

STUDENT PROTEST

I'd like to change a word in the topic given me. "Student unrest" seems a wiggly euphemism for what has been happening since 1964. "Unrest" brings to mind "the natives are restless" sort of remark typical of an 18th or 19th century occupying army talking about aborigines. Let's call it what it has been from the beginning--protest: what someone has defined as "the hitherto powerless, attempting to influence events."

When I was invited to address you, I figured that you ^{folks} gentlemen knew what you were letting yourselves in for--a strictly academic (if you'll allow one pun) discussion by a president whose college had the beginnings of a building, a faculty still spread all over the country, an administrative staff too engaged to cause much trouble, and no enrolled students. Whatever I could be expected to know about the problem would be gleaned from the extensive writing on the subject or in listening to the stories swapped by old pros: ". . . there I was, flat on my back by the flagpole . . .". Even successful old pros (success: keeping the place functioning as a university, free of access and talk, with few or no heads broken) when they talk about campus protest can bring experience to bear on only one situation; whatever else they may say is academic. When a pro successful at one campus moves to another, even he may not be so successful the second time, for every situation differs in detail. In any discussion of campus protest, then, some element of the academic is inevitable. But if I were to recount who did what to whom, when and where, I would be repeating what you can get for yourselves by reading the articles and books and by talking to the old pros.

I shall very briefly summarize the kinds of things known about student protest, and put Evergreen's plans in the light of what we know. But

Evergreen is small fish in these troubled waters, which are not simply American campuses, but all of America today. The main burden of these remarks will be to put protest in its proper perspective.

To keep this academic part as brief as possible, I'll condense a summary by Clark Kerr, the old pro from the Bastille of student protest: It's new in history to have 50 percent of the nineteen-year old population in higher education, concentrated in universities, in a permissible environment, in a culture of their own with little contact with either family or faculty, and with explosive issues in the society around them. They are better educated about those issues, but they lack points of leverage. (We hear expressions of concern, then cries for relevance, then, after no response, the tone becomes one of helplessness and rage.) Students have seen how inane most of the affluent society can be and they therefore put political reform and existential experience before vocational advancement. Lacking leverage, they develop to a fine art confrontation politics and protest, sometimes with an extremely naive, feeling for where power is and what it can do. They use the university as power base because that's where most of them are, it's an open system, and it's vulnerable. Student protesters develop their tactics for the short run, placing great importance on style, with perhaps one of the most effectively developed PR senses in recent times. Kerr sees three kinds of activists: the first protest issue by issue, choosing issues according to their convictions; the second have what many might call radical goals, pursued by accepted means; the third are out for radical goals by unacceptable means. I would add a fourth: the nihilists, the fuse-lighters, with no program. The simple hell-raisers we've always had.

To Clark Kerr's summary we must add also some evidence that protests tend to occur on larger campuses and that the participants tend to be brighter students. It would be an exaggeration then, but not a gross one, to say that where there's been no protest, there may have been little else going on.

A reading of the accounts convinces one that any given protest balloons to the extent that communications break down and dialogue ceases. That original core of activists (and, remember, they can be of any variety from the genuinely issue-oriented to the nihilists) then try to gain support from reform-minded (or simply fair-minded) students who will act on an issue only when they've been provoked. The surest way to get students provoked is to turn someone into bad guys, as Foster has put it, and then get the bad guys (administration, faculty, or police) to say something inflammatory, hit someone over the head, or (the answer to a nihilist's prayer) shoot someone. Many protests, tension-ridden, headline-making, and potentially explosive as they are, have been kept within barely civilized bounds by faculties and administrations willing to talk, listen and even absorb abuse, honestly penetrating to and dealing with the issues, so that the great numbers of reform-minded students could see reasonable progress. If the confrontations approached violence, they have been kept from ballooning still further by security and police forces who had in mind winning, perhaps (they wouldn't be human if they hadn't), but winning as civilized adults with very great human stakes in mind--the preservation of life and the preservation of two fragile institutions: the university and ultimately democracy itself. (In light of this, our communities must respond to the requests--and the warnings--of sophisticated law enforcement officers who must develop a corps with professional skill and discipline that

won't be provoked beyond its planned response.)

