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Reflections on Denison 1969-1970

David J. Hooker, Class of 1972

Since my graduation from Denison in 1972, I have often said that I was fortunate to be in college from 1968 to 1972. It was a time of enormous change in our country, and living on a college campus gave me the opportunity to experience these changes in ways that would not have been possible had I not been a student. At Denison, there is no doubt that my sophomore year (1969-1970) was the most tumultuous of my four years.

I want to memorialize a few of my recollections of that year. This is not meant to be a history of events—I have not done any research other than to look at a few Denisonians. Nor is it meant to describe anyone's experiences other than my own. But there were two major issues that the college faced that year, the "Black Demands Crisis" and the aftermath of the shootings at Kent State, and I have personal recollections about both.

As a bit of background, I grew up in Tiffin, a small town in northwest Ohio. When I arrived on campus, I thought of myself as a Republican (very much under my father's influence). Over my four years, my political persuasion changed, and during my sophomore year I was in the midst of that evolution. I was not moved to take up causes or to advocate radical change, but I was interested in the politics of both the country and Denison. During my freshman year, I started writing for the Denisonian, and that position gave me license to be part of many of the events at Denison, including the Black Demands Crisis in 1970.

Denison changed a great deal during my first two years. When we arrived as freshmen in the fall of 1968, Denison had rules and expectations for students that, today, are hard to fathom. Women (all of whom lived on the "women's quad," now the East quad) were required to be in their dormitories by a specified time each evening (as I recall 11:00 p.m. during the week, with later hours on the weekend). Freshmen men lived either in Curtis or the "The New Men's Dorm" and ate at Curtis, where we were required to wear coat and tie for Sunday dinner. By the end of our first year on campus, the dress code had ended, and women were extending hours and even visiting in men's dormitories.

These modest changes at Denison were a reflection of what was happening across the country. Before we arrived as freshmen in September 1968, the country had been in turmoil. Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy were assassinated in April and June. The Democrats held their convention in Chicago that summer, where violence erupted in the streets as protestors gathered around the convention center. The Vietnam war was splitting the country. Early in the year the Viet Cong had launched its Tet Offensive, and in the spring the US Army massacred hundreds of civilians at My Lai. In addition to the war, the Civil Rights movement was bringing changes to the country. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 mandated some of those changes, and throughout the 1960's, violence, protests, and tension accompanied the integration of our society. So, when I got to college in the fall of 1968, these significant national developments colored how we, as freshmen, began experiencing the independence of college life.

In the fall of 1969, my sophomore year, I would guess that, by that time, on almost every college campus there were protests against our involvement in Vietnam, and Denison was no exception. Sometime that first semester, a network of advocates on college campuses organized a "March on Washington" to protest the continuation of our involvement in Vietnam, and a number of Denison students left Granville to participate. (It is interesting to think about how this occurred before email, Facebook and Twitter!) The March on Washington was yet one more step in the involvement of students across the country. College students had embraced activism for a good part of the 1960's, beginning with "free speech" movements (especially in California), drugs, rock music and rebellion against the social traditions that generations before us had followed. In short, it was an era of radical change on campuses, and students everywhere—including at Denison—had learned ways to challenge authority and effect change.

Denison had undergone one other important change at the end of my first year. Prior to my arrival, Blair Knapp, who had been president of Denison for seventeen years, died. After a year of interim leadership, Joel P. Smith was named the president of the college and arrived in the summer of 1969 to assume his new role. My recollection is that he was a Rhodes Scholar and a graduate of Stanford Law School. I remember his coming to a Thursday night chapel service late in the spring 1969 semester. We were excited about him. He was young and good-looking, and he appeared to be bringing a new dynamism to campus.

The first of the two events about which I write became known as the Black Demands Crisis. At that time, Denison had about forty African-American students on campus. There was an organization called the Black Student Union (BSU), and most, if not all, of the black students on campus were likely members. In February or March 1970, the BSU created a set of “demands” that its members wished to present to the college. I don’t recall today what those demands were, but I am sure they dealt with recruiting and retention of black students and faculty and allocation of resources for the development of a more diverse and inclusive community. I also do not recall to whom or when the demands were first presented. What I do recall, though, is that by March 1970, the campus community had become aware of the BSU demands, and there was a growing number of students who wanted to support the BSU and advocate for change.

