

THE ACTIVIST STUDENT

By Donald Scruggs

Dig 'em

More than most people, we Americans engage in individual and corporate analysis. This is not as constant a fact of our cultural life as some critics would like to believe. The fact is, we tend to wait until we are faced with a crisis before we initiate crash programs of study, analysis, and recommendation for action. We seldom anticipate and act to head off the great social problems for which we are famous—or infamous, depending upon your analytical point of view.

The period of history stretching from November 1964 to the present has presented us with enough crises to fill the careers of most of the human and social scientists presently in our universities and to allow a good bit to be left over for the legions of graduate students abroad in the land. The Warren, Kerner, and Eisenhower commissions have been duly constituted and, except for the latter, at this writing, have reported. And the nation has gone back to business as usual. This should not be too surprising; it seems to be an historic characteristic of us Americans to regard exposure and explanation of social problems as equivalent to their solution.

This article follows in this grand analytical tradition with the exception that I desire to motivate to positive social action. I want to look in some depth at the essence and goals of the activist students of the under-twenty-five generation as a way of helping the "older" generation to understand itself. I also harbor the hidden hope that the two generations, with clear understandings of each other, might together move in a new direction. In more practical terms, we cannot have the luxury of analyzing student unrest, gaining some understanding, overcoming it with paternalism or force, and then forgetting about it for another generation. The student unrest of our time will not go away so easily. God help us if it does.

The students about whom I am concerned in this article can no longer be taken for granted by our society. Despite the fact they consider themselves outcasts, they will continue to seek a hearing from our society. The fact that Oklahoma students have been tame should be small comfort to the people of our state. The factors creating uni-

versal student upheaval are present in Oklahoma. To date they have taken different overt manifestations from those familiar to all who own a television set. It doesn't change the situation to point out that most students are content, conservative, and apathetic. A determined and growing minority of bright, stable, articulate students is forcing all of us to examine our institutions, rules, and values. They will not be ignored. If the "over-thirty" generation continues to allow confrontation to be the only dynamic in this re-examination then we will have more chaos in higher education. The path to a better way is through understanding the elements which go to make up the student unrest. It is my contention that the student unrest of our time is opening the doors to a new America whose greatness we can only dimly see. The voice of youth is crying for national greatness in accents more foreign to adults than they should be. May those who have ears hear and act upon their understanding.

Student unrest is inseparable from the social phenomenon called the youth culture. Persons in this country under the age of twenty-five have their own America. The degree of participation, an important variable as we shall see, may vary; the fact of participation does not. Youth culture is homogenous, integral, and pervasive. Unlike the young of heart and mind of the "over-thirty" generation the chronologically young person does not choose to join the youth culture; he is born into it. Those among us who were born after 1940 have grown up in an environment radically different from that of their parents. It is true that the parents created most of this environment. However, the life styles within the environment, the

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use of the environment for the creation of a new culture are uniquely the "thing" of youth. Youth culture is a "bag" and, for this generation, no one is holding the bag but them. As Sherman Chickering puts it:

Youth culture is the way we affirm the existence of a totally new environment; it is our response to it. The religion of the youth culture is the cult of experience . . . The sex is not so much a revolution as it is a relationship; the education is action-oriented; the politics is crisis-oriented; the arts are "action arts"; leisure activity is kinesthetic, characterized by "happenings," psychedelia, and the omnipresent motorcycle . . . The hero of the culture is the man of "sincerity" whether he be the hedonistic Jean-Paul Belmondo, the strident Fidel Castro, the scrofulous Bobby Dylan, or the David Merrick who said, "Holly Golightly was my Bay of Pigs."

The youth culture is a piece. It cuts across all the traditions and divisions of society. Youth culture cannot be dismissed as the handiwork of a dissident minority or campus kooks. There are two kinds of "true believers," those with total commitment within the youth culture: the activist and the hippie. The activist is deeply involved in the society while the hippie is the drop-out. I will develop the implications of total commitment to the youth culture by the activists at greater length in this article.

