

THE NEW LEFT TODAY--OR TWO YEARS OF THE "NEW ERA"
by Jim Williams

What are the key problems facing the Left in this country at the moment? I think that they can be summarized in this way:

THE CRISIS IN FOREIGN POLICY--the increasing danger of a nuclear war, the problems posed by extension and deepening "brush-fire" wars, and the extreme adventuristic response of the Johnson administration to these developments, combined with the lack of a response from the "tolerated counter-establishment."

THE DOMESTIC ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL CRISIS--The administration is very hard pressed to maintain even the current domestic stagnant status quo, and knows that such things as further tax cuts will not continue to provide equilibrium. There is a general reluctance to cope with economic problems on a large scale, as evidenced by the Appalachian program, and Johnson's labor message which failed to make positive contribution to the minimum wage and the 35 hour week, which the AFL-CIO consider to be absolutely necessary to maintain present income and employment levels. There are further complications in terms of foreign trade and the gold flow as related to the upsurge in overseas military spending.

There is probably no domestic issue where Johnson has been more conservative, even to the point of risking great disaffection amongst the labor movement, as in terms of broad economic measures to ease unemployment and to cope--in some way--with the problem of automation.

Certainly public needs are increasing at an enormous rate, most markedly in the field of urban development and education. At the same time, corporate profits are skyrocketing--generally 10 to 20% higher than last year at this time.

Faced with these growing contradictions, rising unemployment and rising profits, the Johnson responses have been limited. Many short-range programs, War on Poverty, etc. are in effect, but without a broader overall approach, the economy is approaching a state of crisis.

The political situation is also a cause for concern--particularly in view of the growing strength of the Ultra-Right at the local level. It is likely that liberal congressional gains may be wiped out at the 1966 elections, by a reorganized, learned-lessons Right. It seems also that the Right will possibly make gains in local elections this year--city councils, school boards, etc.

As we have previously noted, the net effect of the 1964 elections was to strengthen the Ultra-Right--most notably in certain regions and certain social strata. It is from this expanded cadre that they will draw sufficient strength to make gains over the next two series of elections.

The Right will continue to profit from certain national trends, particularly Johnson's rightward shift in Foreign Policy to the extent that it is hard to distinguish from Goldwater's. (Even ADA's Arthur Schlesinger distinguished himself from Johnson at the Teach-In!) To some extent, the Right will benefit from the tightening economic situation--and, perhaps, the civil rights movement's increased militancy.

To what extent all this increased Rightist activity will tend to shift the spectrum rightward again, is hard to say. What we shall say is this: extreme conservatism and reaction is now "respectable", it is growing, it is organizing at the grass roots level and is uncannily accurate in judging the discontents of significant elements of the population--and, it is power-oriented.

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The strength of the Ultra-Right is also contingent on one other factor: the inability of the Left to put forward a viable program, combined with a sense of political power organization, and the inability and (perhaps) unwillingness of the left to relate to the needs and demands of the whole society, middle-class, labor, liberals as well as Negroes and the poor.

To what extent does the Left bother to deal with the problems of the quality of life for most Americans? (Urban centers, universities, etc.) To what extent are we talking about economic solutions to problems of full employment?

In short, the essential problem we face right now is the general inadequacy of the Left response.

In the near past, the response of the Left to these challenges has been one of militant moral posturing, that of pressure politics, the picket line, the leaflet, the petition. While these serve(d) certain useful functions in terms of retaining a level of activity in the left community, their actual political effect has left something to be desired. We have learned that militancy without power or program is at best a gesture and at worst a criminal waste of vital resources.

As of yet, no new program has come forth to replace these outmoded approaches on the national level. There have been a number of local movements developed which, in varying degrees, represent efforts to break from this older pattern. Some, such as Massachusetts PAX and Otto Feinstein's efforts, like the New York Reform Democrats and California Democratic Clubs, are progressive responses and embryonic examples of the possibilities afforded by the middle-classes. Others, such as the Mississippi Freedom Democrats and the Illinois Freedom Democrats are civil rights equivalents of the same pressure-oriented strategies.

As yet, these have not developed the same direct power orientation as the advanced Texas Democratic Coalition, which has united all of these elements not only in a pressuring function but as a movement designed to take power in a short period of time.

All of these still have inadequacies. Some, like TDC, need to be broadened further, others, like Mass PAX, still need to cope with non-middle-class problems in a more serious fashion--while others need to grasp the essential differences between "moral" and "politics"--pressure and power.

