

Signs of a Student Shift To Real Political Action

By James Reston
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Washington

The British Secret Service has an old rule: "Never complain, never explain, never apologize."

That roughly was the line President Nixon took in his latest press conference: He invaded Cambodia to achieve all the goals the students want, he said, almost as if he had done them a favor. They didn't understand, of course, but he would be generous about it. Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.

Well, it was a brave and even brassy performance. He would give up Cambodia, but not the vice president or even Walter Hickel. He retreated, shaking his head at the young and shaking his fist at the Communists. He knew what the reaction would be, and he took full responsibility for the invasion, even though he'd never do it again. So the mystery and the misunderstanding remain.

In this situation, the main hope of speeding up the end

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of the war obviously lies in political action. If the tumult of the last few days has not convinced the President that he misjudged the temper of the country, it is a fair conclusion that he will react only to effective organization for peace in the November congressional elections.

It has been a long time coming, but the university students are finally beginning to understand the difference between political demonstrations and political organization. Demonstrating without organizing is like kissing the girl and running for home — a pleasant experience with no lasting consequences.

But now there are some signs — a few, not many — that the universities and their young political activists are taking a more realistic view of the practical problem of politics. Princeton University is going to shut down

next fall just before the elections to let students work for the candidates of their choice.

OTHER

James MacGregor-Burns, the historian, is urging the same political vacation at Williams College, and other colleges and universities will undoubtedly follow.

What this really means, of course, is that thousands of students will be working for the peace candidates in both parties. If it is carefully organized, it can be a powerful new political instrument, as it was for Senator Eugene McCarthy in the New Hampshire primary of 1968. If it is a clumsy or violent movement, it could look like a purge and turn the majority of the voters against the students and their candidates.

But anyway, it will bring the talents and energies of many students into the normal democratic process — a good thing in itself — and it will certainly command the attention and maybe even the respect of the President and his supporters and opponents, all of whom, for some mysterious reason, want to remain in power.

PRECEDENT

The idea of letting the students skip class for a couple of weeks in the autumn to help the old folks with the chores is not without precedent in America. As Professor Burns points out, students used to be let out of school in America to harvest the crops every fall, so why not let them out to harvest votes?

The reaction of politicians here to this idea of a new

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army of political volunteers in the last days of the congressional elections is very interesting.

Student speeches and even student demonstrations may leave them cold, but a student lobby, carefully organized and well led is something new, and nothing

shakes a politician more than any new political instrument in his district during the critical days before the vote.

Modesty is not the outstanding characteristic of this generation of university students, but in a funny way, they have underestimated their political power in the last two or three years.

Many of them have been operating outside the democratic system and establishment, asserting it was too strong, and many more of them have been defying the "silent majority," thinking it was weak.

But lately at least some of them have come to realize that the political system is

not strong but weak and that it may be easier to change things by working inside the system than by defying it from the outside.

Whether they are experienced organizers or not, they are effectively another question. For the moment they are essentially a middle class and upper middle class

movement, a privileged class arguing for the disenfranchised and the underprivileged. But whether they succeed or not, at least they are moving, ever so slowly from political demonstrations to political organization and this may be in the end the really important consequence of the President's invasion of Cambodia.