Youth culture provides the necessary matrix within which a young person can find an entire, well integrated identity. Those young people who do not partake of the entire culture because they are attracted to the traditional culture (for instance, parental value patterns) are the ones who appear to suffer the most acute and prolonged identity crises. The youth culture, for its participants, is a complete answer to every human need. This naturally appears bizarre to anyone over the age of thirty. In the past, the youth culture, such as it was, could never give a complete answer. Younger generations in the past seem to have latched on to experiences they could call their own, such as goldfish swallowing, panty raids, initiation ceremonies, only to find more lasting satisfactions within the prevailing culture. The difference today is that the new experience of the young people is no longer confined to a response to fragments of reality. For the first time youth culture is a response to a totally new environment.

We shall look at the elements of that environment within the context of student unrest so common to our time, for the revolt of youth is based on certain elements of youth culture which run into conflict with the prevailing adult culture.

One researcher, Dr. S. L. Halleck of the University of Wisconsin, shows us that the most significant elements of student unrest can be described in six socio-psychological categories:

1. Some students reject the political and economic status quo and are making vigorous attempts to change the structure of our society. These are the student activists.
2. Some students reject the values of society as well as the values of their own past and are developing a style which is contradictory to the Western ethic of hard work, self denial, success, and responsibility. These students sometimes participate in efforts to change society but for the most part they are withdrawn and passive. They can be described as alienated.
3. The activists and alienated students tend to come from

affluent, middle- and upper-class homes. They are sensitive and receptive individuals. They are also highly intelligent.

4. Both activists and alienated students have difficulty in relating to the adult generation. They are articulate, irreverent, humorless, and relentless in their contempt for what they view as adult hypocrisy. Such youth are highly peer-oriented. They turn to one another rather than to their parents when shaping their belief systems or when seeking emotional support.

5. Alienated, and to a lesser degree, activist students find it difficult to sustain goal-directed activity. Their capacity to organize for any kind of action is limited. They often fail at work or at school. Even their political efforts seem highly disorganized. This element is changing as their political goals and efforts have been blocked or rejected by the adult society.

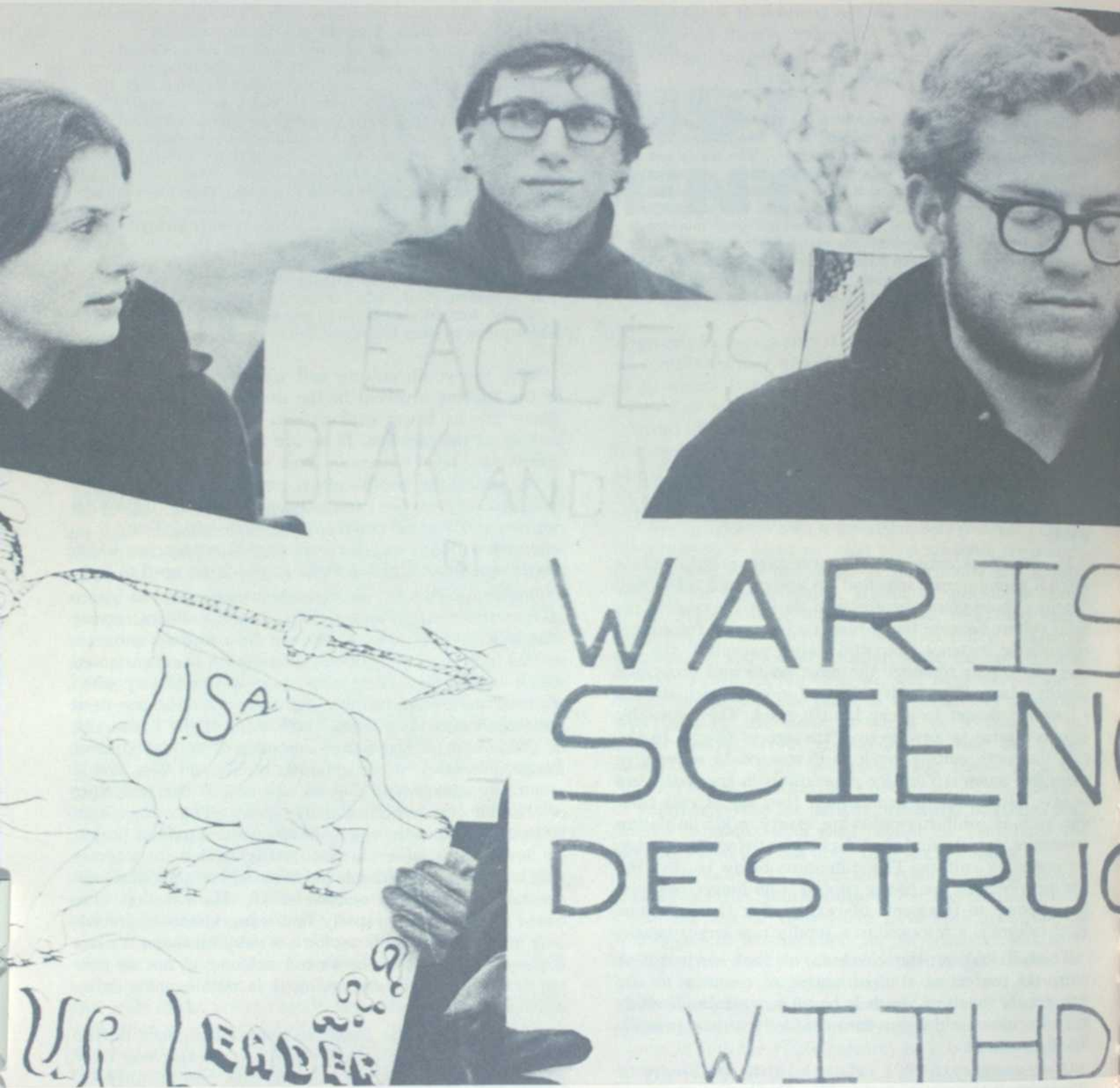
6. Alienated students live at the edge of despair. Although they seem at times to be enjoying life there is always a sense of foreboding about them. Often they become depressed and suicidal. Activist students are more emotionally stable but are also prone to deep feelings of helplessness and self-pity.

