Fraternities
On the Rocks

By Maureen Sirhal

EW ENDURING INSTITUTIONS — and certainly no collegiate institutions — are as quintessentially American as the Greek letter fraternities and sororities. It was in 1776, emblematically enough, that the first such society, Phi Beta Kappa, was founded at the College of William and Mary. Founded chiefly to provide a forum for debate and discussion, Phi Beta Kappa was primarily concerned with enhancing the scholarship of its members. In this the organization was typical of the first fraternities, most of which were founded as literary societies.

The first fraternity in the sense that the word is now used was the Kappa Alpha Society, founded at Union College in 1825 and still in existence today. Like-minded chapters, such as Delta Chi and Sigma Phi, soon followed suit, as did corollary societies for women, sororities. These began forming on campuses in the mid-nineteenth century, mostly as places where women — who were often banned from the public meeting areas of colleges — could retreat.

Neither fraternities nor sororities, of course, have remained static for these 200-plus years; as living institutions, all have changed with the times. Still, it is striking that these particular forms of Americana continue to deliv-
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er much the same benefits to members today as they have since their found-
ing — the provision of a cozier, more intimate setting in which to share
ideas, build lasting friendships, and acquire nurture and support from a con-
tinuous set of peers in a world that is, for most students, their first experi-
ence of life lived separately from their families.

The deep loyalty felt by generations of Greek system alumni is one kind
of testimony to the enduring appeal of fraternities and sororities. The num-
ers also speak to the same point. Despite some attrition during the past
decade, more than two centuries after that first Phi Beta Kappa meeting,
there remain 67 national fraternities and 26 national sororities — in all,
almost a million collegiate members in over 8,000 chapters across
the country.

Fraternities and sororities today are under siege as never before by administrators across the country. To be
sure, campus authorities have clashed with the Greek system at other points in history. In the mid-
nineteenth century, for example, schools like Monmouth College forced their Greek societies to
close down for reasons similar to what is today derided as “discrimination” and “elitism.” Phi Beta
Kappa, to take another example, eventually evolved into its present form of scholarly society as a
response to public criticism of its secrecy. And there is no denying, either, that anti-intellectual practices
at some chapters and houses, notably drinking, have given many an administrator a perfect pretext for cracking down.

Even so, there is also something new afoot in the longstanding power struggle between administrators and Greeks. For one thing, college and university administrators are far more ambitious about what is happening out-
side the lecture halls than they used to be. Throughout the 1990s, they have shown a marked and increasing interest in extracurricular activities or “resi-
dential life,” of which the attempt to control fraternity and sorority life is
but one example.

Even more interesting, though, is the largely unnoticed fact that the antipathy many administrators feel toward Greek life has a political dimen-
sion too. Fraternities and sororities, both of which tout the benefits of single-
sex housing, directly contradict the widespread, politically “enlightened”
view that all such distinctions ought to be obliterated. But the ideological differences between Greek members in general and campus administrators in general go deeper than merely the single-sex issue. It is a gap that suggests we should take a closer look at the ongoing attempt to eradicate fraternities and sororities as over two centuries of history have known them.

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The itch to abolish

Perhaps the most publicized example of 1990s-style attempts to end Greek life on campus is that of Dartmouth College. In fact, Dartmouth is a particularly telling example of the trend, for there the attempt to dismantle the Greek system has proceeded despite the fact that nearly half the student body belongs to fraternities or sororities. Even more interesting, it has also proceeded despite the fact that the Greek system enjoys overwhelming support among the student body at large; according to a poll taken by the Dartmouth, the campus newspaper, some 80 percent of students said they would prefer to keep the system the way it had been.

Nevertheless, last February, the board of trustees abruptly announced its decision (emanating from a long-held desire) to overhaul residential life on campus to “fit with the mission and academic goals of Dartmouth.” Nearly a year in the making, the controversial initiative will cost millions and alter campus life so extensively that Dartmouth President James Wright has declared it “the biggest change since coeducation.” In essence, the initiative defines five goals of residential life — including the creation of a system that “should be substantially coeducational and provide opportunities for greater interaction among all Dartmouth students.”

