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Abbie Hoffman

Reflections on Student Activism

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February 6, 1988

Speech to the first National Student Convention,
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I guess you can't see my button. It says, "I fought tuition." It's a two part set, actually. The second button says, "And tuition won."

You should know that over 650 students have registered as delegates here, representing over 130 different schools. You have come despite freezing weather and hard economic times to do something that I'm not sure anybody is yet ready to comprehend. I'm absolutely convinced that you are making history just by being here. You are proving that the image of the American college student as a career-interested, marriage-interested, self centered yuppie is absolutely outdated, that a new age is on the rise, a new college student.

There's been a lot of talk about comparing today to what went on in the sixties. I would remind you that in 1960, when we started the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee to fight in the South in the civil rights movement, less than 30 people came together to begin it. The famous Students for a Democratic Society, which we're all reading about, was formed in 1962 with exactly 59 people. No one before this has done anything this bold, imaginative, creative, and daring to bring together this many different strains of people, who all believe in radical change in our society. It is just an amazing feat. And I wish you the best of luck today, and especially tomorrow, when you have to decide whether to go forward or backward. I'd also like to take this moment to salute our glorious actor-in chief: Happy Birthday Ronald Reagan! I don't believe anyone in here believes its "Good morning in America" tonight.

I have a lot of speeches in my head: On the CIA, urine testing, nuclear power, saving water — that's my local battle. We're fighting the Philadelphia Electric Company's attempt to steal the waters of the Delaware River for yet another nuclear plant. A local battle? I don't know. One out of ten Americans drink from that river. I also speak on the modern history of the student protest and on Central America, where I've been five times. Every time I get before a microphone I'm extremely nervous that chromosome damage and Alzheimer's will take their toll. I'll come out foaming at the mouth, accusing the CIA of pissing in the nuclear plants, to poison the water, to burn out the minds of youth, so they'll be easy cannon fodder for the Pentagon's war in Central America. Actually that's probably not a bad speech.

On Tuesday I had to give a speech at the local grammar school to nine year-olds. I said, "Go ahead, pick any subject you want." They wanted to hear about hippies. My 16-year old kid, America, heard me give this speech about how you can't have political and social change without cultural change as well, and he said, "Daddy, you're not gonna bring back the hippies are you? The hippies go to Van Halen concerts, get drunk, throw up on their sweatshirts and beat up all the punks in town." I said, "Okay, no hippies." That was last year, this year he's changed his mind. His mother and I were activists in the sixties, and he heard all the anti-war stories over and over again, never believed any of it. Then one night last spring he saw the documentary "Twenty Years Ago Today" about the effect of the Beatles' Sergeant Peppers Lonely Hearts Club Band on us all. It's about the only thing I'm ever going to recommend to anybody about the sixties, a simply brilliant documentary. He sat there watching cops fight with the young people in the streets, people put flowers at the Pentagon in the soldiers' bayonets, and the Pentagon rise in the air, he saw it move just like we said it did. Tears cam streaming out his eyes, and he called up and said, "Daddy, why was I born now? I should have been a hippie."

When I went to college long ago there was a ritual that we all had to go through at freshman induction. We were herded into a big room and the dean of admissions came and gave us a famous speech, "Look to your right, look to your left, one of you three won't be here in four years when it comes time to graduate." I'm going to say to you, "Look to your right, look to your left, two of you three won't be here in four years." That's about the attrition rate of the left. I'm sure that many of the people who want to organize interplanetary space connections have got everything worked out with Shirley MacLaine, and it's Okay with me that they become moonies and yuppies and then borne-again Mormons. They're not the ones who keep me up at night. But I worry about the good organizers, the successful organizers. You're the ones who know you can actually get better at this, that you can get good at it. You know that being on the side of the angels, being right, isn't enough. To succeed you also have to work very hard with lots of cooperation from those around you. You have your wits about you continuously,

middle-aged. Young people have daring, creativity, imagination and personal computers. Above all, what you have as young people that's vitally needed to make social change, is impatience. You want it to happen now. There have to be enough people that say, "We want it right now, in our lifetime." We want to see apartheid in South Africa come down right now. We want to see the war in Central America stop right now. We want the CIA off our campus right now. We want an end to sexual harassment in our community right now. This is your movement. This is you opportunity.

Be adventurers in the same sense of being bold and daring. Be opportunists and seize this opportunity, this moment in history, to go out and save our country. It's your turn now. Thank you.

the t.v. and start reading the Bible, and Postman just wants us to shut off the t.v. They are critics of t.v., but they are not organizers. A lot of people say, “Abbie, you just perform for the media, that’s your duty, you manipulate,” a lot of things like that. This is a misconception. I have never in my life done anything for the media. I’m speaking to you through a microphone because my voice is soft, and I couldn’t reach all of you unless I used it. That’s why I use the microphone. But my words are not for this goddam microphone. If you want to reach hundred of thousands or millions of people, you have to use the media and television. Television has an immense impact on our lives. We don’t read, we just look at things. We don’t gather information in an intellectual way, we just want to keep in touch.

As bad as it is, television has the ability to penetrate our fantasy world. That’s why the images are at first quick and action-packed, very short, very limited and very specific, and afterwards vague, blurry and distorted. How can these images not be very important? They determine our view of the world. We in New England would not have known there was a civil rights movement in the South. We would not have known racism existed, that blacks were getting lynched, that blacks were not getting service at a Woolworth counter, if it hadn’t been for television. We weren’t taught it in our schools or churches. We had to see it and feel it with our eyes. You have to use that medium to get across that image that students have changed. YOU have to show it to them. Let the world watch, just like we watch students in the Gaza strip fight for their freedom and justice, students in Johannesburg, in El Salvador, In Central America, In the Phillipines fight for their freedom.

