

THE COLLEGE CRISIS

A Statement by Dr. Robert D. Clark, President, San Jose State College



The following is a statement by President Robert D. Clark, presented to the Assembly Committee on Education in Los Angeles, December 18, 1967.

I appreciate your concern for our colleges and universities and your determination that law and order shall prevail on our campuses so that we may meet the educational responsibilities assigned to us by the people of the state. I appreciate further your determination to proceed through orderly inquiry, to assemble the facts, and to understand the problem of the college crisis.

Let me declare at the outset my own belief that we must maintain law and order. I fervently hope that we can contain our problem on our campuses and shall put forth every effort to do so, but if we cannot, I shall not hesitate to call for the assistance of law enforcement agencies. I have made that position clear to our students.

This is not the time, however, for breast beating and issuance of threats. Perhaps the most important service a college administrator can render is to help the Legislature and the public to achieve a better understanding of the complexity of the problem.

I should like to discuss two questions: 1) What lies back of the demonstrations, and 2) What can we do to contain them?

What lies back of the demonstrations? First and above all, the war in Vietnam. This nation has been engaged in unpopular wars before in its history, but surely never in a war less popular, or one in which the position of the government has been as ambiguous. A bitterly divided and uncertain Congress has not even declared war. And whether we like it or not, such a posture to the young is sheer hypocrisy. It is not merely the war, but the way we fight it. We, a people once horrified by the torpedoing of the innocent on the *Lusitania*, or by the aerial strafing of women and children in London, are now hardened to the use of napalm or


the bombing of military targets that may include civilian personnel. I am not arguing the merits of our policy in Vietnam—certainly I would not agree with the more radical on an immediate withdrawal of troops—I am asking that you try to understand the deep feelings of our students. The young are sometimes cruel and merciless—as I can testify to from experience with both my children and my students. More often the young are sensitive to the pain of others, quick to visualize horror, and to suffer with those who suffer. Yet they do not lack courage. Oddly enough most of them are not pacifists; most of them, I believe, would be quick to defend their country in time of need. It is this war, the method of fighting it, and our stubborn inability to extricate ourselves from it that evokes their passion.

Not merely the war and the method of fighting, but the draft. The young read. And their favorite writers on both the left and the right oppose the draft. Many of the conservative adults in our society do not even know that popular conservatives oppose the draft. But the young read the books. I am told that Ayn Rand, a novelist and social theorist, is the most popular of the conservative writers. A leader among the young conservatives on our campus said to me recently that he had read all of her books at least twice. Here is what Ayn Rand says in her book in defense of capitalism and entitled **Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal**: "of all the statist violations of individual rights in a mixed economy, the military draft is the worst. It is an abrogation of rights . . . The most immoral contradiction—in the chaos of today's anti-ideological groups—is that of the so-called 'conservatives' who posture as defenders of individual rights, particularly property rights, but who uphold and advocate the draft." Miss Rand favors a professional army. We ought not forget that the first plank in Mr. Barry Goldwater's 1964 platform was elimination of the draft. And in a recent newspaper column, Mr. Goldwater reiterated his opposition to the draft. I do not cite these opinions

