Roosevelt recession” still crippling the nation, the Republicans gained in the November 1938 election. In Connecticut, voters ousted the Democratic governor and lieutenant governor, electing Wesleyan’s

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<sup>52</sup> Hal Draper, “The Student Movement of the Thirties: A Political History,” in *As We Saw the Thirties*, ed. Rita James Simon (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1967), 180; “ASU Swings the Nation,” *Student Advocate*, March 1938, p. 14, quoted in Eagan, 199.

<sup>53</sup> “Sally Rand Holds Crowd With Sagacious Lecture on Labor Unions...,” *Argus*, 23 May 1938, p. 1.



President McConaughy lieutenant governor after a campaign in which he attacked the growing power of the federal government, while in Congress, an anti-New Deal coalition formed between Southern Democrats and Midwestern Republicans.<sup>54</sup> Having staked much of their political capital on an extension of the New Deal in the form of the American Youth Act, young activists found themselves stymied by the stalemate in Washington.

The war that radicals and pacifists had warned about was imminent, and events on campus continually reminded students of the fact. Fascism was on the march: Franco's Aragon Offensive had split the Spanish Republic's territory in two, Japan was occupying the Chinese coast, and Hitler appeared unstoppable after his annexation of Austria and his diplomatic triumph at Munich that granted him much of Czechoslovakia. Sigmund Neumann, a German Jewish refugee and Wesleyan professor of sociology, told students that Britain was the only power that could stand in Hitler's way, and at Munich it had demonstrated that "London wanted peace, with or without honor."<sup>55</sup> German ambition presented itself even on campus. The *Argus* revealed that Germany had ordered all its exchange students in the United States to report on the attitudes of faculty, administrators, and students toward Germany and the "political and financial influences" behind these attitudes.<sup>56</sup> Later the paper reported a planned "hand-picked student army" to represent "the new German attitude of mind" at foreign universities and to recruit students to study in Germany.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> "President Concludes Gubernatorial Fight with Plea to Voters," *Argus*, 7 November 1938, p. 1; "Republicans Triumphant as Baldwin, McConaughy Are Swept Into Office," *Argus*, 11 November 1937, p. 1.

<sup>55</sup> "Dr. Neumann Speaks on Future of Czechs," *Argus*, 10 October 1938, p. 1.

<sup>56</sup> "Reich Tries to Gain Information from Its Exchange Students," *Argus*, 6 February 1939, p. 1

<sup>57</sup> "New Student Policy Announced by Nazis," *Argus*, 27 February 1939, p. 1.

Seventy professors and employees of the University, including McConaughy, telegraphed Roosevelt asking him to protest the persecution of Jews in Germany.<sup>58</sup> The United States appeared increasingly likely to get involved with the impending European war.

In spite of the darkening international situation, students were in no mood to organize against war. Prompted by the economic , anxious students concentrated even on academic work. The overall grade-point average rose, and the *Argus* published a new survey showing that students who concentrated on academics to the exclusion of college life were more likely to succeed.<sup>59</sup> Even advertisers sensed the change in attitude toward academics: one ad read simply “The Stetson Opera Hat: Summa Cum Laude.”<sup>60</sup> The situation was worsening from the point of view of defenders of college life. One student excoriated the student body for its apathy—not over any political question, but for not showing up to what was supposed to be a mass rally and torchlight parade the night before the Trinity football game. The writer blamed academics, claiming that a friend had excused himself from the rally with “Oh no, I have to pound an economics book,” and declared Wesleyan students were “a group of sheltered, vain, bespectacled intellectuals whose only aim is the betterment of scholastic standing.”<sup>61</sup> The editorial agreed, commenting that the very existence of college life was being threatened by “this spirit of every-body-for-himself.”<sup>62</sup> But such exhortations could do little against the economic insecurity that motivated the striving after higher grades.

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<sup>58</sup> “Members of Faculty Send Protests to F.D. Roosevelt,” *Argus*, 21 November 1938, p. 1

<sup>59</sup> “Other Campuses,” *Argus*, 8 December 1938, p. 2.

<sup>60</sup> Advertisement, *Argus*, 1 December 1938, p. 3.

<sup>61</sup> “In The Editor’s Mail,” *Argus*, 3 November 1938, p. 2.

<sup>62</sup> Editorial, *Argus*, 27 October 1938, p. 2.

As less affluent students devoted themselves to study, richer students absorbed themselves in the more diverting aspects of college life. In spite of the economic situation, the Prom that year was a lavish affair. The *Argus* described the elaborate decorations commissioned from a designer in Hartford:

Overhead there will be a concave ceiling, 100 x 150 feet, of a midnight blue color, representing the sky, and in this sky will be set chromium stars fitted with blinkers so that a winking effect will be given to the dancers. Silver broadcloth will be hung in a draped manner around the dance floor and will be sixteen feet in height. ... a canopy will lead from Wyllys Avenue up to the door of the Alumni Cage [Alumni Athletic Building, site of the present Usdan Center]...<sup>63</sup>

The event was hugely popular: the 450 tickets sold out within two days.<sup>64</sup> The *Argus*, meanwhile, became increasingly frivolous, printing many joke articles on the front page and carrying more and more advertisements.<sup>65</sup> The shallowness of the *Argus* is evident in a review of *Brother Rat*, a comedy film about student life at the Virginia Military Institute: far from critiquing militarism, the reviewer suggested that college life would be more fun if students had military-style rules to break.<sup>66</sup> To students looking to amuse themselves, campus radicalism seemed a fixture, no longer new or exciting. All those who remembered when activism at Wesleyan was fresh—in the days of the first peace demonstrations and the Colt picketing—had graduated.

The radicals themselves appeared demoralized and in retreat. Kirby Page, speaking at DKE, predicted that “the chances of avoiding war are one in ten,” and resorted to prayer: “We must pray for the end of capitalism, for the present order runs

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<sup>63</sup> “Contract for Prom Decoration Awarded,” *Argus*, 27 October 1938, p. 1.

<sup>64</sup> “Junior Prom Tickets Completely Pledged,” *Argus*, 3 November 1938, p. 1.

<sup>65</sup> For instance, full-page advertisement, *Argus*, 5 December 1938, p. 4.

