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ARE OUR INSTITUTIONS FLEXIBLE ENOUGH?

A lecture presented at the Naval War College

by

Mr. Howard T. Robinson

on 4 March 1969

The true aim of our Government is freedom and equality for our citizens. The Government assumes the role of big brother, arbiter, innovator, and, finally, conciliator over all our many free institutions.

These institutions, or organized forms of social life, are developed, administered, and controlled by private citizens and generate political, economic, and moral powers distinct and separate from that of the elected Government. Consequently, many of society's rules of conduct are established outside the chain of Government command.

Assuming the foregoing to be valid, I plan first to examine the recent attitudes and behavioral patterns of persons for whom there are no organized institutions, the unorganized blacks, the poor, and the youth; and second to suggest how the current explosive activities of these groups can potentially influence our Nation's standing in the international community.

First of all, it is my premise, for which there is substantial supporting evidence, that our institutions bend under the force of organized pressure. That is to say, organizations acting as pressure groups stimulate and motivate institutional change; and since most citizens are associated in some manner with an organization, be it labor, medicine, veterans, education, religious groups, or one of the many thousand others, they are thus served reasonably effectively within currently acceptable limits. They communicate their desires for change through their organizations. The unorganized, on the other hand, are left to fight their battles as individuals. And since our institutions respond best to organized pressure, the unorganized are not capable of bringing about institutional change. If it were, at present, possible for *all* individuals to achieve membership in an established organization, we could dismiss the grievances of the nonaffiliated with the claim that their failure is a result of laziness or

unwillingness to participate, therefore they are unfit to receive the available fruits of our society. But the facts are that many who want to join and participate in established organizations, particularly in the case of the blacks, are denied the opportunity.

Many of our young intellectuals, both black and white, claim that the present institutions, set up to serve the values of a previous period in our history, are not relevant or responsive to the needs of our present technological society. A few days ago I asked a white student: "In which of our many institutions do you have the least confidence?" His reply was that what he disliked most was an inconsistency he found between the words and the acts of the total establishment. That instead of serious discussion on the issues between leaders and young people, he felt that representatives of the establishment were trying to "buy him off" with the "standard shorthand about being thankful" and offers of material advantages. Further to substantiate his claim, he noted that Federal fund transfers which were intended to alleviate the problems of the poor were disproportionately disbursed for high salaries to Government bureaucrats. And that the "maximum feasible local participation" concept of the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) legislation was not fully implemented because the bureaucrats insist upon maintaining too much control.

A second youth made the claim that current college education was not relevant to the needs of our present society. However, it was necessary to go through the motions of attending classes and passing irrelevant examinations in order to obtain a position where he could influence the course of events. Other students seemed concerned about social inconsistencies regarding sex, family life, and religion.

A young black man told me that he found the new left to be "decadent"

and went on to say that the new left only offered a new system of compromise for blacks and that it was dangerous for blacks to compromise at this time of heightened self-concern. In general, I find black students and, in fact, most young blacks to be seeking a new dignity through identification with what is described as a more favored self-image. They "turn off" when white professors try to teach about black history or about Africa. It is hard for them, they say, to believe that a white person can have the necessary sensitivity and insight to understand the "motivating aspects of black behavior." They recoil when a white professor is "passing" as an expert on Africa while using white values to justify his position.

"Big labor," "big management," "big Government," and "big organization" in general, with their built-in bureaucracies where standards of qualifications for entry are established, so claims our youth, to protect those already entrenched, are waving red flags which taunt the sensitivities of youth and other disaffected members of the population when they seek to persuade young people that things will be all right in due course.

Today, no protest movement is available for them to cling or turn to. The labor movement, and other similar organizations which once attracted the emotions and energies of the poor and the blacks no longer serve this purpose. Labor unions today are working almost exclusively to protect their dues-paying members. New members are sought; but, because of technological changes and more enlightened employment practices by employers, the unions' organizing efforts have, during recent years, met with limited success. Union members facing layoff due to technological changes are foreing leaders to turn in a large measure towards protecting their current bargaining rights. To meet this need, unions, of necessity, are more and more directing their or-

ganizing resources toward the highly trained white-collar and professional employees who have assumed positions within the enterprise for which blue-collar workers were not previously trained to undertake. The expanding areas in which union organizers are having success and consequently devoting a major share of their efforts and resources are education (i.e., teachers) and government civil servants, both Federal and local not the untrained poor. Fortunately, there are a few exceptions to this, however, and one important exception is the unions' efforts to organize the millions of farm workers. In addition, the AFL-CIO recently unveiled plans which will get it heavily involved in the housing field and education, on what appears to be a much wider basis than ever before, of its rank and file leadership. These activities represent flexibility and respond to demands for change.

