



'Not Yet a Good Man'

By William Sloane Coffin Jr.

NEW HAVEN—I was very fond of Jeb Magruder when we were together at Williams College. It was in 1958, his senior year and my first year as teacher and college chaplain. He and two classmates used to take my wife and me to dinner. He babysat for our daughter. Although we never saw each other after his graduation, for several years we corresponded.

During his time at Williams I worried about Jeb. I used to say to him: "You're a nice guy, Jeb, but not yet a good man. You have lots of charm but little inner strength. And if you don't stand for something you're apt to fall for anything."

When I saw him again on television testifying before Senator Ervin's committee, I was again drawn to him. While I do not excuse his conduct, I want to say something in explanation, for his testimony said as much about his education and American society as it did about Jeb himself.

In the 1950's students were agreeing their way through life. There was no civil rights movement to speak of and of course no antiwar movement. At Williams, as at so many exclusive colleges, there were few blacks, no Chicanos, no women and altogether too many fraternities which tended to promote an elitist team spirit, and bred a mistrust of healthy criticism. Professors everywhere were morally asleep. For the most part they represented the bland leading the bland.

Education was for making a living, not a life, to be traded upon rather than to be used to create a better world.

Jeb was very gregarious. He wanted to be liked. He had a much greater sense of himself when he was with others than when alone. As a natural winner, he conformed easily to the American success ethic of the day—popularity, power, money.

As his ethics teacher, I wish now I had stressed the errors and illusions that stem from the fear of being a loser in this particular game plan. I wish I had pointed out the paradox of winners being losers, and losers winners. I wish I had stressed the importance of solitude. I wish I had emphasized that it is the individual consciences of history which, as opposed to the mass mind, best represent the universal conscience of mankind.

Maybe these emphases would have helped Jeb to develop individual convictions. Certainly it would have helped his understanding of civil disobedience, for many of the great consciences of history—Moses, Jeremiah, Jesus, Socrates, Thoreau, Gandhi—many we today regard as heroes were notorious lawbreakers in their time.

I was shocked to hear Jeb lump all lawbreakers together. He should have known—and the Senators pressing him should have reminded a listening nation—that Martin Luther King and many in the antiwar movement were protesting what they considered to be illegal laws whose constitutionality could be tested only by a refusal to

obey them. There is an enormous difference between trying to keep the nation under the law and trying to keep it under Nixon, between being a loyal servant of the Constitution and being a loyal servant only of the man who hires you.

If there are differences in ends so there are differences in means. Whatever Dr. King and Dr. Spock did they did openly. All America could see and judge. Jeb operated behind closed doors. Most of the people in the civil rights and antiwar movements were careful not to infringe on the civil liberties of other citizens. Jeb and his friends deliberately violated these liberties. When the Supreme Court declared against him, Dr. King went from Georgia to Alabama to take his punishment. The draft resisters who went to jail accepted theirs. But Jeb's crowd, far from accepting punishment, tried only to conceal their crimes. Dr. King and those who followed him disobeyed the law to protect it. It is a sad and savage irony if Government officials learn from the practitioners of civil disobedience that law is made to be circumvented.

Teaching is at best a precarious business; the rational mind is no match for an irrational will that needs to place popularity and power above truth. Nevertheless all of us who taught him, and American society as a whole, could have done better by Jeb. Now we have the opportunity to learn from him the ancient lesson that to do evil in this world you don't have to be evil—just a nice guy, not yet a good man.

The Rev. William Sloane Coffin Jr., is chaplain at Yale.