

Confrontation and Consequences

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IN thinking about confrontation in contemporary American life, much depends upon the meaning which we give to words. If confrontation means facing up to genuine evils in our society--for instance, war, pollution, overpopulation, racism, bureaucracy, ghettos--and attempting through social action utilizing the ballot box and the political process to exercise all of the rights guaranteed to Americans in the Constitution while respecting the civil liberties of all, then I fervently believe in confrontation. If confrontation means burning buildings, rioting, bombing institutions, killing people, and engaging in violence against persons and property, then I equally fervently do not believe in confrontation.

But in contemporary experience confrontation usually means a pattern which falls between these two definitions. Contemporary confrontation differs from any working for social change within the democratic rules of procedure in that such confrontation rejects the use of the accepted channels and refuses to play according to the ground rules which characterize the going system. Contemporary confrontation also differs from arson, riot, bombing, and killing in that it takes the form of a variety of ways of blocking procedures without physical or personal violence. Confrontation often takes the form of various kinds of passive resistance, such as sit-ins and sleep-ins which block corridors, occupy offices, and generally keep normal operations from proceeding. It also takes the active form of disruption through drowning out speakers with obscenities and interruptions, and through taking over platforms by preempting microphones.

Three arguments are often made for confrontation of the type which rejects accepted channels and uses either passive resistance or active disruption.

One argument is that it is an effective way to get speedy attention to a problem. Proponents of confrontation point out that institutional bureaucracies are glacially slow when they move at all. We in education do not have to look far afield to find illustrations.

A second argument advanced for confrontation is that it does result in change. Proponents cite abundant evidence supporting this argument: for instance, largely in response to confrontation, black studies programs in colleges and universities have been established, student representation on college and university committees has grown, consultation with students on the high school level has increased, and gradual withdrawal has replaced the acceleration of the war in Vietnam.

The third argument for confrontation which is frequently advanced is that violation of the rules of the game, whether they be violations of customs, laws, patterns, or procedures, is sometimes necessary. Spokesmen for confrontation point out that our forefathers recognized that violation is sometimes necessary and that the American nation itself was born out of an extreme form of confrontation, revolution.

The arguments for confrontation can be summarized as (1) it is the best way to get speedy attention to a problem, (2) it does change things, (3) to achieve change, violation of the established ways even through resort to revolution is sometimes necessary.

What is the alternative to confrontation? The opposite of, confrontation is achieving change within the going system, within the accepted legal structure of things, whether through present channels and processes or through majority action creating new channels and processes.

Three arguments are also advanced for achieving change within the going system.

The first argument is that bringing about change within the going system is the democratic procedure. It utilizes the voice of people through the ballot box and through representatives who proceed through parliamentary processes. The democratic way of achieving social change, while not perfect, is still the best procedure we have or are likely to develop. Democracy has its difficulties, proponents admit, yet it is infinitely preferable to each man doing his own thing in the anarchy of confrontation.

The second argument for working within the going system is that changes do come about, though sometimes slowly. And, say the proponents of working within the system, eventually the good causes win out. For instances, the long fight through legal procedures and democratic processes was eventually won by the spokesmen for the American Negroes who struggled against the "separate but equal doctrine" and achieved the desegregation decision of the Supreme Court in 1954 and the Civil Rights Law of 1958.

The third argument for change within the system is that present procedures provide a mechanism for the voice of the people to be heard through orderly change rather than the disruptions of revolution. As Senator Hollings recently said, "Our problems cannot be solved in the streets. A just society cannot be built on the ashes of burned buildings or the beaten bodies of those with whom we disagree. A just society cannot be built when so many of us sit home in front of the TV, cheering for our side as our adversaries receive their comeuppance. No problem confronts this country which cannot be solved within the system. We must all do our part. The citizen must rededicate himself to the spirit of tolerance and compromise that makes meaningful change possible."

The arguments for working within the present system are (1) it is the democratic way, (2) it eventually results in needed change, (3) it provides for orderly change without resort to the disruption of revolution.

In a specific situation we Americans must use our intelligence as we consider the probable consequences of our support of the technique of confrontation or of working within the going system. Any reason, the fashionable skeptic may ask? Because reason is what distinguishes man from the lower animals. Because throughout history man has tried alternatives to dependence upon the use of intelligence by the common man and the alternatives have failed dismally. Mankind has a long experience of the fixed and final

answers determined by the all-knowing aristocrats, the tyrants, the dictators, the clericals. Mankind has found that these approaches advance the interest of the powerful but that the common man comes off badly. Man has found no substitute for human beings attempting to think their way through.

Again and again in specific situations you and I will be offered the alternative of confrontation or change within the going system and called upon to use our reason in order to judge probable consequences. I advise all of us to think hard as to probable consequences before too readily accepting confrontation.

Admittedly, in the short run, confrontation does work. But, in the long run, it so weakens the social structure and the whole fragile web of human relationships that chaos looms. Despite weaknesses, constitutional law is better than the law of the jungle. Despite their weaknesses, the electoral procedures and the hard-won parliamentary processes are better than converting life into that eternal king of the hill game played by youngsters who storm up the hill to drag down any and all.

Before we too readily accept the technique of confrontation in specific situations, let us bear in mind that this is a game at which all can play. If confrontation is the name of the game, it can be played by hard hats as well as radical students. It can be played by both fascists and communists. It can be played by white segregationists as well as black separatists. (I remember all too vividly a night in Nashville, Tennessee, in 1955 when I had served as chairman of a group of black and white citizens who met in peaceful assembly to discuss how to achieve desegregation of the Nashville schools. We went out on the streets to find that the tires of our cars had been ice-picked by the white segregationists. In the darkness of the night we waited for the coming attack, and when we got home we closed the blinds against the possibility of flying glass. But that night the segregationists thought that ice-picking was sufficient.)

This is not to say that reason will not sometimes support confrontation, despite grave risks to social order. I can understand reasonable men deciding to support Gandhi in India in his confrontation with British imperialists. I can understand reasonable men deciding to support Martin Luther King in Alabama in his confrontation with a system rigged for white supremacy. I can understand Thomas Jefferson, that paragon of reason, and the brilliant colonial leaders who pledged their lives and honors and fortune to the cause of revolution as they signed the Declaration of Independence which Jefferson wrote. I recognize that reason may sometimes find confrontation an essential way of proceeding.

But read that Declaration of Independence again with care. Most of the document is given over to describing the injuries and abuses of an absolute tyranny. In the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson and the colonists warned, "Prudence, indeed, will dictate that governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes."

If reason ever impels you to enter into confrontation, it had best be after you have really genuinely tried to work through the going system. Better be sure that what you confront

is actually despotism rather than the necessary fumbings or delays which sometimes characterize democratic enterprises. And better be sure that your cause is neither light nor transient.

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