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Dissent or Disrupt

Frustration breeds aggression. Some part of the recent campus disturbances that have interfered with and halted educational activities constituted aggressive spillover from the frustrated feeling that the universities have failed to give due attention to matters high on the students' priority lists. Apparently also involved have been calculated efforts to create disturbance for political purposes.

Whatever the motivation, the disruption has frustrated and angered many persons on and off campus, and retaliation has now come from Congress. The House of Representatives has voted to deny financial assistance to students and faculty members who participate in campus riots or disruptions. The appropriations bill carrying funds for the National Science Foundation and the bill extending several student aid programs were amended to bar payments of federal funds to any student or faculty member who, in the words of one of the amendments, "wilfully refuses to obey a lawful regulation of the university or college which he is attending or at which he is employed." Both of the bills so amended were then passed and sent to the Senate.

The House action is indicative of strained relations between government and academe. The current Selective Service policies came about in part as an expression of anger over the sometimes real and often only alleged escape of college students from military service. In the prevailing atmosphere of frustration on a variety of issues, relationships are likely to be worsened by the reductions in appropriation bills affecting university work and the uncertainty over possibly greater reductions resulting from prospective tax and spending legislation.

It is essential that the still cool heads do whatever they can to try to defuse the situation. One of the congressional amendments specifically states that it is not intended to limit the freedom of students to express their individual views or opinions. The American Association of University Professors has vigorously espoused the rights of students to express their own views and to dissent from views with which they disagree, and just as vigorously has condemned the forceful occupation of campus buildings, the halting of ordinary campus pursuits, the detention of faculty and administrative officers, and the threats of physical harm that have disrupted a number of campuses in recent weeks. The American College Personnel Association has made the same distinction. And so also have individual administrators, faculty members, and students.

If the activists disregard this distinction, the majority of students and faculty members can still insist upon it. The faculty is in the critical position on this matter. It has the strength and force, and should have the willingness and sense of responsibility to deal with infractions.

The weapon offered universities by the House of Representatives should be considered in this light. The intent is sound, but the proffered weapon will be damaging to a university if it is used, and damaging if it is available but not used.

The university can better serve its purposes, and better help clarify public attitudes, by insisting that the university is a proper place for free exploration and expression of divergent views on any important issue. If the majority who defend this position cannot control the minority who flout it, the police and the courts are finally available as agencies for dealing with persons who choose to step over the boundary that separates the right of dissent from the lawlessness of disruption.—DAEL WOLFLE