

**THE NEW LEFT, WATERGATE,  
AND AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION**

by John R. Coyne, Jr.

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A few months ago I went back to Berkeley to look for myself. Somewhere between 1967 and 1976 I'd left a large piece of myself somewhere. I thought I might find it at Berkeley, for it was because of Berkeley that I went to work for Spiro Agnew and Richard Nixon.

It's all over there now. Berkeley is as off-beat and funky as ever. But the hate has evaporated. And in a remarkable way, Richard Nixon has succeeded in accomplishing precisely what he was elected to accomplish—he has calmed the nation.

No more mass demonstrations, no more confrontations, no more fire bombs. It's almost as if Nixon drew all the hatred of a decade into himself and then pushed the self-destruct button. And now he squats Job-like on the ash heap at San Clemente, and suddenly there's no longer a focal point for the hatred. Ironic, that he succeeded so well in a way that he never would have dreamed of. Or that any of us who worked for him could have imagined possible.

But it's all over now. At Berkeley the kids are

still scruffy, with that singular Bay-area scruffiness. But they're really not much scruffier than kids everywhere, and anyhow, as I've discovered in Washington among the pin-stripers, there's a lot to be said for scruffiness.

No mass rallies on Sproul Plaza now. The new concerns are everywhere in evidence, of course—the environment, ecology, consciousness raising, mysticism, organic foods, communes. But there's no *anger*.

The drifting, Ophelia-like strays still wander down Telegraph, panhandling loose change. Street vendors still sell hand-made jewelry, paintings, leather bags, hot pretzels, fresh orange juice, Sherpa hats. Pushers still peddle their goods in doorways, and now and then a purse gets snatched. But people are smiling.

Over at the People's Park, scene of one of the biggest and bloodiest confrontations of the late 60s, the dogs chase frisbees and a few couples roll around on the grass. But that hatred and tension—that constant powder keg feeling of the 60s is no longer there.

imprimis (im-pri-mis) adv. In the first place. Middle English, from Latin *in primis*, among the first (things)...

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It's not that Berkeley has been deradicalized. It still is and always will be the radical capital of the nation. There's agitation on campus for a "Third World College." And the student government is controlled by "The Left Alliance," an umbrella organization made of various leftist groups.

The radicals are still there. But with the end of the war and the destruction of Richard Nixon, the issues are not. Students discuss the nature of boredom in the *Daily Cal*. And the *Berkeley Barb*, once the single most influential organ of the New Left, now devotes two-thirds of an issue to massage-parlor ads.

It's an odd period for the radicals, just as it's an odd period for people like me. There is a sense of dislocation, or disorientation, a nostalgia for things as they were—or perhaps, more accurately, a nostalgia for ourselves as we were, with those sharp, clear, hard convictions that once made us so sure of ourselves and the causes we believed in.

"The corruption and incompetence of our recent presidencies is only a talisman of the wider loss of faith," writes Michael Fossman, a founder of the Free Speech Movement, "while people plod numbly on waiting for something, or clutch small fragments of reality against the incipient chaos."

They've won! But they don't really know *what* they've won. Or what to do with it. Or whether they really want it at all.

It's hard to believe that it was just a bit more than a decade ago that the Free Speech Movement was born in Berkeley, a movement that fathered the New Left and by so doing altered permanently the face of American politics, the shape of America's universities, and the terms of our national dialogue.

The New Leftists didn't get everything they wanted. But they certainly fared better than the people on my side. They have, to a significant extent, managed to get their ideas and attitudes institutionalized into the Democratic party. Their movement was responsible, more than any other single factor, for ending our involvement in Vietnam. They drove one Democratic president from office, and, ironically, elected Richard Nixon, who could not have beaten Hubert Humphrey in 1968 without the demonstrations in the streets of Chicago that doomed Humphrey's campaign before it began.

The effect of the New Left on our society and its institutions has been profound.

Without the New Left there would have been no outraged cry from Middle Americans for the restoration of order.

Without the New Left hundreds of thousands of traditional Democrats would not have crossed over

to vote for the law-and-order Nixon-Agnew ticket.

Without the New Left there would have been no Nixon-Agnew administration, no Haldeman, no Ehrlichman, no Mitchell, no Huston plan, no Watergate.

And without the New Left I know that I would not within the space of one year have worked for two vice presidents and two presidents of the United States.



But it's all over for them and for thousands like me now. I know that I'll never again set off in search of that cause larger than self that Haldeman liked to recommend. And I am certain that I will never again take any politician at face value.