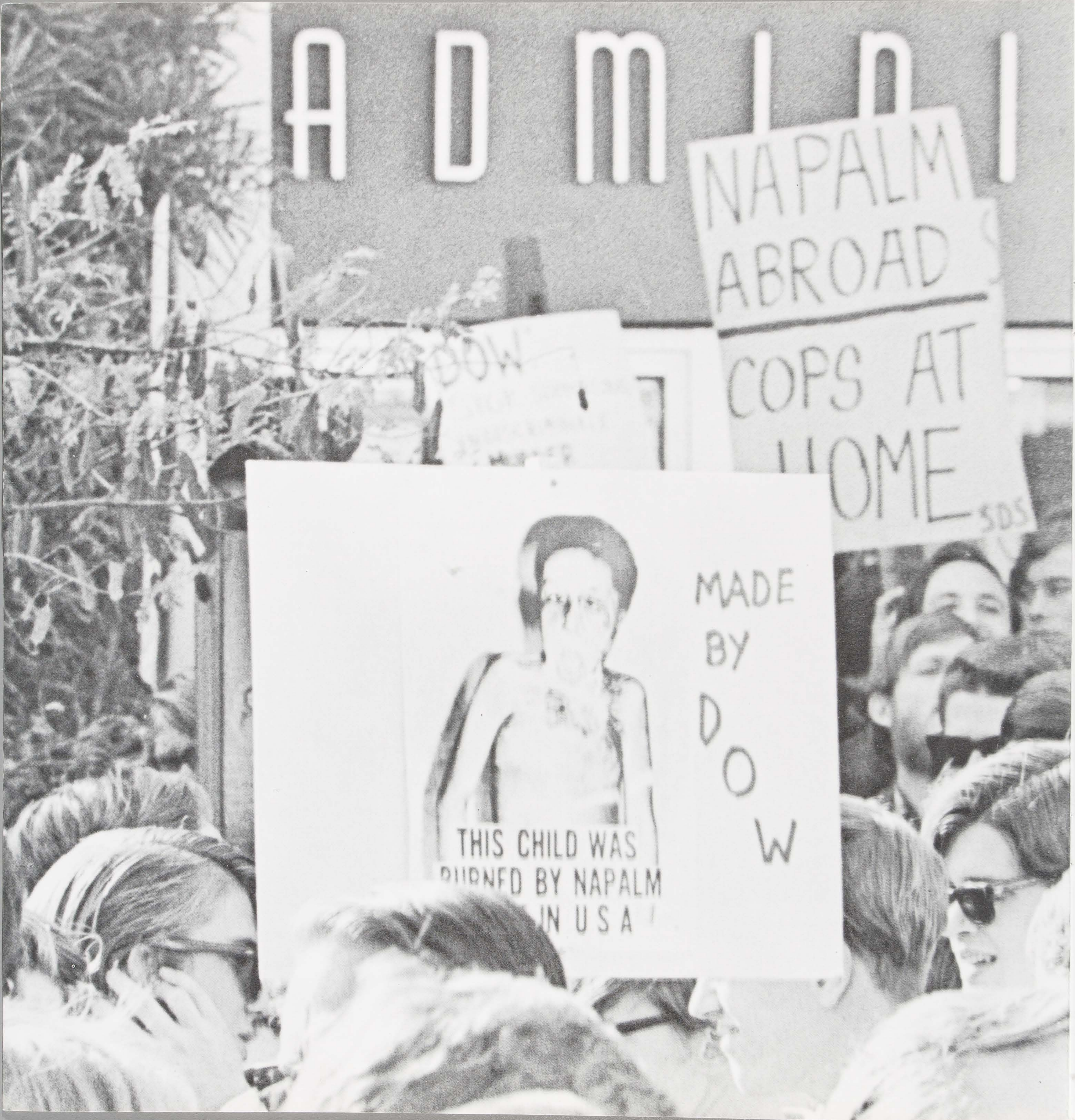
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to suggest that conservative students on our campus participated in the demonstrations—so far as I know they did not—but to show how widespread among the young is the feeling about it. And that feeling is immensely augmented by the recent, and in my opinion unjust, use of the draft to punish or threaten demonstrators.

In trying to explain the demonstrations I have spoken of the war and related issues, but that is only a precipitating cause. The rebellion at Berkeley occurred before the war was an issue. Let me suggest other factors which I shall treat much more briefly.

Our society is undergoing a cultural revolution, induced by many factors in our environment, and including affluence, the decline of absolutism and authority in church and home, extension of freedom through the courts, a much more widespread and sophisticated education. In consequence the generation "gap" is a great gulf. Young people who have never known want condemn affluence. "Business is for the birds" is not only a flippant remark but a judgment against an older society that seems to the young too devoted to material values, enslaved by routine and crass ambition.

Reared in the age of the atom and hydrogen bomb, this generation has been attracted to a popularized existentialist philosophy. It is the "now" generation. The past does not matter, there is no future. There is only confrontation, "now." So action becomes more important than reason. And to many of them argument is hypocritical. The silent witness of the picket sign, the choral shouting of "Hell no, we won't go," are ludicrous unless the marchers and shouters support their words with action that costs them personal danger or sacrifice. Only thus, they believe, can they arouse the people to the seriousness of the problem.

There is at the heart of the movement a small corps of anarchists who are so disaffected with

the establishment that they are determined to disrupt and destroy.

There is a much larger corps of activists (still a small percentage of the student body), ready and willing to participate in demonstrations and coercion if the provocation is sufficient—particularly if some alleged injustice threatens or impinges upon their rights. I can illustrate this from our campus. Some 50 or 60 students planned the demonstration against Dow Chemical Company. Reports of the actual sequence of events differ and the facts are not yet untangled. But in some order these events occurred: The crowd was unruly, there were threats of violence, a glass door was broken, police who were on standby at our request moved in with tear gas. That night there were 1200 students at the rally to plan the next day's demonstration.

