

Editorials

Commentary

The facts of death--little hope for a future

All of you know that in the last couple of years there has been student unrest breaking at times into violence in many parts of the world: in England, Germany, Italy, Spain, Mexico and needless to say, in many parts of this country. There has been a great deal of discussion as to what it all means. Perfectly clearly it means something different in Mexico from what it does in France, and something different in France from what it does in Tokyo, and something dif-

defined its source. I think I understand the reasons for their uneasiness even better than they do. What is more, I share their uneasiness.

What's bothering those students? Some of them tell you it's the Vietnam war. I think the Vietnam war is the most shameful episode in the whole of American history.

THE CONCEPT of war crimes is an American invention. We've committed many war crimes in Vietnam; but I'll tell you

willingness to die, beyond our willingness to kill. In effect they've been saying, you can kill us, but you'll have to kill a lot of us, you may have to kill all of us. And thank heavens, we are not yet ready to do that.

Yet we have come a long way -- far enough to sicken many Americans, far enough even to sicken our fighting men. Far enough so that our national symbols have gone sour.

WE BEGAN as a people struggling for freedom against oppression. Now we are supporting real or thinly-disguised military dictatorships all over the world, helping them to control and repress peoples all over the world, helping them to control and repress peoples struggling for their freedom.

But that Vietnam war, shameful and terrible as it is, seems to me only an immediate incident in a much larger and more stubborn situation.

Part of my trouble with students is that almost all the students I teach were born since World War II. Just after World War II, a series of new and abnormal procedures came into American life. We regarded them at the time as temporary aberrations. We thought we would get back to normal American life some day.

BUT THOSE procedures have stayed with us now for more than 20 years, and those students of mine have never known anything else. They think those things are normal. They think we've always had a Pentagon, that we have always had a big army, and that we have always had a draft. But those are all new things in American life; and I think that they are incompatible with what America meant before.

How many of you realize that just before World War II the entire American army including the Air Force numbered 139,000 men? Then World War II started, but we weren't yet in it; and seeing that there was great trouble in the world, we doubled this army to 268,000 men.

Then in World War II it got to be 8 million. And then World War II came to an end, and we prepared to go back to a peacetime army somewhat as the American army had always been before.

And indeed in 1950 -- you think about 1950, our international commitments, the Cold War, the Truman Doctrine, and all the rest of it -- in 1950 we got down to 600,000 men.

NOW WE have 3.5 million men under arms; about 600,000 in Vietnam, about 300,000 in "support areas" elsewhere in the Pacific about 250,000 in Germany. And there are a lot at home. Some months ago we were told that 300,000 National Guardsmen and 200,000 reservists had been specially trained for riot duty in the cities.

I say the Vietnam war is just an immediate incident, because so long as we keep that big army, it will always find things to do. If the Vietnam war stopped tomorrow with that big military establishment, the chances are that we would be in another such adventure abroad or at home before you knew it.

As for the draft: Don't reform the draft -- get rid of it.

A peacetime draft is the most un-American thing I know. All the time I was growing up I was told about oppressive Central European countries and Russia, where young men were forced into the army; and I was told what they did about it.

THEY CHOPPED off a finger, or shot off a couple of toes; or better still, if they could manage it, they came to this country. And we understood that, and sympathized, and were glad to welcome them.

Now by present estimates four to six thousand Americans of draft age have left this country for Canada, another two or three thousand have gone to Europe, and it looks as though many more are preparing to emigrate.

A few months ago I received a letter from the Harvard "Alumni Bulletin" posing a series of questions that students might ask a professor involving what to do about the draft. I was asked to write what I would tell those students.

All I had to say to those students was this: If any of them had decided to evade the draft and asked my help, I would help him in any way I could. I would feel as I suppose members of the underground railway felt in pre-Civil War days, helping runaway slaves to get to Canada. It wasn't altogether a popular position then; but what do you think of it now?

AND INDEED there are choices in getting rid of the draft. I think that when we get rid of the draft, we must also cut back the size of the armed forces. It seems to me that in peacetime a total of one million men is surely enough; if there is an argument for American military forces of more than one million mean in peacetime, I should like to hear that argument debate.

But there is something ever so much bigger and more important than the draft. The bigger thing, of course, is what ex-President Eisenhower warned us of, calling it the military-industrial complex.

I am sad to say that we must begin to think of it now as the military-industrial-labor union complex. What happened under the plea of the Cold War was not alone that we built up the first big peacetime army in our history, but we institutionalized it. We built, I suppose, the biggest government building in our

history to run it, and we institutionalized it.

I DON'T think we can live with the present military establishment and its \$80-100 billion a year budget, and keep America anything like we have known it in the past. It is corrupting the life of the whole country. It is buying up everything in sight: industries, banks, investors, universities; and lately it seems also to have bought up the labor unions.

The Defense department is always broke; but some of the things they do with that \$80 billion a year would make Buck Rogers envious. For example the Rocky Mountain Arsenal on the outskirts of Denver was manufacturing a deadly nerve poison on such a scale that there was a problem of waste disposal.

