

The New York Times

Published every day by The New York Times Company

ADOLPH S. OCHS, *Publisher 1896-1935*

ARTHUR HAYS SULZBERGER, *Publisher 1935-1961*

ORVIL E. DRYFOOS, *Publisher 1961-1963*



SEP 28 1970

Cease-Fire on Campus

The President's Commission on Campus Unrest has issued an impassioned plea to lift the controversy that divides the country out of the morass of political exploitation. The virtue of this appeal is that it combines a humane cry of conscience with a sensible, even tough, mandate to all parties for a return to reason and decency. It joins the students' abhorrence of the war and social injustice, but avoids the cliché that peace abroad and utopia at home are the only preconditions for campus tranquility.

One need not accept fully the commission's assessment that the country is on the brink of a generational civil war to share its revulsion at "a nation driven to use the weapons of war upon its youth." A crisis of understanding has made too many Americans, old and young, intolerant of each other's opinions and, in the process, of those democratic rights which protect the bedrock freedom to dissent without fear of coercion and violence.

This is a tragic road to a dark stage on which Americans see each other only as stereotypes—long-haired "animals" or "fascist pigs"—and lose sight of people as they grope for humanity.

It is a road of escalating violence because a polarized citizenry is drained of its capacity to condemn violence. On that fundamental issue, the commission offers this concise judgment:

"We utterly condemn violence. Students who bomb and burn are criminals. Police and National Guardsmen who needlessly shoot or assault students are criminals. All who applaud these criminal acts share in their evil."

Specific recommendations by the commission deserve speedy action. Universities must spell out the limits of legitimate dissent and firmly discipline those, including faculty members, who trespass beyond those limits. Police, trained to respond to disorder effectively with minimum force, should dispense with lethal weapons on campus. In the name of domestic safety and sanity, sales of firearms and explosives should at last be strictly controlled.

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But in the end, the burden for calling a cease-fire in the war between the generations rests on the nation's leaders. "It is imperative," the commission warns, "that the President bring us together before more lives are lost and more property destroyed and more universities disrupted."

It is not enough for the President to applaud such a call for reconciliation. His word needs to go out to all who speak for the Administration that to exploit the "student issue" to garner votes or fill campaign coffers is an act of sabotage against domestic peace. Influential Democrats bear the same responsibility in their party.

Clearly no such message has yet been received—not by the Administration's spokesmen nor by state and local politicians of both parties who are hoping to ride to victory on the hate-students bandwagon.

President Nixon himself went out of his way in recent weeks to hit the ball of blame into the universities' court.

The commission's passionate appeal to the nation's conscience warns politicians that their statements "can either heal or divide." It implores the young to remember that "to drop out or strike out at the first sign of failure is to insure that change will never come." It reminds exploiters of antistudent venom that "in all Americans there has always been latent respect for the idealism of the young."

Perhaps that last appeal to the pragmatism of politicians who fail to heed the call of decency will persuade them that prudence, too, dictates the urgency of a cease-fire in a war against the nation's future itself.