Inside the Columbia Protest

By William Bastone ***with photographs by James Hamilton***

One week into the Columbia blockade, President Michael Sovern's so-called Toothpaste Manifesto appeared in student and faculty mailboxes across campus. "At this point, the offenders are hurting not only Columbia but the struggle against apartheid itself," Sovern wrote, referring to the 150 demonstrators camped outside Hamilton Hall protesting the school's $34 million in investments in South Africa. Sovern added that the demonstrators actually want the school to shun "the company that probably makes your toothpaste (Colgate), the computer you work on (IBM), and your family car (Ford and GM)." Sovern concluded by claiming that Martin Luther King Jr. and Thoreau would have "recoiled in revulsion" at the protest and that neither would have even considered asking for the pledge of amnesty the students had requested as part of a set of demands they wanted Columbia to meet before the blockade was ended.

Sovern's statement reflects Columbia's hard line against the protesters, a stance shaped by members of the Board of Trustees whose own companies do business in South Africa and who have rejected the argument that United States investment props up the apartheid government. Keeping with history, the university has opted for heavy-handed rhetoric but little negotiation with the demonstrators. Because of its very intransigence, Columbia is now in the spotlight, debating the moral question of whether an institution that denounces apartheid should invest in South Africa. This "moral dilemma," as Sovern calls it, has been forced on the school by student protesters who, after realizing the blockade was going to last more than the expected 18 hours, have molded an organization that regularly churns out press releases, sends alumni mailings, and has the backing of an extensive labor, religious, and political coalition. As the protest stretched beyond a week, the protesters received support from various unions, including District Council 37, the municipal employees union, and District 1199 of the Health and Hospital Workers union. Because Sovern and Columbia's Board of Trustees failed early on to recognize the broad support that the students would attract (the protest began April 4) they have been forced to play catch-up, denouncing the demonstrators as "offenders" who are "impinging on the rights of students, faculty, and staff."

The Columbia administration underestimated the strength and resolve of the student group that organized the blockade, the Coalition for a Free South Africa. Formed in 1981, the coalition drew 30 to 50 students to meetings and demonstrations during its first three years. Last year, though, as accounts of South African police slaughtering blacks appeared regularly on the nightly news and newspaper front pages, coalition rallies swelled. Joseph Liu, a coalition member, recalled that the first big divestment rally occurred the same night Walter Mondale, Gary Hart, and Jesse Jackson participated in a debate broadcast from Columbia. "I remember it was raining and sleeting that night and it was cold, but we got about 200 people here," Liu said. Last October, the coalition protested before the homecoming football game against Princeton. Liu said that while some alumni criticized the protest and called the group communists ("It was the ones who were having a champagne brunch out of the back of their Mercedes stationwagon," Liu said), most were supportive. University officials, however, refused to let the group parade around Baker Field's stands with a banner calling on Columbia to divest.

The coalition is an offshoot of Columbia's Black Students Organization, but the demonstrators represent an impressive cross-section of the Columbia community. Liu, an 18-year-old Chinese-American from Virginia, said his interest in politics was heightened by Jesse Jackson's candidacy last year. "A lot of people think this [apartheid] is sort of like Jim Crow," Liu said, "but what they don't realize is the explicitness of the racism in that country." Another organizer, Tanaquil Jones, is a 31-year-old black woman enrolled in the general studies program. Her first protest was the 1969 March on Washington while she was attending the Fieldston School in Riverdale.

In March 1983, while the coalition staged small demonstrations on the steps of Low Library, the University Senate, composed of faculty, students, administrators, and staff, voted unanimously to urge Columbia's Board of Trustees to divest from companies that do business in South Africa. Like most university senates, Columbia's 102-member organization can only recommend policy to the most Senate members did. Columbia continued to buy stock in companies involved in South Africa. Last month the senate asked for a clarification from the trustees on what they mean by "freeze."

Coalition members said that when it became apparent the trustees would not budge on divestment and that the university senate, which Sovern, then a law school professor, helped establish after the 1968 takeover, was institutionally impotent, they began planning a civil disobedience action for April 4, the 17th anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.