The students possess tactics learned from the labor movement in the 'thirties and adapted to the student rights movement in Mississippi: picketing, demonstrations, sit-ins, etc. We should remember that the violent demonstrations of that movement were brought to a level of tolerance and legitimacy not simply by the imposition of outside police force—although that was necessary to bring order into particular strikes—but by these developments: First, recognition of the rights of the labor movement; the law guaranteed them the right to organize and establish appropriate procedures; the Supreme Court declared picketing to be a form of free speech. Second, labor put its house into order and assumed much of the responsibility for orderly pursuit of its rights. Third, and perhaps most important, the government engaged in a massive effort to provide employment, or unemployment and old-age benefits. I am not here defending the techniques, for some of the machinery now requires drastic overhaul, but rather I am defending the principle. The government recognized that the depression (like the war in our day) was poisoning the whole social system and it acted to provide an antidote.



Now let me turn to the question of what we can do.

We have taken one of the most important steps: Governor Reagan, Speaker Unruh, and the Board of Trustees, Chancellor Dumke, and many other responsible public officials and educators have acknowledged the right of students to free speech, the right to dissent, the right to express their convictions through peaceful demonstration. That is a first step of immeasurable importance both to higher education and to the democratic processes on which our government rests.

Second, we have taken another equally important position: That we will not permit the disruption or suspension of the college programs through acts of violence or coercion. I have made that position clear on our campus, and the overwhelming majority of faculty and students concur. Within these broad boundaries, however, there are serious problems of procedure, and the passions of the people would force us to abrogate the first, the willful action of a few students to surrender the second.

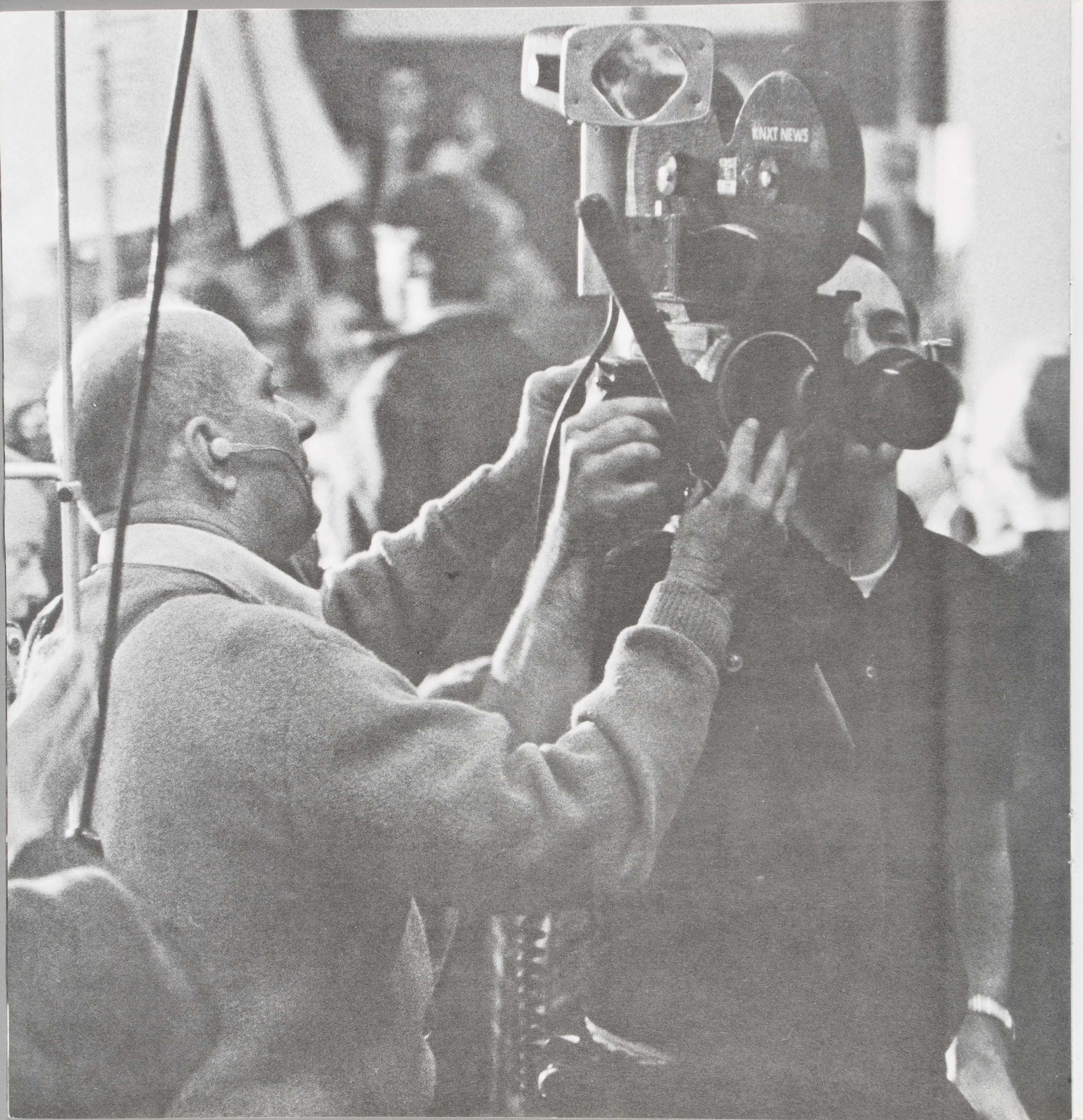
So, in the third place, we must understand that these disruptions will continue until this nation can redress the grievances of an undeclared war and of unrealized civil rights, and that however irritating the disruptions may be we must deal with them through due process. We cannot stop murder by passing a law. And we no longer deal with a murderer by turning him over to the mob and the hanging tree. The courts may sometimes falter, but they are the finest bulwarks of our freedom. They require us to substitute reason for passion. When disruptions occur on our campuses, the public often clamors for immediate and dramatic action. I cite an example: At the Dow demonstration a chair was thrown through a glass door. The press carried the picture of an angry student holding the chair in a defiant gesture. The public demanded that I suspend him at once, such action being "necessary to improve the image of the college." Nothing would more surely destroy

