

# STUDENT ACTIVISTS: CHIPS OFF THE OLD BLOCK

*a summary of remarks  
presented to the Commission on  
Campus Unrest, June 24, 1970*

A primary question is, who are these so-called "troublemakers" on the campuses throughout the nation? I will call them *activists*, by which I mean any student, black or white, who becomes militantly concerned about and actively involved in an effort to correct what he perceives as injustices in his society, in his nation's conduct overseas, or on his campus. I will use the term "activist" as a morally neutral term: there are both constructive and destructive activists on our campuses. Research on student activists typically focuses upon students who have taken some visible action: working in the South for a summer on voter registration, actively resisting the draft, occupying a building, picketing or obstructing a recruiter, taking part in militant parades and demonstrations, working as community organizers in inner city neighborhoods. Often the behavior involved is confrontational; sometimes it is disruptive; rarely, but increasingly it is violent. Several dozen studies of such activists have been conducted by social scientists. Their findings are extraordinarily consistent.

The results of these studies are unanimous in contradicting the stereotype widely held in America of the activist as a "rotten apple" or "bum," acting out his neurotic problems, his hang-ups over authority, or his Oedipus Complex in a destructive effort to overthrow "The System." The stereotype of the bearded, irresponsible, drug-taking student radical, the bomb-throwing nihilist, is almost completely a fabrication of the mass media. To be sure, any social movement, including the Republican Party and the Democratic Party, draws to it cranks, nihilists, nuts and crazies who use the movement to work out their personal problems. As one who has worked closely with student radicals, I could testify at length about isolated student activists who are irresponsible, tormented and conflicted, nihilist and despairing, working out their problems with their parents, and in desperate need of psychiatric help. But these students are, in my personal experience as in the findings of social scientific re-

search, the marginal, peripheral, and unusual among activists.

## ACTIVIST CHARACTERISTICS

I will not bore you with a recitation of detailed social science research methods and results. These can be summarized fairly briefly. Student activists are in many ways the most able, independent, morally concerned and politically aware of the students on American campuses. In study after study they have been shown to be *more* successful in their academic work, *less* likely to drop out of college, *more* committed to their studies, *more* likely to enter occupations that involve service to their fellow man, and *more* informed and concerned about political matters than are their inactive classmates. Psychological studies of such students show them to be unusually independent, autonomous and active in a variety of campus activities, including non-political social service activities.

Studies of the family backgrounds of activists indicate that as a group they are not rebels against their parents. On the contrary, their parents turn out to be unusually politically active and politically liberal. The family atmosphere was one that stressed the value of service to others, of thought and reflection, and of the open expression of ideas and feelings. *These are not "permissive" families:* several studies have explicitly refuted that popular stereotype. They are families with high standards that encourage the independence of their children. Activists are the children of mothers and fathers who are active in the local school boards, the P.T.A.'s, the community fund drives; their parents are also concerned about politics and the state of American society: these are topics that are discussed within the family around the dinner table. Activists are generally implementing and renewing the core values of their parents, rather than rebelling against them. To put it in a phrase, student activists as a group tend to be chips off the old block.

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## HIGHER EDUCATION FACTORS

Some believe that the "real" cause of student discontent lies in the faults of American higher education. In this regard, Governor Reagan and some of his opponents in the radical fringes of SDS have shared a common theory. The trouble, both maintain, is that student-faculty contacts are virtually nonexistent, that campus conditions are impersonal and overcrowded, the food is inedible, and the faculty are off doing everything else but what they should be doing — namely, teaching. While I personally find much to criticize in American higher education, the particular problems mentioned are not causes of student activism.

On the contrary, activists tend to have *closer* relations with faculty members than their classmates. Since activists are usually better and more committed students in general, they tend to be *more* involved than most students in those small seminars and face-to-face student-teacher relationships which are supposed to remedy or alleviate campus unrest. Furthermore, activism is most common at those institutions that attract the most able students and that offer the best, not the worst, that American higher education has to offer. A study conducted by the American Council of Education's Research Office shows that one excellent way to predict whether a college will have protests over the war in Southeast Asia is to calculate the percentage of National Merit Scholarship winners in the freshman class.

This finding points to the close *positive relationship between the quality of the student body, the quality of education, and the presence of student activism*. Most conclusively of all, if students are asked how they personally judge the quality of their education, activists as a group are no less satisfied than any one else in American higher education. The overwhelming majority of students in all categories feel basically satisfied with the quality of the education they are receiving. As a result, I conclude that educational or curricular reform, al-

though desirable on other grounds, will have virtually no impact upon student activism. If anything, closer student-faculty relations, more opportunities for critical discussion, and a devoted teaching faculty in close relation with students would in my opinion be more likely to *promote* activism.