<sup>66</sup> “Argus Reporter Advocates Military Rules and Regulations for Wesleyan,” *Argus*, 8 December 1938, p. 1.

exactly counter to the true ideals of the Kingdom of God.”<sup>67</sup> The Wesleyan ASU became dormant over the course of fall 1938 due to a leadership vacuum after Clifton Davenport graduated, and perhaps also a lack of support for the pacifist chapter from the pro-collective security national office.<sup>68</sup> The only remaining vehicle for pacifism on campus was the Christian Association, and its members were also pessimistic. At a Boston antiwar convention attended by members of the CA, discussion focused on a proposal to join the “Keep America Out of War Committee”: that war would occur was a settled question.<sup>69</sup> In spite of the urgency of the situation, the CA performed educational work rather than student organizing, broadcasting radio programs in Hartford and New Haven intended to “untangl[e] the confusion in many minds concerning the action of the United States in the present war crisis.”<sup>70</sup>

The pessimism about the international situation and the decline of the student movement bred isolationism rather than pacifism among students. Most of students had been isolationist throughout the decade, but in the past, radicals had been able to capture isolationist sentiment and turn it towards left-wing causes. Now, some radical themes still resonated, but there was no activist energy behind them. In one of its only political editorials that year, the *Argus* editors, after relating the Nazi attempt to spy on institutions of American education, urged students to guard their academic freedom. “We believe that in a war against dictatorship democracy will be lost even if its exponents win.... Let us keep our institutions of learning free from any taint of totalitarianism and let us keep them safe by remaining at peace. It is safest to fight

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<sup>67</sup> “Kirby Page Stresses Need for Intelligent Economic Re-Planning,” *Argus*, 15 December 1938, p. 1.

<sup>68</sup> Editorial, *Argus*, 16 February 1939, p. 2.

<sup>69</sup> “Wesleyan Represented at Anti-War Conference to be Held in Boston,” *Argus*, 14 November 1938, p. 3.

<sup>70</sup> “Christian Association Formulates Program,” *Argus*, 21 October 1938, p. 1.

against Fascism at home.”<sup>71</sup> The rhetoric could have been copied out of a student pacifist pamphlet, but it was being used to support a narrow isolationism rather than the anti-war internationalism of the radicals, and it did not translate into any new organizing.

In February 1939 a few students tried to reorganize the ASU. They were not very successful: only six showed up to the reorganization meeting. The new group elected the cabinet of Hubert Rees, Edwin Johnson, and Myron White, all relative newcomers who had not been leaders in the past. Clifton Davenport returned to campus to deliver a report on the ASU’s most recent convention, held in New York the past December; the ASUers heard that the dispiriting news that the convention had explicitly supported American armament and approved of voluntary ROTC.<sup>72</sup> The delegates had near-unanimously supported the resolution proposed by the leadership, which affirmed that unilateral disarmament by the United States was not possible “in the present circumstances” and directed the National Executive Committee to “undertake... a study of what are the defense needs of the U.S. and how they can be carried through with the greatest guarantee of peace and democracy and with a recognition that militarism is by its nature wasteful and injurious in its effects on human personality.”<sup>73</sup>

Oliver Stone, a Wesleyan senior who had served two years on the ASU National Executive Committee, led the hopeless pacifist opposition at the convention. Stone proposed a substitute motion which turned the negative into a positive,

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<sup>71</sup> Editorial, *Argus*, 9 February 1938, p. 2.

<sup>72</sup> “New A.S.U. Officers Elected at Meeting,” *Argus*, 13 February 1939, p. 3.

<sup>73</sup> American Student Union, “Keep Democracy Working by Making It Serve Human Needs: Report of Proceedings, Fourth National Convention,” *Students for a Democratic Society Papers*, Tamiment Library, New York University, 67.

“urg[ing] the United States Government to renew its advocacy of multilateral world disarmament” and explicitly opposed Roosevelt’s proposal to expand the US Navy. On the floor of the convention, Stone debated with ASU Executive Secretary Joseph Lash, a former Socialist who had converted to collective security:

*Stone:* ... What [the leadership’s resolution] implies is that “We recognize that, practically speaking, armaments are the most important factor in checking aggression today. Therefore, let us join and win in the arms race.” Why not put this in so many words, if we believe it?... The issue before us in this part of the peace resolution is whether or not we should support American armament to the great extent necessarily required by our acceptance of a foreign policy of collective security.<sup>74</sup>

Lash, speaking at great length, argued in response that it was isolationism, not collective security, that required heavy armament: isolationists would have the United States make itself a fortress to avoid military engagement, while collective security could stop aggression in the first place and reduce the need for arms. His optimism about collective security was exemplified in the disastrously wrong prediction, “Let no one conjure up the bogey-man of a Japanese attack on the United States, if we deny our resources to Japan. Japan is having sufficient trouble with China to take on another adversary.”<sup>75</sup> For Lash, collective security, rather than pacifism, fulfilled the anti-war movement’s goal of keeping war out of the world, not just keeping the US out of war.

Stone then clashed with Bert Witt, national head of the Young Communist League, who argued that “there are cases in this world, and they exist now in Spain and China, in which the defense of democracy by arms is as important as the defense of democracy by schools.” Stone suggested that Witt’s appeal to democracy was

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 67-68.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 68.

simplistic, reasserting the pacifist argument that war and militarism undermined democracy: “Does fascism threaten us primarily at home, or does European fascism threaten us abroad? Which is most important? The institutions in the United States which lead to fascism are the most important.” A few years earlier, student radicals would have derided the idea of fighting to defend democracy as reminiscent of World War propaganda, but now, with the Communists backing collective security and most of the pacifists gone, Stone was entirely isolated. His motion lost, 16 to 358.

Immediately afterwards, the convention voted by a similar margin for the resolution on voluntary ROTC.<sup>76</sup> After this defeat, Stone evidently felt that the ASU was no longer worth working with—he did not attend the Wesleyan reorganization meeting.