"Early on we were in agreement that it was going to be some type of a blockade," one coalition member said. "We just had to decide on what building it was going to be." During the two weeks preceding the blockade, coalition members met each night to work out details, select a site, and discuss whether they would be willing to get arrested. After a few meetings, tunnel to exit and enter the building. Simultaneously, coalition members wrapped chains around the handles of Hamilton's two sets of doors and then sat down and waited to be arrested. As it turned out, Columbia took more than a day to respond, but it didn't come in the form of a police action as demonstrators expected. Instead, Robert Gallione, a presidential delegate, announced to the students they were in violation of civil and criminal laws and that the university was set to begin disciplinary hearings against them.

Protest organizers said they were willing to be arrested during the first day without securing concessions from Columbia on divestment. No demands were prepared because the protesters never expected they'd actually have time to deliver them before being carted away. "I thought security was going to be on us so fast that we wouldn't get a chance to put the locks on the chains," said Wally Ford, a coalition spokesman. When the university refused to negotiate with the protesters or the fasters and security men began videotaping demonstrators as they woke Friday, coalition leaders said they realized that to sustain the blockade and get a response they had to increase media coverage as well as begin reaching out to the faculty and alumni. And, matching Columbia's stubbornness, the protesters vowed to stay in front of Hamilton until all their demands were met and the university divested.

By April 6, the coalition had moved the seven remaining hunger strikers into the Malcolm X lounge on the first floor of Hartley Hall, a dormitory next door to Hamilton Hall. In a suite of rooms on the fifth floor, a press room was set up. It took a few days before the group could secure a word processor, but after the Easter and Passover holidays, the coalition's press machine, armed with a Kaypro-2 computer and printer, hit stride

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A protester cracked the four-letter computer code and "accessed" the alumni lists. "I think we'll get to use the high-speed ink jet printer," he said. "It gives us the option of personalizing the letters."

Board of Trustees. The divestment issue was referred to the trustees' executive committee for review. Samuel Higginbottom, chairman of the trustees, termed divestment "a fairly futile gesture" when the issue was referred to the board in March. Three months later, the full board concurred, rejecting the senate's proposal. In May 1984, while a university senate committee led by Columbia College dean Robert Pollack was still trying to draft a report addressing the trustees' decision (issued 14 months earlier), the trustees agreed to a request for a temporary freeze on South African investments. The board reserved the right, however, to selective investing if "exceptional circumstances" arose. The Pollack Report, finally issued last November, called for a permanent freeze on South African investment, but not divestment.

Apparently, when the trustees made what they termed a "gentleman's agreement" with Pollack for a freeze, they had a different definition of the word than Hamilton Hall, the main administrative and classroom building for Columbia College, was chosen. Hamilton, which was one of the buildings occupied by demonstrators during 1968, was picked, coalition members said, because although they would be locking the front doors, students could still get to classrooms in the building through a tunnel connected to an adjoining building. Coalition members used part of the group's $200 treasury to buy chains and locks as well as a bullhorn for the blockade.

On March 25, nine days before the coalition's blockade of Hamilton began, 70 students began hunger strikes as part of the first phase of the group's protest.

At 11 a.m. on April 4, as City Councilwoman Ruth Messinger, the final speaker at the coalition's divestment rally on the steps of Low Library, was concluding her speech, coalition members fanned out through the halls of Hamilton and posted signs that announced the blockade and advised students and faculty to use the

