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The Issues of 1970

Vice President Agnew and many other Republican party leaders are involved in a major political effort to win control of the House and Senate in November through the exploitation of fear, anxiety, and frustration.

Instead of offering proposals aimed at solving the very real domestic problems before the country, they are shouting at scapegoats, working up emotions to a more intense pitch, and exacerbating the mistrust of one group of Americans for another. What are these problems? They are the conduct of foreign policy, the management of the Government's relationship with the economy, and the promotion of social justice under law. With a war in Southeast Asia and a major crisis in the Middle East, an economic recession at home and widespread disillusionment over the responsiveness of American political institutions, public men do not lack for serious subjects to talk about.

But these are not the subjects that the Vice President and his colleagues seem to want to discuss. They are hammering away at something loosely called "the social issue." This amorphous topic includes crime, campus disorders, drug addiction, moral permissiveness, and various kinds of violence. This bundle of concerns includes some aspects of human behavior which are outside the domain of politics. Whatever parents may think of moral permissiveness, how many of them really look to political leaders to tell them how to raise their children. Can even a polysyllabic Vice President influence what kind of music is popular with young people or how long they should wear their hair? Or their skirts?

Other concerns such as crime and drug addiction are genuine problems but they are not, strictly speaking, "issues." To have an issue, there have to be two sides. But no responsible man in either party is pro-drugs, pro-crime, or pro-violence.

To make it seem as if there is an issue, Vice President Agnew has to invent the other side by distorting the opinions of his liberal opponents and has to torture logic to connect cause to effect.

The "social issue" falls apart when its components are analyzed. The truth is that no one knows why there has been an increase in crime and in drug addiction. The rate of both have continued to go up during the first twenty-one months of the Nixon Administration, and doubtless they will continue to go up after every one of the Administration's anti-crime and anti-drug bills have passed, dubious and irrelevant as some of them are. This is not to say that society or government is helpless to do anything, but rather that crime and drug addiction are enormously complex and stubborn problems and that effective solutions are

going to take a long time, a lot of money, and patient experimentation. With social maladies as with physical illness, beware of the quack who promises cheap, easy cures for baffling afflictions.

Vice President Agnew, G.O.P. National Chairman Morton, and lesser party orators link assorted social ills to "Democratic permissiveness." But revolution in manners and morals have always taken place outside the boundaries of politics. Were the bobbed hair, short skirts, and hip flasks of the jazz age youth of the 1920's attributable to the permissiveness of Calvin Coolidge? Are the campus rebels of the 1960's whose personalities were formed as children in the 1950's to be attributed to the Presidency of Dwight D. Eisenhower?

The "social issue" is one of those great non-issues which periodically roll across the public scene for a few years and then vanish leaving only a few bad memories and a headache. It is remarkably similar to that great non-issue of the early 1950's—domestic Communism. In the Congressional campaigns of sixteen and eighteen years ago, G.O.P. orators first inflated and distorted the Communist issue and then told audiences that the Republican administration of that day was kicking out Communists and "security risks" by the hundreds. Terroristic violence, on or off the campus, and Communist espionage are both problems for police experts using counterintelligence methods. A Weatherman or some other political fanatic may be as difficult to track down today as a Communist spy in 1950 but in neither case are windy speeches of any help.

It is not an accident that the Vice President, and President Nixon too, while piously protesting that they do not want to curb academic freedom, keep focusing hostile public attention on the universities. From the progressiveness of LaFollete to the New Deal of Roosevelt and the New Frontier of Kennedy, the universities have been the staging ground of every liberal reform movement.

An Administration which wants to protect existing vested interests and usher in a new era of reaction and passivity can more easily achieve its purposes if the university professors, the television news commentators, and the critical newspapers are discredited and, if possible, a little intimidated. An Administration which has to cope with an unpromising war in Southeast Asia, which is more effective at raising unemployment than ending inflation, and which has inadequate programs for the nation's cities is naturally eager to distract attention to long-haired youths, rock music, permissive parents, the "drug culture" and other scapegoats. The Administration's political motives are as understandable as they are unattractive; its divisive campaign strategy must not be allowed to divert attention from the real issue of 1970.