

SDS :

THE NEW TURN

Among the activist organizations of the New Left, two and only two have had a direct impact on American life: SNCC and SDS (the Berkeley phenomenon has been important, but has not been contained in any one organization.) SNCC, founded in 1960, was the first, and its militance, direct action, and spirit of participatory democracy provided the inspiration for the now far larger Students for a Democratic Society founded two years later. In the years following 1960, the Negro struggle provided the sole focus for New Left activity, and hence, SNCC, albeit a cadre rather than a mass-membership organization, was alone in the moral and political forefront. But then a great widening of the struggle took place in the winter of 1964-65, which thereby served as the first crucial turning-point for the New Left; for the Berkeley Free Speech eruption in December 1964 and the shocking Johnson escalation of the Vietnam war two months later ineluctably brought to the fore the issues of university education and the ever more repellent war in Vietnam.

Granting the basic importance of change in the university, it was quickly evident that the horror of the Vietnam War would have to be the main focus of any opposition movement to the current reigning corporate state in America. It was also clear to the New Left that the traditional forms of peace protest were totally inadequate to the building of a truly mass antiwar movement in the United States. For the traditional (i.e. pre-1965) forms were either: (a) personal pacifist witness, such as the strapping of one's body to Polaris submarines, or (b) the puling ineffectualities of wishy-washy Liberalism, as typi-

fied by SANE, pleading: "Please Mr. President, please follow your peaceful instincts and negotiate." SANE Liberalism was not only ineffectual, it would have been little improved had it been effective: for Johnson simply to "negotiate" is very easy and quite trivial; a call for "negotiations" glorifies a mere process rather than the content of American actions. As for personal witness, however heroic and however lovable, this too was necessarily scattered and ineffective; to most opponents of war, stopping the American war juggernaut is more important than bearing individual witness to the sins of the imperial state. The New Left, searching for a new antiwar strategy, escalated the traditional form of demonstration or peace march, and decided, under the inspiration of the "official" Trotskyist groups (Socialist Workers Party, Young Socialist Alliance), to erect a single-issue peace movement, focussed on the theme of unilateral American withdrawal from Vietnam.

The shift from SANE and from pacifist protest to unilateral withdrawal was an enormous step forward in maturity for the anti-war movement, which now for the first time really constituted an opposition movement to the U. S. government's war program. But the movement was still trapped by the Trotskyist insistence on cleaving only to the single issue of the war and on the deliberate omission of all other important social issues, even the ones (such as conscription) which were directly related to the war system. The reason for this uncharacteristic "conservatism" and moderation on the part of the "Trots" is quite clear: the Trots are still part of the "Old Left", and as such believe that the war can actually be stopped simply by forming a traditional, genteel mass pressure upon the President. In short, the static Trotskyist emphasis on public opinion and genteel protest ironically brought the Trots very close to the old SANE strategy of "Please, Mr. President"---even if the Trotskyist "please" is made of considerably sterner stuff. The single issue approach, moreover, was hopelessly static, and totally overlooked the dynamism inherent in the bringing together in a united front of all sorts of opposition forces to the American Leviathan, on issues foreign and domestic. The basis for unity between black power advocates and the antiwar movement, for example, has become increasingly evident, even when limited to such narrow points as the preponderance of Negroes among the troops that do the fighting and dying in the imperial war in Vietnam. A single-issue movement, precisely because it lacks any sort of overall outlook or program, must needs be trapped within the framework of traditional

“please, Mr. President” - pressure-politics; a multi-issue united front, on the other hand, bears at least the potential for a truly radical and all-encompassing movement of opposition to the workings of the corporate state.

Suffice it to say that, by the end of 1965, responsibility for the anti-war movement had devolved again upon SNCC and SDS. And, just when responsibility was again being thrust upon them, both SNCC and SDS were finding themselves, during 1966, at a crossroads; both found that they must take a decisive stand on internal disagreements that were beginning to paralyze their respective organizations. Both organizations faced their internal problems candidly and courageously in 1966; and, almost miraculously, both took a decisive and historic turn away from powerful holdovers of Old Left statism that were crippling their development. Both took a turn toward radicalism and toward liberty.

