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Can colleges make us civilized?

Almost everyone has some notion of changes he would like to make in the systems of education. There is a kind of public obsession with what formal education does to or for the people. We would not be putting the blame for so many of our social troubles on schools and colleges if we did not believe that these institutions, ideally, could civilize their students, establish the standards of everyday life and restore order to the society. But in the long run it is what we do that shapes our lives, not only what we know, and the business of civilization is much too great, too complex to be left in the hands of the schools.

Lying under the popular belief in the power of institutional education, one suspects, is blank ignorance of what civilized life is. For generations the people have simply accepted the entire order of life as though it were natural; they have used it as though it were a natural force, with no perception of how it is contrived. Ortega Y Gasset's formulation is apt: "The world is a civilized one, its inhabitant is not."

The nation's schools and universities are probably capable of doing a better job of revealing to the people the complex order of life, but, in their nature, they are not capable of setting the standards of life. And standards, after all, are the definers of everyday order; we cannot live together without them. They are the shapers of con-

duct, of behavior, and thus of events; and in this matter of standards, the people who control and move the institutions of life are simply more important than the people who only talk about them well. The great teachers of life are not, in fact, the people who make their living teaching.

Probably the most effective teachers, certainly the great shapers of everyday affairs, are the members of the professions—lawyers, doctors, engineers, scientists, economists, architects, even journalists in the many media. You need only consider how different life would be without the engineers of highways and automobiles to see how much power the professions really have.

It is widely believed that the orderly system of life in the nation is collapsing, and that few individuals have the power to effect any change. Behind this popular, and quite revolutionary, belief, I suspect is a failure of personal responsibility, a decay of standards in the professions.

Consider medicine. The infant mortality rate in the nation is higher than that in most western European nations. The certified cases of damage, even death, resulting from some prescription drugs are many. The drug industry is inventive, all right, and very profitable. American hospitals may be the most expensive in the world, but there is no reason to believe they are, therefore, the best. The people have been allowed to lose the concept of

health as the normal condition of life. The medical profession has the expertise, and the prestige, to correct many of these problems, and very conspicuous political power.

Lawyers are the fabricators of the entire system of contract—personal, corporate, governmental—that defies the limits of personal action and responsibility in the entire society. If judges are lazy or stupid, if access to the power and protection of law is closed to the old, the young, the poor, the accused, what are the lawyers doing?

Engineers and inventors of machines can build almost anything imaginable. In combination with architects they can build structures to contain any function, on order. But whose order? If you look at our cities, you feel that not everything imaginable should be built.

Scientists have gained enormous power of manipulation. What the physicists and chemists can do is scarcely credible. But we eat food that does not nourish, breathe air that kills and ruin the waters of the earth with the products of scientific discovery. Discovery may be important, but to the people the uses of what is discovered are more important. That is the whole point of standards.

Economists have grown into a powerful profession in a short time, and a very creative one. Look at the evidence: corporations swallowing one another in

wave upon wave; an international cult of the maximization of profits, a system of international exchange that concentrates power over money. To the average man it seems the creativity of the profession has gone into the service of inhuman distortions.

The professionals will always object that they do not make the great decisions of life, that these are made by the owners of the world. The architect argues that, if he does not build this monstrous building, the developer will hire someone else to build a worse one. The engineer insists that management in Detroit and in the oil companies determine the condition of cars, or that politicians determine the shape and location of highways. This is the common defense.

But these men have an overriding obligation to humanity. Not all jobs or all actions are decent; it is not fit for men to do everything imaginable. Nor is it enough for the professions to establish ethical, personal standards of performance within themselves; it is their proper role at times to become public, even political, to raise objections, to make public inquiry and to use public criticism to help the people understand the depth, complexity and fragility of this civilization.

That is the demand, the real standard of citizenship; it is at once simple and difficult: "No excuses are appropriate." Los Angeles Times-Washington Post News Service

Stanley Karnow

Vietnam War took careful planning

Most efforts to reconstruct the history of our entanglement in Vietnam argue that we oozed into that quagmire through a series of small moves inadvertently taken by a succession of reluctant presidents.

