William S. Coffin Jr.

Dear Mr. Next President

One of America's most articulate dissenters is William S. Coffin Jr., the Yale chaplain who faces jail in a draft-conspiracy case. Here, in the third of a series written for Newsday by five well-known Americans, he examines problems that disturb young people.

What Frustrates Our Youth

AS YOU are well aware, many young Americans today are having their troubles fighting their doubts. They want to love America, but they want to love justice, too. They want to believe in their leaders, but it isn't easy.

Of course I am not talking of the majority. They will not trouble you, neither during the campaign nor during your ensuing presidency. But I wonder if this is cause for comfort.

We are passing through inhuman and inhumanly difficult times. The fact that so few Americans seem to care seems to me only another reminder that majority rule cannot be equated with the rule of conscience. Once again we are witnesses to the fact that evil derives its greatest support from the apathy of the majority. Therefore, what is troubling above all else is that most young Americans—reflecting their elders—are safe, polite, obedient and sterile. With change urgently needed, their theme song remains: "For weal or woe/ My status is quo."

It is this indifference that disturbs the minority who deeply care, and I have in mind particularly university students and young blacks in the ghettos. They fear that the affluence of the majority may be secured by entrapment in poverty of the remainder. They fear that the majority of their fellow citizens, young and old, may be too self-indulgent, too arrogant and too beguiled by half-true legends of America's past to be capable of the self-criticism necessary to find new and creative solutions to problems you know to be both profound and pressing.

Surely it is a tribute to the idealism of so many college students that they who "have it made" are so concerned with racism and poverty and the fact that they are deferred while the uneducated go off to risk wounds and death in Vietnam. And further, it is a tribute to their perception that they have realized that the visceral reaction of most Americans is not to injustice but to disorder.

Young ghetto blacks of course have learned the lesson even better. Didn't Los Angeles, Manhattan, and Cleveland live contentedly side by side with Watts, Harlem and Hough, until the latter erupted in violence?

In a poignant address entitled "The Anatomy of Frustration," Bayard Rustin points out that American society is systematically teaching blacks that violence is the only effective force for social change:

". . . When Martin Luther King and I went to Watts and told the young Negroes they must put an end to rioting, that it was destroying their own community, they said: 'Go back where you came from. We are winning.' One of them lit a match, held it up and said: 'This is our manifesto and it's winning.' And he went on to say that if you went out into the streets you would find sociologists, economists, city planners, hospital experts, transportation experts, 'all there because of our manifesto.' The fact is that there were groups in Watts before that riot which had urged the city to do something about conditions. They were ignored."

Surely you know this anatomy of frustration, surely you know that a ghetto is not part of an established order, but rather an established disorder. And you know the dynamics of frustration. When no change appears possible, people generally are merely resigned. But when change seems possible, and especially when governments make promises only to break them, give money only later to withdraw it, then people naturally get frustrated. In other words, if progress once begun does not continue and accelerate, then the "peaceful revolution of rising expectations" becomes a violent revolution of disappointed hopes.

So let me urgently suggest that what the American people need to hear is not the emotional slogan "law and order." Rather, they need to hear that law is an instrument of justice as well as order. For it is simply not true that only the law stands between man and the jungle. Only good laws do that, I plead with you, then, not to let your concern for order sound so passionate while your concern for justice sounds only ceremonial. I plead with you to speak the truth that law and justice together represent the only route to an order deserving of the respect of decent citizens.

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Last year, Henry Steele Commager suggested that an excess of moral passion and imagination on the part of the young is preferable to the absence of either in their elders. I could not agree more. However, I have no desire to excuse the excesses. Being close to students and reasonably close to ghetto blacks, I know the fanatics among them. I know those who use social ills as a means of acting out their personal hangups. But I also know that for national leaders to attack this small minority is irrelevant at best and irresponsible at worst. For to attack them not only exaggerates—and then increases—their number, but, more importantly, to attack them distracts attention from the social ills that really need to be attacked.

SUCH attacks on the minority are, of course, appealing to the majority. But isn't this because an affluent majority finds repression appealing as the safest, surest and cheapest course?

I am worried about repression. I believe the Bill of Rights is today in clear and present danger. But the danger is far less from some few on the left than from that larger number of "patriots" on the right, intent on raising the flag in order to obscure the Constitution.

Here, from educator John Holt, are some splendidly perceptive words on the state of freedom in America today:

"I . . . believe that freedom is in serious danger in this country because so many people . . . do not feel free, never did, don't expect to, and hence don't know what freedom is or why it should be worth making such a fuss about. For a great many Americans, freedom is little more than a slogan that makes it seem right to despise, hate and even kill any foreigner who supposedly has less of

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