

Stalking the Elusive Campus

By Russell Baker

OBSERVER

'The torrent of gabble flows far into the night on rivers of amber fluid and rampant ego.'

BOULDER, Colo., March 15—Every year about this time the University of Colorado invites six or eight dozen guests, ranging from statesmen through pedagogues, artists, bureaucrats, activists in the cause of social uplift, parsons, publishers, philosophers and even occasionally felons and journalists to come sit on the side of the Rocky Mountains and spend a week talking to students.

The toll on visiting jawbones is heavy, and so is the toll on visiting livers as the torrent of gabble flows far into the night on rivers of amber fluid and rampant ego. What wisdom, if any, the students gain from collision with such great minds it is hard to say, but for the visitors it offers a refreshing chance to check stereotyped impressions of the college psyche against the messy reality.

On the basis of this scanty evidence, press reports of a new silence on the campus appear to misrepresent the situation. Still, things have obviously changed since the last Vietnam spring of 1972.

At that time it was the visitors discussing violence who drew the big audiences. This year sex and diabolism are the big drawing cards.

There is little comfort for President Nixon, however, in this switch from absorption in bloodletting to fascination with the joys of Satan and the flesh. In one large audience for a Watergate discussion someone asked for a show of hands on how many believed the President should be impeached and convicted, and here in Republican Colorado scarcely a hand stayed down.

A scholar arguing that the President should be retained in office to preserve the détente lost large parts of his audience before getting well warmed up, and in one part of the hall at least, whispered obscenities were issued in reply.

Two years ago some of those obscenities might have been shouted. Loud verbal demonstrations of contempt for unpopular argument were the approved social form then; now an outer shell of good manners is the style. The rage is gone, but not necessarily the contempt.

Two years ago, of course, there was a noticeable indifference, if not outright contempt, for the middle-aged guests yearning to explain the organization of humanity, and this awaited many a visiting panelist arriving at a lecture hall to share his wisdom.

It is a sad blow to the self-esteem to go forth to explain the world to youth and find that youth is not interested. This year such humiliations were rare. Respectable turnouts occurred even for dissertations on subjects as arcane as Congress and the Queen of England.

At a guess, one thing that is different is a higher level of curiosity about the variety of the world. "We're not asleep," one young man said. "We're just waiting for something, and we want to be ready when the time comes."

All will surely be ready for the great American sexual feast, judging

from the enthusiastic attendance at every panel concerned with the flesh and its troublesome demands. The level of student sophistication about politics would bore a barber, but on matters sexual most of the campus appears fully qualified for the Ph.D. They packed rooms in which sex was to be discussed in all its aspects and confidently lectured those middle-aged panelists whose views of the matter were ill-informed.

The exception was a panel on the joys and agony of homosexuality, which, though fully attended, could scarcely rouse a question from an audience that sat in rapt attention for two full hours. This is, of course, Colorado.

Elders who revere the social forms will not be cheered by the casual attitude toward sexual encounter voiced everywhere as the approved social norm. Indeed, so general is the acceptance of the active and variegated sex life that the only embarrassing confession one could make in public would be an admission of monogamous heterosexuality.

What is most curious, however, is the serious study that is given to a subject that lies at the heart of so much great comedy. A panel devoted to discussing whether or not to reproduce and, if so, in what social conditions, produced among women students a spontaneous discussion of an order that would have done credit to a U.N. commission on world population.

So much seriousness about sex is undoubtedly a healthy sign of maturity, but after a week's exposure to it one cannot help wondering whether sex really shouldn't be a bit more frivolous than the World Bank and the United States Senate.

It could be a trend to make us all yearn for a return to the good old days of kidnapping the dean and firebombing the physics lab.