The SNCC turn was decisively toward black power and away from compulsory integration, thus transforming the entire thrust of the civil rights movement as it had existed for decades and embodied in such conservative-and-Old Left groups as the NAACP. This shift to black power is quite well known and needs little elaboration here (our views on the cry for power were expressed in an editorial in the Autumn, 1966 issue.) What needs to be added, however, is that Stokely Carmichael, dynamic young leader of SNCC, is following in the footsteps of the martyred Malcolm X not only in the concept of black nationalism but also in beginning to take steps toward internationalizing the Negro struggle. We stated in the Autumn issue that Negro nationalism, despite the low ratio of blacks to whites in the United States as a whole, makes a great deal of sense when we consider it to be concentrated in specific areas where Negroes do constitute a majority. But there is another way in which Negro nationalism can make practical sense by overcoming black minority status within the U. S.: and that is by internationalizing the struggle, by somehow transforming the arena of the conflict to the world scene as a whole, where whites, of course, are in a minority and the colored races in the majority. Malcolm's creative idea, in the last months of his life, was to internationalize by having the African nations bring U. S. segregation laws to the bar of world opinion in the United Nations; while UN resolutions would have been of minor importance, Malcolm's strategy might well have succeeded in pushing the African nations out of their current category of more or less

willing client states for U. S. imperialism. Malcolm, however, was struck down before he had a chance to try out this approach. Now Stokely Carmichael has begun to internationalize the struggle by forming an alliance with the Pro-Independence Movement of Puerto Rico: each group agreeing to oppose U. S. "colonialism" both at home--against Negroes and Puerto Ricans--and abroad, each agreeing to oppose the draft and the Vietnam War, as well as, restore independence to the island of Puerto Rico. SNCC has also moved toward wider international concerns by courageously agreeing to join in the Bertrand Russell War Crimes Tribunal, to bring American war crimes in Vietnam to the bar of world opinion, if not of world justice.

But if SNCC's admirable turn has received the full light of publicity, few people realize that SDS, a far larger organization, has also experienced a decisive turn this past year. SDS has always been in inner tension between two broad forces; on the one hand, an Old Guard, which, despite a great advance over older organizations, remains still at the core statist and Social Democrat, and whose ultimate goal in life is to join in cozy if critical coalition with the left-wing Liberals of the Democratic Party, as well as to fulfill the dogmatic Marxist dream of coalition with the supposedly radical "working class." In short, the goal of the Old Guard, after all the radicalism and participatory democracy and criticism of "corporate Liberalism" is said and done, is to reintegrate SDS into old-style coalition party and pressure-group politics, and hence to reintegrate the Movement back into the encompassing folds of the American System. The Old Guard has unfortunately had in its camp most of the articulate ideologists, and most of the scholars, in SDS. Hence the reason that SDS's Radical Education Project, an embodiment of those within the organization that have wanted to develop a groundwork of scholarship and research, quickly fell into the hands of the Old Guard. In contrast to the Old Guard have been the ever increasing numbers of younger and radical activists, scornful of Marxist or Social Democrat ideology and comfortable coalitionism, who, though often inchoately, are anti-statist and instinctively libertarian to the core of their being. It was due to Old Guard obstructionism that SDS, which had decided in the fall of 1965 to concentrate on a radical anti-draft program, suddenly abandoned the program and essentially did nothing during the first half of 1966. Despite the brilliant and inspiring leadership of Carl Oglesby, who had been elected as president over the Old Guard at the 1965 SDS convention, the Old Guard leadership was quickly taken into camp by

the U. S. government. These leaders were flown down to spend some time with a few of the august Liberals in Washington, after which they were happy to scuttle the most fundamental issue that any youth group must face in this country: the battle against the slavery of conscription. It was easy for these Old Guard leaders to become what the Establishment happily refers to as "responsible"; they had had the makings of "responsibility" (i.e. crooking the knee to Power) long before.