One hundred and thirty schools represented here today out of 5,000 colleges and universities in America reminds us that going against the grain at the University of South Dakota or Louisiana Stat is a very tough, lonely job. You have to feel that you’re part of something bigger. You want to know that there’s a movement out there. That’s where the role of a national student organization becomes so important, giving hope and comfort to people that are out there trying to make change at a grassroots level.

The student movement is a global movement. It is always the young that make the change. You don’t get these ideas when you’re

show up on time, and follow through. These are the things that take place behind the scenes that keep you aimed a goal, at victory, at success. And I worry because somehow on the left, all too often, it’s like three people in a phone booth trying to get out. Two are really trying to kick the third one out, and that’s how they spend all their time. The third one’s always called some dirty name that ends in an “ist.” It’s been a movement that devours its own. I look out at you and I think of my comrades, not the people you saw in The Big Chill, but people that were great movement organizers. You know some of their names, and many others you don’t know. They risked not just their careers, marriage plans, and ostracism from their family, but their lives. They faced mobs with chains and brass knuckles, the clubs of the police, the dirty tricks and infiltrations of the FBI, and the CIA, Army intelligence, Navy intelligence, and local red squads all around the country. They had pressure put on their families. They were prepared for all this from the moment they decided to go against the grain and take on the powers that be. They were not prepared for the infighting. They were not prepared for a movement that devours itself. That has got to cease. I remember a very free and open democratic meeting in a room in New York City in 1971. All the various strains were there. There was one group that disagreed with the decision making structure that had been set up. They wanted to settle their differences with the majority so they came armed with baseball bats. I can’t remember the groups name — it was the National Labor Committee or Caucus — but I do remember the name of it’s leader, Lynn Marcus, better known today as Lyndon LaRouche.

The movement has had its share of other problems. We are too issue-oriented and not practical enough. We debate issues endlessly, Deciding whose issue is more important than whose other issue, and so letting the moment of opportunity in history pass. By that time there’s another issue There that’s outstripped the other two. We debate which “ism” is more important than which other “ism”, and I agree that all the isms lead to schisms which lead to wasms. We need a new language as we enter the next century.

We need to be rid of the false dichotomies. There’s been a big discussion going on for the last couple of days here about whether

the organizing focus should be local, regional, national, or interplanetary. I have never seen a national issue won that wasn't based on grassroots organizing and support. On the other hand, I have never seen a local issue won that didn't rely on outside support and outside agitators. Another false dichotomy is one that I call "In the system/out of the system." Between inside the system and outside it is a semipermeable membrane. And either-or is only a metaphysical question, not a practical one. The correct stance, especially now in these times, is one foot in the street — the foot of courage, that gets off the curbstone of indifference — and one foot in the system — the intelligent foot, the one that learns how to develop strategies, to build coalitions, to negotiate differences, to raise money, to do mailing lists, to make use of the electronic media. You need that foot too. The brave foot goes out into the street to strike out against the enculturation process that says: "Stay indoors," "Don't go out into the street," "You lose your job in the street," "There's crime in the street," "You'll be homeless," "It's terrible," "Yecch." Civil disobedience — blocking trucks, digging up the soil, occupying the buildings, chaining yourself to fences (I spent my summer vacation chained to a fence) — can be a necessary act of courage, but it doesn't take a hell of a lot of brains.

Decision making has been a problem on the left. In the sixties we always made decisions by consensus. By 1970, when you had 15 people show up and three were FBI agents and six were schizophrenics, universal agreement was getting to be a problem. I call it "The Curse of Consensus Decision Making," because in the end consensus decision making is rule of the minority: the easiest form to manipulate, the easiest way to block any real decision making. Trying to get everyone to agree takes forever. Usually the people are broke, without alternatives, with no new language, just competing to see who can burn the shit out of the other the most. There must be a spirit of agreement and in this way most decisions are made by consensus, but there must also be a format whereby you can express your differences. The democratic parliamentary procedure — majority rule — is the toughest to stack, because in order to really get your point across you've got to go out and get more people to come in to have the votes the next time around.

My vision of America is not as cheery and optimistic as it might be. I agree with Charles Dickens, "These are the worst of times, these are the worst of times." Look at the institutions around us. Financial institutions, bankrupt; religious institutions, immoral; communications institutions don't communicate; educational institutions don't educate. A poll yesterday showed that 48% of Americans want someone else to run than the current candidates. The last election in 1987 had the lowest turnout since 1942. There are people that say to a gathering such as this — students taking their proper role in the front lines of social change in America, fighting for peace and justice — that this is not the time. This is not the time? You could never have had a better time in history than right now.

My fingers are crossed because I hope that you won't let the internal difference divide you. I hope that you'll be able to focus on the real enemies that are out there. In the late sixties we were so fed up we wanted to destroy it all. That's when we changed the name of America and stuck in the "k." The mood is different today, and the language that will respond to today's mood will be different. Things are so deteriorated in this society, that it's not up to you to destroy America, it's up to you to go out and save America. The same impulse that helped us fight our way out of one empire 200 years ago must help us get free of the Holy Financial Empire today. The transnationals — with their money in Switzerland, headquarters in Luxembourg, ships in tax-free Panama, natural resources all over the emerging world, and their sleepy consumers in the United States — do not have the interest of the United States at heart. Ronald Reagan and the CIA are traitors to America, they have sold it to the Holy Financial Empire. The enemy is out there, he's not in this room. People are allowed to have different visions and different views, but you have to have unity.

You also have to communicate a message and to do that you have to have a medium. We know television as the boob tube. We know educational television as an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms. We know it from reading fake intellectuals like Alan Bloom and his Closing of the American Mind, or from reading good ones like Neil Postman, whose Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Showbiz is a wonderful book. Bloom wants us to shut off