## ACTIVISM IS DEMOCRACY SUCCESS

Activism on our campuses, whether constructive or destructive, springs not primarily from psychopathology, the impersonality of the multiversity, parental permissiveness, poor education, hedonism, adolescent rebellion, faculty neglect, effete snobbery or most of the other causes to which it has been ascribed. *For the great majority of students, activism is first and foremost a morally-based reaction against unjust practices, policies, and institutions in American society.*

Let me generalize from what I have said so far. In the generation since the Second World War, America has brought up its children well. The young have been taught to ask questions, to learn for themselves, to expect reasonable answers. They have been by and large well educated, they have been exposed to the real world in their classrooms, on the television screens, and in their own travels. More and more come from fairly affluent families where physical survival, material security, and social status are not overwhelming concerns. More and more have been brought up to consider the political world important to their own personal lives. And most critical, they have been brought up to believe that the values upon which this Republic was based were important, true and decent values that should be practiced. Our nation has been committed to equality, to justice, to liberty and to peace since its foundation. In churches, in schools and in families, this is what we have taught the young to believe in. We have taught our children that unless a man is willing to fight for his principles, to stand up for his beliefs, and to sacrifice for his convictions, his principles are worth very little. The activism

of students today is the harvest of this education. *Student activism is not a sign of the failure of American society, but of its extraordinary success in creating a generation dedicated to translating into practice the great ideals of this democracy.*

Student activism is therefore not going to go away. But its mood and direction — whether it is constructive or destructive — will continue to be profoundly affected by what happens on the wider social and political scene — by the war in Indochina, by the *persistence of American racism*, by the *collapse of the war on poverty*, by the "police riot" at Chicago in 1968, by the *murder of Black Panthers*, and so on.

Such events give student activism a despairing, ugly and at times even violent turn. They draw into the student movement delinquents and crackpots who use it to play out their own inner conflicts, to vent their personal rages, and, in a self-destructive way, to help destroy the student movement itself. Events in the social and political world indeed influence the mood and actions of student activists, although they will not "prevent" activism. Every indicator suggests that *in the years to come, an ever larger group of students will be disposed by their backgrounds and convictions to become activists* — whether constructive or destructive remains to be determined.

The only way this or any commission can influence student activism is by helping to determine the course it takes. On a destructive course, committed to trashing, bomb-threats, arson and violence, the student movement will destroy itself, drive away most of its ablest members, and produce a political reaction far more violent than anything activists have done so far. As a constructive force, the student movement could be vital to the renewal of our society, pushing this nation to begin again the largely forgotten work of fulfilling its promises. The question, then, is what can be done to help enlist the activist spirit of growing numbers of students in the radical renewal of American society?

## RECOMMENDATIONS

I. My first suggestions are far beyond the powers of this Commission to implement. But not to recommend them in the most forceful terms would be, I believe, an evasion of the moral responsibility of any group concerned with campus unrest:

- The war in Indochina must end, and American foreign policy must be realigned so as to prevent all future entanglements in the civil wars of other nations.
- Racism can no longer be tolerated in American society. Every effort of federal, state and local authorities must be bent toward eliminating racism and beginning to undo the damage of more than 300 years of slavery, segregation, discrimination and oppression.
- America's commitment to the assistance of the Third World must be vastly increased.
- The effort to improve the quality of the human environment must be taken seriously, not dealt with by token public relations programs.
- The adequacy of existing political, economic and social institutions in America must be re-examined. To many, old as well as young, it seems that the political process is no longer responsive to the public interest, that the economic system is chaotic and uncontrolled, that our social institutions promote injustice and repression instead of justice and liberty.

I am not optimistic that any of these goals will be achieved or even begun. But I believe that could we now begin to move decisively and rapidly toward them, student activism could be a constructive force in this movement.

## CONTINUING ACTIVISM

II. The American public, including especially the officials of government and the agents of civil order, must become reconciled to the fact of continuing student activism and campus unrest, regardless of whether they agree or disagree with its style and objectives.

Relatedly, the actual facts about the psychology and goals of student activists must be widely disseminated in an effort to offset the media-created stereotypes of students as nihilists and terrorists. Law enforcement officers and civil authorities must learn to deal directly with student activists, including young men and women with whom they cordially disagree, *in a joint effort to minimize physical violence and killing*. And new institutional channels must be created not merely for the ventilation of student grievances, but for their implementation in action. Campus authorities must be prepared not merely to "communicate," but to act in response to the legitimate issues and real injustices about which students are concerned. And local, state, and national authorities must establish regular channels of communication with students and, more important, agencies of action that are responsive to the concerns of students.

## EDUCATION'S RESPONSIBILITY

III. American higher education, including administrators, faculty and students, has a major responsibility in assuring that campus unrest does not express itself in random, destructive or terroristic acts. If college authorities, faculties, and student bodies themselves do not establish clear guidelines for the expression of dissent, militancy, and activism on campus, *it is already clear that public authorities will set those guidelines for them, often in an angry, punitive and repressive way*. Specifically, for example, each college and university should develop a flexible but firm scen-

ario — prepared by college administrations in close cooperation with the faculty and the student body — anticipating the course to be followed in case of disruption or violence on campus. This scenario should be widely publicized and should involve the use of outside police *only* as a last resort, after all other legal and informal means of negotiation have been exhausted. Those responsible for student discipline must make clear the permissible limits on student behavior, indicating that violence, disruption, injury to persons or willful property damage will result in institutional discipline, including the possibility of expulsion. Even more important, faculty members and administrators must assume moral leadership and responsibility in addressing themselves to the problems that most concern student activists.

## THE ALTERNATIVE

The greatest tragedy that could befall our country would be to lose the loyalty, the commitment and the basic faith of the most able of its youth. Such a loss of faith has not yet occurred on a mass scale, but *we are closer to it than ever before in American history*. Were it to occur, it could lead to increasing violence on the part of a small minority. But more disastrously, it would lead to the dropping out, the despair, the apathy, the defeat, the indifference of the great majority. Were this to happen, we would definitively lose the energy, the intelligence and the zeal for constructive change of the young.

To prevent that loss, *it is not enough to ask students once again to be sane, understanding and patient. More important, swift and energetic steps must be taken to regenerate our society. Unless we can begin now, ours will be not only a divided and sick society, but a society that has lost the best of its youth — a society on its death bed.*

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