At stake in this controversy, of course, is the very future of Greek life at Dartmouth. A newly released report issuing proposals for the “Student Life Initiative” outlines just how radical the administration’s plans are. Though Wright has indicated that the aim of this plan is not to “get rid of fraternities,” it is hard to imagine a more efficient way of doing just that.

Under this new plan, Greek houses will be forced to live under a slew of tighter rules. In addition to micromanaging the governing boards of those houses, the new initiative would allow only the officers of each Greek house to live under its roof, thus drastically reducing the number of residents at most houses. This is a direct assault on the financial viability of the Greek system, since fraternities and sororities depend on keeping a house filled to capacity to stay solvent. In addition, houses will be open to residents only on condition that a counselor specializing in alcohol or sexual abuse live under the roof. Ultimately, the school will be forcing the closure of all Greek chapters unwilling to accept the proposed regulations. As the report states bluntly and without apparent regret: “It is unlikely that all present organizations would be able to meet the new standards with the result that the number of organizations will probably be reduced.”

Yet it is hard to see how a system whose members include nearly half the campus can be dismissed as “elitist” or “discriminatory.” The truth is that bias against Greek life has animated Dartmouth administrators for years, long before the need for “substantially coeducational housing” proved a
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winner. Wright himself, for example, has chaired task forces recommending that new housing alternatives be made available for students because the "Greek life has dominated campus."

Yet Dartmouth is merely the latest example of colleges that have taken measures to abolish Greek life. In the past nine years there have been over a dozen campuses that have ended or severely limited the scope of fraternity life: Bucknell, Bowdoin, Middlebury, Bates, and Hamilton, to name a few. These institutions generally argue either that Greeks support discrimination or that they foster a culture incompatible with the goals and mission of the institutions — or both. So far, their efforts appear to be working.

As administrators began cracking down on Greek life at various colleges, for example, stagnation and loss of membership were the first results. The national membership averages in fraternities and sororities decreased between 1991 and 1997, as compared to the explosion in membership during the 1980s. According to the National Panhellenic Conference (NPC), an umbrella organization for 26 international women's fraternities and sororities, membership in these organizations, which had been estimated at 163,000 in 1991, declined to 157,000 by 1997 — a decrease of nearly 4 percent. (Just a decade earlier, by way of comparison, sorority membership had been 110,000 in 1981 and jumped to 147,000 by 1987 — an increase of more than 30 percent.) Likewise, fraternities mirror the membership decline. Surveys conducted by the Center for the Study of the College Fraternity at Indiana University found that the 292 institutions reporting in 1992 had 162,820 members; in 1997, while more schools reported (346), the membership number was lower, 133,210. The Chronicle of Higher Education recently noted that overall fraternity membership is down as much 30 percent. At particular universities, the numbers are even more startling. Michigan State University, for example, has suffered a 50 percent decline in Greek membership over the past nine years.

Numbers tell only half the story; matters like morale are harder to measure. Yet one need only walk around campuses today to observe just how anxious and suspicious all these administrative attacks have made the Greeks. Dartmouth's students so vehemently protested their trustees' announcement that they captured national headlines. There is a general consensus among Greek members that administrators and faculty hate them and are out to get them.

Unfortunately, the fear appears justified. Take, for example, Middlebury College. In 1992, the board of trustees, accompanied not far behind by the administration, dubbed the fraternities (sororities had died out by then) to be "antithetical to the mission of the college." The board of trustees issued a
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landmark resolution that all-male fraternities had to integrate women or disband. As in the case of Dartmouth, the decisions met with much reluctance on the part of students, and outright protest from Greek members. More than half the campus supported the notion of keeping fraternities exactly as they were. But administrators and trustees, acting in this case in the name of complaints of “sexism” by a campus feminist organization, were unmoved. As the Task Force on Social Life at Middlebury stated in its report, “As society has changed fraternities have not, and therefore, have become an anachronism.” After winning a lawsuit filed by the Delta Kappa Epsilon national fraternity, Middlebury trustees forced the closure of all Greek chapters unwilling to accept women. The groups that did capitulate renamed their houses, becoming independent of the national umbrella organizations.