The “demands crisis” came to a head in March. On a Tuesday evening¹ students met in the basement of Knapp Hall to talk about how to support the BSU in its efforts to get the college to act on the demands. I was in the room, sitting in the back, monitoring the discussion as a writer for the Denisonian. The room was packed. There were BSU representatives and other students leading the discussion. There was talk about staging a “teach-in” on the issues raised by the BSU. There was a great deal of emotion around the issues in the BSU demands and frustration about how to effect change on campus.

At some point during the meeting, someone pointed out that the faculty was meeting at that same time in the Slayter Auditorium. Someone suggested that the students go up to the faculty meeting and confront the faculty with their concerns. In the excitement and emotion of the moment, there was quick agreement with the idea, and within minutes, many of the students were on their way up the steps to the fourth floor auditorium.

I followed along. I am fairly certain I was walking with Mark Harroff, a friend of mine and fellow writer on the Denisonian. I have a vague recollection of being at the side door to the auditorium with some of the student leaders as they knocked and opened the door. Joel Smith was on the stage and was angry with the intrusion. He said that the students “had no right to be here” and demanded that we leave. As that confrontation was occurring, several hundred students drifted into the auditorium from all of the doors of the auditorium. There was confusion, with some faculty

¹ I have a few issues of the Denisonian in my possession, and I have been able to reconstruct some of the timeline by reference to them.

members supporting Smith's insistence that we leave and others urging the faculty to allow the students to talk. Conversations took place between faculty and students and among faculty as students and faculty moved about the hall. Within minutes, Smith left the stage and the auditorium, and some faculty followed him. Other faculty members stayed, and the students and remaining faculty shared thoughts for a long while.

That night was the start of a break-down in campus life. During the next couple of days, the normal activities of the campus ground to a halt. There were meetings at Huffman Hall (the Denisonian reported 1200 students in attendance) and at Swasey, with discussions about a boycott of classes. There was a sit-in at Doane (which might have taken place on Tuesday, before the faculty meeting) that was peaceful but interrupted by a false bomb threat. And Slayter was turned into an open forum for faculty and students, who used an open microphone to talk about their concerns and thoughts.

I believe that almost all classes stopped meeting that week. I am certain that I did not attend any. In place of classes, most of us spent our days at Slayter in what was deemed the "Alternative College" or moving from one large meeting to another to find out what was going on. I have a specific recollection of one point that captured attention: a single, modern chair, which was brought to Slayter from the new Shepardson Dormitory on the women's quad. Someone described what the chair cost (purportedly an outlandish sum), and the school was excoriated for spending lavishly on a chair while not showing support for the BSU and diversity.

By the end of the week, I was exhausted. I felt that there was an unbearable tension on campus, and there did not appear to be any relief. None of us knew how things would progress. My friend Randy Cebul and I left campus on Friday night and went to Columbus to visit Randy's brother. I recall the sense of relief in getting off campus and away from the crisis.

On the following Sunday night, a student meeting was held at Huffman Hall, and Mark Smith, the former Dean of Men, addressed the students. I wrote the Denisonian article about that meeting and described it as emotional. Mark Smith chastised the students for "destroying" Joel Smith, criticizing students for lack of dignity. It was an unsettling meeting, because Mark Smith had been somewhat revered in his long service as Dean of Men. He was a tall and imposing man. In retrospect, what I now understand more clearly is that we (students and no doubt faculty) were

looking for leadership from the college, and neither Joel nor any other leader had stepped up to lead the community. When Mark Smith came to talk with us, I think that I was hoping for someone to take charge and to outline a plan for ending the crisis. Instead, we heard a bitter man who only wanted to tell us how badly all of the students had acted. His remarks did not help.

I never learned what Joel Smith did during the week of the crisis. He was last seen on campus on Tuesday evening when he left the faculty meeting, and so far as I know he did not return to campus for seven days. We heard that there were “threats” on him and his family, which I do not believe any of us felt had any basis in fact. As tense as everything was, there was never any suggestion of violence or vandalism. Regardless, there was no reason for his apparent absence. (The Denisonian articles suggest that Joel Smith and representatives of the BSU met at Joel’s house to discuss the demands. But a note: Monomoy was not yet the president’s house; Joel and his family lived on Chapin Place.)