the proper image of the college as a place where, if anywhere in our society, reason ought to prevail.

I was angry enough to be tempted. But the police, after a careful study of the films over a ten-day period, arrested another boy for throwing the chair. Had I acted precipitantly I would have suspended the wrong student, or would have suspended him for an act he apparently did not commit.

I can think of no surer way to arouse the sense of injustice in large numbers of students, no surer way to augment greatly the number of protestors than to act hastily and unjustly. If we respond to the passionate demands of the public by arbitrary action, we increase the dimensions of the student protest; and the larger or more frequent the protest, the greater the public passion. It is time for all of us to "cool it."

In the fourth place, we must all understand that law and order are not primarily or even largely a matter of police action. Law and order prevail in a society, and that includes a college campus, because the citizens or students and faculty want and insist upon law and order. We had a dramatic illustration of that on our campus. On the second day of the Dow interviews, with a thousand new recruits to the protestors, the situation was much more volatile. We had a demonstration but we did not have violence, we did not call the police, and all of the interviews were held. The students, I am convinced, did not want violence. A dozen of them who were strongly sympathetic with or numbered among the protestors, moved about the crowd to keep the discussion going, the violence down. They arranged for me to speak and provided what they called "safe conduct" for me into the midst of the crowd. I went willingly, for these are my students, and I love them, even those who were angry with me, for I understood their earnestness and the depth of their convictions. For nearly two hours I stood on a planter box talking with and listening to them and their leaders. Some of them



were not very kind, or charitable, or respectful. Much more important, most of them were honest and responsible, and just, and of such stuff are law and order built by a society for itself.


In the next place, the colleges, not only in this system but everywhere in this country, are operating under outworn and inadequate codes of student rights and conduct. A year and a half ago I became aware of how inadequate our code was. I immediately appointed a committee of students and faculty which issued a report last fall. I referred the recommendations to the Student Council and the Academic Council. Legislative bodies, whether in education or in government, are notoriously but properly deliberate. Despite my pleadings we began the fall term without a revised code. There are plenty of models. In the past three or four years, the AAUP, the National Students Association, the National Association of Governing Boards (that is, trustees or regents) and representatives from other organizations, have developed a statement of rights with general directions on the code of conduct. The University of California Law Review in 1966 devoted most of one issue to the problem. Following our difficulties this fall, I appointed a special committee to take up the work of the two councils and move forward immediately to the drafting of an interim code which will be in effect until the councils have concluded their deliberations. I issued that code in December. It defines much more clearly both students' rights and limitations on their conduct. It will help to deal with our problems. But we shall still have creaks and groans in our judicial machinery that only time and experience can remove or reduce. And in the meantime we shall make mistakes. Academic administrators must be given latitude to correct them. Students in these days are not patient about mistakes. They issue demands. Some of the demands will be unreasonable, intended only to test or undermine an administration. In such instances we must not give way merely to maintain peace and quiet, even

