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STUDENT CONFRONTATIONS: ARE THEY INEVITABLE?

THE HONORABLE HUBERT H. HUMPHREY*

Until recently, when discussing the problems of our educational institutions, I was primarily concerned with the content of federal legislation, and the amount of federal appropriations affecting educational institutions. Today I come to this examination as a practicing pedagogue, as a legislator on a reverse Sabbatical, on leave from Washington to academia. As a result of this occupational change, I have a rather different vantage point from which to speak.

While I hold in high regard man's capacity for rational thought, I have never believed that rationalism can, or should, be an end in itself. The search for truth, however important, is a sterile exercise unless we relate it to human needs. I have a healthy scepticism for any scientific enterprise that cherishes discovery, but denies the human personality and man's sense of individual worth.

Neither do I hold with emotional excess, with instant and predictable response to constant crisis, and the abdication of rational judgment that usually accompanies such response. I walk the middle path, convinced that knowledge without commitment is wasteful, but commitment without knowledge is dangerous. While concerned that today's often healthy activism may be corrupted into an indiscriminate attack on the intellectual process itself, more importantly I am concerned that such anti-intellectualism is today being nurtured in the heart of our greatest universities.

Our campuses are quieter this year, yet it would be a mistake to equate this quiet with serenity. Our universities are still in crisis, a crisis as real and as pervasive as that facing any institution in our society.

The issues have not changed, nor have they been resolved. Confrontation politics have taken their toll among the young as well as among the student's administration and faculty targets. Many university presidents have left their tormented campuses for quieter employment, but more students than professors or presidents have left. For those who remain on the campus, this seems to be a period of reevaluation. There have been changes; there have been victories on both sides, but there has been no permanent resolution of the important issues.

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What is the nature of the conflict? Is it being too simplistic to consider it a confrontation between the activists and the intellectuals? Can student rebels, brought up with the twin expectations of an honest world and instant gratification, find happiness with faculty members reared in simpler times who believe in the importance of thoughtful examination? Are the dynamics of the student revolution incompatible with the historic expectations of university life? Can we restructure our universities to serve as incubators for social change—do we want to?

We do ourselves no service by trying to ignore this conflict, by supposing it has disappeared, or by dismissing it as the work of radicals and troublemakers. Campus violence may be making few headlines this year, but a recent Gallup poll shows that student unrest is on the rise. Only one out of four students had participated in a demonstration by the end of the last school year, but four out of five believe that students should have more to say about decisions in their institutions. Half of the latter oppose expulsion as a penalty, whether or not the law is broken during demonstrations.

The easiest way to maintain law and order is to establish a police state, but this is hardly conducive to the intellectual endeavors that should characterize our great educational institutions. The educational community is splendidly pluralistic. America's professional educators are as diverse in attitude and resources as our American culture. But there is one area in which all the educators of my acquaintance agree: we should not want to, and probably find it increasingly difficult to, confine ourselves to the limitations of the academic program in the effort to impart wisdom to the young. In these less than temperate times, we all find ourselves obliged to relate what we teach, and how we teach, to the major concerns of contemporary life. We expect our universities to bring intelligence to bear in defining, fostering, and carrying on the values of civilization, and to maintain the sensitivity that will ensure that the rational process serves human ends. We expect our universities to provide a forum which permits a radical re-examination of society, and of man's place in it.

For several decades we have seen our universities slide into deeper involvement with the institutions, corporate and government, that control society. We have come to accept traffic between Washington and Cambridge, Berkeley and Washington, and Cambridge, Berkeley, and the corporate world. Thus the university, once a custodian of society's values, has become an active partner of the purveyors of these values.

Concurrent with this erosion of university isolation has been an in-

creasing tendency to delimit man's knowledge. The age of specialization has come largely in response to the massive flood of new information; in our generation the available body of man's knowledge has doubled and tripled.