Joel finally returned to campus on the following Tuesday, and he met with students at Huffman Hall. He brought his wife and two daughters with him, which struck me at the time as odd and as a sign of weakness. In the days that followed, he and the BSU worked out language that Smith could support and an agreement to present the demands to the Trustees at their April meeting. The crisis abated and we returned to classes.

Spring break came, and by the time we returned, campus life was back to a more normal state. When the trustees arrived in April, there was a lot of excitement about the fact that they had agreed to meet with students. Small groups of trustees held open meetings at various locations across campus. I attended one of the meetings at one of the sorority houses, and I recall that there was a lot of good discussion with members of the board. There were some immediate steps taken by the college to address the BSU’s concerns and longer term strategies put in place to deal with African-American students and faculty. While not a perfect resolution, Denison’s board, administration, faculty and students seemed to come together with a sense of optimism about moving forward to create a more diverse and inclusive community.

One other noteworthy fact—at some point during the crisis, Denison was the subject of a front page article in the Wall Street Journal about the black demands and the way the campus had reacted. I know that I kept that article, but I don’t know where it is today.

By the end of April, the trustees had acted, and there were plans in place to implement changes. Spring arrived on campus. For me, it was an important time, because I was leaving Denison to spend my Junior year in Switzerland.

Then the events of May 4 disrupted the nation's college campuses. President Nixon had announced a day or so before that the United States had commenced bombing of Cambodia, and college campuses erupted in anti-war protests. Nixon's actions enraged all of the opponents of the war. The Ohio National Guard marched onto the Kent State Campus to quell demonstrations, and four students were killed as the Guard opened fire against the demonstrators. The country was aghast.

At Denison, there was a high level of interest in the Kent State shootings, but I do not think it gathered as much momentum as it might have, had we not been through the events of the prior two months. At least I do not recall as much disruption. I have always felt that the Black Demands Crisis was such a difficult time and expended so much of the community's energy that we did not react as emotionally as we otherwise might have to the Kent State shootings.

Nevertheless, the Kent State event had a major impact on the country and on Denison. Faced with yet another major distraction to the academic life of the campus, the faculty created a plan that, in effect, allowed students to finish the semester in any of three ways. (Unlike today, on May 4, 1970, we still had several weeks of classes remaining on our schedule, with exams in June.) A student could finish his/her semester classes and take examinations, as scheduled; he/she could stop attending classes and take as final the grade that he/she had earned up to that point in the semester and receive full credit for the class; or the student could take an incomplete and finish the class at a later time. It was almost as if the faculty surrendered to the events that had overtaken the school throughout the second semester; I felt they wanted to wipe the slate clean and move on to the next year.

One more thing happened. Sometime after the Kent State shootings, I heard a rumor that Denison was going to take even more aggressive action, that it was going to make a change in its academic calendar for the following year (1970-71). Before I describe the proposed change, I need to set the framework. Denison historically had been on the semester system, starting in mid-September with exams after Christmas, a semester break at the end of January, and the second

semester ending in June. After what I am sure was a lot of discussion, the school had decided to change from its historical academic calendar to a “4-1-4” schedule, with a fall semester ending before Christmas, a January term (the “intercession”), and a second semester beginning in February. The next year (1970-71) was going to be the first year under the new calendar. There was a lot of excitement about it, in particular because of the unique opportunities for off-campus study in the January intercession.

One day in May 1970, someone told me that Denison was going to abandon the plans for a January term. I was told we were going to move the Intercession to the beginning of the year, effectively changing the “4-1-4” to a “1-4-4.” A one month term would begin at the end of September and go through October, the fall semester would start in November and go through January, and then a second semester would begin in February. The rationale for the change (I was told) was to accommodate students who were likely to want to be engaged in the Congressional election campaigns in the fall of 1970. The thought was that the high state of rage about the Kent State shootings would continue through the fall. By making the “intercession” term coincide with the fall election campaign, students could participate in the campaigns and still be able to have a normal semester after the election.

I remember feeling shocked when I heard this suggestion. I had liked the idea of the 4-1-4 plan, because it allowed us to finish exams before Christmas and do something different in January. Even though I was not going to be on campus for the next year, I thought it was surprising and impulsive for Denison to abandon a well-developed plan in favor of what I saw as an over-reaction to a political crisis. I had thought a lot about the role of a college in the time of crisis, and this was not how I thought an academic institution should respond.

