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Office of the White House Press Secretary

THE WHITE HOUSE

STATEMENT BY THE PRESIDENT

This week the Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare has sent a letter to the presidents of the institutions of higher education in the nation calling attention to the provisions enacted in law by the 90th Congress which provide for the withdrawal of various forms of federal support to students found guilty of violation of criminal statutes in connection with campus disorders.

He did this in the exercise of his responsibility as the Cabinet officer chiefly charged with the routine enforcement of federal laws pertaining to education, however, the state of our campuses have for some time been anything but routine.

I should like to take this occasion to make some more general comments which I hope may be of some assistance in moderating the present turmoil.

First, a measure of perspective is in order with regard to the action of the previous Congress. The new regulations are moderate, and they are justified. It is one of the oldest of the practices of universities and colleges that privileges of various kinds are withdrawn from students judged to have violated the rules and regulations of their institution. Congress has done no more than to withdraw federal assistance from those students judged, not by university regulations, but by courts of law, to have violated criminal statutes. Almost by definition, given the present tactics of disruption, anyone so convicted may fairly be assumed to have been assaulting the processes of free inquiry which are the very life of learning. Any society that will not protect itself against such assault exhibits precious little respect for intellect, compared to which the issue of public order is very near to de minimis.

For there is a second issue, of far greater concern to me, and, as I believe, to the Congress, to the American people generally, and the faculties and students of American colleges and universities especially. That is the preservation of the integrity, the independence, and the creativity of our institutions of higher learning.

Freedom -- intellectual freedom -- is in danger in America. The nature and content of that danger is as clear as any one thing could be. Violence -- physical violence, physical intimidation -- is seemingly on its way to becoming an accepted, or at all events a normal and not to be avoided element in the clash of opinion within university confines. Increasingly it is clear that this violence is directed to a clearly perceived and altogether too conceivable objective: not only to politicize the student bodies of our educational institutions, but to politicize the institutions as well. Anyone with the least understanding of the history of freedom will know that this has invariably meant not only political disaster to those nations that have submitted to such forces of obfuscation and repression, but cultural calamity as well. It is not too strong a statement to declare that this is the way civilizations begin to die.

The process is altogether too familiar to those who would survey the wreckage of history. Assault and counter assault, one extreme leading to the opposite extreme; the voices of reason and calm discredited. As Yeats foresaw: "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold. . ." None of us has the right to suppose it cannot happen here.

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The first thing to do at such moments is to reassert first principles. The federal government cannot, should not -- must not -- enforce such principles. That is fundamentally the task and the responsibility of the university community. But any may state what these principles are, for they are as widely understood as they are cherished.

First, that universities and colleges are places of excellence in which men are judged by achievement and merit in defined areas. The independence and competence of the faculty, the commitment, and equally the competence of the student body, are matters not to be compromised. The singular fact of American society -- the fact which very likely distinguishes us most markedly from any other nation on earth, is that in the untroubled pursuit of an application of this principle we have created the largest, most democratic, most open system of higher learning in history. None need fear the continued application of those principles; but all must dread their erosion. The second principle -- and I would argue, the only other -- is that violence or the threat of violence may never be permitted to influence the actions or judgments of the university community. Once it does the community, almost by definition, ceases to be a university.

It is for this reason that from time immemorial expulsion has been the primary instrument of university discipline. Those who would not abide the rules of the community of learning have simply been required to leave it, for any other form of coercion would cause that community to change its fundamental nature.

The difficulty of this moment, as of most times when fundamental principles are challenged, is that many of those posing the challenges, and even more of those supporting them, are responding to very basic problems. To reassert, in the face of student protest, the first principles of academic freedom, while ignoring the issues that are foremost in the minds of those students, is less than inglorious: it is slothful, and dishonest, an affront to those principles and in the end futile.

Students today point to many wrongs which must be made right:

- We have seen a depersonalization of the educational experience. Our institutions must reshape themselves lest this turns to total alienation.
- Student unrest does not exist in a vacuum but reflects a deep and growing social unrest affecting much of our world today. Self-righteous indignation by society will solve none of this. We must resolve the internal contradictions of our communities.
- There must be university reform including new experimentation in curricula such as ethnic studies, student involvement in the decision-making process and a new emphasis in faculty teaching.

I have directed the Department of Health, Education and Welfare to launch new initiatives toward easing tensions in our educational community.

This administration will always be receptive to suggestions for constructive reform. But the forces of separation and non-reason must be replaced by vigorous, persuasive and lawful efforts for constructive change.

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