My experience has been primarily with presidents and vice presidents. And presidents and vice presidents are the most carefully prepared, packaged and protected political products on the market today.

Their daily lives are arranged to the minute by scheduling staffs. They are totally briefed on every issue of the day by assistants who boil everything down to a few concise pages—a potentially dangerous practice if those assistants want their boss to consider

only certain options. There are aides whose primary function it is to escort the presidential and vice presidential ladies at important functions. There are aides whose mission is to relieve them of the plaques, dogs, rugs, blankets, Indian headdresses, cowboy hats, Shriners' fezzes, pom-pom girls and cheerleaders that they are customarily presented with. There are aides to make them laugh. There are secretaries, pilots, secret service agents, doctors, barbers, house-boys, cooks, musicians. There are letter writers who answer all those letters the people who elect vice presidents and presidents write to them—letters they very seldom see. (The signature is forged.)

There are the middle level managers—Domestic Council, Office of Management and Budget, National Security Council, Council of Economic Advisers—who, sometimes without the cooperation of the Departments and Agencies, actually make national policy, which they then explain to presidents and vice presidents.

And then there are the speech writers, whose work I know best, whose function it is in part to translate policies into coherent English so that the president, having been informed of them, can read them to the nation.

The work of speech writers isn't always that important, of course. We also write proclamations proclaiming things like National Puppy Dog week. We write answers to interviews, articles for college and high school yearbooks and newspapers, love letters to the candidate's wife. We write book prefaces, guest columns, and planted letters. (In one, I identified myself as "a concerned Jewish housewife with no particular political axe to grind.") And we even write telephone calls.

We have heard much in recent years about the loneliness at the top, the ordeal of power, the agony of the presidency. But, in fact, it can be a remarkably carefree life. Everything is done for you, and you needn't do anything you don't feel like doing. You don't even have to make your own decisions or come to grips with your own ideas.

And some presidents and vice presidents choose to do very little indeed. We heard proof of this in the Nixon tapes. For years Nixon had built up a reputation as a hard-working, seat-of-the-pants grind. Even his most virulent enemies gave him that. But when the tapes were released we found out what was really going on in that office. The schedule may have said "desk work." But actually he was just futzing around, jabbering, trying to talk tough like Haldeman and Ehrlichman. And through all that unhinged babbling came an incredibly warped picture of how things really were out there, but a picture that perhaps necessarily had to be warped, given the lack

of contact presidents have with everyday real life. At least partially because everything is done for them, they lose touch with reality and the people they serve—just as, in a similar way, in large part because of bureaucratic layering, our universities lose touch with the people they serve—the students.

My experience as a speech writer has taught me that national politicians often have little to do with what they say. And this in turn has taught me that it is nearly impossible to arrive at conclusions about the reality of the political man beneath the surface of his rhetoric, or conclusions about the principles to which that man holds, by analyzing his rhetoric.

I have learned, in other words, that it is extremely easy to confuse the substance with the shadow, the trappings with the center, the rhetoric with the reality.

Consider a very small and harmless but typical instance. During the campaign of '72 the heckling began to get heavy. Agnew asked us to come up with something that would give our supporters in the crowds sufficient reason to shout down the hecklers. On the plane from Washington to Wilmington, Delaware, I wrote a little essay-lecture on the necessity for civility in a democratic society. In Wilmington, when the heckling began, Agnew flipped to the end of his speech text, and read the essay-lecture on civility. The crowd loved it, shouted down the hecklers, and even the press was impressed, for it seemed spontaneous.

The *New York Times* wrote about it this way: "It was Mr. Agnew at his rhetorical best—establishing a simple premise, expanding it to broader, more philosophical planes, moving to a terse, sharp conclusion—and those who had come to hear him and cheer him loved every word."

Well, fine. But the problem here, if I can be just a bit immodest, is that it was actually *me* at my rhetorical and philosophical best. It was Mr. Agnew reading at his reading and acting best. Which might explain why those who serve presidents and vice presidents become peculiar people. We are they. Or they are we. Or perhaps, essentially, it's that they are not they.

