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On Dissent, Violence, and the Intellectual

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If I have properly assessed the meaning of Dean Forrester's comments, he stated that: (1) America is now in the midst of an attempted revolution, an attempt to create a new society by force and violence; (2) war, race relations, poverty, environment, and the other festers in our society, while great problems, are not the real causes of the discontent; (3) the attempted revolution is the product of a generation of university teaching and writing which has created the intellectual atmosphere and the state of mind that sustain the conflict.

I respectfully dissent while recognizing at the same time the soundness of his proposition that "all men and women of good will who are engaged in the opinion-making professions should stress the affirmative along with the negative in the day-to-day appraisals of our society and that we should endeavor personally to maintain and to strengthen the good things which we have accomplished while giving our very best efforts to correcting the negative conditions." The writings of a few people predicting the end of the kind of free society we now have do not prove that the students for the last generation have not been subjected to all kinds of opinions, both good and bad, about conditions in our society, which we believe to be the best yet devised by mankind, however distressing some of our conditions may be.

There can be no doubt that young people today have a much stronger sense of social consciousness than any I have known in my lifetime. They perceive and want to do something about the conditions they consider to be unjust, but which are legally authorized or allowed to exist. They also want to do something about what they consider to be outright violations of the law on the part of the governors and those most influential in shaping the policies and procedures related to law in action, as distinguished from law books. Many are impatient and want to remedy overnight undesirable world and social conditions like poverty and water and air pollution—conditions that have come about over a long period of time through many causes. It is not only clear that the blame for such conditions cannot be allocated to any particular segment of society, but who can say that the dissenters in our free society today

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have not and will not be a wholesome influence in solving the problems in the world around us?

In the first place, I do not believe that isolated instances at a few universities establish the existence of an attempted revolution. Of course there are extremists in the land—those who wish to disrupt by violence—and this is natural in a situation where expectations have been created that cannot be quickly fulfilled. But I think that while violence and disrespect for law has been materially increased, it can be controlled if greater efforts are made to solve our problems.

The vast majority of young people do not wish to be disruptive so long as their lawful right to dissent in various ways is not repressed. But all too often the approach to dissent has been repressive, and this has indeed been productive of violence and disrespect. History has demonstrated that the repression of a free man's right to dissent—a right that is basic to individual human dignity—will inevitably cause violence. In fact, disrespect for law on the part of the governors, including the law created by the United States Supreme Court, has been productive of much of the violence today.

The realization on the part of the young, the impoverished, and the minority groups in our society that all is not as it should be is a product to a large extent of action by Congress and the Supreme Court—action that was taken not because of student uprisings but because of efforts of the culturally and educationally disadvantaged groups in our society. The civil rights movement was supported but not caused by the young and the intellectuals. It is true, however, that the words and thoughts of the journalists in discussing the failures to meet our goals have contributed to a sense of frustration on the part of many.

Notwithstanding the unfortunate and serious disturbances and riots at some of our universities and in some of our cities, I believe that the concern that has been generated for the well-being of people of all races everywhere has been more beneficial than harmful; that we will be able better to build on the great foundation we already have for a better world because of it; and that this nation can so regulate human affairs as to harness our scientific genius for the benefit rather than destruction of our free society.