The Report of the President's Commission on Campus Unrest (September 1970)

On May 4, 1970 members of the Ohio National Guard fired into a crowd of Kent State University demonstrators, killing four and wounding nine. The impact of the shootings was dramatic. The event triggered a nationwide student strike that forced hundreds of colleges and universities to close. In response, President Richard Nixon created the President's Commission on Campus Unrest to analyze the state of U.S. youth in terms of Vietnam and the Kent State incident. Their findings are also referred to as the “Scranton Report.”

The Report of THE PRESIDENT'S COMMISSION ON CAMPUS UNREST

PREFACE:

TO THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

The crisis on American campuses has no parallel in the history of the nation. This crisis has roots in divisions of American society as deep as any since the Civil War. The divisions are reflected in violent acts and harsh rhetoric, and in the enmity of those Americans who see themselves as occupying opposing camps. Campus unrest reflects and increases a more profound crisis in the nation as a whole.

This crisis has two components: a crisis of violence and a crisis of understanding. We fear new violence and growing enmity.

Crisis of Violence

On the nation's campuses, and in their neighboring communities, the level of violence has been steadily rising. Students have been killed and injured; civil authorities have been killed and injured; bystanders have been killed and injured. Valuable public and private property, and scholarly products have been burned.

Too many Americans have begun to justify violence as a means of effecting change or safeguarding traditions. Too many have forgotten the values and sense of shared humanity that unite us. Campus violence reflects this national condition.

Much of the nation is so polarized that on many campuses a major domestic conflict or an unpopular initiative in foreign policy could trigger further violence protest and, in its wake, counter-violence and repression.

The Constitution protects the freedom of all citizens to dissent and to engage in non-violent protest. Dissent is a healthy sign of freedom and a protection against stagnation. But the right to dissent is not the right to resort to violence.

Equally, to respond to peaceful protest with repression and brutal tactics is dangerously unwise. It makes extremists of moderates, deepens the divisions in the nation, and increases the chances that future protest will be violent.

We believe it urgent that Americans of all convictions draw back from the brink. We
must recognize even our bitter opponents as fellow Americans with rights upon which we cannot morally or legally encroach and as fellow human beings whom we must not club, stone, shoot, or bomb.

We utterly condemn violence. Students who bomb and burn are criminals. Police and National Guardsmen who needlessly shoot or assault students are criminals. All who applaud these criminal acts share in their evil. We must declare a national cease-fire.

There can be no more "trashing", no more rock throwing, no more arson, no more bombing by protestors. No grievance, philosophy, or political idea can justify the destruction and killing we have witnessed. There can be no sanctuary or immunity from prosecution on the campus. If our society is to survive, criminal acts by students must be treated as such wherever they occur and whatever their purpose.

Crimes committed by one do not justify crimes committed by another. We condemn brutality and excessive force by officers and troops called to maintain order. The use of force by police is sometimes necessary and legal, but every unnecessary resort to violence is wrong, criminal, and feeds the hostility of the disaffected.

Our universities as centers of free inquiry are particularly vulnerable to violence. We condemn those groups which are openly seeking to destroy them.

We especially condemn bombing and political terrorism. The full resources of society must be employed to bring to justice those who commit terroristic acts. Anyone who aids or protects terrorists, on or off campus, must share the moral and legal responsibilities for the crimes they commit.

We find ominous and shocking reports that students are laying in supplies of weapons, and that others are preparing to take the law into their hands against protestors and minorities they dislike. There can be no place in our society for vigilantes, night-riders, or militants who would bring destruction and death upon their opponents. No one serves the law by breaking it.

Violence must stop because it is wrong. It destroys human life and the products of human effort. It undermines the foundations of a just social order. No progress is possible in a society where lawlessness prevails.

Violence must stop because the sounds of violence drown out all words of reason. When students and officials resort to force and violence, no one can hear and the nation is denied a vital call to conscience. It must stop because no nation will long tolerate violence without repression. History offers grim proof that repression once started is almost impossible to contain.

Crisis of Understanding

Campus protest has been focused on three major questions: war, racial injustice, and the university itself.
The first issue is the unfulfilled promise of full justice and dignity for blacks and other minorities. Blacks, like many others of different races and ethnic origins, are demanding today that the pledges of the Declaration of Independence and the Emancipation proclamation be fulfilled now. Full social justice and dignity--an end to racism, in all its human, social and cultural forms--is a central demand of today's students, black, brown and white.

