COLLEGE STUDENTS AND THE WAR

An invited essay in response to an assertion that college students "seem to hold to a belief that no ideal is worth fighting for."

The Boston Herald
Reprinted by the National Policy Committee
1940
You requested me to express an opinion why college students "seem to hold to a belief that no ideal is worth fighting for." I have been living among college students for thirty-three years and I find no evidence to support any such generalization. Assuming for a moment, however, contrary to fact, that the statement were true, it ought not to be very surprising.

In their lifetime they have not heard much about the democratic ideal. Since the death of Woodrow Wilson no President of the United States, since the death of Stresemann no statesman in Germany, since the death of Briand no statesman in France, since the accession to power of Mussolini no statesman in Italy, and for many years no statesman in England has been a clear and convincing or eloquent prophet of democracy.

One American President speaks with scorn of those who give "yes, but" support to his projects. However, his own support of democracy as an ideal has been "yes, but" support. The entire accent has been upon the shortcomings of democracy and the way in which it has robbed youth of its chance, of the way in which it has oppressed age, of the way in which it has left one-third ill-housed, ill-clothed and
ill-fed. "The political equality we once had won was meaningless in the face of economic inequality." "The Constitution is intended to meet and to fit the amazing physical, economic and social requirements that confront us in this modern generation." "We seek the security of the men, women and children of the Nation. That security involves added means of providing better homes for the people of the Nation. That is the first principle of our future program. The second is to plan the use of land and water resources of this country to the end that the means of livelihood of our citizens may be more adequate to meet their daily needs. And, finally, the third principle is to use the agencies of government to assist in the establishment of means to provide sound and adequate protection against the vicissitudes of modern life -- in other words, social insurance." These are evidences that economic determinism is the keynote of government action. The ideal set forth is physical, material -- not at all spiritual.

Our youth have been brought up in an era of economic determinism. From the appearance of Seligman's Economic Interpretation of History, something over thirty years ago, and Charles A. Beard's Economic Interpretation of the Constitution and Economic Origins of Jeffersonian Democracy that point of view has filtered down through the textbooks, not of the colleges only, but of the secondary schools and
on down into the elementary histories of the United States. If you will read the books upon which these youth have been brought up, there is not very much about ideals, but there is a great deal about economic determinism. The Grapes of Wrath, which has ceased to be regarded as a novel and has been accepted as an authentic and tragic history, is a literary reflection of this trend.

Idealism has been selling at a discount while economic determinism has had the floor. When the day to raise our voices in thanksgiving to Almighty God is selected with an eye to the retail grocery trade and Christmas shopping, economic determinism has chased idealism out of the temple -- and brought the "money changers" back in.

Youth have seen the Townsend Plan spread like a prairie fire and Congress behave in a craven manner in the face of it. No shadow of idealism crossed that transaction. They have watched the "ham and egg" elections in California -- with reference to what ideal? They have seen the politics of human misery exploited in the W.P.A. The political manipulation is clear upon the record. It is not a record of the triumph of an ideal.

First Russia, then Italy, and later Germany roused their youth by frankly calling for a spirit of self-sacrifice in defense of their ideals, shoddy as they are. Young people were taught gladly to march in a German camp for
"strength through joy" under a sign: Youth who were born to die for Germany. Our accent has been wholly different. It has not been upon the glories of democracy but upon the wrongs of youth, upon the "lost generation." The ideal which has been set before youth has not been risk, has not been self-denial, has not been sacrifice; it has been security.

The American Youth Commission has had eight hundred thousand dollars to tell what is wrong with reference to the treatment of American youth. Recently it wrote: "The very survival of the nation depends upon the prompt establishment of conditions under which the youth of the land may have confidence in American institutions and in the American form of government." The clear inference is that those conditions do not now exist and that until they exist confidence in our institutions is not justified.

It is not the youth of America who have sold democracy short; it is their elders who have offered them sympathy instead of inspiration, palliatives like the N.Y.A. in place of adventure. The whole tone of public and private discussion has been of the things of which youth have been deprived, of their lack of opportunity, of doors closed in their faces.

