

Joseph Rhodes: What's in a Commission?

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The President is to be commended for overriding Vice President Agnew's apparently unsolicited advice on the fitness of Joseph Rhodes Jr. to serve on the White House commission investigating campus violence. Like the trustees of Yale University, to whom Kingman Brewster must account, Mr. Nixon evidently is not inclined to let Mr. Agnew start firing his appointees in public on his own motion. Mr. Rhodes, a 22-year-old Negro, is a junior fellow at Harvard and he is given much credit for the peaceful institutional change (as distinct from violent upheaval) that occurred at Cal Tech while he was student body president there. Since then Mr. Rhodes has been in some kind of frank and doubtless mutually useful discourse with the White House, and there is no reason to believe that John Ehrlichman or anyone else who dealt with him before his appointment to the presidential commission thought Mr. Rhodes a shy or inarticulate exponent of student grievances. Upon his stating that he wished to explore any possible connection between recent killings on campus and hostile administration comment on the subject of student protest, Mr. Rhodes came in for immediate vice presidential attention. The remarks, Mr. Agnew said, displayed "a transparent bias that will make him counterproductive to the work of the commission." He therefore called for Mr. Rhode's resignation.

Transparent bias? The principle is a pretty chancy one to invoke where commission-making is concerned. Under it, we suspect, neither Senator Tower nor Senator Murphy could have made it onto Mr. Nixon's Cambodian "fact-finding" mission. And given the Vice President's own remarks in Jackson, Miss., last fall concerning the school cases then before the Supreme Court, it could get you to wondering what Mr. Agnew himself is doing at the head of the committee designated by the President to

oversee the manner in which the court's subsequent decision in those cases (desegregate *now*) is being carried out. But it is plain from Mr. Nixon's own actions and from Governor Scranton's remarks yesterday that the President understands in this case, as Mr. Agnew apparently does not, a good bit about the composition and the potential usefulness of the commissions that are strewn across our political landscape.

Where the ordinary institutional processes of investigation come into play—as would be the case with the Kent State and Jackson State killings—such a commission could prove in one sense superfluous, but in another it could serve as a useful corroborator of official findings or, should the thing turn out that way, as an equally useful source of skepticism. That is, such a commission has a highly valuable role to play in relation to public confidence in official procedures and conclusions, and it could hardly do so if its own findings did not have to pass muster with men and women representing the various sides of the larger political and/or social issues at stake.

Sometimes, of course, all this merely results in the kind of tacit stalemate that it reflected, though not acknowledged, in the namby-pamby, on-the-other-hand prose we have come to regard as commissionese. But often these commissions have turned up some surprising conversions and have produced some invaluable exchange and agreement between members who came to them poles apart. It depends on the way the commission is mandated and run and on the caliber of its individual members. We think Mr. Nixon's action in appointing this young man and retaining him bodes well for the first of these conditions and that Mr. Rhodes's own remarkable record of independence (which has got him into disfavor with the bash-and-smash left) bodes equally well for meeting the second.