But now, working separately, two former Defense Department specialists have come up with a new set of provocative studies that challenge the comfortable thesis that we slid blindly into Vietnam.

One of these analysts, Daniel Ellsberg, is currently at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The other, Leslie H. Gelb, is at present with the Brookings Institution. They both presented their studies to an American Political Science Association meeting in September.

Though they differ in certain respects, both submit that our Vietnam involvement, far from having been accidental, resulted from deliberately calculated White House decisions made with a mixture of hope and doom.

Gelb contends that "those who led the United States did not stumble, fumble or carelessly step into the quicksand of Vietnam." On the contrary, he asserts, the American leaders "had a much better sense of where they were heading than they let the public know."

While no president viewed Vietnam as intrinsically important, Gelb says, each regarded it as "vital" because he interpreted disengagement to mean defeat that would damage America's prestige abroad and his own political position at home.

Accordingly, Gelb suggests, every president "persevered" in the belief that he could compel the communists to relent—though each escalated only to the degree he considered minimal. Thus the process of involvement was gradual, yet explained in verbiage that made Vietnam a "test case of U.S. credibility" for our enemies, our allies and especially ourselves.

The key affirmation in Gelb's study, then, is that while every administration was tragically aware of its inability to solve the Vietnam problem, each ex-

panded our commitment because that seemed to be the only way to avoid or postpone paying the costs of failure that our own spokesmen had rhetorically inflated.

President Eisenhower, for example, conceded that the communists could "possibly" have won 80 per cent of the votes in an election. Still, he saw "no real alternative" to hanging on in Vietnam lest the dominoes fall throughout southeast Asia.

Similarly, President Kennedy is reported to have been skeptical about our chances. But he also subscribed to the domino theory and therefore opposed a withdrawal that, he said, would "give the impression that the wave of the future in Southeast Asia was China and the communists."

Not only did Lyndon Johnson insist as well that there were "no alternatives" but, as Gelb suggests, he plunged deeper into Vietnam partly because he was untroubled by other world crises, partly because the war had become desperate, and partly because U.S. conventional forces had been built up sufficiently to permit intervention.

Moreover, the bureaucratic and political stakes in the conflict had grown and hardened to the point at which Vietnam was more "vital" than ever. Consequently, President Johnson's "peace overtures" were contrived more to placate American doves than to achieve a genuine settlement.

Reviewing the same period in his parallel study, Ellsberg rejects the arguments of Arthur Schlesinger Jr., Townsend Hoopes, Richard Goodwin and others that there are no villains in the Vietnam drama.

In Ellsberg's opinion, our increasing involvement stemmed from what he sardonically labels a "process of immaculate deception" by presidents, who knew, yet failed to inform the public where their strategies might steer the country.

As early as 1961, Ellsberg points out, the Kennedy Administration camouflaged General Maxwell Taylor's proposal to send U.S. combat troops to Vietnam,

thereby withholding from the public the seriousness of a situation that would later engulf us.

Ellsberg recalls from personal experience in the Defense Department in 1965 that, while President Johnson was publicly playing down the prospect of further escalation, the Pentagon was acting on White House orders to raise American troop levels in Vietnam.

Mr. Johnson justified his commitment by claiming that "this is a bad year to lose Vietnam to the communists." But, according to Ellsberg, every president since Harry Truman used that formula as his rationale.

Against this background, a crucial question at the moment is whether

President Nixon is behaving differently—or whether he is following in the same track.

Like the presidents who went before him, Mr. Nixon has made it plain in his speeches that he considers Vietnam to be "vital." In addition, he clearly stated as he invaded Cambodia last spring that he has no intention of accepting "defeat" in any form.

Therefore, though he has reduced the U.S. commitment numerically, the president has yet to demonstrate in words or deeds that he really aims to deviate from the pattern of his predecessors and disengage completely from what he himself enlarged into the Indochina War. Los Angeles Times-Washington Post News Service