Today's students are challenging this functional evolution. They question whether the university should try to fit students into predetermined slots in society or try to help them comprehend and reshape that society. They question, too, whether the university can maintain standards of impartial inquiry when an increasing portion of budget needs are tied to research commitments. Nor are students alone in raising this question. Many faculty members find it difficult to maintain independent judgment when research is sponsored by government and corporation, the very institutions whose roles should be most severely scrutinized by the university.

This conflict is not easy to resolve. Indeed, it is made even more difficult by those students who want to see their university more closely involved in the outside world, though in very different areas. The demand for "relevance," the movement toward closer university involvement in community and social problems, is one I support and endorse. But it should be recognized that such involvement will again pose the problem of maintaining the university's objectivity. The values of such involvement are obvious, both for the community, which desperately needs both the manpower and the brain power available from the campus, and for the university, which can move from the laboratory into the real world, and find the intellectual stimulation that can only come from confrontation with real problems and participation in their solution. But we need a very careful balance between university involvement in reshaping society, and university analysis of the problems of that society. It is surely better for a university to take part in urban rebirth and community development than to do research in higher megatonnage. In neither case, however, should the university abdicate its primary responsibility of training students to apply rigorous intellectual standards in the examination of their society, and to remain critics of government and the social order, even as they are involved in the reshaping of them. This is no easy task. Involvement inevitably influences the form and content of any examination, blunting the edges of criticism with the inescapable intellectual compromise characteristic of defenders of the faith. It is essential to maintain the capacity for intellectual honesty. If we lose our critical faculties while we test our theories in the real world, we dilute the universities' unique

function as social laboratories, and education will become little more than on-the-job training devoid of capacity to evaluate either the training, or the society.

Much of this argument can be applied to the problems of curricular reform. This is not to deny the need for reform, nor the strong case to be made for student and faculty participation in the decisions affecting university life. But the faculty member, or the student, instrumental in a particular reform becomes committed to its success and may lose the necessary objectivity to evaluate that success, or lack of it.

If we are to have any hope of surviving the problems and the perils of today and tomorrow, we must preserve our universities as arbiters in the marketplace of ideas. We cannot leave the task of ruthless examination to the universities alone, for they are not alone in being questioned, challenged, and subjected to unprecedented social and intellectual strain. We are all caught up in the process of examination. Our universities are archetypical examples of the conflicts of society as a whole. They are in the forefront of today's concerns, for both student and teacher are anxious to relate more closely to the needs of the society.

Though it is sheer fantasy to believe that changing the university, whether by violence or by intellectual timidity, will change society itself, it is likely that destruction of the university will seriously delay improvements in the society at large. It will delay, if not destroy, the tradition of intellectual inquiry that keeps change from being as aimless and arid as a mindless adherence to the status quo. As the president of one of our great universities, Kingman Brewster, has said, "Even the most noble purpose cannot justify destroying the university as a safe haven for the ruthless examination of realities." I share President Brewster's concern. For only by preserving the university (and adapting it when necessary) will we have any hope of coping with the larger and more complex problems of society as a whole. Only in our universities can we hope to find the values, ever subject to ruthless examination, that alone distinguish a humane society, and give the individuals within it the hope of leading lives of individual worth and fulfillment.

Much student violence today is directed at matters beyond the control of universities. University presidents and faculties have little influence over policies on Vietnam, drugs, or the use of billions of federal dollars to develop a supersonic transport while a million American children suffer irreparable damage because of the lack of protein in their diet.

Most students recognize this. Only a small minority resort to violence as an expression of social displeasure. Although, as Gallup reports, one out of four students have participated in some form of demonstration, other reports indicate that only four percent of student protests have led to violence. Citation of this fact is not intended to deprecate the destructiveness of student violence, it is merely intended to place it in perspective and to make clear that I, for one, do not think the entire generation is lacking in character. Far from it. Protest is by no means confined to the campus or to the younger generation. Students are not the only Americans who feel that the war in Vietnam is objectionable; millions of other citizens share this sentiment. Students are not alone in feeling that our effort to achieve equity for racial and ethnic minorities was "too little, too late," and that we now appear to be backing away from the long overdue effort to confront these social problems. Nor are students the only Americans who perceive hypocrisy and sham in our political life; they are not the only readers of Joe McGuiness' exposé of the techniques of the Nixon campaign. Students are not alone in sensing the fundamental absurdity in much of our lives; the soaring rates of divorce and alcoholism, even of suicide, are clear evidence that despair is not confined to the young.