Evergreen represents far more than a reflex action to protest, but we have studied student concerns and allowed for them in ways some of which are well-tested. Our program of study will allow faculty and students to work together in numbers that will insure continuous supervision of students' early work, will occasionally place them in situations where both will be learners. We'll avoid the "sandbox" effect by the choice of a faculty with high standards for their own and their students' work. We hope that industry and business will make it possible for our students to enter the world of work while they're still students, so that they can listen to, think about and help solve the problems of others besides professors, so they get other than an academic slant on the world. We expect a student to have done considerable independent study before he leaves Evergreen. We're committed to making sure that his voice will be heard in college affairs, although we have yet to work out details on this, as on many other arrangements, pending arrival of the remainder of our academic community.

For the Evergreen idea to work, it will require virtues from the student, among them, self-discipline, patience in ambiguous situations, and a willingness to help the community when his own self-interest isn't immediately at stake. These are all virtues required by living in our complex democracy--and at present little in evidence.

I'd like to think that such plans would insure a college without protest. But the evidence does not point that way; if there's to be protest from the young, there will be protest from the young at Evergreen. I trust that when it happens it will be worked out in the alert, fair, democratic way which, to this state's great good fortune, has so far characterized protest here.

We'll do our best to meet the high standard set by the University of Washington and others.

Evergreen, even if successful, won't provide all the answers; neither will universities in general. Higher education has been grossly oversold as the only thing a nineteen-year old can "do" in order to take an honorable place in society. The degree is too often used as a password by the sloppy gatekeepers of the establishment. All of us, but government and business especially, must use some imagination to create outlets for certain talents and energies that higher education can't begin to channel. We must at the same time guarantee everyone a chance at higher education at the time in his life when he thinks he can benefit. Just as society has lost perspective on higher education's place in human development, so has higher education seemed to obsess society, particularly in the late protests. The body politic must develop a perspective on this problem. Let me begin with a small contribution.

It's important to remember that protest among the young began, not on the campus, but in Mississippi in 1962, two years before Berkeley, and not from a few professors who subverted our youth, but from young people themselves who found that their concerted power was very effective against the long-standing evil. At Berkeley in 1964, students rose, not at the instigation of a few professors subverting them, but on their own, against the professors' and the university's failure to remedy conditions which the students perceived counter to the institution's published ideals.

Who can say that the changes wrought by students' protests haven't been for the good? The anachronisms of in loco parentis have been swept away. Miracle of miracles, the curriculum is being reformed, no doubt amazing that astute commentator on education who saw the curriculum like

a graveyard and as easy to move. Interest resurges in that most difficult of arts--helping others to learn. Students aren't right more often than anyone else, but now that they've gained a voice in governance, their ideas can be thrashed out when and where they ought. Beyond the university, students have been instrumental, if not indispensable: courageous students, primarily black, roused our national conscience from its late coma with regard to race, and students turned the lights on America's moral blackout--Viet Nam.

I have not blinded myself to, and I don't condone, the nihilists, yahoos and goof-offs, the insults, intimidations, and threats, the upset files, fires, and the occasional student-caused bodily harm. I say "occasional" harm because it seems that elsewhere in the country most of the heads split and blood flowed and dead bodies dropped only after we've called "law and order" to the scene. We Americans seem to do almost all kinds of mayhem on people to save a bit of property. Until now, most of the damage to human beings has been done not by student protesters. We must, of course, call law and order to the scene; but when there, that force should above all act as professionals in keeping the peace. We owe a great debt to those peace keepers, who with imagination and patience, in spite of insults and bricks, have still kept the peace.