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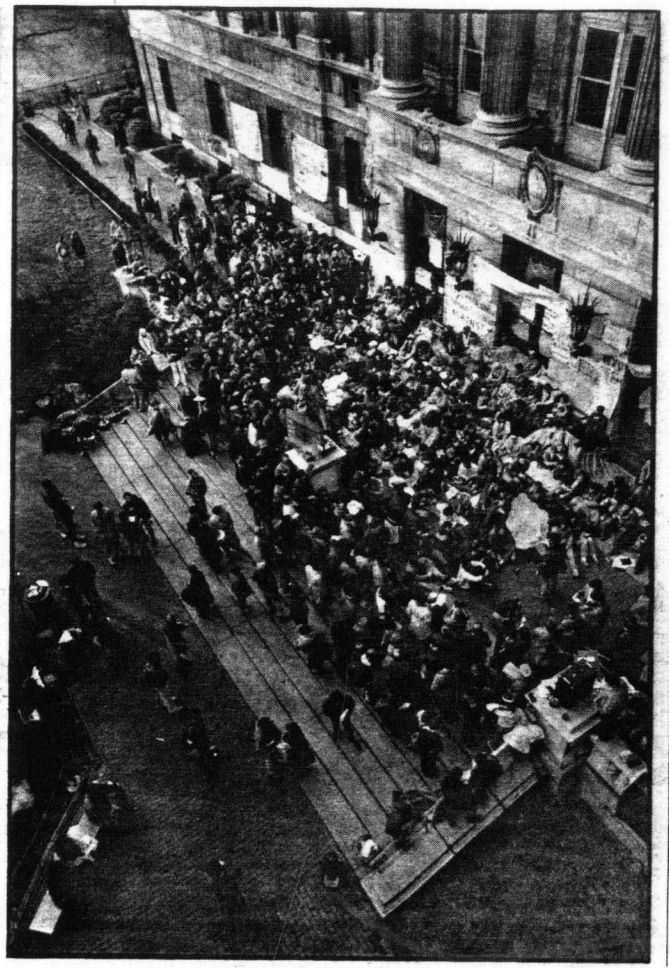
and started issuing copies of Columbia's statements as well as their own, fact sheets, and court papers prepared by lawyers for Columbia and the coalition. The demonstrators have held up to three press conferences a day and regularly call reporters to offer updates and lists of scheduled speakers.

"Sure, we're children of the media," one protester said, "but what are we supposed to do, sit here and hope that without any pressure from the outside Columbia's gonna break down and listen to us?"

The press coverage has been monitored closely by the protesters, who pass around copies of out-of-town papers containing stories about them and discuss who was interviewed on the local news the previous night. One morning, after a few chants of "The people united will never be defeated," Rob Jones, a founder of the coalition, received big cheers when he announced to the demonstrators, "Hey people, we made the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* today . . . " Another student said she was proud that "we've been around long enough to merit a news analysis in the *Times*." The student asked that her name not be used because her parents do not know she has been sleeping outdoors for more than a week.

Support from Columbia's 18,000 students is impossible to gauge, but most questioned by the *Voice* said they supported divestment but did not agree with the blockade of a university building. Columbia's student government voted to back divestment but would not endorse the blockade. The *Columbia Daily Spectator*, the student newspaper, has printed editorials criticizing Sovern's handling of the blockade and supporting the protesters. About 200 of the 4400 faculty members have signed a petition supporting the blockade (see sidebar).

Down the hall from the press suite is the coalition kitchen, where vats of coffee, tea, chili, and black bean soup cover all the stove's burners. Proceeds from the sale of antiapartheid buttons have helped pay for food, with donations from local stores and the Broadway Presbyterian Church's soup kitchen covering the shortfall.



The best 1980s-style organizational move came six days into the blockade and should dispel any notions that the demonstration has been transplanted from the '60s. Coalition members decided that, to build alumni support for divestment, they would start a direct-mail campaign. Any money that alumni contribute to the divestment fund is to be placed in an escrow account that will be turned over to Columbia if and when it divests. What the protesters needed, though, was access to the university's alumni lists, which Columbia guards, as it turns out, not too carefully. A coalition member, using a terminal in the alumni office, broke the four-letter computer code in minutes last Wednesday and "accessed" various lists, including one that contains the names of alumni who contributed more than $500 last year. The student printed out the lists on mailing labels to ease the coalition's solicitation. "We've been promised the use of some word processors," the coalition member said, "and I think we'll probably get to use the high-speed ink jet printer too. It gives us the option of personalizing the letters." The first 100 letters were mailed last Friday using postage from a Columbia meter. "We've also got unlimited access to these mile-long Xerox machines," the student said, adding that the coalition also was given one walkie-talkie by a security guard so they can monitor campus transmissions.

Columbia's clerical staff has been instrumental in sustaining the blockade; without its cooperation, the coalition would not have access to Xerox machines, postage meters, or computers. The strong ties can be traced to the coalition's vocal support of the staff in last year's protracted labor negotiations with the university. A healthy relationship between students and clerical workers is

The Case for Divestment

By Michael Denning & Betsy Blackmar

When Secretary of Education William Bennett recently justified the Reagan administration's proposed cuts in student aid, he said that the reduction might force some students into the "divestiture" of stereos, automobiles, and vacations on the beach. His choice of the word "divestiture" was, one imagines, a deliberate attempt to trivialize what has been the main center of student political activism during the last few years: the campaign to get universities to divest themselves of holdings in companies that do business in South Africa.