So much for the ideal. The ideal has been tarnished by the parents of these youth and not by the youth themselves.
So far as fighting is concerned, it would be a miracle if today's youth wanted to fight. They have been brought up by their parents to believe that the United States not only made a mistake in going to war before, and that in going to war we did not fight for an ideal and certainly did not achieve any worthy purpose; that we went to war at the behest of international bankers and munitions makers and propagandists, as dupes of sordid and scheming people.

It must be remembered that statesmen have not given the last war credit for solving problems. Winston Churchill said: "Victory was to be bought so dear as to be almost indistinguishable from defeat. It was not to give security even to the victors." It was Aristide Briand who said: "In modern war there is no victor. Defeat reaches out its heavy hand to the uttermost corners of the earth, and lays its burdens upon victor and vanquished alike."

In other words, before this war began the people who had experienced the last war gave voice to an utter disillusionment about the fruits of war. American youth knew also that the last war precipitated revolution, that it gave Japan its opportunity in China, that it gave the Bolsheviks their opportunity in Russia, that it gave Fascism its start in Italy, and ultimately Nazism its opportunity in Germany. Nothing that has been written, in short, about the last war would lead youth to believe
that it is a good instrument for the solution of delicate social, economic and political problems.

Literature and the theater have accented the same note. Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Dos Passos' *Three Soldiers*, Gibbs' *Now It Can Be Told* are samples. In the theater *What Price Glory*, *Bury the Dead*, *Idiot's Delight*, and *Fifth Column* told the same story of the grime, the filth, the horror, and, more than all, the utter futility of war. Most of these books, and many others, have been depicted in the movies, with a realism denied to other media.

Students have been brought up on Walter Millis' book, *Road to War* -- a clear and convincing statement to those who do not know better (and youth had no opportunity to know better) that we were drawn into war contrary to our interests by propaganda. The book was greeted with acclaim and only a few were acute enough to see it as "a too well disguised pacifist tract of biased diplomatic history," or to observe, as F. H. Simonds did, that it was "an attempt to explain emotion by means of a post-mortem examination. All the evidence is at hand save the spirit, but that has disappeared irrevocably." When, after taking that book as gospel, youth now see Mr. Millis calling upon the United States to declare war at once (as he did two weeks ago) they may well be skeptical.

Hundreds of thousands of them have heard
Senator Nye speak either in person or over the radio or have gotten at second hand his speeches, supported by a long investigation at government expense. He preached in season and out of season, without arousing any effective effort at contradiction, that the United States was drawn into the war by munitions makers who wanted a profit and by international bankers who sought to batten upon the woes of mankind. In 1935 he declaimed:

"To a body which finds your country and mine spending more money getting ready for more war than is being spent by any other nation on earth, and to whom we say, 'Isn't it too bad the rest of the world doesn't follow our example!' -- how will we explain this madness? Is there any explanation of it? Most assuredly there is, and the record today offers that explanation. Men and institutions have come to learn that there is very large profit for them in these mad programs of preparing for more war. Men and institutions that aren't as alarmed about more war as the rest of us may be have learned by experience there is one thing more profitable than preparing for war, and that one thing is war itself, and that for them and their kind of business profit flows thickest when blood flows most freely upon fields of battle."

The next year he said:

"The burden being borne by the people of America for defense is going to destroy America before she has a chance to try her defense on any one, if she continues her present mad pace."

When Senator Nye now votes money to buy the munitions he has made it disreputable to furnish, youth may well be puzzled.
American youth have seen those who fought in the last war secure one bonus after another over the vetoes of three Presidents of the United States who denounced them as raids upon the Treasury. One President said: "We must either abandon our theory of patriotism or abandon this (bonus) bill." Whether Calvin Coolidge was right or was not, there is no reason youth should not have believed him to be. They have watched the American Legion bill to take the profit out of war and the arguments in support of it, based upon the premise that war is essentially, if not wholly, a profiteering adventure. In short, war has been presented to them as a futile and sordid adventure in which youth pays the cost with his life while age reaps the profit in dollars.