Despite participation in a new national campaign, the refounded Wesleyan ASU never got off the ground. The pacifist group’s hands were tied by its disagreement with the national ASU, and it avoided making an issue of foreign policy. Instead, the group circulated the ASU’s “Human Rights Roll Call,” a national petition demanding “equality of educational opportunity,” “cultural activities accessible to the people,” civil liberties for all races, the conservation of natural resources, and other measures in support of “wider utilization of the resources of government to meet human needs.” The Wesleyan group could support the petition because it called for progressive government programs, but the national ASU intended it as a complement to collective security, part of its campaign for “education to defend democracy.” The language of the petition reflected the Communists’ strategy of building the widest possible liberal coalition at the expense of radical demands: the wording was vague enough that even President McConaughy, an

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 79-80.

opponent of large federal programs, could sign.<sup>77</sup> National ASU leader Joseph Lash visited the campus to speak on “Education for Democracy,” which he defined to include support of academic freedom, “a more collective atmosphere in the classroom, professor and student working together,” and other ways of using education to “protect democracy and apply it to the ever-increasing problem of human needs.”<sup>78</sup> In addition to this campaign, the refounded ASU continued the previous year’s tame program, including the Monday Morning Forums, teaching at CCC camps, and cooperating with the CA in the peace strike and radio broadcasts.<sup>79</sup>

There was little sympathy or even tolerance for the refounded ASU. It was common knowledge by now that the Communist Party controlled the national ASU, and although the Wesleyan ASUers were not Communist, they found themselves the target of anti-communist suspicion.<sup>80</sup> The *Argus*’ gossip column printed “Wesleyan ASUnder—A Fable,” an allegory about a group of radical beavers who are tolerated—“after all, beaverland was more or less democratic, and anyone could cavort about and wallow in martyr’s complexes to his heart’s content”—until the group is taken over by a skunk. The moral suggested that even non-communist radicals were not to be trusted: “trust not thy sense of hearing alone; trust also thy sense of smell.”<sup>81</sup> The humor column printed an attack on the ASU in the style of the Old Testament, in which the six members of the ASU appear as “six wise men smoking black cigars” who plot to scatter “vials of plague” over the earth.<sup>82</sup> The

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<sup>77</sup> “In The Editor’s Mail,” *Argus*, 23 February 1939, p. 2; “A.S.U. Plan Points to Social Equality,” *Argus*, 16 February 1939, p. 1.

<sup>78</sup> “Lash Hits Attackers of Academic Freedom,” *Argus*, 23 February 1939, p. 1.

<sup>79</sup> Editorial, *Argus*, 16 February 1939, p. 2.

<sup>80</sup> Editorial, *Argus*, 16 February 1939, p. 2.

<sup>81</sup> “Gadfly,” *Argus*, 16 February 1939, p. 2.

<sup>82</sup> “Off the Cuff,” *Argus*, 23 February 1939, p. 2.



mocking, which contrasts sharply with the 1934 editorial board's opposition to journalistic redbaiting, reflected the decline of liberal sentiment on campus. With so little support, the ASU ceased activity before the end of the semester, in spite of a drive for new members and funds.<sup>83</sup>

The 1939 Parley on American Foreign Policy demonstrated the extent to which the activist impulse had dissipated. The *Argus* editors urged students to inform themselves on the issues, but did not take a political position, and there was little of the optimism of the radicals that student non-cooperation could prevent another war.<sup>84</sup> The opposition to war that Wesleyan students heard was more patriotic isolationism than internationalist pacifism: the speakers included North Dakota Senator Gerald P. Nye, who had led a Senate committee which had accused the banks and arms manufacturers of leading the US into the World War, as well as Smedley Butler, a retired Marine Corps general who had participated in the American invasions of the Philippines and Haiti and military actions in Central America and the Caribbean, but had since grown sharply critical of such incursions. Other speakers debated collective security, cooperation with South American leaders against German influence, the merits of the Munich settlement, and the consequences for the United States of Japanese victory over China.<sup>85</sup> Unlike the 1931 Parley, where students hoped for disarmament in spite of the speakers' pessimism, the subsequent poll showed a shift away from pacifism: although most students still described themselves as either total or partial isolationists, an overwhelming majority supported aid to

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<sup>83</sup> "Lash Hits Attackers of Academic Freedom," *Argus*, 23 February 1939, p. 1.

<sup>84</sup> Editorial, *Argus*, 6 March 1939, p. 2.

<sup>85</sup> "Wesleyan Parley on Foreign Policy to Be Concluded Today," *Argus*, 10 March 1939, p. 1; "Beals, Butler Score Pan-American Policy," "Eclectic Forum Led by Schuman, Bell," "Peffer and Shuster Bring Parley to End," *Argus*, 13 March 1939, p. 1.

democratic nations at war.<sup>86</sup>

The 1939 peace demonstration was anemic compared to previous years'. With the ASU out of the picture, it was sponsored by the Christian Association alone. The call for the demonstration was muted, merely stating that "many students who will attend the meetings on April 20th are convinced that this nation need not and certainly should not become involved in war. Some students are working in an attempt to achieve this end."<sup>87</sup> Robert Arnold, chair of the CA peace committee, declared that the event was a demonstration, not a strike, and that the CA aimed "to take away all distasteful radicalism, and to go about it in as normal and forceful a way as possible."<sup>88</sup> The speakers were the liberal Prof. Schattschneider and the pacifist Prof. Krusé. The meeting was held as an extension of the ordinary morning chapel period, which took the political edge off the event: the *Argus* editors noted that "when the Administration devotes chapel period to such an exercise and shortens classes to allow for it, the whole thing tends to become as perfunctory and matter-of-fact as a fire drill in high school."<sup>89</sup> The editors did not think the event notable enough to devote an article to it. The student anti-war movement at Wesleyan was dead, a casualty of the rightward turn in US politics as well as the lack of support for radical pacifist organizing from the national ASU.

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<sup>86</sup> "Student Poll Gives Strong Support to Isolationist Policy," *Argus*, 30 March 1939, p. 1.

<sup>87</sup> "In The Editor's Mail," *Argus*, 17 April 1939, p. 2.

<sup>88</sup> "Annual Peace Rally Sponsored by C.A.," *Argus*, 17 April 1939, p. 1.

<sup>89</sup> Editorial, *Argus*, 17 April 1939, p. 2.

