

"Counter-Protest" was a misnomer

Last Friday I and a group of other concerned students held a demonstration to protest apartheid and put forward an idea about what Grinnell should do about it. Needless to say, I was stunned to read in the last issue of this paper nothing but condemnation of what we did. After reflecting on the matter and attending a Students to End Apartheid meeting, I find the whole affair rather curious, and hence I will devote my column to exploring this condemnation.

The criticism which met our demonstration was two-fold. First it contended that our proposal to the Trustees was self-serving puffery designed to give support to apartheid. Second, it asserted that not only was our proposal superficial and helpful to apartheid, it was also exactly what Students to End Apartheid has been working for, and was therefore redundant! The result was paradoxical comments like that of the S&B's editor, who called our position "obnoxious" and simply a chance for us to "[seize] another opportunity to blow their horns as conservatives" thereby endangering "this College's efforts to end its proxy support of a Racist machine." At the same time, however, this same position was described as "no different than the call made by Students to End Apartheid." When the dust settled, our position was condemned for being ignorant of the facts,

inhuman regarding the plight of black South Africans, and repetitive of SEA's position. On all three counts I and the twenty-nine others present at our demonstration plead "not guilty."

First, none of us are ignorant about South Africa, divestment, or apartheid. Indeed, one can hardly attend this college without being exposed to the issue. So it was with all of our demonstrators. We know about the hundreds of South Africans killed and the thousands more unjustly im-

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prisoned by the cruelty and moral paucity of apartheid. We simply came to the conclusion that economic expansion, not economic hardship, will provide the incentive for South Africa to rid itself of apartheid through the combined forces of greed for profits and fear of social unrest.

Second, we are not, as Mr. "Frank Talk" implied, inhuman. We do not desire the continuation of apartheid, nor did we urge the Trustees to "invest" in it, as Mr. Talk suggested. Were Mr. Talk familiar with the Sullivan Accords, he would know that they not only call for "petty things" like

desegregated dining facilities, but also for equal hiring and pay practices. Finally, we — like SEA — have never proclaimed ourselves to be the "masters" of South Africa's destiny. Like all Grinnell students, we are affected by the issue of divestment, and felt that we had to voice our opinions. That we disagree with Mr. Talk is insufficient justification for his misrepresentation of our protest as a conscious attempt to "come forward with reasons why apartheid should . . . survive."

Third, we stated that full divestment should not be considered by this College. SEA disagrees. In its "Preliminary Outline of Divestment Proposal" which it submitted to the Trustees last weekend, SEA states that "It is in the interest of the . . . College . . . to divest that portion of the College's endowment currently invested in mult-national corporations having substantial or strategic involvement in . . . South Africa." The Outline proposes that definitions of "substantial or strategic" be developed and advocates divestment in those companies. It further states that the "Sullivan Principles [are] not adequate" bases for action regarding apartheid and divestment, and concludes by stating "Divestiture of South Africa related holdings is the next logical step."

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Retrospect on Central America

"Let us again transform the Western Hemisphere into a vast crucible of revolutionary ideas and efforts." John F. Kennedy, March 1961, Announcement of the Alliance for Progress

Walter LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America*, New York: W.W. Norton Company, 1984.

From a retrospective vantage point on 1984, one has no trouble recognizing the empty rhetorical mandates of the leaders of nations. They are not unique. What is interesting about Kennedy's announcement is not the plea, but the prophecy. Nearly twenty-four years after he ordered a transformation on the continent, revolution has come to the West. The irony lies in the actions of the U.S. government, which has continually fought to prevent these revolutions, all the while undermining its desires by pursuing policies which have

ultimately nurtured the causes of revolution.

LaFeber's "Inevitable Revolutions" focuses both on the respective histories of the Central American nations during the post-colonial era, and on the evolution of U.S. policy on the continent during the corresponding years. The author argues that even when it was clear that U.S. policy was

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not achieving its desired end (i.e. Nicaragua in 1979), the president involved was either unwilling or unable to adjust to the needs of the particular situation.

LaFeber illustrates the rigidity of U.S. policy by pointing to the major common

thread from Kennedy's Alliance for Progress through Reagan's AID plan: the assumption that "the larger a nation's economy grows, the happier that nation has to be."

Even before the 1960's Latin American history had a lesson to offer the U.S. leaders concerning the fallibility of the above assumption. During the decade which culminated in the Cuban revolution, Cuba had experienced the highest per capita national income in the region. However in Cuba as in Central America, the causes of revolution may be found largely in the distribution of wealth. U.S. policy-makers between 1961 and the present have been fettered by an inability to account for this fundamental inequity when formulating U.S. policy.

Two years after the Cuban revolution, Kennedy had designed the Alliance for

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Thus several important differences between our position and SEA's become apparent. We believe the Sullivan Accords, though not the final solution to apartheid, are the first and best means available to the college to help bring about apartheid's demise — in short, they are adequate. Nor do we agree with SEA's apparent divestiture priorities. As our letter to the Trustees stated, it is precisely the substantial involvement targeted by the Outline which we feel is the strongest potential engine for change in South Africa. Thus, for us, limited divestment is only a stick to prod recalcitrant companies into implementing the letter and spirit of the Sullivan Accords while relying on further economic growth to force more change in South Africa. For SEA, it is a tactic toward a final goal, allowing divestment in at least some companies if not all. As one member of the group put it, limited divestment is "something the trustees are most likely to accept without sacrificing our ultimate goals." It seems then that we and SEA have the same final goal (the end of apartheid) — we just disagree on how to achieve it.