At Middlebury, as at Dartmouth, routine events — general complaints about Greek behavior and incidents of such behavior on the part of the fraternity members — were not treated routinely; they were instead seized upon as weapons in the struggle against the fraternities. Similar circumstances prompted Bowdoin College in 1997 to declare its own war on Greeks. The college’s board of trustees voted to abolish fraternities by May 2000. Waynesburg College in Pennsylvania has said goodbye to its Greek system; at the start of the 1999-2000 school year, fraternities were no more. In these cases, what unfolded was no mere punishment for a couple of bad choices or insensitive comments, but rather a very visible push to de-emphasize and ultimately eradicate the culture that the fraternities represented on campus.

Ironically, a Los Angeles Times report described Middlebury as “spearheading a counterrtrend: an attempt to reform rather than eradicate its fraternities.” While other northeastern colleges, such as Amherst and Colby, simply abolished their Greek systems outright in the 1980s, Middlebury instead merely wanted “reform.” “Reform,” it turns out, means molding Greek organizations into a vision more closely related to the goals of the college trustees and administrators — in other words, making them unrecognizable.

The common perception among administrators is that Middlebury made the right move. In the battle over residential life, traditional fraternities — those chapters that usually have a national presence and hold representation on the North-American Interfraternity Conference (NIC), in other words those most likely to be thought of as the “old boy” network — are now the major targets, and terms like “diversity” and “inclusiveness” are the weapons of choice. Today at Middlebury, some members of the former chapters that once occupied fraternity houses on campus meet in secret. They do so because if caught participating in the rituals and memberships of fraternities, students will be expelled.
Death by alcohol?

When the argument against Greek life is not being rationalized in the name of coeducation, gender equity, inclusiveness, and all the rest, its detractors present a more serious charge: that Greek life perpetuates binge drinking. Here would be real cause for concern, if the stereotype of “Animal House” were to hold up under scrutiny. But it does not help the administrators’ case that the connection between Greek life and alcohol abuse is based on data that invite skepticism.

Alcohol is indeed a serious concern on campus, for several reasons. One is a genuine desire to protect students and reduce the risks of terrible incidents, such as deaths from alcohol poisoning or from related consequences of drinking. Moreover, bad publicity resulting from the behavior and incidents associated with excessive drinking harms the college’s ability to attract superior students, solicit funding, and generally project a reputation as a serious academic institution. Third, there are liability concerns. Though colleges long ago abandoned the idea of acting in loco parentis, thereby abjuring responsibility for student behavior, they are still responsible for student safety. Every incident of injury or death on campus is accompanied by the threat of legal action and million-dollar lawyers’ fees for defending the school.

Over the past decade, the rationale for cracking down on the campus social scene — including on fraternities and sororities — has been the increase in “binge drinking” among students. Of all elements of the campus social scene, it is the Greek system that faces most scrutiny in this regard.

This is ostensibly because of widely accepted research that touts a strong link between binge drinking and fraternity membership — the famed 1993 Harvard School of Public Health College Alcohol Study conducted by Henry Wechsler. According to Wechsler, binge drinking is defined as the consumption of five or more (four for women) drinks in one sitting. Relying on survey data from more than 17,000 respondents, Wechsler estimated that over 44 percent of college students are binge drinkers. With such stunning figures, it was this study, more than any other single factor, that launched a national obsession with college drinking and with fraternity drinking in particular.

Wechsler’s data were especially damning for fraternity and sorority members. Wechsler estimated that four of five fraternity members are binge drinkers. Moreover, he found that both male and female members of Greek organizations are more likely to suffer the extreme consequences of serious drinking. Dozens of reports since Wechsler’s have repeated these and similar findings, pointing the finger of blame for heavy drinking on the fraternity culture as the breeding ground of binge drinking.

As social science, however, the reports just don’t add up to a justification for killing off the Greeks. The link may indeed be strong between Greek
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membership and drinking. But how significant is that, if a number of other factors also predict binge drinking? The Journal of American College Health in a May 1999 report noted the strong link between college athletics and binge drinking. It estimated that nearly 78 percent of college athletes are binge drinkers — almost exactly the percentage that Wechsler assigned to fraternity members. In fact, Wechsler’s own report acknowledged that collegiate alcohol abuse also appeared strongly related to at least one other external correlate, namely high school binge drinking. Nevertheless, it has been easier to blame the Greeks for binge drinking than to pursue such avenues as these.