## Chapter 5

### The Road to War

By the time students returned to campus in September, Europe was aflame, with the German and Soviet armies overwhelming Poland and hostilities commencing between England, France, and Germany. Although it had little immediate effect on college life, the war was treated seriously and discussed earnestly in the *Argus*. Students pessimistically compared the war to the one in 1914: the *Argus*, probing its archives, found that Wesleyan students in 1914 had been as sure as in 1939 that the US would remain neutral, although “this time there is no hopeful talk of peace.”<sup>1</sup> Students received eyewitness reports of the war’s negative effect on daily life and society in England from John Groel, a Wesleyan exchange student at the University of the Southwest in Exeter. In one letter, Groel described a child who cried when her mother took away her gas mask, because “she had come to look upon it as a symbol of safety, actually feeling a kind of affection for the hideous thing.”<sup>2</sup> Later he described the disruptive effect of the draft and increased taxes on education, quoting a student newspaper editorial that “for the first time since 1870 compulsory education does not exist in this country, and the damage that is being done to the health, morale, and education of the children is incalculable.”<sup>3</sup> He portrayed the wartime

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<sup>1</sup> “Wesleyan Undergraduates of 1914 Sure of U.S. Neutrality,” *Argus*, 5 October 1939, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> “Exchange Students in England Pessimistic About War,” *Argus*, 26 October 1939, p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> “Exchange Scholar Reports on War,” *Argus*, 26 February 1940, p. 1.

centralization of the British government as comparable to “the best Hitleristic efforts,” and maintained that nearly all his English classmates at school thought that entry into the war would be “a definite mistake on the part of the States, and a possible beginning of a general entanglement.”<sup>4</sup>

Although they took the war seriously, Wesleyan students treated it as a distant concern—there was no reason yet to regard it as the Second World War. There were a few war-related campaigns: the *Argus* endorsed Roosevelt’s proposed “cash-and-carry” policy of selling arms to the Allies, as did McConaughy in defiance his party, and the student Senate, overriding the rule that prohibited charitable collections, allowed students to collect relief money for Finland after it was invaded by the USSR.<sup>5</sup> For the most part, however, students took President McConaughy’s advice and continued college life as normal. Seasonal dances and the Prom attracted as much interest as ever, and school spirit revived spectacularly. Before the Williams game students executed “Old Eph Williams” in effigy several times, spelled out “BEAT WILLIAMS” in burning letters on the hill, and took part in a torchlight rally and parade that ended in “riots” on Main Street.<sup>6</sup> When the Christian Association brought Norman Thomas to campus once again to speak in favor of US neutrality, attendance was sparse, prompting yet another editorial denunciation of student “indifference” to the prominent speakers who visited campus.<sup>7</sup> Thomas himself attacked the “apathy” of college men in an *Argus* interview, and in chapel, suggested that college men had lost interest in solving the world crisis, instead seeking only

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<sup>4</sup> “In The Editor’s Mail,” *Argus*, 22 February 1940, p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Editorial, *Argus*, 9 October 1939, p. 2; McConaughy Talks on ‘Wesleyan and War’ in Chapel,” *Argus*, 20 October 1939, p. 1; Editorial, *Argus*, 15 February 1940, p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> “In The Editor’s Mail,” “School Spirit High Before Game,” *Argus*, 13 November 1939, p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Editorial, *Argus*, 12 October 1939, p. 2.

their immediate self-interest: “Our educational system has failed if college men go out into the world as politicians, and not with a sincere desire for truth.”<sup>8</sup> In his chapel address, Thomas argued that the United States should stay out of the war to “demonstrate to Europe that democracy will work,” and that anything short of absolute neutrality would draw the US into war, since Germany would attempt to sabotage American manufacturing if the US sold munitions to the Allies.<sup>9</sup>

But not even Norman Thomas could bring back pacifism as a force at Wesleyan. Student opinion was anti-interventionist, but it was a narrow, patriotic isolationism, concerned with avoiding American involvement in another catastrophe, rather than the internationalist pacifism of the early student movement which had hoped to create a world free of war. One student described with suspicion the “disturbing” influence of “British propaganda” in American media, such as the impossible story that Germany was parachuting mines into British harbors and rivers, and suggested that Britain was plotting to draw the United States into the war.<sup>10</sup> Thomas Meeker, a CA member and editor of the *Argus*, cofounded and was elected to the steering committee of a new national student organization, the patriotically-named American Independence League. The League vowed to oppose “all propaganda designed to lead us into a European war,” as well as war profiteering, the extension of credit to belligerent powers, and the civil liberties violations that accompanied war.<sup>11</sup> Meeker formed a chapter of the League at Wesleyan, although it was not active for

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<sup>8</sup> “Thomas Criticizes Love of Power,” *Argus*, 12 October 1939, p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> “Thomas Warns U.S.A. to Keep Out of War,” *Argus*, 12 October 1939, p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> “As I See It,” *Argus*, 11 December 1939, p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> “Students Organize to Keep U.S. Out of World Conflict,” *Argus*, 23 October 1939, p. 1.

long—Meeker was won over to collective security the following year.<sup>12</sup>

In spite of their passionate opposition to war, the pacifists at the Christian Association failed to present an effective alternative to isolationism. In December 1939, the group organized a “World Fellowship Weekend” in which students from Europe, Japan, and China visited campus to discuss international issues with students; they concurred that the greatest threat to the world was an “over-emphasis on nationalism” and that education could ensure peace, but in a world at war, this must have sounded rather hollow.<sup>13</sup> The CA also brought John Swomley of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, who argued that pacifists should work for a negotiated solution to the war, giving the example of a British social worker who had interviewed Hitler and was campaigning for the US to act as an intermediary between the combatants—an approach which he termed “Positive Pacifism.”<sup>14</sup> In response, one student argued that a negotiated solution was impossible: “Mediation in the present war would be the equivalent of a German victory, if we may judge on the only fair basis, namely the past and present record of the belligerents.”<sup>15</sup> Pacifists were unable to produce any realistic strategies for ending the war.

Nationally, the student left was discredited and could no longer offer an alternative. After the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the Communist Party reversed overnight its support for collective security and now denounced the war between France, England, and Germany as imperialist. The position in itself was fairly popular, but this visible demonstration of the party’s subservience to Moscow

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<sup>12</sup> “Meeker Will Form Chapter of A.I.L.,” *Argus*, 6 November 1939, p. 1.