Hope, however, may be unique to the young, and that, I suspect, is why we find more students than adults marching to Washington and burning flags. These are acts of provocation against a beloved country much like the acts of a three-year-old testing the maturity of a beloved parent in repeated displays of temper tantrums. But there is another reason that students march on NBC while their parents sit home and write letters to the editor: they are not as lazy. And they are less bound to the status quo because they have less stake in it. They have yet to accumulate the material rewards that come from fulfilling society's expectations. The puritan ethic has rewarded us; we own houses and cars, hi-fi sets and swimming pools. Our standard of comfort is beyond that known in any other civilization, and our expectations are of greater luxury. Not many of the over-30's will act in moral protest, will risk civil disobedience with so much to lose. The students see themselves as a moral conscience for the nation while their elders sit back in guilty retreat discussing the "acceptable limits of student protest" and the deplorable immaturity and/or irresponsibility of the younger generation.

We hear a great deal about the new breed of youthful rebels these days. I am not at all sure that this generation differs qualitatively from

those that preceded it. I do not know whether they are different. I am very tired of generalities from both generations. There are a great many turned-on middle-aged Americans, and there are just as many square kids. The young have a tendency to paint with a broad brush. Phoniness and materialism, the most frequent targets of the young, are hardly endemic to my generation. They have been with us always, as have treachery and perfidy and other human frailties. And they will come also to this generation as time inevitably erodes their special sensitivity and fine fervor. I do not look forward to this erosion, but neither do I fear it, for there will be another fine activist group coming right along behind—what today's young people lose in dynamism they will accrue in wisdom.

To me, patience is a virtue; to the young it appears to be anathema. I do not ask patience of them; they are the agents provocateur of progress, and patience would hardly be appropriate to this role. But I do ask that they recognize and respect the efforts and achievements of those who preceded them in this activist arena. We have not been cooling our heels waiting for them; we have been busy. Concern and outrage are by no means the special province of the young. Apathy should be resented as much as violent confrontations. And it should also be recognized that the right to dissent carries with it the obligation to permit others the right of advocacy.

It is clear that the angry dismay among students is not limited to campus grievances. It stems from more basic dissatisfactions with society, dissatisfactions that the campus can do little to resolve. But teachers have some obligations to help keep these things in perspective. We must nurture our common humanity in a world increasingly dehumanized by sheer size, by mass media and massive construction, by shrinking distances and a rambunctious explosion of the population. Teachers owe these young people the spirit of honest inquiry; we must join in open minded examination of the treasured shibboleths of our generation, painful or not. We cannot dust off this difficult generation with patronizing tolerance, or impatient intolerance, else we shall lose them altogether. We must struggle unceasingly for comprehension, theirs and ours, at a time when our communication, though constant, is too often trite, meaningless, repetitive and even, on occasion, evasive or dishonest. We must let the lecture platform serve as a forum and a fulcrum, remembering always that education is not an end in itself, but serves the intellectual, moral, cultural, social, and material progress of mankind. We must teach, by word and deed, that civilization is of

consequence and that to be concerned is not "corny." We must help our students to recognize that the generations that preceded them had these qualities in large measure.

I am under no illusion that the ills of society will respond with alacrity to such simple academic medicine, but when those of us who serve as the transmitters not only of our own but of the world's culture, join our serious students in seeking honest answers to the important concerns of their generation, there is bound to be a therapeutic impact. Said the Reverend Theodore Hesburgh, president of Notre Dame, "The great majority of our students need better leadership than we or the faculty have been giving them. In a fast changing society the real crisis is not one of authority, but a crisis of vision that alone can inspire great leadership and create great morale in any society."