The ambiguities of the old SDS may be seen in its major theoretical document, the famous Port Huron Statement, adopted at SDS's founding convention at Port Huron, Michigan in June 1962. While an enormous advance over ADA-type Liberalism, the Port Huron Statement still contained considerable admixtures of Old Left thought. For example, the Port Huron Statement did not fully assimilate the decisive New Left insight of William Appleman Williams and the Studies on the Left group that Big Government as developed down through the New Deal and New Frontier, has not been a "progressive" instrument by which "the people" curbed and regulated Big Business. On the contrary, it has been precisely the instrument by which Big Business has been able to win for itself subsidies, privileges, and monopolies at the expense of the rest of the populace. At Port Huron, there was still the mistaken notion that government is essentially a people's instrument for checking big business, but that business has been able to keep that control weak--the nub of the Old Left position. And, in contrast to the recent insights of Gabriel Kolko, Big Business is deemed to be monopolistic largely out of market forces; it was little realized at Port Huron that business monopolies are created by government intervention in the economy. Thus, the Port Huron Statement talks of "the benign yet obscuring effects of the New Deal reforms"; it speaks of government regulation not as creating cartels but as "ratify (ing) industry policies or serv (ing) as pallatives at the margins of significant business activity"; it considers government fiscal and monetary policy not as inflationary exploitation of the mass of the people but as "minor" because "greatly limited by corporate veto"; it welcomes the federal highway program as "meeting the needs of people" rather than seeing it as a vast boondoggle and subsidy for the benefit of the automobile and oil interests; it fails completely to understand the essential imperialism and corporate statism involved in any foreign aid program; and it makes its obeisance to classical Marxism by avoiding the stark reality of our state-dominated world and affirming that: "the basic decision-making environment of society, the

basic structure of distribution and allocation . . . is still determined by major corporations . . . in comparative insulation from the public and its political representatives." ¹ Sic! Imagine the current SDS speaking in Establishment solemnity about the public's "representatives" in government!

Thus, despite its great achievements and even greater potential, SDS contained within itself ambiguities and contradictions which were bound to intensify and polarize as time went on. Fortunately, year after year the Old Guard got older and the new younger elements were far more radical and anti-statist than their predecessors. Finally, SDS came into crisis during 1966; for, masses of radical students had flocked in to SDS during 1965 in response to its taking the lead against the war in Vietnam, only to find the anti-war effort shrivelling. For now, in the first half of 1966, SDS had abandoned its own anti-draft program and was therefore effectively blocked from giving any leadership to the anti-war struggle.

A hopefully decisive moment for SDS came at its national convention at Clear Lake, Iowa in August, 1966. There, it was expected to elect an Old Guardsman as president. But the grass-roots members of SDS, many of them wearing "I Hate the State" buttons, decisively defeated the Old Guard and elected a slate of national officers sympathetic to their goals. It was the convention at Clear Lake that marked a signal repudiation of the Old Guard by SDS; in effect, it meant the sharp weakening of Social Democrat influence in the organization. The path was cleared for new directions, for new aims, for giving the radicals and libertarians their head.

This critical event went almost undetected at the time, partly because it all happened in such a diffuse and inchoate fashion that few people who were not close to the workings of SDS could decipher what was going on. Furthermore, SDS now had its new turn, but it was still only theoretical; the new stance had not yet been embodied in a concrete program. This concrete program came into being at the December 28 meeting of the National Council of SDS at Berkeley. There the promise of Clear Lake was fulfilled; and SDS decided, by an overwhelming vote of 53 to 10, to focus its activities on an all-out struggle against the draft. Introduced by vice-president Carl

1. The Port Huron Statement (New York: Students for a Democratic Society, 1964), pp. 14-17.

Davidson and ably backed by national secretary Greg Calvert and others, the anti-draft resolution, though slightly watered down from Davidson's original proposal, is one of the most superb resolutions ever passed by an anti-war opposition in this country. Thus, SDS declared "its opposition to conscription in any form. We maintain that all conscription is coercive and anti-democratic, and that it is used by the United States Government to oppress people in the United States and around the world." It also flatly opposed any Liberal attempts to "reform" this evil by such proposals as compulsory universal service or a draft lottery. SDS, moreover, in a true act of heroism, declared that it "encourages all young men to resist the draft." To that end, it has decided to: "organize unions of draft resisters" who "under no circumstances will allow themselves to be drafted." Soldiers already in the armed forces will be encouraged to oppose the war in Vietnam; as SDS puts it, "this is an effort to reach men who, within a system of involuntary servitude, are indoctrinated as well as isolated from open discussion." Information will be provided to those young draft resisters who decide to emigrate to Canada, and these will be encouraged to build international support for the draft resistance and anti-war movement. And on Vietnam, SDS declared its "opposition to the United States Government's immoral, illegal, and genocidal war against the Vietnamese people in their struggle for self-determination."²