This came up rather quickly, as I recall. I heard this rumor late one afternoon. I knew that there was an Executive Committee of the faculty, and I understood that Ted Barclay, whom I knew from taking life-saving classes, was a member of the Executive Committee. I went down to the field house and found Ted. I asked him if, in fact, this proposal was going forward. He confirmed that it was, indeed, the president’s plan and said that the faculty was scheduled to vote on it the following day. I tried to convince him that this was not a good idea, but he did not give me any comfort. In effect, he said, it was going to happen.

I went to the Chemistry library to find my friend, Randy Cebul. Randy was a chemistry major, and I knew Randy had great respect for his professor Gordon Galloway, who I knew was also a member of the faculty's Executive Committee. I asked Randy to introduce me to him, and he took me up to Galloway's office. (As I write this, I find it interesting that I was able to find both Barclay and Galloway in their offices in the evening—and Galloway late into the evening.)

Randy introduced me to Gordon and then left the two of us to talk. By this time, I had thought through my arguments. Earlier in the spring, I had written an editorial in the Denisonian, expressing my view that it was important for a university to be a place for rational debate, committed to open-mindedness but otherwise to be neutral on the propositions on which the community or the country is engaged. I saw Denison (and every university) as a forum for debate but not an institution that would take political positions. I saw the proposed change in the academic calendar as a surrender to the politics of the moment and a collapse of the sanctity of the academic institution.

Galloway and I had a wonderful conversation. (We were friends from that point on.) He was interested in my thinking, talked about his own views, and was complimentary of me that I had thought so much about the role of the school in crisis. At the same time, he was clear that there were contrary points of view about the proposal and that the president had developed it and expected to see it pass. After talking for a while, he said to me, "if you really believe this, then you should address the faculty." I had never heard of a process by which students could address the faculty, and I asked him how that could happen. He told me I had to make a request to the Secretary of the Faculty, and he then said that he was the secretary. After a moment's thought—and with his encouragement—I said I would like to do it. He explained that he had to talk with Joel the next day but that he was sure that my request would be granted. The faculty meeting was scheduled for 4:00 p.m. in Herrick Hall. Gordon cautioned me that I should prepare my remarks in advance and to give it good thought. He told me to call him the next morning.

The next morning, Galloway told me that my request was approved but that the president wanted me to speak to Dean Trevor Gamble (Dean of Students) and to Professor Rod Grant (Department of Physics and the head of freshmen orientation). According to Galloway, they would help me understand the proposal and the rationale behind it. I first went to Gamble's office in the basement of Doane. I don't think I had ever met him before. I explained that I was there to find

out about the proposal and understood that he would describe it to me. He confirmed what I had heard, namely that the change was something that would accommodate students who wanted to be involved in the 1970 Congressional election campaigns. I asked him what would happen to the 4-1-4 plan in 1971-2 (two years hence), and he said that we would revert to 4-1-4 as originally designed. He also said to me, “what difference does this make to you anyway? I understand that you are going to be in Europe next year.” I remember being offended by that comment. As I told him in response, my concerns were not personal; I was concerned about Denison and did not want to see it make a mistake.

I then found Rod Grant. He gave me a different rationale for the proposal. He said that the principal reason for the change was not political but rather to allow for a full month of freshmen orientation, which he very much favored. He said that the “October” term would be an ideal time to bring students to campus and integrate them into the Denison community. I asked him what he thought would happen in the years following 1970-71, and he said that the proposal was to shift the calendar permanently to a 1-4-4 plan to create an annual month-long orientation session for freshmen and, therefore, the January intercession was no longer part of Denison’s thinking.

By 4:00 p.m., I had prepared my remarks. Randy came with me to the meeting, and we took seats in the back row of Herrick Hall. There were a couple of other agenda items, and then Joel introduced the proposal to shift the calendar. He and a few others spoke in favor of it. Then he said that there were two students who wished to speak. The first person (a representative of the fraternities) spoke about the inconvenience of the change on fraternity schedules. His remarks were short and not material (in my view) to the rationale or impact of the proposal.