<sup>13</sup> “Education Is Cited As Way To Achieve World Peace,” *Argus*, 11 December 1939, p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> “Program of Positive Pacifism Seen As Basis For Real Peace,” *Argus*, 22 April 1940, p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> “In The Editor’s Mail,” *Argus*, 2 May 1940, p. 2.

caused the party to lose most of its sympathy. The Young Communists successfully used their position of power to force the new line on the American Student Union, but so many pro-collective-security liberals quit the group that it became little more than the YCL under a different name.<sup>16</sup> The rump ASU tried to recapture the support of pacifists—the Christian Association received an invitation to the ASU’s 1939 convention—but the YCLers’ lack of integrity had so poisoned the political atmosphere as to make this impossible. The *Argus* reported unsympathetically on the convention, where the delegates, hand-picked by local Communist organizers, overwhelmingly rejected a motion condemning the USSR’s invasion of Finland.<sup>17</sup>

Anti-communism on campus became more prevalent, and it was substantive criticism, not the knee-jerk prejudice of earlier years. After Clarence Hathaway, editor of the Communist *Daily Worker*, spoke at the 1940 Parley, one “Truthlover” attacked him in the *Argus*, arguing that his speech contradicted the obvious facts that Chamberlain, far from plotting imperialist war, had done everything he could to come to an understanding with Hitler and that freedom of speech and of religion did not exist in the Soviet Union.<sup>18</sup> Edwin Johnson, one of the leaders of the final incarnation of the Wesleyan ASU, responded by changing the subject, arguing that freedom of speech did not truly exist in the United States and pointing to the recent conviction of Communist leader Earl Browder on forgery charges as one of “the most flagrant violations of civil liberties in our history.”<sup>19</sup> “Truthlover” responded witheringly: “...has anybody hindered Mr. Browder from talking at length? Does anybody hinder

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<sup>16</sup> Cohen, 297-98.

<sup>17</sup> “A.S.U. Sponsors Student Campaign Against War,” *Argus*, 27 November 1939, p. 1; “Soviets Escape Vote of Censure by A.S.U.,” *Argus*, 8 January 1940, p. 2.

<sup>18</sup> “In The Editor’s Mail,” *Argus*, 25 March 1940, p. 2.

<sup>19</sup> “In The Editor’s Mail,” *Argus*, 28 March 1940, p. 2.

Mr. Hathaway from talking and printing his falsehoods? How long does Mr. Johnson think they could do that in Russia?”<sup>20</sup> A similar exchange ensued after eight undergraduates signed a letter to the *Daily Worker* protesting Browder’s conviction. The gossip column reprinted the letter and ridiculed the writers, calling the propagandistic *Daily Worker* “an intellectual house of ill-fame” and “like a comic strip, but without the pictures.”<sup>21</sup> The editorial weighed in, attacking the hypocrisy of Communist appeals to free speech: “Comrades may scream about the glory of Communism, but they would not for a moment have democratic freedom of speech revoked... Yet they would employ our liberal form of government to set up a shibboleth that will not tolerate opposition or freedom.”<sup>22</sup> The Communists and those associated with them had lost all intellectual credibility among the bulk of students.

Apart from the ASU, the student movement lingered on, but it was hurt by the stigma of communism. At the 1940 American Youth Congress, Communist sympathizers openly booed President Roosevelt when, in a speech to the delegates, he declared it “pure unadulterated twaddle” that the US would become involved in an imperialist war if it granted a loan to Finland, which had been invaded by the Soviet Union.<sup>23</sup> The Wesleyan students who attended the Congress told their classmates that most of the delegates were there simply to lobby for the American Youth Act and that the Communists had merely tried to steal the limelight.<sup>24</sup> The booing, however, dominated media coverage of the event, and the gossip column mocked the three attendees, terming them “brothers over at Sigma Nu, and campus pinks” who, it

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<sup>20</sup> “In The Editor’s Mail,” *Argus*, 22 April 1940, p. 2.

<sup>21</sup> Gadfly, *Argus*, 25 March 1940, p. 2; “Gadfly,” *Argus*, 22 April 1940, p. 2.

<sup>22</sup> Editorial, 22 April 1940, p. 2.

<sup>23</sup> “Roosevelt Assails Soviet in Address at Youth Congress,” *Argus*, 12 February 1940, p. 1.

<sup>24</sup> “Forum Discusses Youth Movement,” *Argus*, 22 February 1940, p. 1.



implied, had blindly followed Communist orders.<sup>25</sup> The atmosphere discouraged even activism that was not connected with the Communist Party: when the pacifist Youth Committee Against War called for a 1940 peace strike, Wesleyan, like most other campuses, ignored it.<sup>26</sup> Although isolationism remained popular, pacifism had lost its political momentum, and students were not willing to stand with a discredited movement.

The next academic year, organized pacifism suffered even further setbacks. France had fallen to the Nazis over the summer. Roosevelt signed the Selective Training and Service Act in September 1940, bringing about the first peacetime draft in United States history. The *Argus* carried the draft notice on the front page of the paper: “*Without fail*, all male members of the Wesleyan community, i.e. faculty, staff, students, *must* register... Failure to register renders one liable to a fine of \$10,000, or five years’ imprisonment, or both.”<sup>27</sup> Of the 176 students who registered, three declared themselves conscientious objectors, although there was no process for recognizing objectors.<sup>28</sup> Pro-intervention students now organized, forming a local chapter of the Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies. The Committee’s leadership included several articulate students, including two members of the *Argus* board and Thomas Meeker, who had been won over from the American Independence League; these students began to assert the case for aid in the *Argus* and at public forums.<sup>29</sup> The *Argus*, unsurprisingly, endorsed the new group, declaring “our best

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<sup>25</sup> “Gadfly,” *Argus*, 15 February 1940, p. 2.

<sup>26</sup> Cohen, 307.

<sup>27</sup> “Registration Notice,” *Argus*, 14 October 1940, p. 1.

<sup>28</sup> “218 From Wesleyan Register for Draft,” *Argus*, 17 October 1940, p. 1.