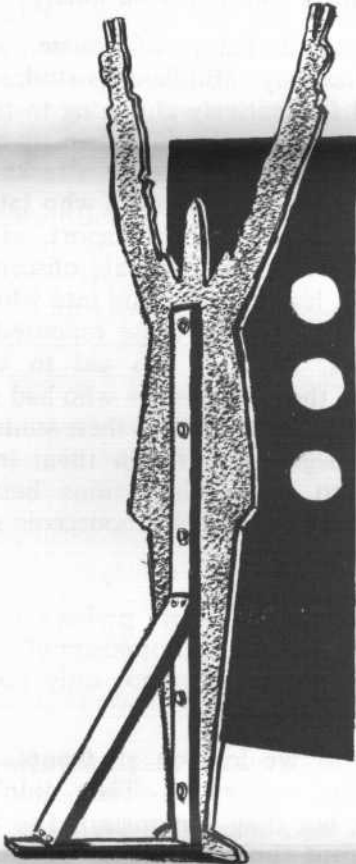
And there are times, and these are the worst of times, when there is just no we and just no they there at all. Such a time came during the disastrous congressional campaign of '74, when President Ford broke out of the White House and raced across the country speaking for every Republican in sight. He never knew what to say next, and neither did the four of us who did the bulk of the writing for him.

The theme that Ford finally came up with was the need to preserve the two-party system, a theme that



had been developed in an earlier unused speech, a theme about as meaningful in '74 as a discussion of academic freedom at Berkeley during the days when buildings were blowing up and burning down.

The theme does make basic sense, of course. No one wants one-party rule. But as we laid it out it sounded just a bit fatuous. Under one-party rule, we said, massive abuse of power becomes possible. Therefore, in order to prevent abuse of power, it was necessary to send Republicans to Washington. But since it was a Republican administration that had demonstrated spectacularly just how dramatically power could be abused, the idea had a certain



hollow ring. It's difficult to say with a straight face that the only way to prevent future Watergates is to send men to Washington who represent the party responsible for Watergate. And the defense of the two-party system, while perhaps a noble idea, isn't the sort of gut issue designed to stampede alarmed voters to the polls.

Like American education, we were adrift. The pudding had no theme, the rhetoric was just rhetoric. And so, because there was nothing to say, Ford began to ramble and babble, picking up some of the prepared remarks, garbling others, speaking almost incoherently for as long as forty-five minutes, pushing against the outer limits of the rhetorical barrier, hoping desperately to break through into some sphere of sense and ideas.

But he didn't, and the problem will remain for as long as the Republican Party continues to drift without distinctive and well-thought-out programs and without philosophical ballast. It's difficult indeed to wax eloquent about the goals to be achieved by a corpse.

I don't intend here to leave the impression that I believe Ford can't think and talk. He can, and the first two speeches he gave upon assuming the presidency were among the most quietly eloquent of the past few decades. But they were personal speeches, the speeches of a good and decent man responding to Watergate and affirming his faith in the basic goodness and decency of our nation and its people.

But the problem arises in the later speeches, when he attempts to lay down the goals, programs, policies and philosophy of the administration he heads and the party he leads. Thus, in that embarrassing speech to the Future Farmers of America on fighting inflation, we are advised to "take all you want," but warned to "eat all you take," and further instructed to take "a trash inventory of our homes." And that's just about where Republicans are today.

As the '74 elections demonstrated, the Republican party may be well on its way to earning endangered species status, and that New American Majority we used to like to talk about seems to have become the Old American Minority.

The blame has to rest, of course, with the Nixon-Agnew administration and all of us who worked for that administration. I make no apologies here. I went to work for Agnew because he personified for me what James Reston, who came to admire Agnew greatly, called "the old American verities." And when I went to work for Nixon, believing firmly that he had dealt kindly with Agnew, I did so certain that although Nixon was a mean, tough, hardball politician, he was nevertheless a man of great personal rectitude. No apologies. But I wouldn't do it again. I have come to agree with Walter Lippmann about speeches and speech writers, and I think his observation applies to most of the other functionaries who surround men of power. Lippmann put it this way: "A public man can and needs to be supplied with material advice and criticism in preparing an important address. But no one can write an authentic speech for another man; it is as impossible as writing his love letters for him or saying his prayers for him. When he speaks to the people, he and not someone else must speak. . . . The truth is that anyone who knows what he is doing can say what he is doing, and anyone who knows what he thinks can say what he thinks. Those who cannot speak for themselves are, with very few exceptions not very sure of

what they are doing and of what they mean. The sooner they are found out the better.”

Many of us didn't find out, of course, until it was much too late. When it all began in the late 60s, I still believed firmly that social and moral conservative principles could be joined to political principles and combined in the person of a national politician. That politician became, for me and millions of others, Spiro Agnew.

It crystallized for me because of the condition of the American university and the New Left. I had come to Berkeley at a time when confrontation had become an accepted part of daily life. The demonstrations and riots which had begun on the campuses had spilled out into the cities and were to reach their apex in 1968 in the streets of Chicago. Pepper gas, bullets, bottles, bricks, nightsticks, guns and firebombs were as common on campus and in the streets of Berkeley as junkies and drifters.

