'Mankato approach' forestalled violence

In Mankato, a retired college president's book looks back at Vietnam War protests and talks about what went right.

Robert Franklin, Star Tribune

MANKATO -- Antiwar demonstrators used a college workshop to make protest signs. When they sat in at the college president's office, he sat with them. But when they broke into the cafeteria and had a food fight, he gave them one minute to leave.

During the Vietnam era, the school now called Minnesota State University, Mankato, escaped much of the violence that swept campuses across the country.

In a new book, former President James Nickerson, now 95 years old, attributes that to "the Mankato approach," an open cooperation among protesting students, administrators, faculty members and city officials.

Protests were teaching experiences, Nickerson said this week: "I would argue [that] when a student group wants to make a demonstration, they should do a good demonstration."

The book is called "Out of Chaos."

It includes contributions from more than 50 people. It grew out of a writing course Nickerson took a few years ago and a regular Friday social hour where he and friends discussed protests of those times.

With war in Iraq, Nickerson asked, "Is that coming again?"

Scene in the '70s

Vietnam brought chaos to Mankato, a divided town with a divided campus.

In 1972, thousands of college and high school students marched through town, angering some veterans and residents. They blocked bridge traffic across the Minnesota River until police responded with tear gas. They occupied the post office. Bomb threats were common on campus. An explosion damaged a dump truck at an Army Reserve center; another damaged a law enforcement center under construction.

War protests began at Mankato even before May 1970, when Ohio National Guard members fired into a crowd at Kent State University, killing four and triggering strikes that closed hundreds of colleges nationwide.
In three years of unrest at Mankato, no one was shot, and injuries and property damage were relatively minor, Nickerson said.

But his book tells of students being called potheads, hit by cars during the bridge blockade, being dragged by the hair off a road ("No bunch of rascals is stopping us from getting to the Twins baseball game"), and veterans threatening a firing squad with live ammunition.

Some townspeople called Nickerson a hippie who abetted student protest. Some of the book's contributors call him among the best college presidents they have known: a great educator, approachable, thoughtful, compassionate and creative.

Nickerson, who agreed not to change anybody's statements for the book, said such accolades are "overblown, embarrassing, but nice." He credits others, including "some very responsible student leadership" and the late Police Chief Charles Alexander, as calming influences.

It was a time of change, Nickerson said. The school, then called Mankato State College, was moving toward a new hilltop campus, a broader curriculum and university status. It was attracting a younger staff and more students from the Twin Cities area. More students were moving off campus and wanted to be treated like adults. And they were subject to the military draft.

Slept behind Old Main

Students who took over Old Main for a weekend did so because their elders weren't listening to their war protests, Nickerson said. Before going in, protesters agreed to prevent damage and allow offices to stay open.

Nickerson and his wife, Nita (who died earlier this year), slept in a camper behind Old Main and were available to talk to students.

Later, he said, he made the "tough decision" to march with students who told him, "We need you."

Jo Ostgarden of Portland, Ore., was a Mankato junior high school student with two brothers in the military, and said in an e-mail that the protests were "a defining moment in my life as a peace activist."

Nickerson's book isn't the only echo of protest days.

A plan to install a downtown plaque recalling the peaceful protests was withdrawn after veterans opposed it.

Currently, a monument to the war and to peace stands on the university campus.
Nearby, a gravestone-style monument commemorates protesters who died at Kent State and Jackson State in Mississippi. Details of the era have faded, according to Meghan Jeffrey, an education student from St. Paul.

"It's not really talked about," she said.

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