Other scholarly journals as well as the media tend to take Wechsler’s findings on binge drinking as holy writ — which overlooks potential flaws. Consider the fundamental question of methodology, i.e., how drinking patterns are measured in the first place. Wechsler’s subjects self-reported their behavior — a way of doing social science that leaves open the question of the truthfulness of the reporting by subjects. There is reason to be skeptical about that. To take just one example, a 1991 report in the Journal of Studies on Alcohol by John Baer, a professor at the University of Washington, asserted that students, when self-reporting on their own drinking practices, commonly overestimate the drinking practices of their peers.

Moreover, the Highway Safety Research Center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill has recently released the results of a two-year study indicating that student binge drinking is not as dire as Wechsler’s research initially proclaimed. Unlike the self-reported data in the Harvard study, the data in the North Carolina study were derived from measuring the blood-alcohol concentration (BAC) via breathalyzer of its participants, resulting in more accurate, quantifiable assessments of student drinking. The study revealed that students are simply not drinking as much or getting drunk as often as perceived. Sixty-six percent of the 1,790 student participants showed a BAC of .00 on weekend nights. That percentage was even higher during the week.

But amid the hype of several well-publicized alcohol-related deaths, parents, administrators, faculty, and the general public are always in a hurry to blame something. The point here is this: Most students drink, both Greek and non-Greek. But administrators and critics of fraternity life single out the correlation between fraternity and sorority members and binge drinking. The drinking issue is, in effect, a handy pretext for clobbering Greek life at large.

Collegiate administrators wasted little time in seizing upon alcohol incidents as a way to control fraternities and sororities. As Indiana University
Dean Dick McKaig put the point, "there are a number of behavioral problems that capture the headlines with enough consistency that always have [Greeks] at the scrutiny of faculty.” He noted that fraternities incur a higher burden because, unlike off-campus housing or even dorms, Greek chapters have an “organizational structure that [one] can argue against or lobby against.” So administrators impart restrictions on membership recruitment, living arrangements, and social events. Most Greek systems on campuses across the country are expected to register their social events with an administrative arm of the college and seek official approval from collegiate officials for their membership recruitment. Most colleges also restrict the time period for membership recruitment, limiting the age group as well (all of which have damaging financial consequences for the Greek organizations).

Forcing the closure of fraternal organizations only gives students the excuse to seek even less supervised and less accountable venues.

Even more perverse is forcing Greek chapters to close in the name of wiping out drinking. The consequence of this move, experience suggests, will be a surge in off-campus drinking. Consider Princeton University, where, in the past five years, the speedy growth of underground fraternities has led to concerns about drinking off-campus. Greek letter organizations were stamped out at Princeton under the reign of Woodrow Wilson (the Greek organizations were eventually replaced with a different, albeit similar, social network called eating clubs.) These new underground fraternities are organizations unrecognized by the school’s administration. They survive mainly because members organize activities in off-campus housing (mostly rented by the members of these organizations, which do not own their own chapter houses).

In all the attention given to culpability on the part of fraternities, little to no attention is paid to the students who break laws or college regulations because they are out of sight. Forcing the closure of fraternal organizations only gives students the excuse to seek even less supervised and less accountable venues: Bars, apartments, and private houses become host to the same bad decisions and irresponsible behavior, with no organization whatever to hold responsible for it. David Hanson, a sociologist at the State University at Potsdam in New York, cautioned in a 1995 New York Times report, “Moving the Greeks off campus could be the worst solution of all. As long as the drinking is on campus, the school has some control over it. It would lose that control if students had to go to bars and other places which are not so desirable.”

There can be no doubt that the typical level of drinking on campus is too high. Indeed, most students openly acknowledge as much. In the face of so
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many incidents involving alcohol, many campus Greek systems are now using self-imposed bans on alcohol or revising alcohol policies to reduce abuse. At Michigan State University, for example, the campus's Greek chapters voluntarily banned alcohol from their houses after campus riots last year. Countless other Greek systems organize campus-wide events, open to all students, to educate them about alcohol. The North-American Interfraternity Conference and National Panhellenic Conference expend much time and many resources educating Greek members on the dangers of alcohol abuse. In addition to a financial commitment, potential Greek members must make a time commitment, usually each semester, for alcohol awareness seminars and discussions, all of which are sponsored by individual chapters or the campus Greek community.