To anyone who has seen the growth of the divestment movement in the years after Soweto, the blockade of Hamilton Hall at Columbia University over the last two weeks is not a surprise; it is not a spontaneous resurgence of the spirit of 1968 (nor even the return of the repressed, as the Columbia administration seems to see it) but the latest turn in a widescale struggle opposing American support for the apartheid regime.

The heart of the divestment argument is that money changes things. If economic sanctions against South Africa were pursued with the vigor of, say, the destabilization of the democratically elected government of Allende in Chile, the regime might well be prevented from prosecuting the war in Namibia, and forced into negotiating with the African National Congress. Divestment, as an act of solidarity with the black trade unions and the United Democratic Front in South Africa, can help make South Africa ungovernable.

The university's position is that American investment should be governed by the Sullivan Principles. But its argument that these principles—which focus on discrimination at the workplace and only effect one per cent of South Africa's labor force—could act to reform the government represents a corporate paternalism that the repressive events of the last few months have shattered. As the Coalition for a Free South Africa points out, "IBM is still supplying computers which keep track of blacks under the pass law system. Mobil is still providing oil to the South African military, and all companies are still obliged under the Key Points Act to offer their factories to the military in case of black unrest."

At present, Columbia's investment policy looks more and more like the Reagan administration's "constructive engagement"—which has meant backing IMF loans to South Africa, shipping 2500 electric shock batons to the country's police, and encouraging further American investment. Indeed, the changes that have taken place recently in South Africa—like the heavily boycotted "Coloured" and Asian Parliaments—are signs not of the success of "constructive engagement" but of the vulnerability of the apartheid regime.

The Columbia administration's only response when several hundred students confronted the university's investment policy by blockading Hamilton Hall was to say that the students were illegally violating the rights of the university community. Even before talking with the fasting coalition leaders, the administration turned to legal and disciplinary actions against the students. But it has been the administration and the trustees who continue to abuse the rights of the university community by disregarding the unanimous 1983 Senate vote for full divestment.

Although President Michael Sovern has tried to say that the university isn't the proper target for an anti-apartheid campaign, everyone knows that it's a university issue: that it is a question of Columbia's investment policy. What has happened in the last two weeks is that two visions of the university have come into conflict: on the one hand, the humanistic ideal of the university as a community, which, if not quite democratic, still recognizes the rights and responsibilities of its several bodies—faculty, students, staff, alumni; and on the other hand, the university as a successful real estate corporation, directed by a corporate board, increasingly dependent on corporate monies, and selling a service to student consumers. Students at Columbia became particularly aware of the second Columbia—Columbia Inc.—when the administration bitterly resisted recognizing the clerical union earlier this school year. And they have seen it again in the trustees' resistance to the university community's support for divestment.

Although the press and the broadcasters have reached back to 1968 to tell this story, the students themselves are aware that this is 1985, not 1968. The Free South Africa movement has brought to gether several strands in contemporary student life: a historical memory that draws less on the student movement than on the civil rights movement, echoing the accents and nonviolent tactics of Martin Luther King; a generational witness to the events in South Africa since Soweto; and even a material consciousness that made a financial counselor advocating "socially responsible" investment one of the most popular speakers at a faculty-sponsored teach-in. In the immediate context of the killings on Sharpeville Day and the highly publicized arrests at the South African embassies, the coalition has created a multiracial movement for change in university policy that has both symbolic and economic effect.

In a movement that has been short on revolutionary polemics and long on computerized fact sheets and press releases, the students on the barricades have expressed surprise at their own commitment and willingness to take risks—risks that are far greater than those facing congressmen or professors arrested at South African consulates. But the earlier organizing and educational work of the Coalition gave them confidence in the legitimacy of their position when they sat down. And as these students sit through a cold and damp April, the Columbia campus is getting a political education in the character of the American university, in the tactics of nonviolent direct action, in the complicity of American capitalist investment with the apartheid regime, and, as they hear of the support of many community, church, labor, and left organizations, in the possibilities of a rainbow coalition. ■

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rare at universities because administrations like Columbia's have used the argument that any labor settlement will result in higher tuition as a wedge between workers and students. "The staff here has been real supportive," Rob Jones said. "They have not forgotten we've been with them when they needed us."

