

Speech Platform, Free, or Why Silence Is Golden

By TED MAHAR

Emerald Managing Editor

In front of the Student Union stands a concrete lectern called free speech platform. It replaces a wooden structure that was removed by the Physical Plant, and that had looked for months like it was going to rot into splinters. The reason for the platforms is free speech; whenever a student feels that he must speak out on any topic he can do so at the free speech platform. On the front of the wooden platform was the inscription "Every new idea at its beginning is precisely in a minority of one."

The free speech platform shows a tendency to go unnoticed. A speech was given at its dedication, a debate was held on the relative value of a new football stadium, another speech was given. That takes care of last year. This year a speech was given, ASUO President Neil Goldschmidt tried to stimulate interest in the platform by giving a speech, and a few candidates in the ASUO elections gave speeches.

Quite possibly the free speech platform will never be used again. The one and only reason is that it is simply not the nature of students to speak out individually. When they act, they act in groups. To be more precise, they do not act so much as they react. Toward the end of the 1950's teen-agers and young adults were tagged by some the "Silent Generation." That term, applied to students today, would not be inappropriate.

TO ONE who has followed events at the University of Oregon this label might seem to be misapplied. Students have on many occasions shown themselves to be both active and vociferous. For example, in the winter of 1961 nearly 300 students contributed to an advertisement in the Register-Guard to take issue with a statement by state representative Grace Peck. In the spring of the same year over 200 students actually picketed the administration building, Johnson Hall, to protest permanent secret student files in the office of student affairs. Moreover, it is a rare issue of the Emerald that contains no letters to the editor.

But the students who took exception to Rep. Peck in the advertisement were on pretty secure ground. She had been quoted in newspapers as having said, in effect, that students had no right to criticize a legislator. To say that her statement was in-

correct in a democracy was hardly going out on a limb.

The group that picketed Johnson Hall was quiet, orderly, and pessimistic. Few seriously expected that anything would be achieved. It was impossible to tell the demonstrators from curious bystanders. The entire demonstration took less than half an hour. Except for the issue involved, it could have been a flag-raising ceremony or a funeral.

LETTERS to the editor as a type of public forum are in a class by themselves. They are written in private for an audience of which the majority would not recognize the author personally.

Although it is possible for a person to make a name for himself on the campus by having several letters to the editor published, it remains a relatively anonymous way of speaking out in that the writer does not face his audience at the moment the point is made.

And if the writer elicits criticism, it is usually through other letters to the editor rather than face to face.

On the average, the Emerald receives three letters a day. In a year only about 400 people—less than four per cent of the University population—use even this comparatively safe outlet for public opinion. Students prefer to remain as inconspicuous as possible.

Students are reluctant to speak out or stand out for many reasons. One is that the person who stands out must pay a penalty. In the past speakers who have been extremist in one way or another have been punished. When the state organizer for the John Birch Society spoke in the Student Union ballroom two years ago he was all but hooted off the stage. When a religious fanatic tried to crown himself "King of the University of Oregon—for Good" he was pelted with tomatoes, eggs, and shaving cream.

Last fall during Homecoming three students defied tradition and staged a protest sit-in on the University Seal—about 25 paces from the free speech platform. They were harassed by onlookers and finally covered with mud thrown by those who had been in the "Kangaroo Court" enforcing Homecoming traditions. They had their sympathizers in the protest of Homecoming traditions, but none vocal enough to speak in their behalf or attempt to prevent the mud-throwing.

A student named Gayle Os-

burn who, as a dorm counselor, decided she did not like the practice of keeping secret files on students in dormitories made the files public and thereby lost her job. "For the first few days I was a heroine," she said later, "and then I was a bum. Even people who were my friends and knew me acted as if I were an anarchist."

Ken Wilson, former chairman of the IFC Tribunal, reported the same situation. Having struggled for a year for reform within the fraternity system, he felt he had failed when it became obvious that hazing had been so flagrant winter term. To draw attention to the problem, he resigned his chair.

"THE FIRST day I was a martyr," he said, "but the day after I was a traitor."

When the ASUO Senate voted winter term to demand that Emerald editor Ron Ruel resign because of the Emerald's coverage of the hazing incident, one senator, Rick Palmer, resigned in protest. The day after he resigned he was lauded. A week later those who remembered the incident at all felt Palmer had acted foolishly in resigning and passed off his resignation as an empty gesture.

A student who has drawn attention to himself by trying to save the Side has come to be regarded as simply "some kind of a nut."

There is also a popular opinion that writers of letters to the editor are cranks. Almost every student has at one time or another heard someone say, "I always read the editorial page to see what nuts are writing letters to the editor;" or "Letters to the editor are the funniest thing in the Emerald." Even the comparatively sane practice of writing letters to the editor has its drawbacks. The idea that only chronic malcontents write letters to the editor dies hard; in fact, it thrives.

THERE ARE other reasons for students' not wanting to speak out. Students see their role as listeners. Only rarely does a student speak out in class, and if he does it is almost always to ask a question. Some students live by a motto which says, "If you keep your mouth shut, he doesn't know who you are." They are glad the instructor does not know them, and they will do what they can to see that he never does. In a situation where a course grade is of supreme importance it is the height of folly to risk alienating the grader.

