

worldview

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FOREIGN AFFAIRS: STUDENTS AND THEIR ELDERS

June is the month of graduations and the voice of the commencement speaker is heard throughout the land. This ritualistic observance can frequently be instructive—as it was this year. In the addresses that were most widely publicized, two themes were recurrent and often intertwined. One concerned student militancy and involvement; the second, both student and faculty involvement in America's national and international problems.

It was not many years ago, one recalls, that college students, convicted of apathy and self-centeredness, were being urged to involve themselves in the affairs of the world, and by some of the speakers who now advise caution and restraint. For "caution," "restraint" and "moderation" were key words in many of this year's addresses. The pendulum of student reaction has, apparently, swung in too wide an arc for the comfort of many of their elders. Reviewing these many calls to caution, it is difficult not to believe that the speakers who were most critical of student demonstrations were those who least understand the thinking and motivation of the students who demonstrated.

Not all the speakers were critical, however. George Ball, Undersecretary of State, for example, and Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach both defended student militancy and called it a healthy sign. And Representative Edith Green of Oregon, who said that "authority must earn respect," told the students that "I don't believe for one minute that you are losing faith in democracy, in the Constitution, in American liberties and in the concept of law and order. On the contrary I find you making your elders uncomfortable precisely because you have the bad taste to take those concepts literally."

The specific issues to which students have attempted to apply these concepts most rigorously have been, domestically, the struggle for civil rights and, internationally, U.S. foreign policy

in Southeast Asia. The degree and extent of student involvement in international affairs is, of course, one of the most surprising and in some ways most encouraging signs of campus activity. There can be little doubt that much of the responsible criticism directed at our present foreign policy in Vietnam was nourished on the campus, however one-sided and fragmentary many of the teach-ins were. And much of the criticism, responsible or not, was put in moral terms. It was hardly accidental, then, that the address President Johnson delivered to students of the Catholic University of America was about United States foreign policy and that it was couched within a definite moral framework.

"The strength of our society," said the President, "does not rest in the silos of our missiles nor lie in the vaults of our wealth—for neither arms nor silver are gods before which we kneel. The might of America lies in the morality of our purposes and their support by the will of our united people. . . . For America's only interests in the world today are those we regard as inseparable from our moral duties to mankind." For reasons of their own, the President added, critics from other lands have embraced "the myths of American isolationism and imperialism, the myths of American materialism and militarism." But our country, he went on to say, is "an America morally aware, morally aroused—an America determined to end at home the compromise of its own moral duty which has, for much too long, given credence to those who would doubt us or misrepresent us elsewhere in the world."

These are brave words, but for many they will not carry complete conviction. It is not only that some critics, including domestic critics, believe that the gods of arms and of silver have their faithful adherents in this country, or that materialism fosters and continues to support racial

injustice in this country, or that the U.S. has, even recently, used its great might without sufficient reflection. For even if these faults were admitted it would not necessarily follow that the moral bases for U.S. action had been completely eroded.

But the President spoke of the purpose of the United States in terms that invoke a problem with a long history but one that is of immediate and urgent concern to a country as powerful as is ours today. President Johnson said that "America's *only* interests in the world today are those we regard as inseparable from our moral duties to mankind." Is this really an acceptable or accepted definition of our national interest? Is not our national interest usually described in less grand terms? Doesn't America have some interests that are simply hers, that have little or nothing to do with "moral duties to mankind"?

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Yet if this statement of President Johnson's invites criticism, it is squarely in the messianic tradition in which much of America's involve-

ment with other nations has been formulated. And if it is exaggerated, it is exaggerated in the proper direction. For, barring catastrophe, Americans will be called on increasingly to use their immense wealth and power to aid the family of mankind, beginning quite naturally with those needy members of the family who are closest to home. The claims are undeniable; the problem is how best to respond.

But here we have come full circle to the bases of the student protest. The students accept the moral duties of which the President spoke. What they cannot wholly accept are the terms of calculation which the Administration has used in its response to the problem. The chidings they have received, the calls to wisdom and sober moderation, were clearly well-intentioned and can be defended. They remain, however, quite beside the main point. For the real achievement of the protests is that they call our nation to re-examine its national interests, to measure its deeds against its claims. And this is neither a trivial nor an unworthy achievement.

in the magazines

"The loose coalition of labor, liberal, Negro, church, and minority groups which usually supports welfare measures" in America "has no consensus within itself regarding foreign policy," writes Irving Howe in a review appearing in *The New York Review of Books* for June 17. "Except for a tiny radical fringe, the Negro movement has little to say about Vietnam and the Dominican Republic, and its constituency probably cares even less." But this same passivity and lack of consensus in matters of foreign policy have made it "possible for articulate minority groups to exert—whether for good or bad—an influence disproportionate to their numerical strength." And as a result, "the protests of intellectuals and academics" over American actions in Vietnam and the Dominican Republic "seem now to matter."

Although "this should give us modest confidence," Howe asserts, it "should also serve as a warning not to exhaust whatever political credit we have. There is a destructive and at times nihilistic fringe in the essentially healthy campus protests; it takes the form, at times, of a vulgarized sort of Marxism which ascerts the evils and failures of American foreign

policy to be inevitable. (But if you believe that, then what is the point of demanding that the U.S. withdraw from Vietnam? And if you believe that, how do you explain the presence not only of hawks but of doves? Unless of course you mean your protest simply as a maneuver to 'expose,' etc., etc. . . .) And disturbingly," the author finds, "the campus protests have sometimes spilled over from entirely legitimate attacks upon U.S. policy in Vietnam to either an ingenuous or disingenuous support of the Viet Cong."

"It is a difficult position: to fight against the moral and political insanity of the hawks while dissociating ourselves unambiguously from the authoritarian 'left.' If ever there was a need in this country for a strong articulation of a true liberalism, it is now. I propose that we try."

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The difficulties of judging the realities of the Vietnam war are illustrated in a recent editorial in *The National Catholic Reporter* which comments upon the published remarks of two men with differing