A great majority of students and a majority of their elders oppose the Indochina war. Many believe it entirely immoral. And if the war is wrong, students insist, then so are all policies and practices that support it, from the draft to military research, from ROTC to recruiting for defense industry. This opposition has led to an ever-widening wave of student protests.

A third target of student protest is the shortcomings of the American university. The goals, values, administration and curriculum have been sharply criticized by many students. Students complain that their studies are irrelevant to the social problems that concern them. They want to shape their own personal and common lives, but find the university restrictive. They seek a community of companions and scholars, but find an impersonal multi-verse. And they denounce the university's relationship to the war and to discriminatory racial practices.

Behind the student protest on these issues and the crisis of violence to which they have contributed lies the more basic crisis of understanding.

Americans have never shared a single culture, a single philosophy, or a single religion. But in most periods in our history, we have shared many common values, common sympathies, and a common dedication to a system of government which protects our diversity.

We are now in grave danger of losing what is common among us through growing intolerance of opposing views on issues and of diversity itself.

A "new" culture is emerging primarily among students. Membership is often manifested by differences in dress and life style. Most of its members have high ideals and great fears. They stress the need for humanity, equality, and the sacredness of life. They fear that nuclear war will make them the last generation in history. They see their elders as entrapped by materialism and competition, and prisoners of outdated social forms. They believe their own country has lost its sense of human purpose. They see the Indochina war as an onslaught by a technological giant upon the peasant people of a small, harmless and backward nation. The war is seen as draining resources from the urgent needs of social and racial justice. They argue that we are the first nation with sufficient resources to create not only decent lives for some, but a decent society for all and that we are failing to do so. They feel they must remake America in its own image.

But among the members of this new student culture, there is a growing lack of tolerance, a growing insistence that their own views must govern, an impatience with the slow procedures of liberal democracy, a growing denial of the humanity and good will of those...
who urge patience and restraint, and particularly of those whose duty it is to enforce the law. A small number of students have turned to violence; an increasing number, not terrorists themselves, would not turn even arsonists and bombers over to law enforcement officials.

At the same time, many Americans have reacted to this emerging culture with an intolerance of their own. They reject not only that which is impatient, unrestrained, and intolerant in the new culture of the young, but even that which is good. Worse, they reject the individual members of the student culture themselves. Distinctive dress alone is enough to draw insult and abuse. Increasing numbers of citizens believe that students who dissent or protest, even those who protest peacefully, deserve to be treated harshly. Some even say that when dissenters are killed, they have brought death upon themselves. Less and less do students and the larger community seek to understand or respect the viewpoint and motivations of the other.

If this trend continues, if this crisis of understanding endures, the very survival of the nation will be threatened. A nation driven to use the weapons of war upon its youth, is a nation on the edge of chaos. A nation that has lost the allegiance of part of its youth, is a nation that has lost part of its future. A nation whose young have become intolerant of diversity, intolerant of the rest of its citizenry, and intolerant of all traditional values simply because they are traditional, has no generation worthy or capable of assuming leadership in the years to come.

* * *

We urgently call for reconciliation. Tolerance and understanding on all sides must re-emerge from the fundamental decency of Americans, from our shared aspirations as Americans, from our traditional tolerance of diversity, and from our common humanity. We must regain our compassion for one another and our mutual respect.

There is a deep continuity between all Americans, young and old, a continuity that is being obscured in our growing polarization. Most dissenting youth are striving toward the ultimate values and dreams of their elders and their forefathers. In all Americans there has always been latent respect for the idealism of the young. The whole object of a free government is to allow the nation to redefine its purposes in the light of new needs without sacrificing the accumulated wisdom of its living traditions. We cannot do this without each other.

Despite the differences among us, powerful values and sympathies unite us. The very motto of our nation calls for both unity and diversity: from many, one. Out of our divisions, we must now recreate understanding and respect for those different from ourselves.

Violence must end.

Understanding must be renewed.

All Americans must come to see each other not as symbols or stereotypes but as human
beings. 

Reconciliation must begin.

We share the impatience of those who call for change. We believe there is still time and opportunity to achieve change. We believe we can still fulfill our shared national commitment to peace, justice, decency, equality, and the celebration of human life.

We must start. All of us.