But for many administrators, it is clear, the goal is not simply to reduce alcohol abuse, but to crack down on fraternities in order to mold a new campus culture. At Dartmouth, former Panhellenic President Kelly Bodio acknowledged that drinking is such a serious problem that campus Greek leaders meet regularly to address the issue — and voluntarily offered to go dry during student/administrator discussions of the looming “social initiative.” But at Dartmouth, significantly, even going dry is apparently not enough. As President Wright told the campus paper in an interview, “I wouldn’t even fantasize how to make a dry campus here.”

Undoubtedly, the alcohol craze on campuses across the country will take years to change — years in which alcohol will continue to be used as a rallying cry against the Greeks. The ironic footnote to it all is that dormitories, not fraternities, took the lead in creating the drinking culture on campus. In the early 1970s, when colleges relaxed restrictions in dormitories, dispensing with faculty supervision, droves of students migrated back to the dorms. With a lower drinking age, and no supervision, dorm life was far more attractive to student bodies shrugging off authority. Facing the heavy financial burden of filling their houses with members, fraternities quickly followed suit. One by one, they lifted many restrictions, making the presence of alcohol in the chapter houses a relatively new phenomenon, dating back approximately 25 years.

Animal-friendly house?

The course of the past two decades has given rise to a distinctly new campus culture shaped by administrators’ concerns over residential life. Administrative and faculty concern for students extends beyond the scope of simply attending classes, researching, and studying. Their ambitions now encompass the totality of a student’s experience while in college, including social activities. Gordon Haaland, president of Gettysburg College, sums up the enlarged scope of all this nicely in the fall issue of Net Results, the on-line magazine of Student Affairs
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Administrators in Higher Education, also known by the acronym for its former name, NASPA:

I fear we have not done enough to create the kind of community in which a student’s intellectual and academic development is well-integrated with that student’s emotional, physical, spiritual and social development. While all colleges have a statement of academic purposes, few have a well-articulated philosophy of college life beyond the classroom.

In a sense, the new campus culture is trying to revive the old practice of acting in loco parentis. Its abdication in the 1960s and ’70s was, in part, politically motivated, a capitulation to student protest. But it was also grounded in the belief that students, when un supervised, would be free to explore areas of personal interests. Of course, at the time, those interests included the counterculture and anti-war protests—all of which made Greek life an arm of the establishment, and therefore an unattractive option. And indeed, in this period, the Greek houses saw their lowest membership numbers in history.

Yet instead of pursuing the same countercultural activities as their faculty antecedents, post-baby boom students went the other way. They chose Greek life. Newsweek proclaimed in 1983 that “It’s Back,” meaning “The Rise of Fraternities.” By the mid-1980s, there was a 180-degree change in Greek popularity from a decade earlier. “Across much of the country a special kind of Greek revival is thriving on campuses,” Time reported. In fact, membership between 1980 and 1986 nearly doubled.

By 1990, the growing trend to limit these organizations, their activities, and by extension, their very existence had also become clear. “The Party’s Over,” announced the headline in the Washington Times, and what began as a trend to “reform” has quickly grown into the trend toward eradication visible today.

But if this is a return to in loco parentis, it is an entirely new incarnation of that practice. Today’s direction is fueled as much by controlling the influences on students as it is by the concerns over safety and drinking. And fraternities and sororities are greatly pressured in a whole host of professional literature to bow politely to political correctness in all its forms. “The Future of the Greek Experience: Greeks and Diversity,” as taken from the guidebook for student services New Challenges to the Greek Letter Organizations: Transforming Fraternities and Sororities into Learning Communities, is one such piece of literature detailing the new approaches Greek organizations must take in order to remain a successful and viable part of residential life on campus. Among other things, Greeks must embrace the notion of a “community of learners” — a phrase loaded with...
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ideological meaning in the progressive tradition of education — and actively recruit with goals in mind that will strengthen and diversify the Greek experience. In other words, the goals of Greek organizations must clearly promote and endorse and even advance the political goals of college administrators, which inevitably include the promulgation of diversity and multicultural awareness, as well as the spread of anti-sexist and anti-homophobic agit-prop — the dominant orthodoxies on most campuses across the country.