The coalition's organizational success, however, has not forced Sovern and the trustees to waver from their contention that divestment would only lead to more unemployment and hardship for black South Africans. Bishop Desmond Tutu and the 120,000-member Federation of South Africa Trade Unions (the country's largest federation of black unions) reject this argument. "Since when have these companies been such altruists?" Tutu has asked. "The companies benefit from black suffering and the repressive policies of the apartheid regime."

In Sovern's first "Dear Fellow Columbian" letter about the strike, he said that no university has done more than Columbia to "help South Africans in their struggle against racial oppression. Bishop Desmond Tutu proudly calls Columbia his university." When Tutu was informed of the blockade, he told a WCBS radio reporter, "I salute them for their commitment and wish to thank them on behalf of the victims of apartheid." Tutu's name has not surfaced in any of Sovern's subsequent statements or any Columbia press releases.

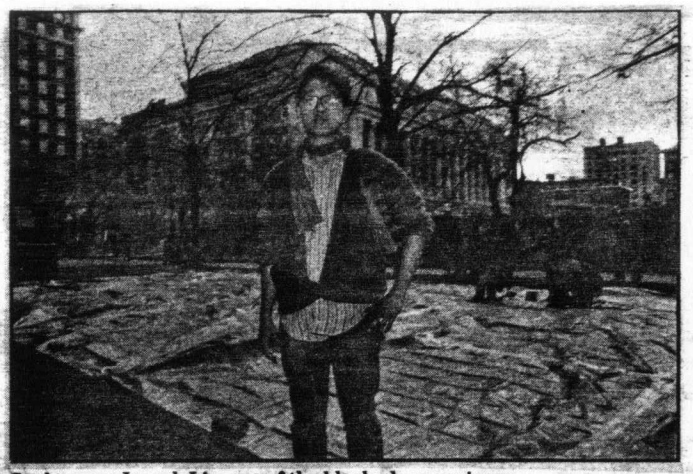
It is helpful to examine the composition of Columbia's Board of Trustees and trustees emeriti to understand the university's bind on divestment. Samuel Higginbottom, chairman and president of Rolls-Royce, is chairman of the trustees. Rolls-Royce does business in South Africa. William Hubbard, another trustee, is president of Upjohn, which employs 211 people in South Africa. Trustee Thomas Young is a retired partner of Arthur Young and Company, an accounting firm that employs 475 people in the country. Trustees emeriti have been associated with Sterling Drugs, CBS, Citibank, and McGraw-Hill, all of which have financial interests in South Africa. Trustee emeritus Grayson Kirk, who called police onto the campus when he was president in 1968, sits on IBM's advisory board. Columbia holds more than $6 million in IBM stock. The company employs more than 2000 South Africans and accounts for half that country's computer sales.

Divestment, therefore, would be not only a statement from Columbia, but also from the companies that its trustees control. To date, none of these corporations have shown signs they are ready to desert the apartheid government.

A Columbia official said there was the possibility of a corporate backlash if the university moved to distance itself from companies that do business in South Africa. Say, for instance, Columbia sold its IBM stock, which would imply that the university believed the company lent legitimacy to the apartheid government. Would Columbia still receive donations like the $6.5 million in computers that IBM gave the university last year? There is apparently enough doubt in the minds of Sovern and key central administrators that they have continued to oppose divestment.

Since Columbia is a very conservative investor, a divestment of the school's 26 South African stocks would lead to a reinvestment in blue chip corporations. Sovern has contended that he is hesitant to start selling university stocks since he and the trustees are charged with safeguarding the $800 million endowment, which will balloon to $1.2 billion when profits from the sale of Rockefeller Center properties are figured in. Stock in companies with operations in South Africa make up less than 5 per cent of the university's endowment. In essence, Columbia University's finances are like any other corporation's.

Some protesters believe that financial considerations make total divestment unlikely, but they figure they'll be able to wring some concessions out of the university. Negotiations between the two sides broke off last week when school officials refused to guarantee amnesty from disciplinary procedures for the demonstrators and would not set up a meeting with the trustees until the blockade had ended. Eric Foner, a history professor, acted as the go-between for the students. Foner said he met with university officials in Dean Robert Pollack's apartment and carried back the Columbia proposals to the protesters. "The university offered prearranged arrests as part of the package," Foner said, "but amnesty wasn't on the table as far as they were concerned." In Sovern's April 11 letter after negotiations failed, he stated that amnesty would "leave the offenders free to disrupt again, signal those who have broken the rules before that they may continue to do so with impunity, and tell everyone that at Columbia disruption of teaching and learning is regarded as a legitimate activity." Protest leaders admitted they held little hope that Columbia would agree to amnesty, "but we had to at least give it a try," Tanaquil Jones said.



