

AMERICAN STUDENTS AND TEACHERS ON INTERNATIONAL ISSUES

There are roughly five million college students and teachers in the United States. This is seven times as many people as the automobile industry employs; 16 times as many as are involved in the entire space drive. Yet it is only in the last few months that the academic world has made a collective impact on American policy-making.

Individual professors have criticised American policy in Vietnam, student rallies have been held to protest against the bombing of North Vietnam and to demand the evacuation of American troops from South Vietnam, and when American troops landed in the Dominican Republic a month ago students all over the nation protested almost automatically. The Johnson Administration, as always sensitive to criticism, was quick to recognise the

importance of these attacks.

Senior State Department officials were sent out to defend policy in Vietnam at universities all over the country. Respected academic figures who supported the official American line were encouraged to make public statements in its defence.

The product of this was the "teach-in", a public debate on the merits of the Government's policy. These debates originated almost unnoticed, at the University of Michigan on March 24. A month later they had spread right across the country. The climax came with the Washington teach-in of May 15, which was broadcast to more than 120 universities in 35 states.

Travelling around a variety of campuses after this debate I found that its audiences had been surprising,

not only in their numbers, but also in their character. The organizers in many universities had expected, and indeed feared, a Left-wing rally. Instead they found a wide cross-section of students and young faculty members genuinely trying to make up their minds.

Many of them, indeed, were supporters of President Johnson's policy, and remained unconverted after the teach-in. But the interesting point was that they felt sufficiently interested and sufficiently involved to give up a sunny Saturday afternoon in the middle of May to study the arguments of both sides. Five years ago, I was told, this would have been impossible. That was the period of the "bland generation," of the boys with the button-down collars whose aim was to secure a respectable degree and to qualify for executive training in a large corporation.

But since then a great change has taken place. This is not just a matter of student uniforms and fashions, as some commentators have assumed. These young people are not unduly bearded

or unwashed, and it would be inadequate to describe them as "beatniks". After all, no one could be more politically apathetic than the original Beat Generation.

Nor are they usually adolescents in the throes of rebellion against the comfortable world of their parents. Many of them are married post-graduate students or young faculty members, reasonably contented with their lives. At the typical rally there are more young children playing underfoot than banners overhead. But they do feel that the ordinary citizen of the United States is too remote from the men who make the nation's policy and who may one day ask them to die for it.

The feeling of frustration is increased by the scale of modern American university. Professors and heads of departments are distant figures, involved in administration or absent at conferences. Research rather than teaching is the road to a successful academic career. It is not surprising that both young teachers and young students often feel that the system is passing them by.

One young political science teacher told me that "the Movement", as he called it, had been going on longer than the country realized. John F. Kennedy's election had started the new wave. Politics for the first time became not a matter of wheeling and dealing but a career to which someone could, literally, devote himself. At the same time machinery was devised within which youthful idealism could express itself, notably in the Peace Corps.

In this way the self-education of the American college student proceeded. Some enthusiasts joined the Peace Corps. Others went to the Southern States to work in the civil rights movement; others still to the slums of the Northern cities to work on the poverty programme. The vast majority stayed at home, but nearly everyone had some friend or acquaintance who was actively involved.

The involvement in foreign affairs was the latest to develop. For a long time the sheer remoteness and complexity of most international problems insulated the stu-

dents from them. But throughout the last year the growing newspaper pre-occupation with Vietnam has been forcing this issue on their attention. The landings in Santo Domingo seem to have been the last straw. They have aroused an emotional reaction which was absent from the debate on Vietnam.

This has naturally led some officials and supporters of the President's policy to attack the campus radicals for being "pro-Communist". At best they are accused of being warmhearted but naive dupes of Left-wing propaganda; at the worst it is alleged that their organizations have been infiltrated by the Communists.

Workers for the various Left-wing groups are extremely sensitive to such charges. They have had bitter experience of them during the civil rights campaign from Southern segregationists. As a result they firmly deny in public that they know of any Communists associated with their groups.

In private they are franker and more realistic. They admit that they are so loose-

ly organized that they could easily be infiltrated. But they insist that the weight of democratic opinion among their members is so great that the elderly and bumbling American Communist party could do them little harm.

One of their insurances against the possibility of Communist control is, in fact, their lack of formal organization. "The Movement" has no formal membership as such, no official representatives, no central funds. Individual organizations, such as Students for a Democratic Society do have an office and a telephone, but their branches from campus to campus appear to have considerable autonomy. This makes it much more difficult for any organized political party to exploit their idealism. The traditional Communist technique of placing party members in key positions in the central organs, which has been used in the past in the trade unions, is useless here.

It is much harder to say what the political views of the movement are than to explain what they are not. They are certainly well to the

Left of either of the two main American political parties, both in domestic matters and in international affairs.

But they are not all Marxists by any means, or even Socialists in the Western European sense of the label. The majority of those to whom I talked would not accept any single analysis of society in either ideological or economic terms. If it is possible to find any single doctrine to which they would all subscribe it is the importance of the individual and the need to protect him against the automatic forces of society, whether he is a Vietnamese peasant, a voteless Negro in Mississippi or a shopkeeper in Santo Domingo.

This is both their strength and their weakness. It is their strength because it makes it very difficult, within the American political tradition, to oppose them on matters of principle. Their opponents must either imply that they are being led astray or try to prove that the course they advocate will in fact make the lot of the individual worse rather than better.

It is their weakness because the chances of a group of loosely organized individuals affecting policy are strictly limited. They cannot work through any established political organization or through the trade unions. This diminishes their access not only to all forms of news coverage but also to the purely practical help, financial and even secretarial, which is needed for a prolonged and effective campaign. Although the American Press has been fair and conscientious, much of the time the students' voices have just not been heard. This is in strong contrast with, for instance, the nuclear disarmament campaign five years ago in Great Britain. CND members were probably almost as widely assorted in their political views as the members of the Movement, but they enjoyed support from a political experienced minority of the Labour party and from some trade unions.

The lack of permanent organization will also affect the future of the Movement.

Students graduate and marry, crises move on to the inside pages of the newspapers and then vanish altogether, and the momentum is lost.

The most permanent result of the student debate will probably be on the students themselves. The traditional response of the American citizen to any crisis, especially one in foreign policy, has been: "Don't rock the boat. The man in the White House has all the facts, and he knows better than we do." This assumption has now been rudely challenged.

Some of these students are voters already; nearly all of them will be voters by the time of the next Presidential election. By then they may well have changed their minds about the merits of President Johnson's past and present policies. But at least they will have taken the trouble to think and inform themselves about American foreign policy in a way no earlier generation ever did. — *Jeremy Wolfenden, Washington.*