In the nation the unrest was reaching new heights. The President of the United States, a prisoner in the White House, could no longer appear publicly in any sizable city, and would soon be forced to announce that he would not run again. The mobs were marching on Washington and the government seemed no longer to function. Robert Kennedy was murdered. Martin Luther King was murdered. And to many of us, it seemed the country was coming unglued. We didn't realize then that the glue had hardened and fallen out long ago.

As the 60s wore on we came more and more to believe that the social unrest and the collapse of traditional morality was the logical outcome of the neo-liberal philosophy that had evolved in our century, an eclectic intellectual mixture of Marxism, Freudianism and Darwinism, a philosophy that was preached unthinkingly in the classroom and that had led, inevitably, to the birth of the New Left Movement.

My own beliefs were simple, perhaps naive. I believed in all those values that Agnew used to like to say “made America the hope and envy of the world.” I believed patriotism to be one of the highest of those virtues. I believed our government and our political system to be the finest yet devised by man, and I believed absolutely that the men charged with running our government and our political system were sincere and totally dedicated men who, no matter what their idiosyncracies, could be trusted to do their very best for their country. (“Your President is not a crook.” The vast majority of the Americans of that period could never have conceived of the possibility that such a statement would ever have to be uttered.)

It was a good country, a good society. Certainly, we had problems. But we were still the best fed,

best clothed, best housed, best educated nation on earth, in which anyone could still rise, to borrow another Agnewism, as high as his abilities and talents could take him.

I believed it all, and I grew profoundly uneasy as I watched the rapid growth of a movement apparently dedicated to destroying that system and replacing it with a new neo-Marxian collectivist system modeled vaguely on Fidelist and Maoist principles. I didn't want to live in such a society and I didn't want my children growing up in it. And so, without quite realizing it—I was relatively apolitical, had voted for JFK in 1960 and might have voted for Bobby had he lived—I became a counterrevolutionary.

The process at Berkeley, of course, commonly worked the other way. Middle-class students arrived on campus still instinctively clutching to them most of the ideas and values they'd grown up with. But after a couple of years of steady attacks on those ideas and values by the professors who taught them (“Middle-class morality,” they'd snort, as if having delivered themselves of the ultimate obscenity), they finally collapsed, leaving a vacuum into which rushed a whole new set of values, those espoused by their radicalized peers. (And it was sad to watch the bewilderment of those professors who had succeeded in breaking down the beliefs of their students when those students began to turn on them in the late 60s unwilling to make distinctions between the bourgeois professoriat and the bourgeois politicians who ran the country.)

For a few of us, however, perhaps because we were veterans, it all had the opposite effect. For we believed that revolution was not only possible but very likely inevitable.

And of course we lost on all fronts. The New Left won in the universities. They didn't *destroy* the universities, but they demonstrated to the nation just how bankrupt the universities were, and by so doing they forced them to commit public suicide.

And precisely the same thing happened to our government. The threat posed by the New Left led to most of the sordid excesses we list under the general and symbolic heading of Watergate.

Again, that isn't to say the New Left *caused* massive abuse of power. The potential for those abuses had been building steadily as government came increasingly to rule rather than represent, and as our rulers became increasingly cut off from their subjects—just as, if you will, professors became pontificators, administrators became tyrants, students became statistics, and universities became mills.

The New Left didn't cause Watergate. But it acted as catalyst. The dam broke, and we suddenly

realized that the same thing was true of our massive government that was true of our massive universities—structures without substance, run by men without centers.

And so, those of us who set out to defend our universities and our government found we had nothing to fight for.

Are we finished? I don't know. But it is now obvious that the illness at the center of our system—or perhaps a lack of center—is symptomatic of a much deeper sickness. The old values are still

there, just as immutable as ever. But somehow we seem to have forgotten how to apply them, as we once did, to life. And this more than anything else dramatizes the failure of higher education in America.

Perhaps we can still pull it out. If we can find a way to reestablish the proper relationships between students and teachers, between representatives and the people they represent, between ideas and action, philosophy and politics, values and life—then we might make it.

But it's getting late.

## ALTERNATIVES

Today, thoughtful Americans everywhere are expressing alarm over the accelerating erosion of national confidence in our historic freedoms and the subtle and ominous concentration of powers in the hands of those who, too often, have declared war on the traditional values espoused by our Founding Fathers.

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