They have heard war blamed for the economic collapse of the world, for limitation of their own opportunities, and no word, save in the dictatorships, has been raised to make a counter statement. It has been the theme of countless editorials in the newspapers that America was tricked before, until fear of being taken in by propaganda became a psychosis. Those who for twenty years have sedulously cultivated the idea that this great and free people were led into a war by foreign propagandists did no service to the cause of democracy, showed little faith in its essential solvency, preached a doctrine which sapped the vitality of our own institutions. Now the newspapers
have reversed themselves, but after twenty years of telling us to mind our own business -- to let the rest of the world go hang -- after twenty years of saying that America has no great stake in Europe which ought to lead it to give up any niggling portion of its sovereignty to a feeble League of Nations, after twenty years when even the ideal of the World Court sponsored by America and fought for by America was sabotaged by America, it would be amazing if youth were not suspicious of the sudden switch in opinion. I would not blame youth if they thought they were now being subjected to propaganda.

They have had clear assurance from the President that they were not expected to fight. Speaking at the Alamo of all places, and apostrophizing the dead, the President said:

"I hope they know that the overwhelming majority of the Americans of 1936 are once more meeting new problems with new courage -- that we, too, are ready and willing to stand up and fight for truth against falsehood, for freedom of the individual against license by the few. Unlike them, we do not need to take up arms; we are not called upon to die; we can carry on a national war for the cause of humanity without shedding blood."

And again:

"It is but an extension of the challenge of Woodrow Wilson for us to propose in this newer generation that from now on war by governments shall be changed to peace by peoples."

It is obvious that efficiency in prepara-
tion was not regarded as essential. The youth of America knew that the administration of the Navy Department was for years in the hands of an invalid, and the War Department had a first-class administrative war between its two highest officers. Such a scandalous feud would not have been tolerated if preparedness was being taken seriously.

As late as May 28 the President was reported as saying that "there was no reason for the country to become 'discomboxerated' in apprehension of what may come to pass. The women of the country would not have to give up their cosmetics, lipsticks and chocolate sodas in consequence of the preparedness program. It was the intention not to upset the normal trends of American life any more than necessary. Mr. Roosevelt underscored his observation that the present defense program was not to be compared with that of 1917 when the nation was attempting to raise an army of 4,000,000 men. There was no thought in government today to revive the draft system, whether of men or money."

There has been amazing lack of candor in laying the facts in the international situation before youth. Practically every other nation has published a "White Paper" or a "Blue Book" or a pamphlet of some hue giving documents relevant to the world crisis, but our government has had neither the candor nor the courage to publish its own diplomatic exchanges. It had
to loan the diary of an Assistant Secretary of State and the memoranda of the President and others to a couple of newspaper columnists in order that the public might learn the facts by indirection and through interpretation. In an elaborately secret conference the President said something about the Rhine. People who heard the comments reported one way, the American White Paper under official inspiration reports it differently. The whole business could be clarified if the President would tell the public what he said, why he said it, and what he meant by saying it. To this moment, being dependent upon graduation speeches, like those at Arthurdale and Virginia, banter with newspaper men, inspired leaks, and Congressional bickering, there is no one in a position to tell youth precisely what the policy of the United States government is.

The flight training under the Civil Aeronautics Authority offers a good illustration of this utter lack of candor on the part of the government. Many students have signed up for aviation training, knowing how hollow was the pretense of the government that it was civil aviation which it had in mind. The C.A.A. last year sent representatives to the several colleges to persuade them that there was no military purpose. The application for the student pilot certificate said specifically that it involved no military obligation. In the telegram to the colleges, dated June 3, 1940, military
objectives were not accented. Is there a crisis in civil aviation that precipitates or justifies this activity? It is transparent that there is not and the students know it perfectly well.