Thus we were neither ignorant, inhuman, nor redundant. In fact, according to the SB, our strategy and SEA's, though ultimately different, were congruent on several points (e.g., the advocacy of

limited divestment as a desirable option), and our final aims were identical. Why, then, was the impression of intense conflict and hostility allowed to dominate this paper's coverage of events?

The answer lies in that this paper chose not to focus on demonstrations of contrasting opinions both dedicated to ending apartheid, but chose instead to portray an imagined battle of social groups. This paper took one look at who we were, how we were dressed, and what extra-curricular activities we may (or may not) have participated in and concluded ipso facto that we could be nothing else but ignorant, inhuman, horn-blowing conservative/Young Republicans who could not sincerely be concerned with apartheid or Grinnell's reaction to it. Hence the S&B's labeling us "counter-protestors" when in fact we never described ourselves as such. Hence the editorial judgement that we were "conservatives" protesting the "commie/liberal/hippies" on campus when, in fact, no effort was made on the part of the SB to ask any of us thirty-odd demonstrators about our political philosophies. (For what it's worth, allow me to point out that of the thirty "conservatives" at our demonstration, fully three had attended a Young Republican meeting, and only five have written for *The Outcry*). Finally, how can the members of SEA be justifiably described as "commie/liberal/hippies" when no one

in this whole affair — save for the S&B editor — ever labeled them as such?

In conclusion, the S&B's coverage of last Friday's events is best described by the words of a famous publisher: "You supply the pictures and I'll supply the war." Rather than give in-depth coverage to two groups of concerned students trying to eliminate apartheid, this paper played up the "counter-protest" angle it created to the point where the real issues of apartheid and Grinnell's reaction to it took second place. Thus a disservice was done to ourselves, SEA (whose activities regarding the Trustees' visit went wholly unreported), and to the campus at large.

A Clarifying Post-Script: I would like to thank SEA for inviting me to attend its last meeting and for answering my questions about the group frankly and hospitably. Mr. Ragen of SEA was quite right to suggest that it would have behooved us to attend an SEA meeting so that we might coordinate our efforts last Friday. But in all honesty, it must be said that for years SEA and its predecessors have repeatedly and publicly advocated nothing but full divestment. Thus we had no reason to believe that our impressions of SEA's direction were not accurate. Though I disagree with the desirability of complete divestment, I have nothing but praise for SEA's long tradition of opposing apartheid, and find its more recent approach of selected divestment laudable.

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Progress in order to prevent other Castroesque revolutions in the Americas. In his haste to prevent the spread of tough revolutionaries in the tradition of Castro, Kennedy lost sight of the cause of revolution: poverty. Castro was a symptom of the nationalist uprising; the U.S. treated him as a cause. The Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 was a good example of the U.S. policy on Cuba as it grew out of the Alliance. Castro had to be isolated in order for the alliance to be successful, for he was seen as a threat to continental stability. The Cuban Missile Crisis was thought to be a success for Kennedy: Castro was isolated. But the poverty-stricken Central American nations continued to steep in popular discontent.

It was during the early years of the Alliance that Kennedy began to build counter-insurgency forces in countries like El Salvador. Today's infamous Salvadoran "death squads" and none other than the special police forces that Kennedy founded between 1961 and 1963. Policing the continent received more attention than alleviating the overwhelming poverty of the vast majority of its inhabitants. During those early years of the Alliance revolutionary activity was first seen on the continent. In 1961 the FSLN began to cause trouble for the National Guard in Nicaragua. Interestingly enough, the FSLN was formed by Nicaraguan nationalists in La Havana, precisely the kind of

event that the U.S. tried to prevent.

During the Johnson years and spilling over into the Nixon administration, the Alliance underwent a number of changes, and by 1970 was dead, except for the wealth of violent reactionary police forces it left in various counties across the Central American isthmus. The Johnson years through 1965 were marked by a reduction of government programs for development, and an increased promotion of private investment, which often times was, in practice, foreign investment. Private investment has proven antithetical to any desire to relieve poverty. In the case of Nicaragua, the first half of the decade saw a 20 percent increase in exports, almost wholly in the agricultural sector of the economy. On one hand, this trend left a large number of Nicaraguans without food. On the other hand it introduced a situation which forced masses of destitute farmers to sell what little land they had to a few "latifundistas," (for example, the Somoza family owned 30 percent of Nicaragua's land). This phenomenon precipitated the rural-urban exodus in Nicaragua, as was the case in both El Salvador and Guatemala. All three situations were marked by large-scale rural-urban migrations, further intensifying the popular discontent.

At the end of the decade what was left of the Alliance was purely military. Military aid to Guatemala and Nicaragua had doubled between 1964 and 1963. Nicaragua,

El Salvador and Guatemala all experience revolutionary activity by the end of the decade. The U.S. response was to send military advisors to the region to train local armies in counter-insurgency techniques. This era sealed the U.S. commitment to the forces in Central American which were often the oppressors, but never the oppressed. Only Costa Rica escaped the trend. LaFeber suggests that this occurred because Costa Rica had traditionally been a system which more readily allowed aid to filter down fairly through society. As for most of the region, stability came not from a tolerable distribution of land or food, but through U.S. backed repression.

The tradition of U.S. policy in the region is a continuum, illustrated today by Reagan's continued aid to oppressive militaristic oligarchies in Guatemala and El Salvador, and further characterized by his brazen disrespect for international law, illustrated by the funding and training of counter-revolutionary forces dedicated to upsetting Sandinista Nicaragua. Where the U.S. had attempted to exorcise the causes of revolution, it has energetically directed its efforts at the flowers of the revolution rather than the roots. This has usually worked against U.S. interests. Were the U.S. policy-makers to take a closer look at the lessons that history offers, maybe they could upset the status of their policies. The only other alternative, as LaFeber suggests, may be the inevitable revolutions.