Why the youth culture and why these characteristics of the student involved in the unrest on our campuses? There are as many explanations as there are scholars looking at the problem. If we are to deal with the future creatively, and if we are to sense any of the positive elements which the youth culture gives us we will need to look carefully at the various explanations for these phenomena and respond creatively to our insights. There is no one answer. However, there are several approaches which have elements of truth in them at which we need to look.

One approach must be set aside immediately: to ignore all but the most serious aspects of the problem, saying that it is nothing new. Many say that student unrest is neither new nor exceptional. Precedents can be sighted which suggest that there were times in our history when students were more restless than they are now; one need not search very deeply into the history of the University of Oklahoma to find many examples of serious student unrest. Periods of unrest do seem to ebb and flow, and it is entirely conceivable that we are now in the beginning of the ebb of a period of rising unrest. This proposition is reassuring to those who look forward to a quieter future. Its weakness, however, is that it assumes that those forces which make for predictable behavior will remain relatively constant. I share the opinion of Dr. Halleck that "the world is changing so rapidly that using historical precedents to predict future behavior is a risky business. We can deplore student unrest or we can welcome it, but we cannot ignore it by simply saying it is nothing new or by waiting for it to go away."

In cataloguing the major elements of student unrest, Dr. Halleck is again helpful. The first general way most people look at the youth culture, he says, and the phenomenon of student unrest is to be extremely critical. They know that something is wrong with students who protest or withdraw from the dominant society. The explanation of what is wrong takes many forms.

Perhaps the commonest specific form of this negative reaction is to say that the unrest is the natural result of permissiveness in bringing up children. It is said that we have reared a generation of spoiled, selfish youth who are unable to deal with frustration without becoming angry or infantile in response. There is considerable evidence, Dr. Halleck points out, to support this. Much research shows that activist students are members of well



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educated families deeply committed to liberal doctrines probably instilled with permissive behavior patterns. It can also be pointed out that restless students, such as those raised in permissive homes seem to be more open to ideas, more involved with social issues, and more flexible than their peers. Restless students often react inappropriately, however, when their demands are not immediately accepted. They are prone at such moments to protest violently, to give up or withdraw, or to wrap themselves in a cloak of despair.

