

## Escalation of Vietnam War sparked month of campus unrest



*On May 8, 1970, an estimated 750 ISU and IWU students marched to downtown Bloomington to protest the Vietnam War. Seen here are the lead marchers passing the 900 block of North Main Street. Despite heavy police presence, there were no incidents. (photo courtesy of The Pantagraph)*

The Vietnam War, it's been said, was fought on two fronts—in Southeast Asia and back home, especially on college campuses.

On April 30, 1970, President Richard Nixon announced his decision to send U.S. troops into Cambodia to engage Vietcong elements that were active on both sides of the Cambodian-South Vietnamese border. This escalation of an already unpopular war was met with widespread unrest, culminating on May 4 when Ohio National Guardsmen killed four students at Kent State University.

The following day, some 200 Illinois State University students occupied Hovey Hall, the school's administration building. Looking to defuse the situation, President Samuel Braden agreed to demands that included lowering the American flag on the campus quadrangle to half-mast for six days to commemorate the Kent State dead, as well as for Mark Clark and Fred Hampton, Black Panther leaders killed the year before in Chicago. He also agreed to lower the flag again on May 19 for the birthday of slain black leader Malcolm X.

Though ISU weathered its share of marches, rallies, and street scuffles, it would be the only public university to remain open throughout the long, turbulent month of May 1970.

The flagpole on the ISU Quad served as the focal point for a month of battles, both literal and figurative, between anti-war students and those who either supported Nixon's

decision or simply opposed student anti-war and countercultural protests. Braden was criticized for capitulating to student radicals, though to the consternation of pro-war (or anti anti-war) residents and students, he remained unapologetic. "You can say that the flag flies at half-staff over an open university here, while it flies over closed universities across the land," he said.

On May 6, students marched to Fairview Park to hold a memorial service for the Kent State four. That morning, someone or some group cut the flagpole ropes and hoisted a banner that read, "National Guard 4 / Kent State 0." Later in the day, a melee broke out after three protesters brought a Vietcong flag to the site.

While vandalism plagued ISU the entire month, most of the incidents were relatively minor. University staff stayed in campus buildings overnight to prevent mischief, and members of the Academic Senate patrolled the Quad from midnight to 6 a.m.

On Monday, May 11, Republican state senators called Braden to Springfield for a dressing down. At issue was why he buckled under the demands of student protesters. "I would not characterize it as being a friendly discussion," Braden said after the closed-door Republican caucus. Alan Dixon, Democratic state senator from Belleville (and future U.S. senator), was not as diplomatic, calling the meeting "the grossest violation of academic freedom."

Two days later, Wednesday, May 13, students began vociferously protesting a curfew set by the Town of Normal. At 11 p.m., Braden spoke to about 3,000 students gathered on the Quad. "I'd rather that you would go home and go to bed, but I am going to be here all night and you can be, too, if you want to be," he said. "If we can keep it on the campus, we can show what we have here at ISU—an open university." Despite Braden's plea, students and police clashed for several hours on School Street in front of Hovey Hall. Rocks were hurled at police, who responded with swinging nightsticks. Normal Mayor Charles L. Baugh finally agreed to lift the curfew at 4:15 a.m., a move that quieted the protesters. Fortunately, combatants on both sides sustained only minor injuries.

Yet throughout the long month of May 1970, a sense of normalcy prevailed on the Normal campus. For instance, most of the school's 14,000 students continued to attend classes, even though they were given the choice to skip them for a week.

On Friday, May 15, more than 4,000 crowded into McCormick Hall's gymnasium for a patriotic rally organized by a group of students referring to themselves as the "no longer silent majority." Speakers included Mayor Baugh and Gen. Richard T. Dunn, a Bloomington lawyer and Illinois National Guard commander.

Tensions increased again on Tuesday, May 19, when a group of construction workers raised the flag, which was supposed to be at half-staff for Malcolm X's birthday. ISU officials lowered the flag once more and ringed the flagpole with university vehicles. Braden, who stood inside with forty-four ISU police officers and sheriff's deputies, told the "hard hats" that anyone venturing inside the cordon would be arrested.

Although Braden received a fair amount of scorn on both the right and left, he kept the campus open, calling that achievement “one of the proudest stories in the history of this institution.” For some critics, the end did not justify the means. Due in part to pressure from Springfield, Braden resigned as president just one month after the protests.