though the press and the public are much less excited by peace and quiet than they are by trouble. But inevitably some demands of students will be just. And when they are, we ought not be forced by the public's image of an authority figure into peremptory rejection of the demands simply because they are demands not very politely stated by the upstart young. It ought not be hard for a college president to say he is wrong when he is. In the American idiom crow is not a very delectable dish, and I don't like to eat it. But I can. And the Legislature can render us a great service by helping the public to understand that we must have the latitude to make the necessary decisions and that final judgment on our administration will be measured by effectiveness and justice, not by dramatic posturing.

In more particular and immediate action, the Legislature can assist us by providing desperately needed staff. In our college of 23,000 students I have less administrative staff than many institutions a half or a fourth our size. While we take care of the most pressing problems, mountains of regular and routine work pile up on our desks. Our dean of students' office, unusually successful through the years in treating student problems through counseling services, has no staff to deal with the discipline problem of today's student who knows his rights and insists upon legal adherence to them. The public wants to know what is going on in our colleges, demands to know. Representatives of news media come in great numbers, and we are not staffed to provide the simple informational services we should provide regularly, to say nothing of times of crises. We have three trained security officers. Although we would not desire to take over the police functions of the community, if the staff were augmented we might more easily maintain order without resort to police force. In these particulars immediate and specific assistance can be given the college.

Perhaps the most important thing I can say to you, the most important problem I can discuss, is that





the presidents of the state colleges are seriously limited in their ability to meet a crisis. In many ways we are not managers but clerks. We are so hedged about by bureaucratic procedures that we cannot act with proper dispatch and effectiveness. We have no contingency fund. Last fall I had, with the Black Students, the most serious crisis of my educational experience. Their demands for redress of grievances were just. I desperately needed a man to serve them and the college and appointed an ombudsman. The action, widely applauded in the press across the country, was possible only because we were unable to fill all of our instructional positions. I made the ombudsman an assistant professor and was criticized by one public official for using funds in a way the Legislature had not prescribed. I was astonished. We have had an extraordinarily creative and productive society, largely through the invention of what we call the "free enterprise" system, that is, local management and the freedom to manage. We could learn much from business. But in this state we suppress creative management of the colleges. By some strange perversion of our goals and beliefs we seem to prefer the Soviet system of bureaucratized management by officials and clerks far removed from the scene of action. The Legislature can do us a great service by giving us freedom to act within appropriate guidelines.

Finally, we should help the public to understand that the colleges are engaged in education, not in training. I suppose it is inevitable that training will occupy some part of our curriculum, but if we fail in our primary task, we have failed in our responsibility. Business and industry can do a better job of training than we can. We must provide an environment that will prompt students to deal in concepts, to achieve a critical and creative mastery of their discipline, and to think critically and creatively about the most important issues of our day. In our recent crisis I was appalled to find that the public thinks of a class as a series of exercises programmed for a computer-professor, and divid-

ed off into segments of fifty minutes each. Although I do not approve a concerted effort to convert the classroom into an agency to propagandize against the war, I do not see how the vital classroom, particularly in the humanities and social sciences, can avoid reference to the most vital and pressing issues of the day. Some of my most meaningful experiences as a student and as a teacher resulted from such digressions. Nearly every college graduate will attest to the same conclusion. A university, said the great educator, John Henry Cardinal Newman, "is a place where inquiry is pushed forward . . . and error exposed, by the collision of mind with mind, and knowledge with knowledge." Some of our students gained that insight into the purpose of the university (or college) in our recent time of troubles, and chief among them, I would guess, were those who did not favor violence or coercion but who were required by events to think for themselves and answer "why not?" They learned something about a democratic society and the rights of individuals that they might not have learned in the classrooms.

In conclusion, let me say that I am grateful to and proud of the people of San Jose and this state for the support they have given me. They have sometimes been impatient, irritated, angry, and so would I in their stead. They have sometimes urged me to do what I ought not to do, but they have stood by me when the decision was taken. It may not always be so. I may fail their trust, or my profound belief in students and faculty and in the workings of justice and due process may in the short run prove inadequate. If so, I shall yield the responsibilities to some one less sensitive to student and faculty rights, less concerned with the finer workings of a democratic society. I do not believe that will be necessary. I believe that students and faculty will assert their responsibilities and that as a college we shall be able to contain, not solve, our problems until the larger society has cleansed its own house.

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