Our recommendations are directed toward this end. […]

CHAPTER 2:

THE NEW YOUTH CULTURE In early western societies, the young were traditionally submissive to adults. Largely because adults retained great authority, the only way for the young to achieve wealth, power and prestige was through a cooperative apprenticeship of some sort to the adult world. Thus, the young learned the traditional adult ways of living, and in time, they grew up to become adults of the same sort as their parents, living in the same sort of world. Advancing industrialism decisively changed this cooperative relationship between the generations. It produced new forms and new sources of wealth, power and prestige, and these weakened traditional adult controls over the young. It removed production from the home, and made it increasingly specialized; as a result, the young were increasingly removed from adult work places and could not directly observe or participate in adult work. Moreover, industrialism hastened the separation of education from the home, and the young were increasingly concentrated together in places of formal education that were isolated from most adults. Thus, the young spent an increasing amount of time together, apart from their parents' home and work, in activities that were different from those of adults. This shared and distinct experience among the young led to shared interests and problems, which led, in turn, to the development of distinct subcultures. As those subcultures developed, they provided support for any youth movement distinct from --or even directed against -- the adult world. A distinguishing characteristic of young people is their penchant for pure idealism. Society teaches youth to adhere to the basic values of the adult social system -- equality, honesty, democracy, or whatever -- in absolute terms. Throughout most of American history, the idealism of youth has been formed --and constrained -- by the institutions of adult society. But during the 1960's, in response to an accumulation of social changes, the traditional American youth culture developed rapidly in the direction of an oppositional stance toward the institutions and ways of the adult world. This subculture took its bearings from the notion of the autonomous, self-determining individual whose goal was to live with "authenticity," or in harmony with his inner penchants and instincts. It also found its identity in a rejection of the work ethic, materialism, and conventional social norms and pieties. Indeed, it rejected all institutional disciplines externally imposed upon the individual, and this set it at odds with much in American society. Its aim was to liberate human consciousness and to enhance the quality of experience; it sought to replace the materialism, the self-denial, and the striving for achievement that characterized the existing society with a new emphasis on the expressive, the creative, the imaginative. The
tools of the workaday institutional world -- hierarchy, discipline, rules, self-interest, self-defense, power -- it considered mad and tyrannical. It proclaimed instead the liberation of the individual to feel, to experience, to express whatever his unique humanity prompted. And its perceptions of the world grew ever more distant from the perceptions of the existing culture: what most called "justice" or "peace" or "accomplishment" the new culture envisioned as "enslavement" or "hysteria" or "meaninglessness." As this divergence of values and of vision proceeded, the new youth culture became increasingly oppositional. And yet in its commitment to liberty and equality, it was very much in the mainstream of American tradition; what it doubted was that America had managed to live up to its national ideals. Over time, these doubts grew, and youth culture became increasingly imbued with a sense of alienation and of opposition to the larger society. No one who lives in contemporary America can be unaware of the surface manifestations of this new youth culture. Dress is highly distinctive; emphasis is placed on heightened color and sound; the enjoyment of flowers and nature is given a high priority. The fullest ranges of sense and sensation are to be enjoyed each day through the cultivation of new experiences, through spiritualism, and through drugs. Life is sought to be made as simple, primitive, and "natural" as possible, as ritualized, for example, by nude bathing. Social historians can find parallels to this culture in the past. One is reminded of Bacchic cults in ancient Greece, or of the wandering bands of German students in the early 19th century, the Wandervoegelen, or of primitive Christianity. Confidence is placed in revelation rather than cognition, in sensation rather than analysis, in the personal rather than the institutional. Emphasis is placed on living to the fullest extent, on the sacredness of life itself, and on the common mystery of all living things. The ancient vision of natural man, untrammeled and unscarred by the fetters of institutions, is seen again. It is not necessary to describe such movements as "religious", but it is useful to recognize that they have elements in common with the waves of religious fervor that periodically have captivated the minds of men. It is not difficult to compose a picture of contemporary America as it looks through the eyes of one whose premises are essentially those just described. Human life is all; but women and children are being killed in Vietnam by American forces. All living things are sacred; but American industry and technology are polluting the air and the streams, and killing the birds and the fish. The individual should stand as an individual; but American society is organized into vast structures of unions, corporations, multiversities, and government bureaucracies. Personal regard for each human being and for the absolute equality of every human soul is a categorical imperative; but American society continues to be characterized by racial injustice and discrimination. The senses and the instincts are to be trusted first; but American technology, and its consequences, are a monument to rationalism. Life should be lived in communion with others, and each day's sunrise and sunset enjoyed to the fullest; American society extols competition, the accumulation of goods, and the work ethic. Each man should be free to lead his own life in his own way; American organizations and statute books are filled with regulations governing dress, sex, consumption, and the accreditation of study and of work, and many of these are enforced by armed police. No coherent political dialogue has yet emerged. Yet in this new youth culture's political discussion there are echoes of Marxism, of peasant communalism, of Thoreau, of Rousseau, of the evangelical fervor of the abolitionists, of Gandhi, and of native American populism. The new culture adherent believes he sees an America that has failed to achieve its social targets; that no longer
