

Royce Brier

The President And the Young

WHEN WE SPEAK of American youth, we loosely mean ages 15-25, and they number about 35 million. President Nixon is in confrontation with a large share of them.

But he is also in confrontation in one obvious respect with their parents, 35-60, and they number about 60 million. These parents may not be in agreement with their offspring in some areas, but they largely agree with them in doubt of the Indochina war.

Thus Mr. Nixon is in confrontation with going on half the population so far as concerns his problem of the moment, and related problems, racial conflict and economic dislocation.



This is too large a segment of the populace for a President to disregard, or to fail in the matter of communication or mutual confidence. Merely to brand the more militant youth as "bums" — a most un-Presidential word — is not going to solve the problem, nor contribute to the national unity all Presidents seek. Nor is lip-service to an abstraction called the right of dissent going to stem the rising tide of resentment and distrust now gripping the Nation.

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IT SHOULD BE CLEAR to the President, and to his supporters, in Congress and out, that when institutions of higher learning throughout the land are paralyzed by the youthful resentment and distrust, something is critically wrong somewhere.

When Mr. Nixon's oratorical Vice President attributes this chaos to the mere perversity of the young generation, or to the machinations of a small muster of violent revolutionaries, he is talking through his hat.

He is promulgating a myth which goes only to the foreground appearance, and not to the root of the national travail.

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EVENTS HAVE BEEN piling up on Mr. Nixon for several weeks. American youths and most of their parents abhor the war because it is abhorrent, phony in its presentation to the people, and so plainly futile it would be laughable were it not so tragic a waste.

For all Mr. Nixon's earnest pleading, the Cambodian experiment did not bear a stamp of plausibility for an intelligent people, including its youth. Unhappily, it did bear a stamp of vainglory so often attending five weary years of escalation.

When four students died on an Ohio campus, Mr. Nixon resorted to a machine-made statement which bore the semblance, surely unintentional, of cold recoil, while the young and their parents were in hot grief and anger.

Interior Secretary Hickel, surprising everybody, wrote the President a letter embodying some of these concepts. One passage will suffice for tone: the Administration "finds itself today embracing a philosophy which appears to lack appropriate concern for the attitude of a great mass of Americans — our young people."

This upheaval is the most ominous we have known since the 1860s. Its causes will not be alleviated by flailing back at its surface manifestations. They require understanding and meditative perception, and neither cause nor effect will go away by wishing or by wrathful exhortations.

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