Any fraternities and sororities reluctant to dive headfirst into the sea of liberal academic rhetoric only reinforce the stereotypes in administrators’ minds. In an article in the *NASPA Journal*, Edward Whipple, a vice president at Bowling Green State University, explained that administrators “see no contribution by fraternities and sororities to the moral, ethical and intellectual development of their members.” Hence, “the challenge to student affairs administrators appears to be clear. We must either find ways to redirect the values systems of the fraternities on our campuses or we should commence the process of eliminating this dinosaur from our midst.”

See no good

The final proof that the attack on fraternities is politically motivated is this — that changes have already occurred in the way fraternities operate, and that administrators intent on dismantling the system must turn a blind eye to them. Yet on many campuses, Greek life is becoming a more practical part of the new campus culture. For years, national chapters have been emphasizing a push back to the roots of the organizations: scholarship, friendship, and service. As Steve Zizzo, a former executive vice president with NIC, explained, “With the drop in membership in the 1970s we had to examine our role and how we were recruiting. The NIC has always stressed the traditions of brotherhood and service, while trying to reduce hazing and alcohol.” Additionally, individual university chapters of national fraternities have started grass-roots initiatives that emphasize less “partying” and more community outreach.

Changing the culture inside the systems is as difficult as changing the drinking culture on campus — which explains why in the four years since his initial report, Henry Wechsler found little decrease in binge drinking numbers. But while administrators point the finger of blame at fraternities, NIC leaders have been working for the past two decades to change students’ mindsets on drinking. Already more than half of the organization’s 65 member fraternities have declared initiatives to “go dry” by the end of 2000. If alcohol were indeed the source of administrators’ antagonism toward the fraternities, then initiatives like these would appear to be the solution. The fact that many administrators want to shut them down, dry or not, ought to tell us something.

Greek life on campus is more than a thorn in the side of administrators; it
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is also, at least for some, a political affront. The problem, in a word, is Greek conservatism. During the mid-1980s, when the Greek system enjoyed visible popularity across the country, *Time* magazine accurately noted that the boom in Greek membership, "to many educators . . . [was] a reflection of the swing toward Establishment values and conservatism on campuses." Some interesting data bear out this link between politics and attraction to Greek life. For example, the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan, in conjunction with the *Michigan Daily* (the campus newspaper), conducted a poll in March 1999 on student views on affirmative action (Michigan is the site of two lawsuits for reverse discrimination in its admissions process). Of the population polled, a large contingent of Greek students sided against U-M's firm defense of racially based admissions. According to the *Daily*, only one-third of Greek students polled supported using race as a factor in admissions, compared to 43.8 percent of non-Greek students.

The difference is noteworthy because it adds to the perception that there is something about Greek students that creates an alternative constituency whose opinions run counter to policies and goals of faculty and administrators. As one professor put it recently in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, "Higher education today is controlled by those who reached maturity in the 1960s and 1970s. I suspect that the vast majority were not Greeks and view the characters depicted in *Animal House* as accurate models for the sorority-fraternity experience."

These ideological divisions are beginning to be noticed elsewhere. The *New York Times* recently noted in an extensive piece on Dartmouth:

> The college's plans represent an important test case in a small but growing movement . . . . Worried about alcohol-related deaths, sexual assaults and hazing, but mostly by deep divisions within their student bodies [emphasis added], more than a dozen colleges have either banned fraternal organizations from campus or forced them to become coeducational . . . .

