

Laos and the 'Infection of Apathy'

By ROLLO MAY

Why was the protest so great at the invasion of Cambodia, and so small when the almost identical thing happened in Laos? Why the veritable scream of objection, closing down some 700 campuses last May, and an almost complete silence at the time of Laos?

True, the invasion of Laos was handled very differently in Washington. It was accomplished by stealth, the rumors allowed to dribble out for a dozen days to inoculate the people against the real announcement when it did come. But deeper than this practical fact, is there a cooling-off period, an infection of apathy abroad in the country which may give promise of greater dangers?

The Calley trial shocked us temporarily out of our zombie-like state. Is there a possibility that this too will wither away into apathetic silence?

Apathy is a defense against anxiety. When a person continually faces dangers he is powerless to overcome, his final line of defense is to avoid even feeling the dangers.

Apathy can be first a temporary withdrawal from the active world to give one time to repair the damage to the self, and to protect one's self from further damage. This seems to be part of the present preoccupation of young people. They turn inward and devote themselves to personal relations and their own inner life. The peril here is that this may represent a disillusionment with politics and the establishment which will drive them into greater isolation.

The second kind of apathy is a general feeling of impotence. Surely this kind is evident in the confusion about tactics among students. How influence

Was There No Protest At Home Because We Couldn't Face It?

a Washington juggernaut that moves inexorably deeper into the war regardless of the protesting cries of the age-group who must do the fighting and dying?

Third, apathy can be a thoroughgoing hopelessness and despair. This, continued over a period of time, is the condition that breeds dictators. We recall that Germany, burdened with impossible economic reparations for the First World War and forced to accept the "war guilt," could do no other but retreat into an apathy which was an open invitation to a Hitler.

For apathy is dangerous. It can swing into violence at a moment's notice. We saw this last May when the hardhats in New York attacked the marching students. Though the two seem opposite, apathy actually is first cousin to violence.

So let no one congratulate himself on the lack of protest about Laos. If Agnew had been right about the "silent majority," we would have been in the most precarious state of all. No human being can live perpetually in a state of unfeelingness. If he feels nothing which challenges him, if he is not growing toward something, he does not merely stagnate. The pent-up potentialities turn into morbidity and despair, and eventually into distinctive activity.

Our inherited belief that we can train people into docility and passiveness is a delusion. Though such training may well maim the individual, it also develops in him a readiness for

wild aggression and violence in which he may swing without thought of whom he will hit.

This is why I believe that Nixon's expressed goals of a "lower decible of protest" and a "tranquillized society" are exactly the wrong way to meet the problem.

This very tranquillization—now given the added soporific of that incredible fantasy of Nixon's that "this is the last war"—may set the stage for a swing into a violence that will dwarf everything up till now. Let us not forget the moral in Herman Melville's story of Billy Budd, who, unable to speak against his false accuser, puts all of his strength into a blow that knocks him dead. When the captain tries Billy Budd for murder, the young man states, "If I could have found my tongue, I would not have struck him . . . I could say it only with a blow."

But if we look more deeply into the frame of mind of ourselves and our neighbors, we see not merely apathy. We sense a general feeling of shame, and a sense of guilt at our impotence in the face of the horrors of this second invasion of a neutral country in eight months.

I do not believe that our consciences have become so dulled that Laos will simply pass unnoticed, nor the lesson of the Calley trial evaporate into thin air. We may be getting ready for a radical recamping of the war-making powers of this nation. The introspection will thus have been a good thing, and can make our eventual action more resolute. We can fervently hope that there will be other ways of saying it than "only with a blow."

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