

The New Passivity

In high schools and colleges, the final push to the end of the spring semester is beginning. In recent conversations and contacts I have had with some teachers, two themes were noticed in their comments: That the teachers are weary from the labor of it all and that this weariness is caused by the exceptional passivity of most of the students. Some teachers described the passivity in terms of student unwillingness to stay intellectually alive; others said the young come into class with a take-it-or-leave-it attitude. Why give your gifts to them, asked one teacher, if they don't care one way or the other about receiving them? All the teachers—about a dozen—were regularly forced to deal with such symptoms of passivity: reading assignments not read, written reports that were first-draft efforts marred by basic spelling and grammar errors, lack of interest in class discussions, rare signs of imaginativeness.

Student boredom and apathy are old subjects, but the current wave of it is something new, the teachers insisted. They believed they were seeing the early results of a number of visible pressures that the students grew up with, as if they were all in a control group in a scientific experiment and certain things were done to them—deviations from the normal—and we were now receiving the first conclusions.

One of the "control group pressures" has been the quality of American political life in the last 10 years. The only felt awareness of leadership that high school and college students have comes from the values and standards shown by Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon, the two Presidents of the last 10 years when the students were maturing socially. In "Beyond Black and White," James Comer writes: "We live in a society that makes trust and respect difficult. Our social system produces too much uncertainty, fear and anxiety. This is due largely to the fact that America has a defect in its executive or leadership structure. In fact, the behavior of too much of our leadership group resembles neurotic patterns in individuals—fleeing from responsibility, failing to face up to reality, self-destructiveness." And that was written before Watergate.

The mature and the seasoned are able to build emotional defense systems against attacks made by the shames and absurdities of a Watergate, but the young are unable to do this. As a result, trust and respect suffer. It is not that these qualities vanished, but that they never appeared in the first place. The same part of a young person's inner life that must defend itself from a Watergate has no emotional resources left for such normal activities as trust and respect.

There is no hard, unarguable proof that the values of Johnson and Nixon—more so Nixon, because he has dominated the last six years of our national life—has affected the young this way. But it needs to be wondered whether the current passivity would affect so many if, for the past six years, we had had a different kind of President. What if we had a leader who truly was a leader, who gave the country a sense of security, not a sense of dread, whose honesty was above question, who sought new ways to get among the citizens rather than constantly ducking and shifting to hide from them, who showed some sense of caring for the

old, the poor and for children, and who conveyed a feeling of warmth and humor about life? Perhaps that is too sentimental a thought, but it is hard to imagine that the young would not eagerly enter life because of such a President's example, rather than limply retreating from it.

The effect of Watergate on the personal lives of the young has been barely a part of the discussion of the whole case. But some are thinking about it. Dr. Robert Coles said recently before the Senate Subcommittee on Youth and Children: "We need a sense of immediate concern for what is happening to a generation of children who are growing up and have seen before their eyes the deaths, one after another, of various idealistic and politi-

cally idealistic and socially idealistic leaders, the increasing confusion in this country as it came enmeshed in a war that practically no one defends, followed by this latest episode of deteriorating public morality. . . . If the family is anything, it is the medium through which one generation teaches an ethical system of values to another

generation. That is what the family is all about. It is concerned with the ethical rearing of children. When those children and those parents who rear them can fall back on nothing but the kind of pervasive hypocrisy and the kind of two-faced preaching that on the one hand exhort law and order and on the other hand demonstrate lawlessness and corruption of extraordinary kind, then I say the American family is as jeopardized as it possibly can be."

One of the other numbings suspected by teachers for student passivity is television. Some repeated the commonly heard complaints that the kids had short attention spans in class or that they wouldn't stay interested in a teacher's presentation unless it was highly entertaining, bringing show biz into education. In the absence of hard proof that a direct causal relationship exists between watching television and passivity, the teachers are only guess-

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ing. But no speculation is involved in another fact: The two to three hours a day spent before a set—the general average for children—is two to three hours of not using the imagination, the most valuable resource of childhood. Unlike muscles which can be returned to normalcy after long periods of non-use, the imagination is not so easily revived. It is either highly developed during childhood or it is not developed at all. The better part of a child's imagination is enthusiasm, but where is the enthusiasm in watching TV characters have fun or being creative? It is the child's fun and creativity that is crucial.

Just as Watergate has corroded trust and respect among the young, television has also made its contribution. A study done at the Harvard Graduate School of Business Administration reported a striking and growing cynicism that appears even before adolescence. "When asked why commercials tell the truth or do not tell the truth, 24 of the 33 older children—ages 9 to 12—said they feel that the commercials are untrue because the motives of the commercials are suspect—they just want to make money." To be cynical at so early an age can only cause great emotional strain, a kind we have not begun to deal with.

What will become of so many of the young who have been victimized by the only Presidents they have known, by the dupings of television and other social pressures? Predictions are hard, except to note that passivity among the young happily reassures those who have been benefitting by a public that is adjusted to graceless politics and raw commercialism. It guarantees their continuance. As for those who refuse adjustment, let them be typecast as "activists." This not only labels them as hotheads—easier to handle a label than a person—but also confers normalcy on the passivists.

For now, the teachers are grateful the school year will soon close, and some of the bored and numb they've endured since September will be washed off by graduation. It is waste enough that so many students are missing opportunities for growth, imagination and feeling, but it is compounded by their never being let near those opportunities in the first place.