Nothing daunted, they dug a tunnel two miles deep under Denver, into which they have injected so much poisoned water that beginning a couple of years ago Denver began to experience a series of earth tremors of increasingly severity. Now there is a grave fear of a major earthquake. An interesting debate is in progress as to whether Denver will be safer if that lake of poisoned water is removed or left in place.

Perhaps you have read also of those 6000 sheep that suddenly died in Skull Valley, Utah, killed by another nerve poison -- a strange and, I believe, still unexplained accident, since the nearest testing seems to have been 30 miles away.

AS FOR Vietnam, the expenditure of fire power has been frightening. Some of you may still remember Khe Sanh, a hamlet just south of the demilitarized zone, where a force of U.S. Marines was beleaguered for a time.

During that period we dropped on the perimeter of Khe Sanh more explosives than fell on Japan throughout World War II, and more than fell on the whole of Europe during the years 1942 and 1943.

One of the officers there was quoted as having said afterward, "It looks like the

world caught smallpox and died."

The only point of government is to safeguard and foster life. Our government has become preoccupied with death, with the business of killing and being killed, so-called defense now absorbs 60 per cent of the national budget, and about 12 per cent of the Gross National Product.

A lively debate is beginning again on whether or not we should deploy antiballistic missiles, the ABM. I don't have to talk about them, everyone else here is doing that. But an ABM is a nuclear weapon. It takes a nuclear weapon to stop a nuclear weapon. And our concern must be with the whole issue of nuclear weapons.

There is an entire semantics ready to deal with the sort of thing I am about to say. It involves such phrases as "those are the facts of life." No -- these are the facts of death.

We are told that the United States and Russia between them have by now stockpiles in nuclear weapons approximately the explosive power of 15 tons of TNT for every man, woman and child on earth. And now it is suggested that we must make more. All very regrettable, of course; but those are "the facts of life."

WE REALLY would like to disarm; but our new Secretary of Defense has made the ingenious proposal that one must be practical. Now is the time to greatly increase our nuclear armaments so that we can disarm from a position of strength.

I think all of you know there is no adequate defense against massive nuclear attack. It is both easier and cheaper to circumvent any known nuclear defense system than to provide it. It's all pretty crazy.

At the very moment we talk of deploying ABM's, we are also building the MIRV, the weapon to circumvent ABM's.

So far as I know, with everything working as well as can be hoped and foreseeable precautions taken, the most conservative

estimates of Americans killed in a major nuclear attack run to about 50 million.

We have become callous to gruesome statistics, and this seems at first to be only another gruesome statistic. You think, Bang!--and next morning, if you're still there, you read in the newspapers that 50 million people were killed.

HOW REAL is the threat of full scale nuclear war? I have my own very inexperienced, but realizing how little I know and fearful that I may be a little paranoid on this subject, I take every opportunity to ask reputed experts.

I asked that question of a very distinguished professor of government at Harvard about a month ago. I asked him what sort of odds he would lay on the possibility of full-scale nuclear war within the foreseeable future.

"Oh," he said comfortably, "I think I can give you a pretty good answer to that question. I estimate the probability of full-scale nuclear war provided that the situation remains about as it is now, at two per cent per year."

Anybody can do the simple calculation that shows that two per cent per year means that the chance of having that full-scale nuclear war by 1990 is about one in three, and by 2000 it is about 50-50.

I think I know what is bothering the students. I think that what we are up against is a generation that is by no means sure that it has a future.

ARE WE to have a chance to live? We don't ask for prosperity or security only for a reasonable chance to live, to work out our destiny in peace and decency. Not to go down in history as the apocalyptic generation.

That is the problem. Unless we can be surer than we now are that this generation has a future, nothing else matters. It's not good enough to give it tender loving care, to supply it with breakfast foods, to buy it expensive education. Those things don't mean anything unless this generation has a future. And we're not sure that it does.

Dr. George Wald is a Nobel Prize winner for research in biological sciences. On March 4 during a national day of "research halt," he spoke extemporaneously to scientists concerned with the political misuses of scientific advancement. His speech is reprinted here by permission of the Boston Globe.

ferent in Tokyo from what it does in this country.

Yet unless we are to assume that students have gone crazy all over the world, or that they have just decided that it's the thing to do, there must be some common meaning.

I DON'T need to go so far afield to look for that meaning. I am a teacher, and at Harvard, I have a class of 350 students -- men and women -- most of them freshmen and sophomores. Over these past few years I have felt increasingly that something is terribly wrong -- and this year ever so much more than last. Something has gone sour, in teaching and in learning. It's almost as though there were a widespread feeling that education has become irrelevant.

A lecture is much more of a dialogue than many of you probably appreciate. As you lecture, you keep watching the faces; and information keeps coming back to you all the time. I began to feel, particularly this year, that I was missing much of what was coming back. I was asking the students, but they didn't help or couldn't help me very much.