Dr. Halleck's next critical hypothesis for student unrest is one familiar to me in my work at OU. Many parents complain that behavior regarded as bad in their youth is now branded as sick, thus cutting from it all moral content. Many have tried to explain youth behavior in terms of a culture which is overly "psychologized." Students and others, it is said, are no longer willing to assume responsibility for their behavior. The psychiatrist will rightly plead not guilty to the charge and appeal to the theoretical foundations of his discipline for support. There must be recognition of the fact that our expanded understanding of psychology has had an impact on the way in which we view mental illness; however, the evidence that activist youth are deeply influenced by a climate of irresponsibility is inconclusive. Some activist students are often impressive in their willingness to hold themselves accountable for their actions. On the other hand, most alienated (hippie) students are not.

Another critical approach to the youth culture and the phenomena of student unrest is based, says Halleck, on the alleged hazards of growing up in an affluent society. "It must be said for this point of view that it does seem likely that man is less likely to be troubled if he is distracted by some momentual task which dominates his life goal. In a relatively poor society the very need for survival creates a structure of life. In an affluent society man has the time and freedom to contemplate the meaning of his existence. Many students feel the need to atone for the guilt over having it so good. This criticism of youth has certain undertones of criticism directed toward the parents of restless students. Affluence, after all, does not always produce protest or indolence. Traditionally many of our most useful public servants have been products of wealthy homes."

A number of explanations of student unrest focus on the disturbed family. It is said by some that activist students behave as they do because they are responding to an unresolved conflict within the family unit. "This approach emphasizes the breakdown of authority at the parental level, the confusion of sexual roles in our society, and the break with tradition which such confusion produces. Sociological studies of students and their families do not support any family pathological hypothesis. In fact many studies suggest that activist students, at least, come from rather stable families." Psychiatrists such as Dr. Halleck, on the other hand, find some evidence of serious familial conflict in most of the families of the restless students they treat. The most they are willing to say is *some* aspects of student restlessness *may* be directly related to family pathology.

Dr. Halleck's next set of observations about student unrest comes from those who are sympathetic with the

protest of the young. In explaining the behavior of restless students, these persons see it as rational and a legitimate response to man-made circumstances which should be changed.

Persons sympathetic to student unrest and to the youth culture point out that this generation of young people has grown up in an age when the world has been divided into large camps which compete with each other ideologically, economically, politically, and sometimes militarily. This competition, Dr. Halleck tells us, has manifested itself, in as far as the young person is concerned, primarily in the educational institution. Where educational competition is characteristic of the grade school and high school it is not easily maintained after the student arrives at the university. By this time he is at least partially burned out. As the student comes to objectively view the implications of our educational competitiveness with Communism as a never-ending phenomena, he also begins to question the social value of his efforts. He increasingly asks himself whether the competitive search for knowledge is worth it. He begins to view our competition with the Communist world and often competitiveness itself as a form of mass paranoia, and he views the university as an agent of the government which contributes to the perpetuation of the paranoid system. He reacts by protest or by withdrawal. Thus, where competition is a positive value for the adult world it is a destructive value for the youth culture, which activist students in particular feel must be exorcized from all parts of the society beginning with the educational system. It is of no small significance that more alumni are concerned with the OU-Texas, OU-OSU rivalry than are students. If one is to combat something, the activist students say, the combat must have meaning which transcends the particular or series of encounters. Thus activist students will confront presidents and deans for a "free university" and the political structures for "participatory democracy." For them such combat has meaning. Most of the competitiveness of their parents has no meaning for them beyond itself.

Others sympathetic to what is happening to our youth point to the Vietnam war as the major factor influencing the behavior of students. The war is particularly unpopular on American campuses. OU is no exception. Says Halleck, "A large portion of students, perhaps the majority, see it as a misguided effort. A significant minority see it as wholly immoral. Much of the rest of the behavior of students can be directly related to their efforts to do something to stop the war or to their total frustration when they feel powerless to stop it."

Interestingly, rather than create a conservative climate on campus, the Vietnam War has had a direct effect upon efforts at university reform. Much of the frustration built up over the war finds outlet in efforts to make the university a more humane place in which to live. The war has attracted many male students to the campuses of the nation who would seek education and training in other contexts. As they put it, they find the university less objectionable than jail. If it were not for the war and the draft, they would show their distaste for higher education as conceived and controlled by the Establishment by drop-

ping out. Given that state of affairs, our universities would not have to deal, in as great numbers at least, with student demands for educational reform. It would seem that our national efforts to combat Communist revolutionary activity in the "third world" has lead to demands for a radical overhauling of our universities at home.

