

Student Power: NSA Takes Aim at Status Quo

Manhattan, Kansas. The National Student Association is an organization which, over most of its 21-year history, has built rhetorical castles in the sand. Year after year, resolutions on political and educational issues were passed without discernible effect on either student life or the body politic. In the past few years, however, the potency of "student power" on campus and in politics has been amply demonstrated and the delegates gathered here last week at Kansas State University for the NSA annual congress, knew student government need not be "sandbox government."

NSA delegates are representatives of college and university student governments, and student governments have for the most part not been in the forefront of radical activity on American campuses in recent years. Lately, however, NSA has moved with the times and has taken a more activist line. It is fair to say that the dominant group is made up of liberals with interest in radical ideas.

Indeed, university administrators who see mostly mischief in student unrest can take no comfort in the work of this 21st NSA congress. Congress delegates spent much of their time in workshops, discussing a problem on which student governments traditionally have been weak—that of developing strong student constituencies eager for institutional reform.

The delegates, numbering over 900, were from all regions and all kinds of institutions (NSA now has 368 affiliated schools). Significantly, delegates representing small Catholic women's colleges—highly authoritarian institutions where the concept of *in loco parentis* is slow to die—were particularly numerous.

In the workshops, NSA leaders such as Edward Schwartz, NSA's outgoing president, and Robert Powell, Schwartz's newly elected successor, emphasized that students can often shake up the status quo without negotiating with the campus administration. Establishment of student-run experimental colleges (of which there were more than 100 on United States campuses last year) was recommended as a way to point up the inadequacies of traditional methods of instruction—and a way to attract the ablest students to student government activities. Although acknowledging that obstructive tactics designed to bring out the worst in university administrators may sometimes result in student mass demonstrations, the passions thus aroused, he says, are usually short-lived. Sustained interest, he adds, comes best through stimulating serious discussion of reform issues among students.

Neither Schwartz nor NSA leaders who took part in the workshops think student-power goals will be met by the growing willingness of university administrators and faculties to include a few students on their committees. Powell says that students who sit on such committees are "easily bought off" and generally lose touch with the students they should represent.

Students should have complete control over student discipline, says Powell, and in curriculum matters students and faculty should have an equal voice. "Students today are not being taught how to learn," he ob-

serves. "They are given not only the answers but the problems as well. Students taught in this way later become citizens who are willing to have LBJ decide our foreign policy and to let the mayor decide what to do about the ghetto."

The NSA congress, besides addressing itself to institutional reform issues, took a major step to widen its field of political action. In fact, if NSA's plans materialize, congressmen, senators, and members of state legislatures will, increasingly, be waited upon and button-holed by NSA's national and regional leaders, especially on issues such as the Vietnam war, the draft, the 18-year-old vote, state speaker-bank statutes, tuition increases, and university appropriations.

In the past, NSA has been restrained from lobbying, even on issues of student concern, for fear of losing the right to receive tax deductible gifts from foundations. It also has been afraid that, if it were to lobby, federal agencies such as the National Institute of Mental Health (which supports NSA drug education and student "stress" programs) might not renew their grants and contracts.

NSA leaders wanted to go to Congress to press their views on the Vietnam war and the draft, but felt they could not. They overcame their frustration in part by publicizing an anti-Vietnam war ("We Won't Go") petition signed by over 100 student body presidents.

Now, however, NSA expects to be free to lobby because of the NSA's congress's approval of a plan to establish a new subsidiary corporation, to be known as the National Student Institute, which will carry those activities which depend upon tax deductible gifts and government contracts. The NSA itself hopes to finance its activities, including an ambitious lobbying effort, largely from the sale of life insurance, record-club memberships, and various student services. Although it will not endorse candidates for political office, NSA could well influence the outcome of some elections, especially at the state congressional-district levels, by mounting strong regional programs to focus the attention of students and the public in general on issues relevant to higher education.

The NSA congress seemed to assume that existing political, social, and educational structures can be reformed without being torn down. Yet there were undercurrents of cynicism and radical feelings, derived from the Vietnam war, the racial crisis, the general belief that the political parties were producing presidential candidates unworthy of student support. Prominent radicals invited to appear at congress sessions, such as Tom Hayden, a founder of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), were warmly welcomed and applauded. This should surprise no one for—in student elections last spring—radical sentiment was running strong enough for SDS candidates to win 20 or more student government presidencies. Schwartz believes SDS is riding a wave which is still to reach its crest. "SDS is going to look more attractive to students this year," he says. "Theirs is a dialogue between radicals and revolutionaries; ours is one between liberals and radicals."

—LUTHER J. CARTER