Sophomore Joseph Liu, one of the blockade organizers

After the students refused to end the blockade, Columbia went to court and secured a temporary restraining order that barred protesters from continuing the blockade. When demonstrators defied the order, Columbia went back to court with the names of 14 students they claimed were in contempt of the court order. In fact, each afternoon more than 100 students are in contempt of court, but it appears that Columbia officials were only able to identify the 14 protesters named in the contempt citation. During the negotiating sessions, Pollack said Columbia was willing to drop the contempt charges if the protesters would end the blockade.

Randolph Scott-McLaughlin, a coalition lawyer from the Center for Constitutional Rights, secured a temporary restraining order from Judge Bruce Wright that, he contends, prohibits Columbia from calling in police to clear the protesters. "Legally, it's a mess," said McLaughlin, a 1975 Columbia graduate. "We've been before four judges and nothing is really clear yet."

Most students are more concerned with disciplinary charges than criminal prosecution. "One day I came down to the protest and someone told me that something had come for me," Raffi Babakanian said. "I was so relieved when I found out I was being cited for contempt and not a disciplinary hearing." However, more than 40 students have received letters informing them that they were being charged with eight violations of the Rules of University Conduct. Penalties, university officials said, could range from probation until graduation for first-time offenders to suspension or expulsion for those already on probation.

According to depositions filed by Columbia in the contempt of court procedure, security officer George Smartt "videotaped the group of students gathered at Hamilton Hall from a variety of perspectives and angles" April 5 and then, Smartt stated, "I showed the videotape I had made to a group of deans and other employees of Columbia University." Presumably, this is how administrators identified the students who eventually received disciplinary notices as well as those cited for contempt and those named in the temporary restraining order. Lawyers for the university refused to say how the students were identified.

Floyd Abrams, a First Amendment specialist handling litigation for Columbia, said the university was "hesitant" to call police because of prior "bad experiences," but that the option has not been ruled out. Sovern is not talking to reporters about how he plans to end the blockade. In fact, when Sovern met last week with a group of fasters, Columbia security guards escorted the group to a university van and then drove around Morningside Heights for 15 minutes before dropping them off at the meeting site, St. Luke's Hospital, only one block from where the fasters were picked up. "They said they wanted to make sure no press people were following us," Dave Goldiner, one of the fasters said. "Then when we got into the hospital, we rode three elevators and walked through the halls for a while before they led us to Sovern."

On April 11, leaders from the black press, ministers, and businessmen marched to Columbia for an evening rally. Vernon Mason, a coalition lawyer, sang lead on "Oh Freedom," and then launched into an attack on Columbia's legal harassment of students that ended with him imitating Abrams. "My law firm spends more money on word processors," Mason whined, "than Columbia has invested in South Africa."

Last Saturday, the protesters organized an alumni open house, featuring former members of Students for a Democratic Society. Standing in a courtyard dotted with babies in Aprica strollers and Gerry backpacks, Eddie Goldman, an SDS member when he was in graduate school in 1968, said, "Sovern is using the same tactics as Grayson Kirk, except that his reputation is a lot better. This protest shows you that the trustees are still as intransigent as ever when you start talking about profits." Coalition lawyer McLaughlin, dressed in a dashiki, introduced his wife, bongo under her arm, and daughter, doll in hand, to the protesters. Coalition member Rob Jones said comparisons with the 1968 riots "are all in the media's head. All you'd have to do is look at us; we're protesting peacefully."

This week, the Columbia administration has seen Jesse Jackson, who met with Sovern for 35 minutes on Monday to discuss the blockade, draw 2000 students to Hamilton Hall and MTV and *Nightline* drop by. Also this week, students who have been accepted for next year's freshman class will begin arriving for tours and the Pulitzer Prize committee will be meeting on campus. Both would make excellent excuses for the school to try and clear the protesters from Hamilton Hall. How Columbia University moves to end this demonstration and how it deals with the protesters will set an example for other universities where the question of college versus corporation lies unresolved. ■