The draft and the inequities engendered by the student deferment contribute to the unrest in other ways. The major issue is fear compounded by guilt. Says Halleck, "The male university student knows he is spared from military service only because he is richer or smarter than someone else. While he may believe that the war is immoral, he also fears that his college status is immoral. He is afraid of dying in a war of which he does not approve and he feels guilty of having a deferment he knows he did nothing to deserve." Psychiatrists tell us that much of the alienation on the campus is a means of denying the relevance of the society that created such guilt. The unpopularity of the war gives the student a cogent reason for avoiding military service but it does not resolve his nagging fears that he is somehow or other being cowardly or less than masculine in being specially treated.

There are many, Dr. Halleck's study points up, who believe that student unrest is an appropriate response to the deterioration of the quality of life in America. Students, it can be argued, are among the first to sense the painful anonymity of bigness. Few universities can be called small. OU certainly is not. Halleck again: "Students of today have grown up in a world in which they have watched beauty fade and pollution gain. They see real estate developments take available open spaces in cities. They see cities becoming increasingly crowded; they know little of clean air and clean streams. Is it any wonder they despair of the future?" One way of looking at student unrest is as a massive reaction to the destruction of the kind of world and way of life which their forebears enjoyed but which will be denied to them. It is almost as if they say, "In your world life had some meaning, but in the world you have left to us, these qualities are gone. Worse still, you, our fathers, have taken them from us."

Many individuals see our massive society as immutable to change. An increasing number of radical students are convinced that the forces of government, industry, and education are totally interdependent and allied to one another for the purpose of warding off any effort to change the society. Many students are also convinced that constructive change in our society is not possible by working through the system. They do not have a plan for social change, but they do have a deep sense of the need to tear down the traditional.

The civil rights movement increased the awareness of white youth to injustice in our society. Black young people needed no training. It made it difficult for them to be proud of their country and also served as a training ground for future activists. The painful situation at Berkeley began when students demanded the right to work freely on their own campus in behalf of oppressed black Americans. Students at Columbia University first expressed their frustration to that school's administration by being concerned for black people being displaced by the school's expansion program. It was the civil rights bill

before the Oklahoma Legislature, the near impossibility of members of minority groups, even faculty members, to obtain decent housing in Norman, and the complaints of the black athletes which stirred some two hundred OU students, black and white, to action this spring. White students throughout the country have developed an amazing empathy and identification with black Americans. The commitment to the black cause has taught them the psychological meaning of oppression and has encouraged them to seek out and attack sources of oppression in their own lives. At OU, unfortunately, the cause is still mainly black; the shift in the movement's concern to all poverty stricken folk has yet to stir a significant number of OU students.

There are other ways of expressing the student unrest in the youth culture which neither attack nor affirm these phenomena. One is to look the fact of technology in American society as an essential ingredient in understanding student unrest and the youth culture. Post-war America has been characterized by a massive and continuous growth of technology. Our society is one in which the conditions of everyday life are constantly changing. Moreover, the rate at which technology changes our lives is itself increasing. No one can project what life will be like in twenty years, ten years, or even five years. Says Halleck, "Today's knowledge, today's work skills, and today's values may be totally irrelevant in tomorrow's world. Kenneth Keniston has described the manner in which some youth who are exposed to an ever increasing rate of technological growth come to perceive that the values of the past are totally inappropriate for the world in which they will be adults. Moreover, they feel powerless to anticipate the future. In this environment, which no longer sustains, it is adaptive to be cool, to learn to live in the present."

Many people have looked at the growth of the mass media, particularly television, as a basis for the troubled behavior of students. It can be argued that simply to be able to publicize the activity of the protestors and hippies, the media exaggerates the importance of these groups. The television camera forces all of us to take seriously forms of behavior that might have been dismissed by, or unknown to, men of earlier decades. Conceivably the media may be creating a climate of education in which youth are subtly seduced into dissenting roles which may not represent their actual interest. It has also been argued that the mass media creates a self-consciousness in youth which exaggerates their sense of their own power. In any case, the mass media does confront youth with the hard issues and realities of life. Dr. Halleck points out that until recently it was possible for young people to experience the world as adults only after they had reached adolescence. "Most of the time the adolescent absorbed this knowledge gradually and painlessly. Even when he did feel that his parents had been hypocritical or had deceived him, his awareness of their dishonesty came so gradually that his awareness and rebellion was restrained. Today it is different. One of the significant developments for America has been the influence on man of mass media, particularly television, which is capable of disseminating information to all age groups immediately. The hypocrisies