Then Joel called my name, and I went down to the front of the auditorium. I gave my speech (a copy of my original is attached to this paper). I said that the premise for my coming to the faculty was that student opinion had not been sought on this proposal, that we should have learned from our mistakes earlier in the year in not engaging students, and therefore I was going to share my thoughts as one student’s view about the proposed change. My main point was the one that I had discussed with Barclay and Galloway, namely that Denison should not over-react to the politics of the month but should remain above the political fray. I also pointed out that there were inconsistencies in the rationales offered to support the proposal, that some of the faculty were supporting the change as a one-year, temporary adjustment responding to political events while

others saw it as a permanent shift to make a better freshmen orientation. I said we were too late in the year to make such a substantial change.

When I finished, there was a sustained applause, and I felt pleased. I took my seat at the back, and I listened to a few comments by faculty members both in support and in opposition to the proposal. Then Joel took the floor. He addressed my remarks directly, saying that “as for Mr. Hooker’s remarks, to say that students were not consulted is not true.” After he spoke, there was a motion to table the proposal, and a loud voice vote in favor of the motion. After the vote, I left the hall.

Galloway found me a little while later. He had a big smile on his face and congratulated me. I said that I didn’t understand what he was talking about. I knew from the vote that the proposal had been tabled, but I expected Joel would put on a full court press to get his proposal adopted. Galloway said, “No, you don’t understand. There are no more faculty meetings scheduled for the rest of the year. It’s over. You won.”

The next morning I was sleeping late, and my roommate woke me to tell me the president’s office was on the phone. Half asleep, I told him that I didn’t want to take the call. Wisely he told me that wasn’t a good idea, and I went into the hallway to the campus phone. Joel’s secretary said the president wanted to see me and suggested I come to his office immediately. I got dressed and went to see him in his office at Doane. Joel was not happy, and he said that he did not believe my remarks to the faculty were well-taken. He repeated what he had said the day before at the meeting, that he had spoken with students and that I was wrong in saying that students had not been engaged. I did not say much in response. I was upset that he had in effect called me a liar, and I did not want to engage him in a discussion in which neither of us were going to see eye-to-eye. After a moment of silence, he then said that he wanted me to see Larry Ledebur, a professor in the Economics department and told me that Ledebur was expecting me.

I went to Knapp and found Ledebur’s office. He was visibly upset with me. He asked me angrily more than once, “Why did you feel the need to dress down the faculty yesterday?” I know he had to repeat it, because I did not know what he meant by the term “dress down”—I’d never heard it before. I repeated what I had just said to Joel, that I meant no disrespect to the faculty or to the president, I thought I had acted appropriately, and that I hoped he and others understood that I

had a fundamental objection to the proposal that was not personal but philosophical. He made it clear that he and others were upset with how I had conducted myself.

One memento that I kept from that event (attached to this paper) was the short announcement made by Joel on May 20:

To The Denison Community:

At its meeting this noon the Executive Committee unanimously agreed to withdraw its recommendation that the calendar for the next academic year be revised.

May 20, 1970

Joel P. Smith

I left Denison, not to return until the fall of my senior year. The January term was held, as planned, in 1971. When I returned in September 1971, I resumed writing for the Denisonian, and my friend Bob Graves, the editor, asked me to interview Joel Smith to reflect on his first two years as president of Denison. I remember going to his house for the interview and experiencing the awkwardness of wondering whether he remembered me from May 1970. I am sure he did.

I would like to thank Mr. Smith, the Executive Committee, and the faculty for granting me this opportunity to express my opinion this afternoon.

Last evening I learned of the Executive Committee proposal to alter the academic calendar for the coming school year. My first reaction to it, as was that of many of my fellow students, was one of disbelief. It did not seem to me consistent with the purposes and goals of this University to change its schedule in the face of a national movement. Since first learning of the proposal, I have talked with four faculty members representing what I believed to have been representative of both sides of the argument.

The reason that I have asked to speak today is primarily because those of you who have formulated the proposal and who are ready to approve it this afternoon have acted without consideration of student opinions regarding this plan. This is a mistake; we have already seen the need this semester for communication among the segments of this community and to ignore that need now in the face of major academic change is wrong....wrong. Therefore, I am going to give you one student's opinion which

represents those of many of his fellow students, but I would strongly recommend that before acting you would seek out opinions from other students as well.