But I think I know what's the matter even a little better than they do. I think that this whole generation of students is beset with a profound uneasiness. I don't think that they have yet quite

something interesting about that. We were committing war crimes in World War II, even before Nuremberg trials were held and the principle of war crimes started. The saturation bombing of German cities was a war crime and if we had lost the war, some of our leaders might have had to answer for it.

I've gone through all of that history lately, and I find that there's a gimmick in it. It isn't written out, but I think we established it by precedent.

That gimmick is that if one can allege that one is repelling or retaliating for an aggression -- after that everything goes. And you see we are living in a world in which all wars are wars of defense. All War departments are now Defense departments.

THIS IS ALL part of the double talk of our time. The aggressor is always on the other side. And I suppose this is why our ex-Secretary of State, Dean Rusk -- a man in whom repetition takes the place of reason, and stubbornness takes the place of character -- went to such pains to insist, as he still insists, that in Vietnam we are repelling aggression.

I think we've lost that war, as a lot of other people think, too. The Vietnamese have a secret weapon. It's their

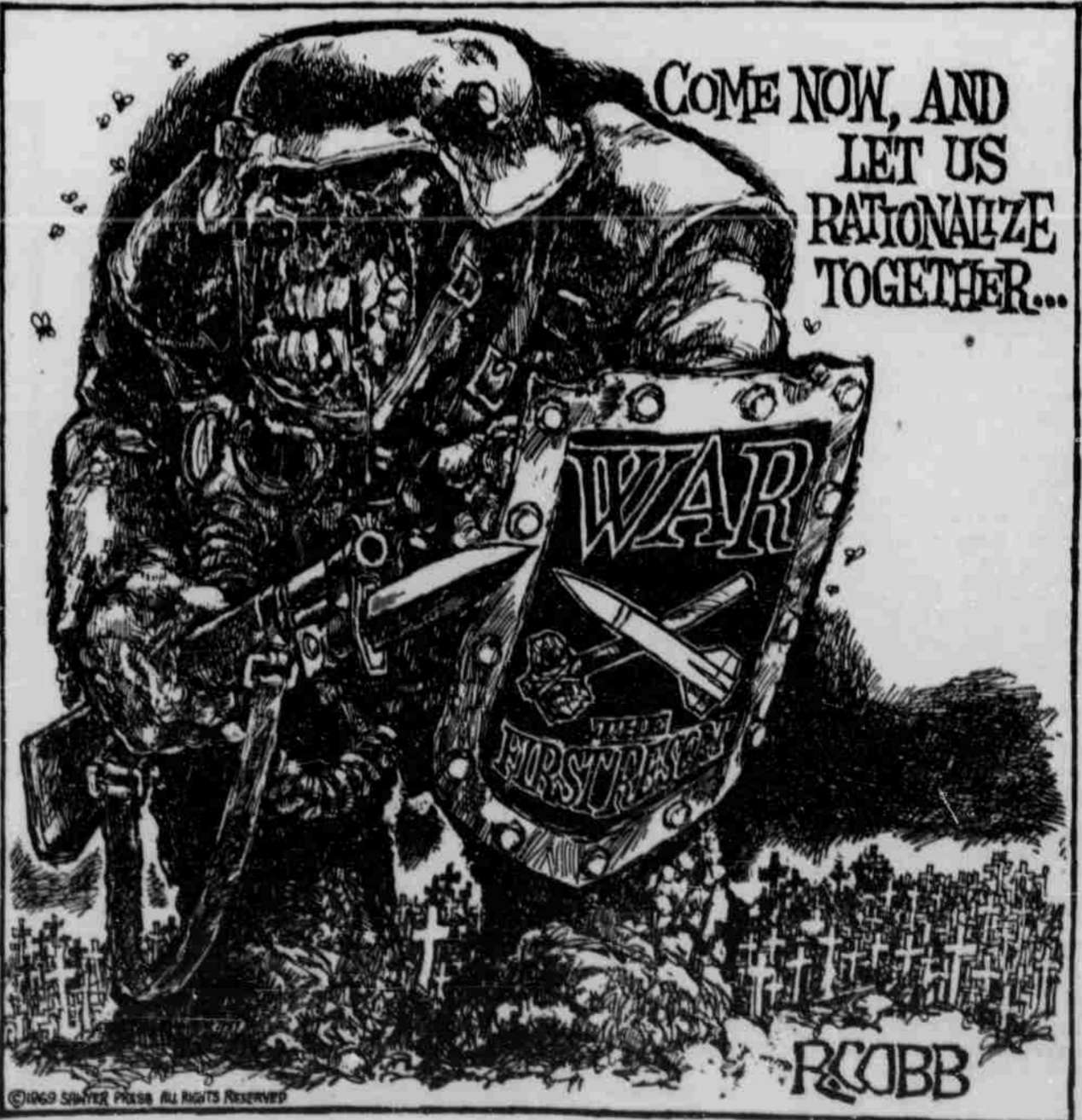


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