There can be little doubt that such "deep divisions" are political, with Greeks being singled out as others are not. Dartmouth, for example, initially placed a moratorium on any new college-recognized Greek chapters shortly after first announcing the changes to residential life, thereby halting the growth of the system. Of course, the moratorium would not affect any group of women who chose to start a club to promote sisterhood — only when they decide to take Greek letters as their name would the opportunity expire. Steve Menashi, a student at Dartmouth and the executive editor of the *Dartmouth Review*, summed it up well in a letter to the editor of *National Review*: "Undergraduate societies allow students to organize and dissent from regnant political orthodoxy. The Dartmouth administration wants to end the college's Greek system precisely because it presents a barrier to the imposition of an ideological agenda."
What does the Greek experience provide? From the perspective of today’s faculty and administrators, perhaps, not much but headaches. Alumni of the system, however, feel differently. According to a 1997 survey conducted by the National Panhellenic Conference and North-American Interfraternity Conference, Greek alumni are the building blocks of “social capital.” They are people who go on to volunteer, donate money, and help provide the manpower to revive and propel communities. Likewise, Greek alumni contribute more generously to their alma maters than do non-Greeks. The same study showed that 22 percent of Greek alumni contributed between $500 and $1,000 in 1996, compared with 4.2 percent of non-Greeks.

Greek life was founded on the idea that there are substantial benefits to be had from a small group of men or women coming together in a setting that promotes selectivity: the honor of preferring some above others. And while this notion may be outdated in the eyes of administrators, it is a tradition that has endured for centuries, stressing values that are now foreign across most college campuses.

Yes, there are indeed problems with the Greek system, but so too are these problems part of the larger issues on campus. They stem from a wider and more debased cultural environment, which students have embraced. But those trends surfaced and have been fueled by these same administrators who now argue that students might actually require a little supervision. Dismantling fraternities and sororities, or molding them into unrecognizable versions of themselves, accomplishes very little compared to the big-picture troubles that plague students and campuses alike. It is the culture that needs to change, and the destruction of these organizations, along with the opportunity for students to choose how they associate, will not achieve that.

Alexis de Tocqueville famously observed that Americans “constantly form associations. They are the most fraternal people in the world.” But first they must be allowed to associate. It will be a pity if a decade of ideological hostility ends up extinguishing a tradition that remains, warts and all, an irreplaceable link to the country that shares its birthday.
Retirement (In)Security?

Social Security is one of this country’s best-known and most widely accepted government entitlement programs. Unfortunately, few Americans really understand how the system operates. Now a pair of new books from The Heritage Foundation brings the Social Security debate into clear focus:

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Books

The Truth About Robber Barons

By Woody West

Jean Strouse. Morgan: American Financier. Random House. 796 pages. $34.95


Capitalism has never suffered from a glowing reputation, of course. This is not surprising. It does not present itself as cozily as can socialism — or, now, the "Third Way" of splitting the ideological and economic differences that the center-left is adopting since the command economies collapsed. In this country — the right auricle of democratic capitalism — there has long been a tension between admiration for material achievement and resentment of it as an insult to our fiercely egalitarian ethos. It is an ambivalence that rises nearly to the level of a national characteristic.

Sociologist Peter Berger put it neatly when he wrote that capitalism is "particularly deprived of mythic potency." That status will change, he writes, only "on the day when poets sing the praises of the Dow Jones and when large numbers of people are ready to risk their lives in defense of the Fortune 500." Berger does not assign high probability to either.

Well, droll as it may seem, let us now praise famous capitalists. Praise seldom is their portion. They must content themselves with the money — and perhaps the fawning authorized biography that celebrity of all sorts can command. Judicious appraisal, however, of those who’ve scaled the capitalistic heights is rare enough to deserve high billing on the literary marquee. Two recent biographies qualify — of J. Pierpont Morgan and John D. Rockefeller Sr.

Those two great and admirable Americans (this sentence is an Irony Free Zone) have been recognized only fitfully for their achievements, respectively as industrialist and as banker — recognized, that is, without an asterisk sourly asserting that their accomplishments were at the expense of widows and orphans, the helpless and the oppressed, and are testaments to acquisitive soullessness. "Robber Barons," as in the title of Matthew Josephson’s 1934 dyspeptic demolition job, is the label under which these individuals are usually filed away.

There indeed were rogues who worked the raw precincts of nineteenth century capitalism — Jay Gould, Daniel Drew, E.H. Harriman, and Cornelius Vanderbilt are only the top names on a long muster roll. These

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