

The Weekend Everyone Went to School

The schools were closed, but never before, in so short a time, had Americans been caught up in so vast an educational experience. Suddenly people found themselves thinking about their relationships to each other and to their government. They were asking themselves searching questions about ultimates—about their history and their future, about the basic design of their society, and about their ability as a people to control great events. The opportunities for learning during the weekend of May 8-10 were infinite. What was learned?

For the policy-makers in government, there were stark, mammoth new lessons to be learned about the connection between cause and effect in the making of foreign policy. They learned that the American people can no longer be counted upon to sit still while their government undertakes far-reaching actions and military commitments without prior notice or debate. The President as Commander-in-Chief is obliged to act in the national interest, but the Presidential Seal is not the final stamp on American history; the ultimate power belongs to the American people themselves. If they feel the authority is being misused or is morally indefensible, they have the historic right and ability to assert themselves, as the framers of the Constitution intended. Nothing is more erroneous than to suppose the President is totally free to commit American lives. The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, as many Senators have since made clear, was never intended to serve as an indefinite detour around the Constitution.

Surprise is a basic factor in the learning process. No doubt the President was surprised by the size, scope, and vehemence of public opinion against his new Cambodian commitment. It was apparent he thought the people had overreacted, and that he had expected them to accept unquestioningly his statement that U.S. forces in Cambodia would be engaged in a "limited" military action. What he overlooked was that these were the precise words used by President Johnson to justify sending American troops into Vietnam. By now, the rhetoric of escalation has produced conditioned reflexes in the American people.

Still another lesson turned up by the events of recent days is that it is no longer possible for the government to contend that opposition to the war is largely concentrated among campus radicals. The arrival in Washington of the full population of various colleges makes it clear there is no longer any

significant division among the young people of this country in their view of the war. The culminating effect of the shootings at Kent State was to close campus ranks—not only between radicals and moderates but between students and teachers. The Kent State tragedy, of course, was not the initial but a final cause in a long procession leading to disillusion, distrust, opposition, and anger.

For young people, the most heartening lesson of recent events is that they don't have to demolish the system in order to be heard or to have an effect. The system works if it is properly used. What doesn't work is the use of violence—whether by government or by protesters. What works is the persistent and resolute pursuit of a moral good. The young people have succeeded in opening up direct communications with their government. It is to President Nixon's credit that he left the White House at dawn to mix with the students and to see and hear for himself that their ideas are their own and not the sinister products of a foreign ideology, as he had been told. The encouraging thing, to borrow from the title of a book by Roger Garaudy, is that the students and the President at long last have moved from anathema to dialogue.

If a pervasive sense of purpose is manifest among young people, the same is increasingly true of the adult community. National pride is no longer being measured in terms of hollow victory but in terms of responsibility. Even conservative financial journals have joined in the clamor against the war. A prominent investment analyst has declared that the country will go into an economic tailspin if the Vietnam War does not come to an end and if the power of the military is not severely curtailed. He sees no end to inflation without mammoth reductions in military spending.

The American people have been told repeatedly over the years that our standing in the world is a powerful factor in any total estimate of our security. Never before in our history has there been such an outcry against the United States around the world. The President has declared we must stand behind the flag. But the flag has been planted in places where it ought never to be—and in ways that do not command respect. The English historian Arnold Toynbee has said, more in sadness than anger, that "the transformation of America's image within the last thirty years is very frightening

for Europeans. It is probably still more frightening for the great majority of the human race who are neither Europeans nor North Americans, but are Latin Americans, Asians, and Africans. They, I imagine, feel even more insecure than we feel. They feel that, at any moment, America may intervene in their internal affairs with the same appalling consequences as have followed from American intervention in Southeast Asia.

"For the world as a whole," Dr. Toynbee wrote, "the CIA has now become the bogey that Communism has been for America. Wherever there is trouble, violence, suffering, tragedy, the rest of us are now quick to suspect the CIA has a hand in it. Our phobia about the CIA is, no doubt, as fantastically excessive as America's phobia about world Communism; but, in this case, too, there is just enough convincing evidence to make the phobia genuine. In fact, the roles of America and Russia have been reversed in the world's eyes."

The final lesson has to do with the dangerous irrelevance of balance-of-power politics in the present world. A high administration official was quoted as saying that the decision to move into Cambodia was prompted not just by the existence of military sanctuaries for North Vietnamese troops but by the need to demonstrate to the Soviet Union the instant readiness of the United States to take on additional military commitments. This move, the official said, was dictated by the action of the Soviet Union in sending pilots and planes to the Middle East.

One wonders whether one of the reasons the Soviet Union was escalating in the Middle East was that it felt the need to prove to the United States it has the will and capacity to undertake important additional military commitments and risks.

Either way, it is an insane business and constitutes an unspeakable peril to the human beings on this planet. At some point, the students—and everyone else concerned with world peace—are going to have to face up to basic causes and realities. There can be no peace in the world so long as nations are the ultimate form of social and political organization, with unlimited power to act contrary to moral principle and the human interest. Anyone who genuinely wants to work for peace is wasting his time if at some point he doesn't address himself to the need to bring nations under the rule of law. The kind of outpouring of world public opinion we have seen in recent weeks, if directed to the need for upgrading the structure and functions of the United Nations, could make a startling difference in the prospects for mankind.

—N. C.