If we stand back far enough from the heat, with the perspective of several years since 1962, it's clear that students have committed themselves to act for ideals to which the rest of us Americans have been giving only lip service lately. We have seen that their energy has often aroused simple force in reaction. Their equally energetic ideas have also brought over-reaction, directed beyond students to include universities as well. If this reaction persists, it endangers one of the life sources of the free society.

Everyone sees the university in a different light. Society's expectations of it could probably be summed up, as a recent writer did, in four areas: it trains people for jobs; it carries out social welfare programs; it acclimatizes future leaders of society at all levels (grows the establishment, if you will); and it is a place where new knowledge and ideas are generated and where both new and old ideas are re-expressed, re-ordered, measured against the current scene, sometimes even by way of criticism. Other places besides universities can perform the first three functions. If the university doesn't perform the last, then it's likely not to happen at all. The constitution protects free speech for everyone. But, short of constitutional infringement, there are always subtle pressures on a man who says what he will. Our society, therefore, has taken care to protect the universities with a carefully built, precise understanding, called "academic freedom"--that a man may say what he will pertaining to his area of investigation without fear of economic or other harassment, subject, of course, to the constitutional limitations put on all citizens. The present reaction to students and hence to the universities puts this vital good, one of the life sources of freedom, in danger.

The second element I see in the reaction is of a different order, and it extends far beyond the university. It's our complete failure to see protests by the young as what, in the main, they've been--prods of conscience. These are American young people prodding their elders to get on with building one nation with liberty and justice for all. What a picture we present! Our conscience hurts us, and we dart off, pointing to a "communist" here and a "radical professor" there. And make rules and regulations perhaps already piled too high. Darting off in the other direction, roused to rare political activity, others of us act to hang on to everything we've got, in an attitude most eloquently expressed by a two-word American vulgarity.

What will happen when our yet-evolving republic confronts three even bigger problems? The first, of course, is to eliminate the second country within us. We won't be an indivisible republic until skin color doesn't make one a second-class citizen. Two great problems lie beyond; the first has been tackled more or less ineffectively by successive administrations for the last couple of generations, but we seem to be losing ground: The rich get richer, the poor poorer. The third hurdle our republic faces looms now, and it will come closer to light as we pursue facets of the ecological problem; it concerns the use and control of property and resources while population increases and human interactions increase in pressure and complexity. The point is that these difficult problems must be worked out in ways which evolve from our American traditions.

All law and order vigilantes are not thugs. Nor are all policemen sadists, or all students nihilists. All are basically good people--who happen to have been born and brought up in America, saluting its flag ever since they were so high, saying something about liberty and justice for all. When a whole people has embarked on a quest like that, you can't stop it. But somehow things have stopped, and the worry and frustrations of these people show up in different ways. We can't stop on the way to that goal and wrap ourselves in flags or in the material possessions we've acquired and say, "I'm satisfied; this is as far as we go." To say that when all have not reached liberty and justice would be to betray our history so far. It would be to create a grim country, divided--the have nots versus the haves. Few Americans want that.

But all of us are human, and we get tired when democracy gets too complicated for us, or when the commonwealth makes demands upon our pile of material possessions. All of us tend to rest and clutch. And the young

have been accusing us, among other things, of resting and clutching.

Our forefathers at various times have made progress toward the American goal. I think most students and workers and businessmen and professors today will pick themselves up, loosen their clutch on things, and get on with the tough work. (Perhaps we should drop flashy images of frontiers--there aren't any frontiers left--and of wars--we know what they gain. It's now simply a matter of working things out where we are.) Each of us, student, worker, professor, businessman, would summon up extra patience, energy, ideas, and share of resources. Then our country--still the hope of the world--could shake itself loose from its late wallowing in the status quo, and get on with building our indivisible republic.

Address to the Capital City Press Club
May 13, 1970
by Charles J. McCann, President of
The Evergreen State College