Several years ago the civil rights movement attracted many young white and black intellectuals. Not so today. This is not altogether the fault of the whites: young black militants have made white civil rights workers unwelcome in these organizations. They say that the whites should work among their own people, alter their opinions about blacks, and that they (young whites) should respect black history and culture. Due to the lack of substantial progress in this area, young blacks are fed up with integration as a goal. This is not to suggest that if integration had had more rapid success there would not have been complaints. I believe there would have been complaints because the kinds of concerns of blacks today are not and were not within the framework of references of the established civil rights organizations. Consequently, neither the unorganized poor nor the blacks nor the young intellectuals have today an attracting magnet to engage them in practical goals such as integration and higher wages. They have turned

their criticism toward the broader institutional framework. They want substantive change not only in their lives but also in the direction and the "sincerity" of all our institutions. Many of our youth believe it is possible for this Nation to conduct its world affairs without Vietnam types of involvement or the necessity for the employment of our massive military power, if only we respected the rights of others and would neutralize our anti-Communist phobia.

The complaints of the unorganized poor and the blacks are less sophisticated. What they seek is a larger share of the material wealth. They want to have the existing institutions provide jobs, housing, education, health care, and, in general, a better and more dignified life. These are only a few of the things we hear being demanded by the unorganized poor and the blacks. A very limited shopping list indeed.

We must answer the question: How can present established institutions be responsive to the demands and needs of the unorganized blacks, the poor, and the young intellectuals? Can our military establishment meet the challenge of how to attract young men into the services? Can we inspire our servicemen, black and white, to behave better at home and particularly overseas. Or will it be necessary to dismantle the existing institutions and replace them with something else? At this point we can bring into sharp focus the question, "Are our institutions flexible enough?" My response to this question is an optimistic yes. But will this flexibility be demonstrated in time to avoid the kind of frustration which, in turn, causes institutional repression to what might otherwise be useful and valuable self-criticism.

There is already considerable evidence from the fields of social welfare, education, employment, and poverty, although not nearly enough in substance and size and not yet effectively communicated or administered, to support

my claim that our institutions are flexible but perhaps, it can be argued, not enough.

One needs only to examine the revolutionary nature of recent actions by educational institutions in providing black studies programs to get a feeling, albeit limited, of optimism. Several universities have gone so far as to advance the possibility of having black study programs lead to degrees. Upon first hearing of this I became personally indignant, "Why a degree?" I asked. I could justify the requirement that all Americans study black history at all levels of our educational system, but to grant a degree—I was not prepared to go that far until it dawned on me that we give degrees in Greek culture, medieval history, et cetera. These programs were advocated by black militants and supported generally by white students. This responsiveness is a good example of flexibility by our institutions of higher education.

Social welfare innovations have been made that go far beyond regulatory changes. These changes affect the very heart of the social welfare concepts. The new changes to which I refer are now effective in the State of Rhode Island and a few other states (self-declaration system) whereby a person need only apply and he will receive assistance without the demeaning investigations and restrictions previously associated with welfare. In addition to receiving money, the recipient also can qualify for education and training with which, hopefully, coupled with the cooperation of private employers, he will become a productive citizen. We have also made some upward substantive moves in our ability to employ our citizens but have failed to develop new methods leading to assurance of full employment. Black citizens suffer most the pains of unemployment. (Source: U.S. Department of Labor) Their unemployment rate is more than double that of white, and in spite of efforts to lessen this problem it

is increasing not only in percentages of unemployment but also in the spread within the earning gap, at certain levels, between whites and blacks. One positive sign is in the distribution of black employment which has shown important shifts over the past few years. There are currently more black executives, middle-level managers, professionals, black government officials, elected and appointed: there are more blacks in the civil service and the military. Major universities have employed black professors and are seeking more.

The list of positive responses to demands for change is long, but the list of demands for further changes is even longer, and as we open up the channels of communication between the leadership and the masses these demands will grow. For once the citizens know and understand what society can do, they will insist that it be done.

Our technological society today demands more from us: more education and technical training for each of our citizens and because of successes we have had technological achievement, we can afford a larger overall resource for dealing with our problems of housing, social welfare, and institutional changes, including the situation of race.

