

Violence in America

Variations on Violence

By Anthony Lewis
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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 insight into the psychological gulf between so many American students and their elders.

In thinking about public issues, he says, most people instinctively keep their minds or arguing about a few possibilities. There are unstated limits of the credible.

For example, a man reads in his newspaper that a

A
Personal
View

Black Panther has been killed and another Panther charged with the murder. The accused is a frame-up. The ordinary man may have some doubts about official treatment of the Panthers, but his mind rejects 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.

ASSUMPTIONS

But to the students it is not incredible. They do not have our assumptions of impartial law. They have come to feel, the professor says, that nothing can be excluded any more in examining the reasons for what goes on in American public life. No hypocrisy, no 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 saw, on their television screens, armed men clubbing down unarmed young demonstrators and threatening middle-aged women with shotguns; an inquiry termed a police riot.

edge helped to carry Yale through a most difficult time.

But not even 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.

BLACKS

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 peo-

ple 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.

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 uncongenial to most Americans. We thought events had less dramatic or imperfect mechanism. When someone said that the CIA plotted coups we dismissed the idea. Are we quite so sure now?

Yet the Chicago authorities praised the police, and the polls showed public opinion in support of that attitude.

HARVARD

The thesis that students therefore 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, moderate in the college spectrum: 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. The violence, they 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 time it was a fact: They knew."

PREMISE

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?

from NYTimes version:

..... mass demonstration that ended in violence and the burning of a bank. The violence, they said, was led by students who were working for the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

This difference in premises was understood by president Kingman Brewster of Yale when he questioned the ability of a Black Panther to get a fair trial in the United States. The statement was criticized outside New Haven. But there the students knew that they understood their doubts, and that knowl-