Now youth have laid before them another piece of social experimentation, more vast, more unwieldy, more nebulous, involving improvisations more grandiloquent and sketchy than any that have gone before, with its military objective carefully camouflaged in a cloud of socialized terms. The President proposes to take a year from the lifetime of every young man and young woman in America to do something—no one knows quite what—only partially and inferentially military. We worry about taxes paid in money, but under this proposal each boy and girl is to be taxed a year of his life for objectives which are vague, under leadership not calculated to inspire confidence, the machinery for which is nonexistent. The whole proposal was tossed in their midst as one of a series of glittering improvisations, like a "hemispheric cartel." This is not calculated to inspire belief that it is a matured plan designed to support an ideal. It seems much more a gesture of panic or an attempt to actualize some totalitarian social philosophy under the guise of meeting a current crisis.

Youth see the denunciation of economic profiteering in war preparations coupled with the most brazen attempts at political profi-
teering. They watch the effort to overthrow a barrier to continuation of personal power for more than eight years by playing "crisis politics." They cannot tell any more than their elders whether the changes in the cabinet represent a "coalition" which the President lately called "cock-eyed," or merely a slick political trick designed to throw the apple of political discord into the opposition party.

They have been assured over and over again and virtually without denial that going to war means the end of democracy here, that democratic controls must be not only suspended but probably ended, that dictatorship can be fought only by using the methods of dictatorship, and that total war involves totalitarian methods. This they have been told by public officials, by the newspapers, by experienced commentators such as General Johnson.

They have watched the increase of the power of the President, relative to the other coordinate branches of government, to the highest point ever reached in a time of peace. They have seen a political raid upon the Supreme Court frustrated only by the collapse of the overworked heart of Senator Robinson. They have seen Congress surrender authority again and again. Now they hear a demand on the part of the Solicitor General for yet greater executive power, though he says, "increased administrative power has great risks to human liberty." It may not make sense to them to see lib-
erty jeopardized in order to protect it.

Recent developments have seemed to mean simply that you cannot resist Hitler without first surrendering spiritually to Hitler, that the effort to save democracy by arms means losing democracy even before the clash of arms begins. Youth have seen, as the war has gone on, the way in which the democracies have step by step, and usually too late, accepted that logic. They do not have proof, they do not have evidence that even if the war is won the democracies can find the road back. Only the older generation who know how wartime controls can be thrown off, afterwards can give any light on this point, and there has been singularly little light in recent years.

The key to what is wrong with the college students of America is very simple. They are our children. We bred them, we brought them up, and they have believed too pathetically what their elders have told them. Now that we rather hastily say, "But we didn't mean it in the way you took it," they betray evidences of confusion. I seem to see some evidences of confusion even among their parents. It is not the fault of youth that they were born of a disillusioned generation.

Naturally enough, youth show more ardency in championing causes, less restraint arising from experience. In other respects they display the characteristics of youth. But if any one doubts their courage, he is simply doubting
his own; if any one questions their loyalty, he is simply casting stones as to his own capacities as father and citizen.

Having said so much which might be thought to justify youth in believing that there is no ideal worth fighting for, I return to the point at which I started to say that any such generalization about American youth is absurd on the face of it. "I do not know the method of drawing up an indictment against an whole people," said Edmund Burke. No more can you indict the youth of America. They do not run in any standard pattern -- and it is both foolish and stupid to suppose that they do. Why annoy and alienate young people by pasting one label onto all or them, or tarring them all with one brush?

Having been a teacher at the time of the last war, I know at first-hand that youth did not then spring to arms with a song on their lips or any bright and starry illusions as to the glory of war.

It is high time to stop worrying about youth. I like to remind myself that the greatest missionary who ever went out of Brown University was an atheist in his college days; that the greatest philanthropist graduated in the first half of the existence of the University was such a rascal that when, twenty years later, he came back to pay his respects to the president, the old gentleman said, "I am nervous in your presence for fear there is a fire-
cracker under my chair"; that the greatest educator turned out by the University was not much of a student. The essential difficulty with youth is that they are young. You will not cure that by quarreling with youth. Time will cure it all too soon.

Let their elders, if not their betters, renew their own faith, refresh their own courage, adopt a less defensive tone, express less apprehension in the face of a German victory, and more determination. If the older generation stands up to its responsibilities, it need have no anxious thoughts for the morrow of American youth.

June 26, 1940.

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