The University is a big place. Relatively few undergraduate classes have an enrollment under 50; many have more than 200. The dormitories cover the equivalent of several square blocks. And the University is getting bigger. In an institution being operated for the masses, the individual must give way. Each student knows he must adjust to the fact that he is but one small voice among many. A don't-rock-the-boat attitude seems to be the most utilitarian in a situation where events and the powers behind events are bigger than any individual. Any reaction against this well-oiled machine is generally silent rather than vocal.

When the student comes back from the crowded classroom, he does not come back to solitude. He either returns to his cubicle in the dorm or his room in the frat. There is almost no such thing as privacy in either place. Moreover, if one is to live symbiotically with one's roommate, concessions must be made. Again, it is easier to adapt than to quarrel.

STUDENTS must adapt themselves to much more than the size of the University. Almost all students find themselves questioning values they had taken for granted most of their lives. Some leave the religion they knew in their youth to

become a member of another church, an atheist, or an agnostic. Many see their parents, and, indeed, society in general, in a different light than they ever had before. Partially because it comes in the normal maturing process, and partly because of what they see and hear at the University, students find that their values are in transition. As a consequence, they are hesitant to speak out because they are not certain that what they feel is right.

College students of today are, it is said, more sophisticated than those of twenty or thirty years ago. For one thing, they are open-minded enough to see that in almost every situation there is room for argument. Most feel that it is wise to be silent until all the developments of an issue are brought to light. With this sophistication, too, comes the knowledge that overnight changes will likely never be brought about. Therefore, they see little sense in making an issue out of most things.

Another reason for remaining silent is that many students feel they are "just passing through." They will not be at the University forever. What problems they have with the University will be over when they graduate. The dissatisfaction of most students seems relatively minor in most cases, and they are certainly among the most temporary in the world. Like their values, the students themselves are in transition.

AND, AS most students realize, the world outside is no less massive than the University and no more private. If problems at the University of Oregon are ephemeral, those after graduation will not be. To most students the size and consequent problems of the University are 1) merely a fact of life, 2) not the University's fault, and 3) certainly less formidable than the size and problems of the graduate's world. At the University, as well as in the world outside, a person will put on a shell of reserve, check which way the majority is going, and slip quietly into the main stream. In such a world, many feel, speaking out not only gains nothing, but can actually involve risk.

Students fear criticism both in the present and in the future. Students are extremely sensitive to peer pressure and will do almost anything rather than risk the displeasure of their associates. Moreover, students who plan to enter teaching, politics, government work, or similar fields will often refrain from stepping out of line because they fear that it might somehow work itself into their records and thus jeopardize their career opportunities.

But if students decline to become involved and speak out, they are still responsive. If they do not initiate action, their reactions can be quite energetic. A good example of this phenomenon is athletics spirit. Many complain that student participation in organized yells is miserable. And perhaps it is. But their spontaneous reactions to what happens on the playing field is as enthusiastic as anyone could want.

THE SAME phenomenon is evident in the student body elections of last spring term. The petitioning deadline had to be extended because only 37 people petitioned for 15 offices. Finally 59 petitioned, but still left four offices uncontested. Yet, despite the small turnout of candidates, the number of people who voted was proportionately no smaller than it had been in the past. Once someone—anyone—had come forward, the students responded.

This year the voter turnout was smaller than last year's, yet more people made themselves candidates. It has been said that both reactions were the result

of a weak ASUO Senate this year. More people ran because they felt the Senate had to be improved, and fewer people voted because they felt such an inactive body was unworthy of their consideration. In any event, it will certainly be a record if half or more of the student body votes in any election.

On other occasions student reactions of events has been strong. After the religious fanatic had been humiliated on the steps of the Student Union the whole campus was shocked, and letters to the editor criticizing those who threw the eggs and tomatoes streamed in for two weeks after the event.

When Communist leader Gus Hall spoke at Hayward Field virtually the entire University turned out to hear him. It is true that Hall's speech had been promoted tremendously by patriotic extremists, and that students more or less hoped something violent would happen; yet at the same time they applauded enthusiastically when the man introducing Hall proclaimed that every person in the country is entitled to the right of free speech. Even if students do not use free speech themselves, they feel strongly that everyone else should have it.

So the free speech platform stands in front of the Student Union. The sun fades it, the rain wears it down, and the wind whistles hollowly past it. If it happens that someone ever does use it again, a student audience is sure to gather.

But that is not likely. The fact is, most students don't even notice that it's here.

Letters to the Editor

Emerald Editor:

I was most pleased to find that the minority took a firm stand and boldly stated that "society (the majority?) generally accords women a different role than men." Before this Great Truth was revealed to me, I must blushfully admit, I had been wont to consider whether the discipline rules were good, better, or worse for the students, whether—my face turns red even to admit this now—they were stunting the intellectual growth of those with "different roles," and whether they were even in conflict with the U.S. Constitution's amendment which I need not mention since the amendment conflicts with the minority's Truth and is thusly wrong and immoral and all sorts of unmentionable things. But now, since I have been enlightened—
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