I have committed myself to an optimistic view about our institutions, not because of romanticism, but because of my faith in our demonstrated ability to do the necessary.

But do we have the ability to convincingly communicate the substance of our positive actions to the young, the unorganized poor, and the blacks? To communicate means to effectively employ their energies, their imaginations, and their talents in ways which provide them (and, in fact, all of us) an opportunity for a greater sense of values which offers a renewed personal dignity in productive enterprise.

Before I turn to show how all this affects our international standing, let me hasten to note that while I have

faith that we can meet the challenge, I believe that in doing so many of our norms of behavior will be in the process of undergoing serious change and that some organizations will be replaced. Our universities seem to be the first to begin reshaping themselves. Racial prejudice and the organizations supporting it will have to meet their deaths. Black citizens will find their dignity, and the unorganized poor among us will need to become organized--either with or without Government support.

Foreign nations, both our friends and our adversaries, will continue for some time to think "Why haven't you made your Constitution live as you said you would?" It is difficult for many of these nations to understand why such an economically powerful Nation cannot deal more effectively with its social and employment problems.

I do not think any of these nations doubt our military or economic powers. Our adversaries see our disturbances as a desirable weakness, one to be exploited. Our friends are perhaps a bit uneasy when they see our institutions challenged from within. They, in many cases, fail to understand or, for that matter, have faith in the strength and flexibility of our institutions.

Until recently we thought of poverty, student unrest, and violent demonstrations as a product of undeveloped societies. We now witness that our young people, students, the blacks, and the poor are stridently confronting our society and our institutions. The world public has been given liberal doses of violent opposition to established institutions and political instability all described as an inevitable part of the disorganization relating to the new and undeveloped nations. These reports were framed and evaluated in such a way as to lead one to believe that governments were teetering, and indeed many were.

Today these same kinds of reports, by the same public media, describe the

unrest and violent disorder which exist in most of the developed world. This, perhaps, could have been expected from the public opinion point of view of, say, France and perhaps even far-off Japan. But when it is evident that the most consistent of these violent demonstrations, concerning institutional response to public needs, are principally in what is considered by all nations the strongest nation in the world, there is cause to be concerned. For, in my opinion, the consistency of our internal problems is viewed by our enemies with mild surprise and our allies with shock and alarm. Our allies question these acts and wonder aloud about our viability as a strong nation. This very concern was pressed upon me not long ago by one of our leading ambassadors: He told me that a leading figure of his constituent country, which for the last 20-odd years has been one of our closest allies, had expressed to him the feeling which had previously permeated his government: that his government was often somewhat bemused by what they considered American mistakes and awkwardness in conducting international affairs. But in spite of this, his government respected

BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY



Mr. Howard T. Robinson is a Foreign Service Officer and is currently a senior fellow at Wesleyan University. He has had a wide and varied experience in national and international labor affairs and in community activities dealing with minority problems. His most recent positions as a Foreign Service Officer were as Labor Adviser to the State Department's Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs (1964) and as the Asian Adviser to the U.S. Delegation to the International Labor Organization conferences in Geneva, Switzerland (1965-66). He has published numerous articles dealing with the labor movement in labor journals.

our strength and our goodwill. But today, he said, that when talking with leaders of his country he finds a lessening of confidence, not in our military or economic strength, but in our ability to manage our institutions at home.

I judge this kind of misunderstanding to be an ignorance, on the part of some foreign governments, of the internal goals and functioning of our Government in managing our free institutions. This, of course, is coupled with a failure to comprehend the elasticity and strength of our private institutions. Such ignorance can, if we do not educate them about our internal strength, lead to costly and serious miscalculations. Consequently, I believe that increasingly those bureaucracies, civilian and military personnel that represents

our Government abroad will need to become and to stay knowledgeable of current developments at home to a degree not demanded heretofore, and that this new knowledge should become the basis for one of the most important dialogs we ought to develop in communicating with foreign nations. The new dialog ought to stress the commonality of our problems that, in order to survive, institutions must have a built-in flexibility.

It is safe, I believe, to assume that an enemy will give aid and comfort to those friendly nations with whom our relations are weak. If such nations are uncertain of our internal strength, it follows that they will make, for the sake of their own "self-interest," common cause with the enemy.

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The most complete and happy victory is this: to compel one's enemy to give up his purpose, while suffering no harm oneself.

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