cares about achieving them; that is thoroughly hypocritical in pretending to have achieved them and in pretending to care; and that is exporting death and oppression abroad through its military and corporate operations. He wishes desperately to recall America to its great traditional goals of true freedom and justice for every man. As he sees it, he wants to remake America in its own image. What of the shortcomings of other societies, especially the Soviet Union? Why does the new culture denounce only the United States? On this question, Drs. Heard and Cheek said in a memorandum to the President: The apparent insensitivity of students to Soviet actions and to evils in the Soviet system is at least partly explainable by considerations like these: First, they feel that by the wrongness of our own policies, such as the war in Vietnam, we have lost our moral standing to condemn other countries. Second, there is an obsession with our own problems, a feeling that, our own crises should occupy all our attention. Third, the fear of Communism is less than existed a decade ago. Students perceive the Czech invasion as one more evil action by a powerful imperialist government, but they don't perceive it as a threat to the United States. Since the Sino-Soviet split, they see Communism as consisting of different and often competing national governments and styles. The Russians appear to repress their satellite countries, but students see that fact as parallel to American domination in its sphere of influence (the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, economic exploitation, etc.). They see the Russians as no better than we, maybe not as good, but feel more responsibility for our actions than for those of foreign powers. The dedicated practitioners of this emerging culture typically have little regard for the past experience of others. Indeed, they often exhibit a positive antagonism to the study of history. Believing that there is today, and will be tomorrow, a wholly world, they see no special relevance in the past. Distrusting older generations, they distrust the motives of their historically based advice no less than they distrust the history written by older generations. The anti-rationalist thread in the new culture resists the careful empirical approach of history and denounces it as fraudulent. Indeed, this anti-rationalism, and the urge for blunt directness often leads those of the new culture to view complexity as a disguise, to be impatient with learning the facts, and to demand simplistic solutions in one sentence. Understandably, the new culture enthusiast has, at best, a lukewarm interest in free speech, majority opinion, and the rest of the tenets of liberal democracy as they are institutionalized today. He cannot have much regard for these things if he believes that American liberal democracy, with the consent and approval of the vast majority of its citizens, is pursuing values and policies that he sees as fundamentally immoral and apocalyptically destructive. Again, in parallel with historical religious movements, the new culture advocate tends to be self-righteous, sanctimonious, contemptuous of those who have not yet shared the vision, and intolerant of their ideals. Profoundly opposed to any kind of authority structure from within or without the movement and urgently pressing for direct personal participation by each individual, members of this new youth culture have a difficult time making collective decisions. They reveal a distinct intolerance in their refusal to listen to those outside the new culture and in their willingness to force others to their own views. They even show an elitist streak in their premise that the rest of the society must be brought to the policy positions which they believe are right. At the same time, they try very hard, and with extraordinary patience, to give each of their fellows an opportunity to be heard and to participate directly in decision-making. The new culture decisional style is founded on
the endless mass meeting at which there is no chairman and no agenda, and from which
the crowd or parts of the crowd melt away or move off into actions. Such crowds are, of
course, subject to easy manipulation by skillful agitators and sometimes become mobs.
But it must also be recognized that large, loose, floating crowds represent for participants
in the new youth culture the normal, friendly, natural way for human beings to come
together equally, to communicate, and to decide what to do. Seen from this perspective,
the reader may well imagine the general student response at Kent State, to the Governor's
order that the National Guard disperse all assemblies, peaceful or
otherwise. Practitioners of the new youth culture do not announce their program because
the movement is not primarily concerned with programs; it is concerned with how one
ought to live and what he ought to consider important in his daily life. The new culture is
still in the process of forming its values, programs and life style; at this point; therefore, it
is primarily a stance. A parallel to religious history is again instructive. For many (not
all) student activists and protestors, it is not really very important whether the protest
