Battering Ram: The Occupation of the President’s Office, January 15, 1970 — I

By Michael Feirtag

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Shortly before noon on Thursday, January 15, 1970 a demonstration began in the lobby of building seven of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. A few hundred seemed to be participants, as opposed to those who only paused before continuing through the lobby from Massachusetts Avenue to classes. A drama of sorts was being performed, including a mime in which two prisoners were bound and gagged by an executioner. Several persons carried “For sale” signs, including one woman costumed as a whore and labelled Miss America. There seemed to be a group caucussing, men in a niche next to an elevator, for the wish that the demonstrators move on to the president’s office second to emanate from there. The sluggish demonstration began to move once, stopped, and, again in response to an unseen will behind the turn, finally moved slowly down the building seven corridor.

At the end of the group came four persons, wearing ski masks and white laboratory jackets. They carried a five foot length of metal fashioned of two five or six inch diameter pipes welded together along their length, somewhat like a double-barreled shotgun. Two crosspieces had been welded on to the double length of pipe; four persons could grip the thing. Some who were at the window say they saw the group of four carrying the welded pipe, wondering about the lobby during the mime presentation; some even remember thinking they seemed to blend; in naturally with the gerilla theater taking place.

Simonides crossed the corridor. A few steps brought him to a double door on the second floor of building three, across the hall from the alcove in the secretarial reception area of the suite of the MIT Corporation, and their secretaries, Assistant to the President Constantine Simonides had heard nervous laughter from a few students who seemed to be loitering in the corridor just before the demonstration had begun in building seven. At some time a few hours earlier, two or three persons had been walking around with cap pistols.

And sometime that morning, Simonides had met with Dean for Student Affairs J. Daniel Nyhart, Associate Provost Paul E. Gray, and others. They had thought of the crowd which massed outside the president’s office on the last day of the November Actions the preceding fall, and they had made the final decision to lock the office and remove the secretaries. There were no active files in either President Howard Johnson’s or Chairman James Killian’s offices, and the safe—a small one in the president’s office, a larger one in the chairman’s—were empty; the filing cabinets and safes had been emptied before the November Actions, and the materials had never been replaced. Most had merely been moved across the hall to Simonides' office. Simonides expected a confrontation and rally in front of the doors. Johnson would be elsewhere, possibly in Building Nine, where he had been in November, administrators having decided that they could not hazard a meeting between Johnson and radicals. It would be Simonides who would wait at the door as the representative of the president.

Simonides had been down the corridor to the balcony overlooking the rally. He had had only a glimpse, insufficient inspection to sort out participants in the rally from the usual bustle in the lobby, and then he had returned to his office.

Told that the demonstration was approaching, Simonides ceased the corridor. A few steps brought him to the double doors labelled ‘Office of the President; Office of the Chairman of the Corporation.’ He took up a position with his back to the locked doors. With him was then Lieutenant James Olivier of the campus patrol, and two or three other campus patrolmen. They all clustered in front of the doors; there were no campus patrolmen elsewhere, either toward building ten, or back along the corridor through buildings three and seven. The doors were rather flimsy. Made of the expensive hardwood that had induced student politicians to give the name ‘Tenfoot Row’ to the second floor of building three, both doors swung inward in a two-foot alcove in the secretarial/reception area of the suite of the president’s office. At the top of one of the doors was a pin that fit into a slot in the ceiling of the door sash, thus securing that door in its closed position. In conjunction with a bolt that fastened the two doors together, this flimsy mechanism would be all that locked the entrance shut. There was no massive bar or any other similarly bulky but effective lock mechanism; apparently such an apparatus would be gauche on the door to the office of the two top men at an educational institution. There was perhaps a quarter-inch gap between the two closed doors even when locked, applying the method of lock-breaking involving slipping a laminated card into the lock mechanism to force it open—the method known as coop carding—would be easy here.

In fact, a person walking rapidly could apply pressure to the wrong door, the one with a pin into the ceiling, and almost effortlessly force it open. It had been done by absent-minded persons entering the offices.

The demonstration moved from the lobby down the building seven corridor on the first floor, ascended the stairwell opposite the medical department at the junction of buildings three and seven, and moved down the corridor of building three to the president’s office on the right. Behind them came Associate Provost Paul Gray, who had been in building seven watching the rally. He had not seen the four persons holding the double length of pipe.

Gray began slowly easing through the crowd, which now completely filled the width of the corridor around the entrance to the offices of the president and corporation chairman. He could see Lillian Robinson, a humanities department instructor. She appeared to be delivering a speech to Simonides, who stood in front of the doors a few feet from her. She was speaking into a bullhorn.

She was reading a document that has, in some mysterious way, come to be known as the People’s Injunction, although none of those who had produced the document had so named it. The bullhorn, in fact, was part of the effect. The humor of injunctions is of a peculiar sort that is most effective when the injunction is read by an amplified emotionless male voice at a group meeting...