

Students Are Not Oatmeal

By RICHARD GALANT

WALTHAM, Mass.—America's mass media, in trumpeting the end of the student movement, are now employing the same kind of verbal overkill used to elevate student protest to the status of a national issue.

A few years ago, readers of every influential publication in the country became aware that the campuses were harboring seething masses of rowdy, discontented students constantly attuned to political issues and willing to hop into the nearest picket line of bearded freaks at the slightest provocation. Now, the new orthodoxy holds, these same protesters are alienated from the political process. They have returned to their books, dropped out of school, left the country or locked themselves up in their rooms and smoked dope until their minds resembled lukewarm oatmeal.

The moral of this tale is that the students who virtually shut down the universities last spring are now, if not satisfied, at least quiescent with regard to political issues. I think there is good reason to doubt the truth of this analysis. The mass of American students have never participated in a sustained political movement with a coherent set of goals. Nor have they now finally abandoned the barricades, rejected politics and lined up in silent support of the status quo.

Why then is the new myth of the passive student so widely believed? One primary reason lies in the nature of contemporary journalism, another in popular misconceptions concerning the student movement of the late 1960's.

The press, and more recently radio and television, have given a new prominence to the technique of news analysis. Reporters, formerly restricted to so-called objective reporting, are now permitted to write signed columns on issues of manifest importance. "Hard news" (war, crime, electoral politics) items are increasingly being played down in favor of articles that seek to pinpoint current trends.

Thus, The New York Times opens its front-page columns for several trend type stories each week. And editors throughout the land read and clip these stories and assign similar ones. Life magazine offers a six-page spread with color photos. Newsweek and Time present slickly rewritten round-ups of the trend. N.B.C. plans a documentary. And, in six months, a reprint of a National Review attack on the trend as a symptom of "knee-jerk liberalism" finds its way into the Reader's Digest. Eventually, The Times brings the trend full circle by announcing its demise.

Student passivity is now undergoing a similar treatment, and it is important that this "trend" be put in perspective. One source of distortion in reporting student protest is the concept of a "national student mood." The use of this term is seriously misleading, as students reflect a multiplicity of diverse and elusive concerns.

How can a reporter decide whether a certain set of attitudes constitutes a majority or minority view, a predominant view, or a composite picture? And which is the student mood?

At Brandeis and other universities, most students throughout the 1960's remained interested in politics, yet generally refrained from participation in political activity and protest. On certain occasions, however, the relatively small contingent of activist students successfully mobilized the majority for political action. The retreat from last May's student strike should be placed in the context of a history of periodic shifts between passivity and activity. Viewed in this manner, no fundamental change in student attitudes can be inferred from the current calm on the campuses. The media misconstrue this period as the end of the student protest movement because they never understood the movement itself.

Richard Galant is a student at Brandeis and editor of its newspaper, "The Justice."