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Universities at the Crossroads

These excerpts are from an address to the University of Notre Dame faculty by the Rev. Theodore M. Hesburgh, the university's president.

Maybe our problems relate more deeply than we suspect to the parlous state of the world around us—to its basic malaise, to its anomie, to its frustration and rootlessness. I suspect that we are, in the Western world and even beyond its boundaries, passing through an historical watershed which we little understand and which may be ultimately of more importance than the Renaissance, the Reformation, or the industrial revolution.

Into this explosive mix comes a strong cry for "law and order" from the so-called silent majority who are not anxious to face new approaches to human equality or social justice if these threaten their hard-earned gains. When the university responds negatively to this demand for law and order, which it rightly construes as "status quo," and continues to insist on stronger priorities for the nation, new initiatives for peace, for equality, for social justice, whatever the shock to the "status quo," then we have a super-explosive situation.

It is simply an historic fact that any group, and particularly a university community, does not understand not being understood. What is more serious, young people in the university do not realize how much the university depends upon the support of the larger surrounding society. Even less do they understand that when their frustrations about the problems of the larger community lead them to act in anger and, at times, with violence, there is only one normal response from that larger community, namely, counterviolence and repressive action.

One might speculate what would happen if some American universities that suffer constant disruption were suddenly closed down for a year or two. It might be healthy and it might be disastrous, but it could happen and it may.

Some have tried to describe the present situation as the politicization of the university. It certainly is true that faculties, even at Harvard and Princeton, have taken rather unani-

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mous positions on the Vietnam war that would have been unthinkable a few years ago.

There is some merit in all of this, but some thoughtful university observers call it the politicization of the university and the end of that objective, other-worldly, balanced and impassionate activity that has long characterized the university. Some see in all of this the end of academic freedom and a call for repressive action.

The fact is that almost every state in the Union has considered in its Legislature some punitive legislation against faculty and students—about half of which has been enacted into law. Trustees and Governors have practically forced the resignation of a number of presidents, for instance in Texas, Oklahoma and California. Feeling is running high against many highly visible universities and the witch hunters are out and at work. Both federal and state programs of support for higher education have been reduced or tied to impossible conditions. Many private universities find themselves hard put to hold fast to the support they now have, much less to augment it. Disaffection with uni-

versities, their presidents, their faculties and their students is simply a growing fact of life that will probably get worse.

The great majority of the best university presidents that I have known, respected and worked with over the past years are simply resigning to escape what has become an impossible task: to keep peace inside and outside the university, when trustees cry "law and order" and students condemn this concept as another form of "status quo" in a very imperfect world. Alumni think the whole enterprise is coming apart at the seams, while faculty call for even greater changes than those now taking place.

To begin with, students and faculty unrest in our day—a world-wide phenomenon—is in large measure a manifestation of their moral concern for the priorities or the values of present-day society. One would find it difficult to fault them for those things they oppose: war, violence, racism, poverty, pollution, human degradation on a large scale.

Maybe the university is the only place on earth where we can bridge the generation gap by common moral concern on the part of young and old, faculty and students. Granting that students are often naive in their concern for instant solutions to very complicated problems, granting their addiction to absolute black and white judgments in matters that are often very gray, granting their lack of a sense of history, their rupture with tradition, and their inability to appreciate experience and competence, they still are concerned and are unafflicted by the anomie that is the cancer of so many of their elders.

I do not believe that the university has by any means come to the end of its road, but I am willing to concede that it faces a fork in the road and must make some real decisions as to where it is going. Generally speaking, I would conclude that the university can and must remain politically neutral as an institution, although its faculty, students and administrators are free to take their own political stance, indeed must do so when faced with national and international crises with deep moral undertones.