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THE CAUSES OF STUDENT UNREST

A Research Paper

Presented to

Mr. Ralph Ford

Sandra Sawyer

May, 1970

THE CAUSES OF STUDENT UNREST

Protest is not a new invention of the 1960's. Protest has always been the normal apparatus to initiate change in human societies.¹ College students can no longer be taken for granted. Though the great majority of them remain largely content, conservative, and apathetic, a determined minority of restless ones have forced others to examine and sometimes to change institutions, rules, and values that were once considered inviolate.²

No hypothesis thus far advanced can be considered a sufficient explanation of the roots of student unrest. Each provides only a partial explanation that sheds only a small light upon a highly complex phenomenon.³ The very fact that the students' protest runs across the existing political boundaries from Berkeley to Warsaw, and from Prague to Paris and London, shows that there is no ideology that they think will solve the problems of the world overnight.

¹J. Bronowski, "Protest--Past and Present," The American Scholar, 38:535-541, Autumn, 1969, p. 535.

²S. L. Halleck, "Hypotheses About Student Unrest," Today's Education, September, 1968, p. 24.

³Ibid.

The young now do not expect to reform society by a ready-made program of points numbered from one to fourteen.⁴

The young people of today were born after the Depression and under nuclear potential.⁵ Certainly one of the basic reasons for student unrest is the fact that this is a generation whose members have grown up with the knowledge constantly hanging over their heads of the very real possibility of man's self-destruction. While this knowledge has generated a certain amount of cynicism, its stronger effect has been the creation of a sense of urgency.⁶

Motivating young people also is the character of the times. Man's age-old problems of attempting to manage his environment and to humanize his relationships have attained in this age a magnitude and a complexity that no longer will allow delay and indecision. The much more difficult human problems now are rapidly superseding those of mere material advance. The imperative need to deal with such problems and the possibility of finding solutions that offer real hope for

⁴Bronowski, op. cit., p. 537.

⁵John D. Rockefeller, "In Praise of Young Revolutionaries," Saturday Review, December 14, 1968, p. 18.

⁶James E. Jr. Allen, "Campus Activism and Unrest," 96:357-359, School and Society, October 26, 1968, p. 357.

the betterment of mankind's lot have a strong appeal to the idealism of the youth.⁷

Because of the influence of mass media and the freedoms of our society, young people today learn faster and mature earlier. They become quickly aware and deeply resentful of the differences in what older people say and what they do. In short, the very accomplishments of our generation--in technology, communication, affluence--have served to focus the attention of the young on what older people have failed to accomplish.⁸

Never before have young people had greater freedom to move about and express themselves and to make their own personal decisions. It is not surprising then, that the greater awareness of themselves and their world and the better preparation for coping with the problems of today, should have produced also a deep illusion and a restless impatience which are among the most compelling reasons for activists' behavior. Thus they are eager for revolutionary change and the immediate correction of long-standing ills and injustices.⁹

⁷Allen, loc. cit.

⁸Rockefeller, loc. cit.

⁹Allen, loc. cit.

Some critics of student unrest often blame it all on the alleged hazards of growing up in an affluent society. They argue that unearned affluence, unless accompanied by a tradition of service and commitment, creates a sense of restlessness, boredom, and meaninglessness in our youth. The child raised in an affluent society has difficulty finding useful goals. He does not learn to use work or creativity as a means of mastering some aspect of the world. Therefore, he is caught in a never-ending search for new diversions and new freedoms that sooner or later pall.¹⁰

Other critics say that students have grown up in an age when the world has been divided into two large camps that compete with each other ideologically, politically, and sometimes militarily. Students today are trained in a school system that emphasizes the competitive acquisition of knowledge as a source of power and stability. Some question the worth of the intensive search for knowledge.¹¹

A student gradually begins to view our never-ending competition with the communist world as a form of mass paranoia, and he views the university as an agent of the government that contributes toward the perpetuation of the paranoid system. He reacts by protest or withdrawal.¹²

¹⁰Halleck, op. cit., p. 26.

¹¹Ibid., p. 26.

¹²Ibid.

