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*European Office: Lime Tree Farm, East Hagbourne, Berkshire, England. Telephone Didcot 3317

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EDITORIAL CORRESPONDENCE: 1515 Massachusetts Ave., NW, Washington, D.C. 20005. Phone: 202-387-7171. Cable: Advancesci, Washington. Copies of "Instructions for Contributors" can be obtained from the editorial office. ADVERTISING CORRESPONDENCE: Rm. 1740, 11 W. 42 St., New York, N.Y. 10036. Phone: 212-PE 6-1858.

Student Anxiety

Each generation of university undergraduates has questioned to some degree the value system of its elders. There has always been a small activist fringe advocating radical change. However, in the past, a very large majority of students neither probed very deeply nor were discontented with what they found. The mood on campus today is drastically different. Students are grappling with major questions with unprecedented intensity.

At Washington University, St. Louis, the fraternities on campus recently conducted a 3-day symposium entitled "Man Against Himself?" Some of the thoughts expressed by the fraternity men were as follows:

Society's institutions today fall far short of what serious college students expect. We look at the church and see an institution that is more a social gathering place than a source of spiritual inspiration. . . . We look to the business community and the professions . . . and we are troubled by the mass bureaucracy which seems everywhere to stifle individual growth . . . and which promotes a striving for acceptance which is often at the expense of justice.

We look to government and wonder whether our vote and our voice is really heard. . . . We see a war which we are asked to fight, but whose course we have little if anything to say in determining. We wonder whether the communications media are shaping our thoughts . . . through presentation of a managed view of the world.

In discussions at the symposium and in conversations at fraternity houses in which I participated, no student vigorously defended any aspect of our present way of life. Only a few advocated revolution, but many expressed deep unhappiness. What is worse, most seemed to be without hope, and religion had lost its role as a source of comfort.

If this nation is to prosper, some of our brightest young men must enter the business world. However, few of the young men at the symposium were inclined toward a business career. Their attitude seemed to be even more negative than one recognized by a large company in a recent two-page advertisement in a national weekly: "Unfortunately, college kids don't even dislike American business. They just ignore it."

Discussion of the mass media elicited contempt, particularly contempt of material used in advertising. The offensive and phony appeals of some of the products of Madison Avenue contribute to the low esteem in which all industry is held.

Held in even lower esteem was government, an institution that students cannot ignore. When first queried, students cited Vietnam as a principal source of dissatisfaction. However, further questioning revealed that a majority of the fraternity men were not highly critical of our role in Vietnam. They did not defend our moral position, but they did not criticize our stance. The focal source of discontent is the draft. Students dislike the prospect of an interruption in their lives just as they are contemplating graduate school, a career, and marriage. Only part of the students will eventually be drafted. However, almost all live in tormenting uncertainty, unable to plan their lives. Few humans live comfortably for long periods under the stress of major uncertainty. The students are no exception. Almost all have responded by developing negative attitudes toward the major institutions of society. As yet, only a few have resorted to violence, and it is unlikely that many will. However, there is sickness at the universities, and society must respond sympathetically. As a first step of high priority, a mechanism must be developed and implemented to remove the uncertainties of the draft. Although use of a national lottery has been criticized, its liabilities would be small in comparison with the damage currently being inflicted.

—PHILIP H. ABELSON