The new orientation of SDS is incisively explained in a moving report by the new national secretary, Greg Calvert. Calvert explains that the new program on the draft:

does not talk about politics or the taking of power . . . It talks about "resistance." And finally, behind its rhetoric and its programmatic details, it talks about the only thing that has given life and creativity to "the movement." It talks about the kind of struggle which has been most meaningful to the new left--the revolutionary struggle which engages and claims the lives of those involved despite the seeming impossibility of revolutionary social change . . . It is the struggle . . . which says that "this is what a human being must do, no matter what the consequences,

2. "Anti-Draft Resolution," new left notes (January 13, 1967), p. 1.

because this is what it means to be a human being" -- "this is the struggle for freedom in our time" -- "this is the revolt of slaves against their masters" -- "this is what being a 'crazy nigger' meant in the South and what it now means in the North" -- "this is the first act of freedom."

One might dispute the political wisdom of the program. One may decry the lack of analysis. One may be appalled by the lack of direction. But unless one does not understand what it meant to be a "crazy nigger"

in a world of "good niggers", it is impossible to understand what has created and recreated the new radicalism . . . It is a subjective struggle for individual freedom and meaning thrust up against the "objective" world which denies freedom and self-realization. It offers no clear path to power, no magic formula for success, only struggle and a new life. No promise is made, only the hope that struggle and confrontation with the existing system of inhumanity will create freedom in the midst of a life-destroying society.

We can speculate endlessly about how draft resistance might end the war. However, only talking about how resisting the draft will change peoples' lives can create a draft-resistance movement. Call that "anarchistic", "personalistic", "religious", or "crazy" -- you will not have dealt with the reality which created the movement . . . SDS just simply was not interested in talking about organizational problems or about political analysis; it revealed its deepest concern in talking about what people can do with their lives . . . and with their bodies . . . What counts is that SDS be involved in the creation of a cutting-edge in the freedom struggle.

SDS, as a movement, is a wedge into American society. It is involved in the creation of what Carl Oglesby called "space" -- breathing space, living space, freedom space -- in a society which increasingly stifles freedom. Those who opposed the draft resistance program because they considered it "adventuristic" failed to understand the dynamic of "movement sensitivity." If the wedge is to continue to create more and more space in the society, then we cannot recoil from those areas of greatest tension where the risks are most dangerous. We were once desperate: "Trapped in a System." The movement has begun to pry open the jaws of that trap. The necessity which we must

deal with involves keeping up the pressure on that trap until it is finally sprung. In the process, new life, new hope, and new freedom are created, --but, above all, it engages the lives of people in new ways and that's how revolutionary cadres are built.

Two years ago, Lee Webb and Paul Booth urged SDS to move "From Protest to Politics." Now SDS has moved from "Protest to Resistance." 3

We can only stand in awe and admiration at the clear-sightedness, the gallantry, and the astonishing courage of the kids of SDS. But where, for the sake of all that is holy, are the adults? Must we always endure an America where the adults abandon their youthful radical vision in exchange for a comfortable and even prestigious seat at the trough? Are there none to dare, and dare mightily? If we had adults with one-tenth of the courage of SDS, we would be well on the way to achieving that free society that America always boasts of being.

One basic flaw remains which might imperil the success of the new turn: the fact that the overwhelming majority of the scholars and ideologists of SDS are Old Guardsmen who will struggle to return to the old paths. The problem will be particularly acute should SDS, as seems likely, attempt another overall theoretical statement of its views. If the radical kids at the grassroots leave ideology in disgust to the Old Guard, they might well find SDS shifting state-ward without their realizing it. The hostility to ideology per se at the grassroots is easy to understand; but it is vital for the radical kids at SDS to realize that not all ideology, not all theory, is a call for centralized control over the individual. There is a theory of liberty, a theory at the very least as solid and well-grounded as the various ideologies of statism. The crucial problem of today is to discover that body of theory and to make it known.

3. Greg Calvert, "From Protest to Resistance", ibid., p. 1.