of older generations have always been with us. What is new today is that it is ridiculously easy to expose them. The effect on our youth of premature emergence of truth has been a deep skepticism as to the validity of authority. Neither the family, the church, the law, or any institution demands the automatic respect it once did. There may be other factors contributing to this decline for authority, but it is best understood in terms of the psychological impact of our new media."

In my work with students I am often impressed with how easily they believe in the perfectability of man. Hostility is not seen as innate in man, but rather as a response to frustration. The teachings of social psychologists that hostility is learned has won over Freud's warnings that it is innate. In their adherence to scientific rationality activist students do not accept guilt as in any sense basic or lasting to the condition of man. They are convinced that in a perfectable world man could be joyful and guiltless. Halleck: "When a person raised on such beliefs encounters the harsh realities of life, he has little to fall back upon. If he pursues his own aggressive tendencies, he is frightened by them and attempts to deny them." The restless student, Dr. Halleck tells us, is one who has taken the message of science, rationality, and perfection literally. He is more often open to action and change than the earlier generation of students. At the same time, however, he is not equipped to understand or deal with in depth that irrationality in man which resists change and leads man to seek his own destruction. Too often such a student finds it necessary to construct "devil" theories of history in which the existence of evil is attributed to a few who block the progress of many.

There is no simple explanation for the fact of student unrest in our time. There are a number of ingredients to this unrest and to the youth culture from which the unrest flows. These various bases for the fact of our youth culture and student unrest themselves are grounded in the realities of our times. Regardless of which explanation we regard as being true, the youth of our time are trying to tell us something about the world which we of the over-thirty generation have created. They are trying to tell us something about the America of 1968 which most of us are not really ready to face.

What are some of these things which "turn on" student unrest? To start with, it is worth realizing that the youth culture is convinced that America is not experiencing enough guilt (regardless of their ambivalence regarding the problem of guilt). Youth is telling us that we need to hear that American society has been involved from

its beginning in the near extermination of one race and the enslavement of another. We associated with OU should be particularly sensitive to this. Callousness in warfare did not start with Vietnam. In the 19th Century American troops burned American Indian villages. We burned people alive in Japan in 1944-45, and very few protested. The youth of our day are also pointing us to some ironies of American history much as Reinhold Niebuhr did in our generation. New England Puritans came to the new world in search of religious freedom and scourged and hanged Quakers; men who had gone to the frontiers in search of individual freedom persecuted dissenters; believers in egalitarianism condoned segregation and even lynching; Woodrow Wilson's New Freedom tightened segregation in Washington; F.D.R.'s war against racism put American citizens of Japanese origin in concentration camps. Our youth are calling for a high quality in the life of our people, regardless of the low quality of life found at present. They are calling our society to match its behavior with its most favorable self image.

Worse yet, all these things, youth believes, have been done by people who believe in the purity of their own motives. There is nothing essentially new, they tell us, in bureaucrats who really believe we are eventually going to bring the American way of life to South Vietnam, or even generals who say with doubtless quite genuine regret that we must destroy a town in order to save it. This, our youth has seen clearly and are telling us in very emphatic terms, is not the way to live.

Youth is telling us further that the more we can accept our own guilt and allow for that of everyone else the less we are likely to move from one mistake into its opposite. Youth is telling us that we must immediately stop slaughtering civilians in Vietnam. We must admit our prior responsibility and guilt for the Negro ghettos and understand the anger of those who live in them. It is now impossible to shut our eyes to the challenges of our time which students are pointing up to us so clearly and it will do no good to beat our breasts. We have to love ourselves as we are and the restless students as they are. This is what the restless students are telling us. Further, they are saying despite all our psychological "hang-ups," individuals can change things for the better. If we can get away from the cycle of crusade and frustration, we must cherish, even in the midst of our guilt, all the creative forces of our culture. If I hear youth correctly, they are telling us that the American Dream is a possibility if all America will but dream a little more. □