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Mr. Reagan and War Dissenters

ADDRESSING A MEETING of the American Society of Newspaper Editors on the campus turmoil, Governor Reagan said: "Is this just a ferment of youth? Are these young people just showing their idealism? Or is it possible that there is a plot involved? It is possible that some people set out several years ago to make this happen?"

Since the theory that ill-starred public events are rooted in conspiracy is attractive to many public men, it may be appropriate to explore the Governor's application of the theory to the current state of affairs.

A basic ambiguity attaches to the passage quoted, because Mr. Reagan neglected the time element which cannot be divorced from the evolving upheaval. Elsewhere in his address he seemed to be alluding to what may be called the Berkeley-Columbia cycle.

There is little doubt the cycle, which deeply touched only a few colleges, resulted from local conspiracies of campus militants determined to disrupt their schools. But the cycle was marked primarily by academic grievances, secondarily by the Vietnam war. It was a scholastic rather than a national revolt.



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THE CHICAGO CONVENTION disorders instilled this protest with a new dimension and direction, giving it a political color.

After the election, a gestative period ensued, and President Nixon was its beneficiary. His notice of Vietnam troop withdrawals was received with caution by both youth and the elders, and suspicion of the President's true intent was not lacking.

So came the Cambodian venture, attended by such a strangely arcane aura that most of the colleges began seething, some the most unlikely. This recoil manifestly took the Nixon Administration by surprise. It had seen the tip of the iceberg, not its real bulk.

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THE OHIO CAMPUS TRAGEDY added an emotional intensity to the national scene unexampled in our experience. Though Mr. Nixon was not responsible for it, he could not escape its backlash, and the Washington reaction was stumbling and unaware, up to the character who told Interior Secretary Hickel it would "blow over in 24 hours."

Nothing is going to blow over in this crisis.

But note Mr. Reagan's last sentence: "Is it possible some people set out several years ago to make this happen?" No. Because several years ago nobody whosoever could foresee the present magnitude of the abhorrence of this war. Academe is almost forgotten. All the kids in the land, and most of their parents, want an end, and no fooling around.

Mr. Reagan does not appear to perceive this grim reality. He said, "One thing hasn't changed" — when everything has changed in days. He wistfully seems to think the war protest is still in the hands of the revolutionaries. He concedes the "good students" have now joined the opposition, and he believes they are "wrong" because they won't listen to him in his unyielding loyalty to the Asian crusade.

The anti-war folk had heard this pleading for years, and they only multiply, and they're not going to listen anymore. They will only listen to the silence of the guns, conferring life on those who, while the guns fire, will surely die tomorrow, and in vain.

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