tactics employed will actually contribute to the political end allegedly sought. What is
important is that a protest be made -- that the individual protestor, for his own internal
salvation, stand up, declare the purity of his own heart, and take his stand. No student
protestor throwing a rock through a laboratory window believes that it will stop the
Indochina war, weapons research, or the advance of the feared technology -- but he
throws it in a mood of defiant exultation -- almost exaltation. He has taken his moral
stance. An important theme of this new culture is its oppositional relationship to the
larger society, as is suggested by the fact that one of its leading theorists has called it a
"counter culture". If the rest of the society wears short hair, the member of this youth
culture wears his hair long. If others are clean, he is dirty. If others drink alcohol and
illegalize marijuana, he denounces alcohol and smokes pot. If others work in large
organizations with massively complex technology, he works alone and makes sandals by
hand. If others live separated, he lives in a commune. If others are for for police and the
judges, he is for the accused and the prisoner. By these means, he declares himself an
alien in a large society with which he fundamentally is at odds. He will also resist when
the forces of the outside society seek to impose its tenets upon him. He is likely to see
police as the repressive minions of the outside culture imposing its law on him and on
other students by force or death, if necessary. He will likely try to urge others to join him
in changing the society about him, in the conviction that he is seeking to save that society
from bringing about its own destruction. He is likely to have apocalyptic visions of
impending doom of the whole social structure and the world. He is likely to have lost
hope that society can be brought to change through its own procedures. And if his
psychological make-up is of a particular kind, he may conclude that the only outlet for his
feelings is violence and terrorism. In recent years, some substantial number of students,
in the United States and abroad, have come to hold views along these lines. It is also true
that a very large fraction of American college students, probably a majority, could not be
said to be participants in any significant aspect of this cultural posture, except for its
music. As for the rest of the students, they are distributed over the entire spectrum that
ranges from no participation to full participation. A student may feel strongly about
anyone or more aspects of these views, and wholly, reject all the others. He may also
subscribe wholeheartedly to many of the philosophic assertions implied while occupying
any of hundreds of different possible positions on the questions of which tactics,
procedures, and actions he considers to be morally justifiable. Generalizations here are more than usually false. One student may adopt the outward appearance of the new culture and nothing else. Another may be a total devotee, except that he is a serious history scholar. Another student may agree completely on all the issues of war, race, pollution, and the like, and participate in protests over those matters, while disagreeing with all aspects of the youth culture lifestyle. A student may agree with the entire lifestyle, but be wholly uninterested in politics. Another new culture student who takes very seriously the compassion and life aspects may prove to be the best bulwark against resorts to violence. A student who rejects the new youth culture altogether may, nevertheless, be in the vanguard of those who seek to protect that culture against the outside world. And so forth. As is observed elsewhere in this report, to conclude that a student who has a beard is a student who would burn a building, or even sit-in in a building is wholly unwarranted. But almost no college student today is unaffected by the new youth culture in some way. If he is not included, his roommate or sister or girlfriend is. If protest breaks out on his campus, he is confronted with a personal decision about his role in it. In the poetry, music, movies, and plays that students see, the themes of the new culture are recurrent. Even the student who finds older values more comfortable for himself will, nevertheless, protect and support vigorously the privilege of other students who prefer the new youth culture. A vast majority of students are not adherents. But no significant group of students would join older generations in condemning those who are. And almost all students will condemn repressive efforts by the larger community to restrict or limit the life style, the art forms, and the non-violent political manifestations of the new youth culture. To most Americans, the development of the new youth culture is an unpleasant and often frightening phenomenon. And there is no doubt that the emergence of this student perspective has led to confrontations, injuries, and death. It is undeniable, too, that a tiny extreme fringe of fanatical devotees of the new culture have crossed the line over into outlawry and terrorism. There is a fearful and terrible irony here as, in the name of the law, police and National Guards have killed students, and some students under the new culture's banner of love and compassion have turned to burning and bombing. But the new youth culture itself is not a "problem" to which there is a "solution;" it is a mass social condition, a shift in basic cultural viewpoint. How long this emerging youth culture will last, and what course its future development will take, are open questions. But it does exist today, and it is the deeper cause of the emergence of the issues of race and war as objects of intense concern on the American campus.

Document Analysis

What are the commission’s views on campus violence? Do they blame a clearly defined group or situation?

In general terms, what are the commission’s suggestions to President Nixon? How does the commission perceive the “new youth culture”? Does the report condemn protests?