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When Nothing Is Beyond Belief

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By ANTHONY LEWIS

LONDON—An American professor now teaching at Oxford has just made a brief visit to his old campus in the United States. He came back here with a new attitude toward the political and social situation in America.

In the past, he has argued, he has argued about the conspiracy of the Chicago police.

Conspiracy

His newspaper has reported that the Panther has been framed in the murder. The accused says the case is a frame-up. The ordinary man may have some doubts about official treatment of the Panthers, but he would reject the idea that American policemen would themselves deliberately kill someone in order to frame a murder case against another man. That is conspiracy theory stuff, beyond belief.

But to the professor, it is incredible. The assumptions of our law. They have

professor says, that nothing can be excluded any more in examining the reasons for what goes on in American public life. No hypothesis of violence is beyond the system.

The students may be thinking about such an event as the Democratic Convention in Chicago in 1968. Millions of Americans actually saw, on their television screens, armed men clubbing down unarmed young demonstrators and threatening middle-aged women with shotguns. The Chicago police, the professor said, dismissed the police, and the public showed public opinion in that attitude.

His thesis that students have a different way of looking at public events is supported by another person who recently visited Harvard College on a trip from London. He spoke with three students, one the son of a Boston doctor, the second a black from the south, the third an Episcopal minister's son.

The students spoke of the events in Harvard Square a few weeks ago, the mass demonstration that ended in violence with the burning of a bank. The violence, they said, was led by agents who were working for

the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

"They did not say that argumentatively," the London visitor recalls. "They seemed to assume that I could not or would not believe it. But for them it was a fact: They knew."

When one group ceases to accept as a premise the good faith of the authorities—when indeed it instinctively suspects bad faith—is it any wonder that rational discourse becomes difficult?

Difference in Premises

This difference in premises was understood by president Brewster of Yale when he questioned the ability of a Black Panther to get a fair trial in the United States. The statement was much criticized outside New Haven. But there the students knew that he understood their doubts, and that knowledge helped to carry Yale through a most difficult time.

But not even Kingman Brewster and others like him will be able to preserve American universities if students more and more doubt the decency and truthfulness of public officials. Nor are students the only group that now finds itself without essential limits on the believable. There are the blacks, whose

reasons for total skepticism hardly need to be stated.

The dangers to society of letting large numbers of people develop that state of mind are so obvious that one has to ask: Don't the police and the National Guard commanders and the Governors and the national politicians care?

Some do understand, and are trying. But others act as if they were fighting a war—one with disaffected Americans as the enemy. In war anything is fair, so it is all right for policemen who regard the blacks as outside the constituency to brutalize them and lie about it. And students are the enemy, so it is all right for the Vice President of the United States to provoke and excoriate them.

Spreading Doubts

The trouble is that doubts cannot be confined to hated classes; they spread. And so the rest of us may begin to let our thoughts go beyond the ordinary limits.

Conspiracy theory used to be uncongential to most Americans. We thought events had less dramatic origins—fallible men, chance, imperfect mechanisms. When someone said that the C.I.A. plotted coups, we dismissed the idea. Are we quite so sure now?