<sup>29</sup> “Committee for Aid to Allies Defines Primary Aims,” *Argus*, 31 October 1940, p. 1.

defense is to keep war away from American shores” by aiding Britain.<sup>30</sup> The following semester fifty-eight faculty, including McConaughy, formed a parallel group, the “Committee of ’41,” to promote research that would aid the Allied war effort.<sup>31</sup>

The Wesleyan campus left organized one last time under the leadership of Edwin Johnson. Johnson was a poor spokesman, coming across as more dogmatic than principled, and he was widely criticized. In an *Argus* guest column, Johnson asserted that war was completely incompatible with social justice: “In our attempts to save democracy at home, we will have invoked the use of the very totalitarian methods we supposedly abhor... we will no longer have a democracy to protect.” Aiding the Allies would mechanically draw the United States into the war: “There is no such thing as giving ‘aid short of men’ to the Allies. The last war aptly demonstrated this. First tanks, then ‘obsolete’ destroyers, and now Army bombers—all this can[not] but lead up to the final logical shipment—that of soldiers.” Johnson dismissed the idea that the United States could not exist in a world dominated by totalitarian states, and declared Britain was fighting for its colonies alone. It was a simplistic argument, compounded by his final belligerent “I stand by what I have said, be it right or wrong.”<sup>32</sup> In response, liberal Professor Norman Ware accused Johnson of “an almost willful refusal to think.”<sup>33</sup> S. C. Reed, one of the leaders of the Committee to Aid the Allies, wrote that Johnson’s argument was based on the rigid application of pacifist dogma without reference to the actual world situation:

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<sup>30</sup> Editorial, *Argus*, 31 October 1940, p. 2

<sup>31</sup> “Faculty Committee Is Organized to Defend American Principles,” *Argus*, 9 January 1941, p. 1.

<sup>32</sup> Edwin Johnson, “As I See It,” *Argus*, 14 October 1940, p. 2.

<sup>33</sup> “In The Editor’s Mail,” *Argus*, 21 October 1940, p. 2.

“[Johnson] dogmatically asserts that England is ‘fighting for her colonies and hers alone,’ and refuses to go beyond that point. He does not see what England is fighting *against*—the dark forces of Nazism and world revolution.”<sup>34</sup> There was a more thoughtful case to be made against intervention. John Groel, the Wesleyan student who had studied in England, argued that “democracy is as much a state of mind as it is a form of government,” a state of mind which he could see being destroyed in Britain by the war: “I would gladly forget the enthusiasm with which some college girls spoke of the bombs destined to blast other women’s homes, to ‘give the Germans a taste of their own medicine.’”<sup>35</sup> But although Johnson was a particularly poor exponent of anti-interventionism, his reception illustrates the marked reduction in isolationist sentiment.

Johnson’s organizing was no more successful than his *Argus* columns. He founded a Socialist Club, which later changed its name to the Progressive Club.<sup>36</sup> The club’s advocacy for Norman Thomas in the 1940 Presidential election failed: in the *Argus* poll, Thomas won only 11 votes (all write-ins, as the editors had not bothered to put his name on the ballot).<sup>37</sup> With such a small constituency, the Progressive Club could not be very active, and it kept a low profile. The group occasionally heard speakers, including local Communist Emily Pierson, had discussion meetings on various issues, and briefly circulated petitions against the Southern poll tax.<sup>38</sup> Johnson publicly debated Meeker on the question of aid to England. While Meeker argued that British control of the Atlantic kept the United

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<sup>34</sup> S.C. Reed, “As I See It,” *Argus*, 17 October 1940, p. 2.

<sup>35</sup> John Groel, “As I See It,” *Argus*, 24 October 1940, p. 1.

<sup>36</sup> “Political Clubs Now Organized; Various Activities Slated,” *Argus*, 21 October 1940, p. 1.

<sup>37</sup> “Willkie Wins Easily in Argus Election Poll,” *Argus*, 4 November 1940, p. 1.

<sup>38</sup> “Notice,” *Argus*, 12 May 1940, p. 4; “Against Poll Tax,” *Argus*, 12 May 1940, p. 2.

States safe, Johnson responded that the British-German war was a local conflict in which the US had no interest, and repeated his argument that there could not be aid short of war.<sup>39</sup> If the debate changed any minds, it was not in the direction of pacifism; circumstances were pushing students towards support for aid to Britain. A student poll conducted by the Progressive Club showed that, although most students still opposed actual entry into the war unless American soil was invaded, an overwhelming majority supported military aid.<sup>40</sup>

The Christian Association brought Norman Thomas to campus one last time to speak against involvement in the war. He argued that the United States' increasing support for British war aims would lead to direct military involvement, for Britain could emerge victorious only by occupying the Continent, which would require American troops. He suggested that the President should instead mediate between England and Germany to encourage a negotiated peace: "Perhaps it would fail, but if peace were established, even an armed peace, the mad hypnotism of war might be broken, the peoples of the world might see the downward path they were taking, whatever the principles, and there would again be peace in our time."<sup>41</sup> The scenario did not sound plausible to students: the *Argus* responded that "manifestly there is nothing to be gained by dealing with Hitler who has set a new record in dealing in broken promises," and contrasted Thomas' speech unfavorably with the "positive program" of the faculty Committee of '41.<sup>42</sup>

Support for the Allies intensified over the course of the year. It was

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<sup>39</sup> "Wesleyan Political Forum Debates Aid to Allies Question," *Argus*, 11 November 1940, p. 1.

<sup>40</sup> "Students Approve Aid to England," *Argus*, 25 November 1940, p. 3.

<sup>41</sup> "Thomas Presents His Views on the Present War," *Argus*, 9 January 1941, p. 1.

<sup>42</sup> Editorial, *Argus*, 9 January 1941, p. 1.

acknowledged that enormous fortunes were at stake—the war was now considered the “Second World War.”<sup>43</sup> The Committee of ’41, in response to the German destruction of British shipping, urged the US to begin convoying its aid shipments, a move which would risk direct involvement in fighting.<sup>44</sup> Students were no longer anti-interventionist: in an *Argus* poll, an overwhelming majority supported the draft and a majority stated that they would support US entry into the war if Britain appeared certain to lose without it.<sup>45</sup> The same was true of students across the United States.<sup>46</sup> When the Youth Committee Against War called a 1941 peace strike, the *Argus* denounced it: “They would have us divorce America from the human race and build a self-contained hermitage of 130 million people, totally oblivious to the fate of other peoples equally desirous of peace, security, and independence—which benefits they would selfishly guarantee to themselves alone.”<sup>47</sup> It was no longer possible to imagine a world free from war—pacifism now appeared mere myopic isolationism.