Those who are very critical of student activism and alienation are most likely to seek its causes in factors that they believe have created a moral weakness in our youth. They believe students are restless because they lack discipline, values, or purpose. Their deficiencies are blamed on a disturbed family and their behavior charged to unresolved conflicts within the family unit. However, sociological studies do not support this. In fact, such studies show that they come from rather stable homes.¹³

Most of the above reasons are related to student unrest in general. But what are the real causes of dissent on our campuses today? President Nixon said, "Our colleges have their weaknesses. Some have become too impersonal, or ingrown, and curricula have lacked."¹⁴

Many students today are frustrated about the war because they are powerless to stop it. Much of the public opinion against the Vietnam war has caused more young people to participate in various kinds of anti-war demonstrations.¹⁵ However, only 51 per cent of all student disorders last year are classified as being war-related. The remaining 49 per cent was attributed to other causes particularly complaints about the educational system.¹⁶

¹³Halleck, loc. cit.

¹⁴"What's Really Wrong with Colleges," U. S. News and World Report, June 16, 1969, p. 36.

¹⁵Halleck, loc. cit.

¹⁶"Nixon's Effort to Solve Problem of Youth Unrest," U. S. News and World Report, November 17, 1969, p. 76.

Over all, less than a third of the total number of college students have been involved in campus uprisings. However, many indicated support of a bigger student voice in running colleges and universities.¹⁷ They want full responsibility for their personal conduct on and off campus. They would like to evaluate the faculty members and have their views stand for something. They think they should have the right to participate in helping improve their curriculum.¹⁸

While deans and presidents stress good teaching when they are addressing parent or alumni, the department heads of many American universities continue to select and promote faculty members on the basis of research and publication. Instead of the quality of teaching they perform.¹⁹

Fred R. Hartley, vice president and dean of faculties at Indiana University, Bloomington, conceded that some faculty members placed teaching relatively low in their priority of time. He said, "A much higher percentage of undergraduates are now taught by part-time graduate students than fifteen years ago."²⁰ Moreover, what little teaching the professors do often is "dull and ineffective." They have no incentive

¹⁷"Nixon's Effort to Solve Problem of Youth Unrest," loc. cit.

¹⁸Peter P. Muirhead, "What Students Want," Today's Education, November, 1969, p. 29.

¹⁹Paul Woodring, "A View from the Campus: The Latitude of Protest," Saturday Review, August 17, 1968, p. 52.

²⁰"What's Really Wrong with Colleges," op. cit., p. 37.

to get any professional training in the art of teaching because good teaching is "no help in getting a salary increase, moving to a more prestigious campus, or winning their colleagues' admiration." It may be a handicap because "the able teacher finds students beating a path to his door and leaving him little time for research," and this is what pays off in money and reputation.²¹

A 75-page report to the U. S. Office of Education attributed today's student unrest to "social injustice," "inequitable distribution of wealth, power, and prestige," "irrelevancy of the educational establishment," and "cultural exclusion."²²

Many students are attending universities today in order to obtain draft deferment, and this does not improve the dedication of the average student to accepted goals of university education. Social psychologists suggest that disruptive activities often reflect a wish for opportunities to demonstrate bravery and risk taking on the part of the students escaping military service.²³

A basic point made by many students was that the universities are too big. They spoke of a sense of isolation--a feeling that they are really not a part of their colleges. They find it difficult to develop a sense

²¹John Fischer, "The Case for the Rebellious Students," Reader's Digest, November, 1968, pp. 192-193.

²²"Nixon's Effort to Solve Problem of Youth Unrest," loc. cit.

²³Ibid.

of identification toward a university that they perceive as monolithic and impersonal.²⁴

Various other causes of student dissent directly related to the university are hypocritical grades, poor counseling, and poor method of registration procedures.²⁵

Universities are not the only place student dissent is taking place. Today's teenagers in urban, suburban, and rural high schools are demanding a voice in what is happening to them during their years in the classroom. These students feel like they have something to offer.²⁶

Most of the reasons for student activism have sufficient validity and substance to make reasonable the forecast that the movement will gain rather than diminish in force. There will be increasing emphasis on its constructive aspects. It will help to revitalize our society and bring about more quickly the improvements and the new directions that are needed so desperately.²⁷

²⁴Halleck, loc. cit.

²⁵"What's Really Wrong with Colleges," op. cit., pp. 36-38.

²⁶Seymour Holzman, "Talk with Us Not at Us," Scholastic Teacher, September 22, 1969, p. 8.

²⁷Allen, loc. cit.

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