We have said a number of times that there is a basic convergence of issues on the left which will lead to the development of a coalition of Negro, labor, liberal forces that will deal with the broader problems of our society--the quality of life. We have said also that such a coalition is not necessarily a conscious coalition--indeed some parts of the coalition would be horrified to think of themselves as a part of this spectrum. But, coalitions are not built on "like" or "dislike", good guys or bad guys--they are built on absolute political necessity, which is the only firm basis for a meaningful political movement. Civil Rights and Poor leaders may scream "sell out" at the labor movement until they are hoarse. Liberals and laborites may likewise holler "red" and "disrupter" at the former. This makes for no alteration of the basic facts, the objective conditions which more and more drive them into the same political corner.

Questions which we as students must face is how this alliance can be concretized in meaningful fashion? How can this coalition be enriched? There is no other question before us.

Part of our role is easily seen. It is the organization of American students around a program which meets their needs. Such a program would deal with the problem of

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equality of education and the availability of education. It would deal with the economics of the working student, with the whole concept of a free college education, with democratic concepts and control by students and faculty, and--the major solution of paying students for the useful work of going to school. Certainly, a number of secondary issues do spring forth after this basic statement, but the point we wish to make is that we should approach the problem of organizing in the student community exactly the same way as we approach the problem of organizing in the ghetto. The campus programs we develop should flow from the needs of the students and not based what we would like them to think they need.

In December, we pointed out that the rapid growth of the student community meant that within the next ten years, students would become a minority group rivaling the black movement and the Negroes in size. We should not let this potential escape us--we must rest assured that the Ultra-Right and the corporate establishment will not. More than ever, the actual organization of masses of students around a progressive program becomes extremely vital.

Again, we must, as organizers of students and poor and middle-class constituencies, think of the content of our programs as they relate to the needs of the developing coalition. We believe, that at the point where the lines of convergence cross, there is one, and only one, basic solution for society's ills, and some people call that solution socialism. The role of the New Left (and our role within the New Left) within the coalition is to make that fact abundantly clear. The only decent America is a socialist America.

We must realize that a democratic society is one where people, the whole people, control the resources of society and direct its commanding heights, that "Guns or Butter" is the basic democratic issue at stake.

If, when we speak of our desire for a new society, we are serious--and this is not casually put--we must think seriously in terms of power, and nothing else. We must not let ourselves be diverted by anything--middle-class hang-ups, or whatever.

This means that we must always be looking for the motive forces in society. Which sections are in motion, around what issues, and how can the left capitalize on this? How does this motion relate to power?

We must visualize ourselves as one section of this movement, belonging to our own student base, but relevant to the whole thrust at every point.

This will force us to face certain questions at every point, if we accept this. At times it will be on major issues--such as our stance in a given political campaign. At other times it will be over insignificant and minor things. But, if we see power the power to make a new society, as our goal, these problems come with ready-made solutions.

We don't know if it has occurred to many of you, but we really don't have too much time. We don't consider ourselves as gazers of crystal balls--but we are pessimistic about the ability of this society to continue as is for more than 10 or 15 years.

There are those "radicals" whose economic analysis tell us that capitalism is so powerful that it is here to stay, now and forever, amen. They say that capitalism can meet any demand, co-opt any group.

We do not believe this. We will never believe this as long as the whole world is rejecting capitalism at an enormous rate. Until the post-war period, capitalism was:

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to export most of its domestic problems. This process was called imperialism. The colonial revolution is putting a stop to this. Thus, increasingly, the problems of the system are internalized. A simple look at the map will tell you that capitalism as a world system, is doomed. Thus, we are faced with an ironic paraphrase of an older argument--can capitalism exist in one country?

What we mean by all this, is that we consider time an important factor--that this is crucial in determining strategy.

With this in mind, we must brace ourselves for the challenge--the challenge to become relevant to the American scene, to get to know the American people and their needs, to take our heads out of the sands of a search for a surrogate proletariat, and face the needs of the left in a realistic fashion.

We must learn to work where we are most effective.

We must learn to evaluate society, to look at it more closely and more carefully than ever before, to be quicker to discard old conceptions and to adopt new ones based on current realities. To abandon reflexes to outmoded situations.

We must learn to play for keeps. We must learn to play to win. The Old Left is not in the dustbin of history for these failures. If we fail there will not even be a dustbin left for us.