War seemed inevitable by fall 1941. There was no opposition to war on Wesleyan’s campus—Johnson and every other students who remembered an active ASU had graduated. Instead, sixty students stayed on campus over the summer to aid the United States’ rearmament efforts by working in military industries, including some who worked in the Colt factory Wesleyan students had picketed six years earlier.<sup>48</sup> In November, the *Argus* editors predicted that the US would go to war with Germany “within a comparatively short space of time—a matter of weeks, or, at best,

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<sup>43</sup> Editorial, *Argus*, 6 February 1941, p. 2.

<sup>44</sup> “Committee of ’41 Urges Convoy Aid,” *Argus*, 1 May 1941, p. 2.

<sup>45</sup> “Wesleyan Student Body Registers Opinions on Foreign Policy,” *Argus*, 8 May 1941, p. 1.

<sup>46</sup> Cohen, 315-16.

<sup>47</sup> Editorial, *Argus*, 18 April 1941, p. 2.

<sup>48</sup> “Wesleyan Students Aid Defense,” *Argus*, 18 September 1941, p. 3.

months.”<sup>49</sup> With Germany attacking United States ships and Britain looking more and more beleaguered, the prediction was not controversial, and an *Argus* poll of Wesleyan and six other schools showed that most students supported intervention—a majority supported either expansion of lend-lease aid, which would inevitably draw the US into the war, or immediate war on Germany.<sup>50</sup> The only surprise about the declaration of war in December was that it was against Japan before Germany.

When war was declared, Wesleyan students rushed to do their part. The *Argus* urged that Wesleyan institute an ROTC program, and the Senate immediately voted to cancel Prom and spring dances.<sup>51</sup> The paper told students of “the brilliant record of war-time service” that Wesleyan professors contributed in the First World War, without a word on their subsequent denunciations of war that the *Argus* had publicized in 1934, nor on the perversion of the university’s intellectual mission and the corruption of college life in the First World War that Thomas Bodine had described.<sup>52</sup> No one walked out of class; there was no mass refusal to fight. There was no political alternative to war, and almost nobody would have wished it otherwise.

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<sup>49</sup> Editorial, *Argus*, 3 November 1941, p. 2.

<sup>50</sup> “Prevalence of Interventionism Is Shown by Student Poll,” *Argus*, 3 November 1941, p. 1.

<sup>51</sup> Editorial, *Argus*, 8 December 1941, p. 2; “College Body Elections Tues., Prom, Spring Parties Dropped,” *Argus*, 8 January 1941, p. 1.

<sup>52</sup> “Twenty Wesleyan Faculty Men Saw Service in World War I,” *Argus*, 12 January 1941, p. 1.

## Conclusion

There are always radicals, but only at certain times do they exercise influence. The 1930s was one of those times, when the upheaval of the Depression created a political opening that allowed political radicals to gain a following in labor unions, social movements, and that unlikeliest of places—universities. Radical activists were never more than a small minority at Wesleyan or at any other school, but the conditions of the time gave the radicals the opportunity to mobilize large sections the student body behind them. On Wesleyan’s campus, there was no clearly articulated right-wing alternative to radical politics, and the radicals dominated campus political discourse, impacting even those students who did not participate in the peace strikes. Hal Draper, a prominent YPSL member in the 1930s and later involved with the Berkeley Free Speech Movement, aptly describes the atmosphere on campus which gave the radicals influence in spite of their small numbers:

Even... if we consider the students who never participated in any dissenting form of activity at all, it would be an error to suppose that all of them were hostile to the student movement... The general social disillusionment with “The System,” conditioned many of them, if only because it put them on the defensive before the self-confident radicals. It deprived them of that capacity to feel that “all radicals must be kooks,” which is characteristic of a social system sure of itself.<sup>1</sup>

By 1938-39, however, the feeling that “all radicals must be kooks” was coming back, due to circumstances beyond the student movement’s control (the march towards

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<sup>1</sup> Draper, 183-84.

war) as well as the national ASU's abandonment of the left wing of the movement.

Wesleyan's radicals were radical in spite of overwhelming class and institutional pressures. The entire university system and in particular the institutions of student life were designed to serve the interests of their class, interests which were diametrically opposed to left-wing agitation. This opposition manifested itself in the rebukes of the radicals by their fellow students. In asserting that they could be college men and radicals at once, the radicals performed a delicate balancing act that was only possible at that historical moment. For a time in the 1930s, the urgency of the crisis and the power of the radical movements were such that privileged students could overcome the pressures of their class and its culture. After the war, as American politics stabilized and the movements dissipated, most of these men dropped out of organized political life—the conditions to support radicalism were no longer there.

Most former student radicals, like their classmates, became middle-class professionals. The professions they chose, however, were different: while most Wesleyan graduates became businessmen, a high proportion of former radicals went into education, social service, or the New Deal and Great Society welfare programs. Most notable among these was Robert Ball, who went on to head the Social Security Administration and helped create Medicare; Clifton Davenport also worked for the SSA.<sup>2</sup> Some former radicals remained active for a time before settling into professional life. Britton Harris continued organizing students and consumers with the Communist Party until the war, but left politics during the McCarthy period of the

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Ball entry, Class of 1935 50th Reunion Book, Class Reunion Books Collection, Special Collections & Archives, Olin Library, Wesleyan University, Middletown, Conn.; Clifton Davenport entry; Class of 1938 50th Reunion Book, Class Reunion Books Collection.



1950s and became a professor of urban planning at the University of Pennsylvania.<sup>3</sup> Joel Leighton became an organizer for the Textile Workers Union of America, but went into business after finding himself “on the losing side of an internal union fight” after the resounding defeat of the CIO’s organizing drive in the South.<sup>4</sup>

Most of those who had been anti-war activists went to war, with a few notable exceptions. Most who went felt little contradiction: Emil Kotcher wrote, decades later, “though I was a pacifist at Wesleyan (and still am), my service with the Sixth and Eighth Armies in the Pacific was satisfying. I was a square peg in a square hole.”<sup>5</sup> Edwin Johnson, leader of Wesleyan pacifism’s desperate last stand, became a military man, serving as a briefing officer in Korea.<sup>6</sup> There were some notable exceptions, however. At least five 1930s alumni were conscientious objectors. Russell Tuttle was one of the 12,000 objectors in the government’s Civilian Public Service program, serving as a “guinea pig” in medical research, while Thomas Bodine and Joseph Brown were among the few who were allowed to perform alternative service, working with the American Friends Service Committee to relocate Japanese-American students from West Coast internment camps to whatever Eastern universities would take them. (Wesleyan, Bodine informed his classmates at their fiftieth reunion, was not among them.) Two Wesleyan alumni, Oliver Stone and Richard Petherbridge, refused Civilian Public Service and were sentenced to jail and to probation, respectively.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Britton Harris entry, Class of 1935 50th Reunion Book, Class Reunion Books Collection.

