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A Fault in Reality

AT HOME ABROAD

By ANTHONY LEWIS

LONDON—Feb. 26—A year ago, a British expert on American foreign policy was doing an appraisal of President Nixon's first Message on the State of the World. He felt it necessary to begin with a comment on the state of America.

The American people, he said, had come to know that "They had won the cold war and were losing the war in the cities. They realized that their interests were in Harlem and Watts and Chicago and only to a limited extent in Vietnam. They realized that the only people able to destroy American society were the Americans themselves.

"They began to comprehend that the affluent society was not concerned much with the individual, was not necessarily just or moral, and was not even very agreeable. The young realized it first, or at least they were the first to say that the emperor's clothes were tawdry."

It was against that background that the British analyst tried to explain the Nixon Doctrine. By that self-consciously named attitude, he suggested the President was trying to reassure his own people that the United States was going to be less adventurous abroad, less crusading—and more concerned with itself.

Many Americans, including some of the students most convinced that our first concern should be our own society, evidently were reassured. Even more than the Message on the State of the World, the steady run-down of American troops in Vietnam seemed to show an understanding on Mr. Nixon's part of the new realities of American interest and power.

Then came the invasion of Cambodia. Can anyone really be surprised, in retrospect, at the ferocity of the reaction, the sense of betrayal? And especially among the students.

Experts read the President's intentions more carefully; the British analyst said at the time that Mr. Nixon would not reduce American commitments willingly and would not eschew adventures. But the students, less experienced and more self-deluding, may really have expected a new attitude in their government.

American students have had some severe shocks in the last few years to their idealism and their hopes for social change.

They thought for a while in 1968 that they could alter their country's course by politics, and they thought they had. But the end result was a choice between Richard Nixon and Hubert Humphrey. Then, after Cambodia, they were advised to work through the political system again. They did, and found a campaign corrupted by money and demagoguery.

"A sad scorn, a monumental scorn" was Kingman Brewster's reading of the student mood toward the political process after the 1970 experience. Another event, just how, has underlined the realistic basis for that attitude.

The use of money in last year's campaign became a national scandal. European friends of the United States were bewildered at the reports of men like Nelson Rockefeller spending millions to buy their way into office. When Congress passed legislation to deal with the heart of the problem, political spending on television, President Nixon vetoed it. But the Senate Republican leader, Hugh Scott, did promise to bring in a more comprehensive bill in the new Congress.

Now we have Senator Scott's bill. It turns out to remove all ceilings on any candidate's election expenditure. Its reform consists largely of requirements for disclosure and limitation of individual contributions. It does nothing about the disgrace of selling politicians like cereal on television. Senator Scott is the man who should now make the speeches to students telling them not to be cynical about politics and politicians.

The students tried protest, too. But that turned out to lead, too often, to manipulation by the extreme few, to anti-intellectualism, to irrational violence.

Reports from the United States now speak of a new calm on campus, a welcome return to the idea of universities as places for quiet thought and reflection. But it might be a mistake, in two senses, to take too much satisfaction from the apparent change of mood.

There is the danger, first, of mistaking a feeling of helpless sadness for contentment with things as they are. Quiet campuses should not encourage more rash adventures in Indochina, for that would risk turning the students back to hatred and anarchy.

But the greater danger is that the students will really cease to care. They have been annoying and foolish and destructive at times, but they have shown ideals and commitment largely lacking, for example, at English universities. And they have told us important things about American society. The rest of us need to have American students go on believing what the writing on the wall says: "Do not adjust your mind. There is a fault in reality."

I have had a few letters asking what eventually happened to the Malayan British rail porter, Mr. Bahari. In fact he's been transferred to a suburban station with lots of grass and flowers, and everyone seems happy.