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Campus Unrest—The Erosion of Excellence

by ROBERT V. ANDELSON

ACROSS the length and breadth of our troubled land we see the temples of knowledge desecrated by violence and the threat of violence, and we see ivied halls reduced to smoking rubble.

The clenched fist has very nearly replaced the lamp of learning as the symbol of the contemporary university. Brickbats and barricades have become the benchmarks of a generation that never learned to love books. . . .

In 1960 I wrote an article deploring the "dull passivity" of college students, citing a survey conducted by *The Nation*, in which students were described as "timid, unadventurous and conforming," seeking security, shunning causes, keeping their noses to the grindstone, and accepting the opinions of their professors. Little did I then imagine that ten short years hence I should be looking back upon that period with nostalgia. How welcome a little passivity would seem today! And yet, of course, passivity is not the answer. The answer is a tough-minded idealism which does not expect instant solutions or total panaceas, but which accepts the patient discipline essential



for the achievement of realistic goals.

This kind of idealism requires careful nurture. It needs to be rooted deeply in the wisdom of the past. Our educational institutions for the most part have failed to provide that nurture and that rootage. That is why we see among campus youth today a cheap and petulant pseudo-idealism which knows nothing of discipline or sacrifice or patience, but which knows only how to mouth slogans and issue non-negotiable demands.

Wherein specifically do the causes of this failure lie? I submit that they lie in the fact that educators have lost sight of what education is all about. Time was when school was where a person learned to think and to articulate his thoughts with lucidity and exactitude; where he gained at least a nodding acquaintance with the classics and participated in the exhilarating adventure of coming to grips with issues raised by great minds throughout the ages. The capacity for discriminating thought, the ability to use language clearly and precisely, knowledge of the cultural heritage—today, in all too many cases these are no longer prerequisites for a diploma. Instead we have mass matriculation and social promotion, narrow vocationalism and watered-down humanities, puerile per-

(Continued on Page 3)

Campus Unrest

(Continued from Page 1)

missiveness and preposterous priorities.

Except in a very few schools the expectation of excellence is considered undemocratic, scholastic competition is downgraded as traumatic, and objective standards are jettisoned as unenlightened.

We are told that the present generation of students excels in sensitivity and social conscience. This remains to be seen. Many of its members have, indeed, been clamorous in their criticism of those of us past thirty for our alleged materialism and supposed indifference to social needs. But children of affluence, who are not responsible even for their own support, can afford to indulge themselves in the luxury of condemning the "materialism" of those who foot the bills. I wonder if they will be any less materialistic than we when it comes their turn to hope that there will be a dollar or two left over after feeding their families and paying their taxes. In one of his essays, William Graham Sumner remarks that an individual's most important duty is to keep from being a burden upon others. After our young idealists have accomplished this, we may have an opportunity to observe how far their social sensitivity extends. Until they have accomplished it, they have not earned the right to criticize.

At the same time, I should be the last to urge complacency upon my peers. We do not have to condone the brash self-righteousness of militant youth to realize that we have little cause for self-congratulation. And I should be the last to suggest that the concerns which agitate young people are not legitimate. I believe this republic exhibits a degree of freedom and justice never before achieved on such a scale in human history. Yet let us by all means recognize that we have fallen down in many areas, and that our so-

This is a shortened version of a commencement address which appeared in the August issue of *Vital Speeches*. It was delivered at Union Academy, Dadeville, Alabama by Robert V. Andelson, philosophy professor at Auburn (Alabama) University, a school of arts and sciences with a student enrollment of 15,000, which offers the doctorate in 21 fields (and wins football games).

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ciety is in deep trouble.

The problems which face the nation today are truly ominous, and I don't blame serious young people for being fed up with a diet of proms, pep-rallies and pap. Too much of what is being offered them is trivial and banal and unchallenging. They are not amiss in dismissing much of their instruction as irrelevant. The only trouble is that they're not in a position to know what *is* relevant. They are innocent of logic. They know nothing of history. If they ever went to Sunday School all they remember is that Jonah was swallowed by a whale. And so they ask for courses in astrology and Swahili and hard rock. They fall for every passing fad and cult. They want Instant Insight, and try to get it through the use of pot and hash and L.S.D.

A good part of the difficulty is that we try to educate everybody and wind up educating practically nobody. We have a mania for quantity. We seem to think that the more colleges we build and the more students we dragoon into them, the more educated our population will become. This is a fallacy. There are altogether too many people in college now who have no business being there—people who didn't come to cultivate their minds, but came to please their parents, or to snag a hus-

band, or to avoid the draft. And, since all too often the level of instruction is geared to them, many of them manage to survive and get their sheepskins without ever having really known what it is to engage in intellectual activity. So we are surfeited with third-rate professionals: teachers who are barely literate, business executives who are weak in economics, engineers who have trouble with a slide-rule, radio announcers who mispronounce the simplest English words. And while droves of ill-prepared and poorly motivated people are sporting baccalaureate and even graduate degrees, it's next to impossible to find a competent mechanic or chef or electrician.

Don't let anybody push you into college against your will. If you aren't sincerely interested in obtaining a liberal education, and if you aren't prepared to pay the price in rigorous application that such an education requires, don't become part of the problem. Don't make my job that much harder. There is a desperate demand all over this country today for honest craftsmen—for people who know how to work effectively with their hands, and who take pride in manual accomplishments. Consider that to be a good plumber is infinitely more honorable than to be a slipshod scientist or an incompetent attorney—and these days it's likely to be more lucrative too!

But if you have a thirst for humane knowledge; if you have learned how to stretch your minds, and want to

keep on stretching them—come to us. We need you and we want you. And when you come, be persevering. Remember that amid all the spoonfeeding and busy-working and rat-capping and hell-raising—amid the Cliff notes and the roll calls and the snap tests and the beer busts—amid and in spite of all these things, if you seek diligently enough, and study hard enough, and wait long enough, you may find a couple of professors who will inspire you, and four or five books which will open new vistas for you. And as these professors and these books force you to think, who knows? Who knows but what out of your thinking may arise constructive ways of dealing with the terrible and solemn issues which imperiously confront our nation and our world?

In this lies the hope of the future, perhaps the only hope. "Not in wild dreams of red destruction nor weak projects for putting men in leading strings to a brainless abstraction called the State," but in this. For, as a great American sage and prophet, Henry George, wrote many years ago:

"Social reform is not to be secured by noise and shouting; by complaints and denunciations; by the formation of parties; or the making of revolutions; but by the awakening of thought and the progress of ideas. Until there be correct thought, there can be no right action; and when there is correct thought, right action *will* follow."

A people may prefer a free government; but if, from indolence, or carelessness, or cowardice, or want of public spirit, they are unequal to the exertions necessary for preserving it; if they will not fight for it when it is directly attacked; if they can be deluded by the sacrifices used to cheat them out of it; if, by momentary discouragement, temporary panic, or a fit of enthusiasm for an individual, they can be induced to lay their liberties at the feet even of a great man, or trust him with powers which enable him to subvert their institutions—in all these cases they are more or less unfit for liberty; and though it may be for their good to have had it even for a short time, they are unlikely to enjoy it.

—John Stuart Mill