My immediate reaction to this plan was negative; I viewed it as an institutional commitment to the crisis which this nation is experiencing. Since that time, I have learned that in some faculty member's opinions, this change is not to accommodate those who wished to work during this crisis, but rather a permanent change that will enable better counseling of freshmen each year. I would like to respond to each of these ideas.

First, those who hear this proposal for the first time have regarded it as a commitment by this university to the present situation in this country. To those of us who respect the academic environment in which we now function, this does not seem consistent with the maintenance of ~~XXXX~~ the academic freedom that has allowed dissent and protest to grow in the past few years. In a Denisenian editorial last week, it was said, "before subscribing to the emotional urgency of the members of its community, a university must keep sight of its place as an institution which has been able to maintain a broad perspective on the problems of society and to ^{reach} rational solutions that pertain not only to the campus

but also to the country as a whole." In approving this plan it would seem to me that you, too, would be losing sight of the role of the university during this time of crisis. I do recognize the fact that the semi-normal functions of the university in intercession would be carried on during this period, but the fact remains that the university has altered its calendar to make an institutional commitment ~~XXX~~ to a crisis.

Let me add that ^{part of} the original purpose of the plan seems to have been to prevent disruption of the university during the month of October. My reaction to that logic is, first, if, as this reason seems to imply, there is a great anti-war sentiment in the nation during the fall, it is unrealistic to believe that the possibilities for disruption ~~in~~ will end on election evening. If the movement is strong, it will continue during November and December and January. Secondly, it ~~seems~~ ~~is~~ as somewhat of a sacrifice of the intercession in saying that we will allow it to be subject to disruption and not the regular semester.

Thus, these are my reactions to the proposal as a temporary one for next year planned to accommodate that portion of the community which may desire to participate politically during that time.

Since its formulation, however, the proposal has gained support from those who recognize the need for a more complete freshman orientation program on a permanent basis. This is, as I think we would agree, a very fine idea. However, we have reached this plan not as a result of efforts to make a better orientation program but rather as a side effect of a plan to accommodate those who desire to work in October and to avoid disruption of the normal semester.

We are at the end of the year. We are in the midst of an emotional crisis. Let us reach a decision regarding curricular change and orientation improvement not in the wake of an institutional commitment to a crisis, but rather following intelligent, rational discussion. To institute such a plan at this time will require much work to make the freshman program a success, because ^{very little} ~~nothing~~ has been done to ~~even~~ begin to design such a program. In order to make a decision regarding this, it would seem to me that it should receive more consideration, including the suggestion of other alternatives as to how the freshman program can be improved. If this is a beneficial thing, I would conclude that it would be best instituted in the fall of 1971 after a year during which we can study this further.

The final point I wish to make concerns the nature of intercession. Many students and faculty have regarded the January term as a break in the academic year during which the intellectual momentum can be continued in individual study.

It is the opinion of every student with whom I have conferred the proposed change that ^{the} intercession will be much less effective if not an outright failure if this idea is passed. Granted this ~~is~~ is a value judgement by a handful of students, but please recognize the fact that they realize the effect of an intercession immediately following an extended summer vacation. They do not think that it would be successful.

To be truthful, I am rather surprised that I felt it necessary to speak to you today, because in past decisions my experience has been that the faculty and the administration pursued the solutions to each problem with rationality and without emotion. I think that we are in danger of sacrificing our scholarly discipline-- the discipline that has taught us to attack problems from all sides in an effort to reach the most just decision--in acting on this proposal now. To institute effective change that will recognize the quality of the academic environment and the need for orientation

reform, further study, including the vital inclusion of student opinions must be undertaken. I hope that my faith in the academic process will not be destroyed and that you will begin such a study.

Last night, in his address in Swasey Chapel, Mr. Acheson remarked that he would rather be intelligent than committed. It is my great desire, that this university will make the same decision--that it would rather be intelligent than committed.

In conclusion, let me outline briefly my major points— first, this plan requires an examination of the role of the university during a period of crisis; second, it requires an examination of the goals and purposes of the intercession, and, finally, it requires the further study by the faculty and the student body to achieve a ~~more rational~~ decision which has been considered more thoroughly.

To The Denison Community:

At its meeting this noon the Executive Committee unanimously agreed to withdraw its recommendation that the calendar for the next academic year be revised.

Joel P. Smith

May 20, 1970