<sup>4</sup> Joel Leighton entry, Class of 1936 50th Reunion Book, Class Reunion Books Collection.

<sup>5</sup> Emil Kotcher entry, Class of 1937 50th Reunion Book, Class Reunion Books Collection.

<sup>6</sup> Edwin Johnson entry, Class of 1941 50th Reunion Book, Class Reunion Books Collection.

<sup>7</sup> Russell Tuttle entry, Class of 1937 50th Reunion Book, Class Reunion Books Collection; Thomas Bodine entry, Class of 1937 50th Reunion , Class Reunion Books Collection; Joseph Brown entry, Class of 1938 50th Reunion Book, Class Reunion Books Collection; Richard Petherbridge entry, Class

A few of the most prominent former radicals remained liberal activists while becoming professionals. John P. Trinkaus, a renowned professor of biology at Yale, using his faculty position to oppose McCarthyism and the Vietnam War, to support the admission of women and people of color to Yale, and to support the strike of Yale clerical and technical workers in 1984.<sup>8</sup> John F.P. Tucker, a professor at Georgetown University, was a model liberal, involved with the ACLU, NAACP, Amnesty International, and Public Citizen, and a founding member of the anti-communist liberal organization Americans for Democratic Action.<sup>9</sup> With postwar liberalism's decreased emphasis on class, there was less of a contradiction in being a middle-class professional and remaining active on the left. Only one Wesleyan alumnus, Robert Schneider, remained a political radical. Living in Berkeley during the 1960s, he became heavily involved with civil disobedience in the movement against the Vietnam War and later in the anti-nuclear movement, helping to organize the mass blockade of the University of California's Livermore nuclear-weapons laboratory in 1983. At the age of seventy-eight, he claimed to have been arrested more than one hundred times for his convictions and served more than a year of jail time.<sup>10</sup> Although the tactics were of the 1960s, his sustained conviction and energy undoubtedly derived from his encounter with the radical pacifism of the 1930s.

Far more common among student radicals, however, were those who never returned to political activity, mirroring what happened to student movement alumni

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of 1938 50th Reunion Book, Class Reunion Books Collection; Oliver Stone entry, Class of 1939 50th Reunion Book, Class Reunion Books Collection.

<sup>8</sup> John Trinkaus entry, Class of 1940 50th Reunion Book, Class Reunion Books Collection.

<sup>9</sup> John F.P. Tucker entry, Class of 1936 45th Reunion Book, Class Reunion Books Collection.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Schneider entry, Class of 1935 50th Reunion Book, Class Reunion Books Collection; "A Passion for Protesting," *Marin (County, Calif.) Independent Journal*, 18 November 1990.

nationally. Many who had been sympathetic to the Communists or even members of the party were turned away by the Communist manipulation in 1939 and the movement's subsequent implosion, never to look favorably upon radical activism again. Many of the most bitter faculty opponents of the 1960s student uprisings were former 1930s radicals who had made peace with their role in system. The conservative 1950s were doubly hurtful to the prospects for continued involvement: there was little mass movement activity to counter the temptation to get a comfortable job and forget about radicalism, and many of those who continued to be politically involved as labor organizers, journalists, or professors were attacked in the McCarthyist purges. Those who survived both McCarthyism and the doldrums of the 1950s to join the movements of the 1960s and 70s were disproportionately religious pacifists or influenced by pacifism.<sup>11</sup>

Although the student movement did not succeed in its stated goal of preventing another World War and most of its alumni did not remain active, it would be simplistic to conclude that the movement accomplished nothing. The student movement was part of the general leftward turn of the 1930s, whose effects lasted long after the war in the form of the American welfare state and the labor movement. The radicals also affected, albeit indirectly, the development of universities. Wesleyan University today resembles much more closely the ideals of the radicals in the 1930s, with its more diverse student body, academic departments devoted to the study of what were once called "social problems," and continued—if declining—student activist presence. Rather than businessmen, Wesleyan now trains its students to become professors, nonprofit sector workers, and other professions that are more

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 238-40, 260.

socially involved (if still part of the political and intellectual establishment). The majority of Wesleyan alumni from the 1930s remained politically conservative and opposed many aspects of the university's transformation, such as the admission of women and the 1970s policy of free tuition for black students.<sup>12</sup> It is possible that the former radicals were a chink in the armor of institutionalized conservatism, continuing to donate to Wesleyan while more conservative alumni stopped or reduced their contributions. Of course, it took another mass political upheaval—the convergence of the civil rights and black liberation movements, the women's movement, and the student movements of the 1960s and 70s—to transform Wesleyan in this manner. The 1930s radicals, however, may have planted some seeds. Victor Butterfield, who as president of the university planned its expansion and the readmission of women, and under whose tenure the black students of the “Vanguard Class” of 1969 were admitted, had much contact with students as a dean during the 1930s, and had a personal relationship with at least one student radical.<sup>13</sup> One wonders whether the vision of the radicals made an impression on him.

It can appear unrealistic or naïve of students to have believed that they could prevent a war that in retrospect seems inevitable. But history always seems inevitable in retrospect. The student movement was a product of its circumstances, but not a prisoner to them. Perhaps, if the student anti-war activists had stuck with pacifism, they could have continued organizing after the war, forming a bloc against McCarthyism and against the development of a permanent military machine. Such counterfactuals aside, the fact that Wesleyan students had the courage to act in what

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<sup>12</sup> Class of 1938 40th Reunion Booklet.

<sup>13</sup> Alvin von Auw, interview by author, 7 May 2009

they believed to be the interest of all humanity—in the face of their class, the campus culture, and the overwhelming movement towards war—is undoubtedly to their credit. Today, faced similarly with economic crisis and political stagnation, and with the threat of ecological catastrophe looming at least as large as did the Second World War, we need that courage more than ever.

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