

J. Edgar Hoover on campus unrest, 1970

Introduction

In September 1970, J. Edgar Hoover composed an open letter to American students detailing his view on civil unrest at the nation's colleges and universities and warning against the elements he believed responsible. Hoover opened with the empathetic assertion that "[t]here's nothing wrong with student dissent or student demands for changes in society or the display of student unhappiness over aspects of our national policy." Hoover drew a line, however, between "legitimate" student dissent and "extremism." Extremists "ridicule the flag, poke fun at American institutions, seek to destroy our society," he wrote, and their actions "led to violence, lawlessness, and disrespect for the rights of others on many college campuses during the past year."

Hoover's remarks were a reaction to the increase in violence across the nation's campuses, most notably the shootings at Kent State just four months prior to this letter. At Kent State, during a protest against American escalation of the Vietnam War, four students were killed and nine others injured when the Ohio National Guard opened fire on protesters. Hoover's letter placed the blame for the violence squarely on the protesters who "have no rational, intelligent plan of the future either for the university or the Nation."

Hoover's tone was contemptuous of extremists and condescending toward the students "lured in" by their message. Accompanying Hoover's letter is a memo from President Richard Nixon communicating his request that "the message it contains will reach as many students as possible."

EXCERPT

There's nothing wrong with student dissent or student demands for changes in society or the display of student unhappiness over aspects of our national policy. Student opinion is a legitimate aspect of public opinion in our society. . . .

But there is real ground for concern about the extremism which led to violence, lawlessness, and disrespect for the rights of others on many college campuses during the past year. The extremists are a small minority of students and faculty members who have lost faith in America. They ridicule the flag, poke fun at American institutions, seek to destroy our society. They are not interested in genuine reform. They take advantage of the tensions, strife, and often legitimate frustrations of students to promote campus chaos. They have no rational, intelligent plan of the future either for the university or the Nation. . . .

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Based on our experience in the FBI, here are some of the ways in which extremists will try to lure you into their activities:

1. They'll encourage you to lose respect for your parents and the older generation. . . .
2. They'll try to convert you to the idea that your college is "irrelevant" and a "tool of the Establishment. . . ."
3. They'll ask you to abandon your basic common sense. . . .
4. They'll try to envelop you in a mood of negativism, pessimism, and alienation toward yourself, your school, your Nation. . . .
5. They'll encourage you to disrespect the law and hate the law enforcement officer. . . .
6. They'll tell you that any action is honorable and right if it's "sincere" or "idealistic" in motivation. . . .
7. They'll ask you to believe that you, as a student and citizen, are powerless by democratic means to effect change in our society. . . .
8. They'll encourage you to hurl bricks and stones instead of logical argument at those who disagree with your views. . . .

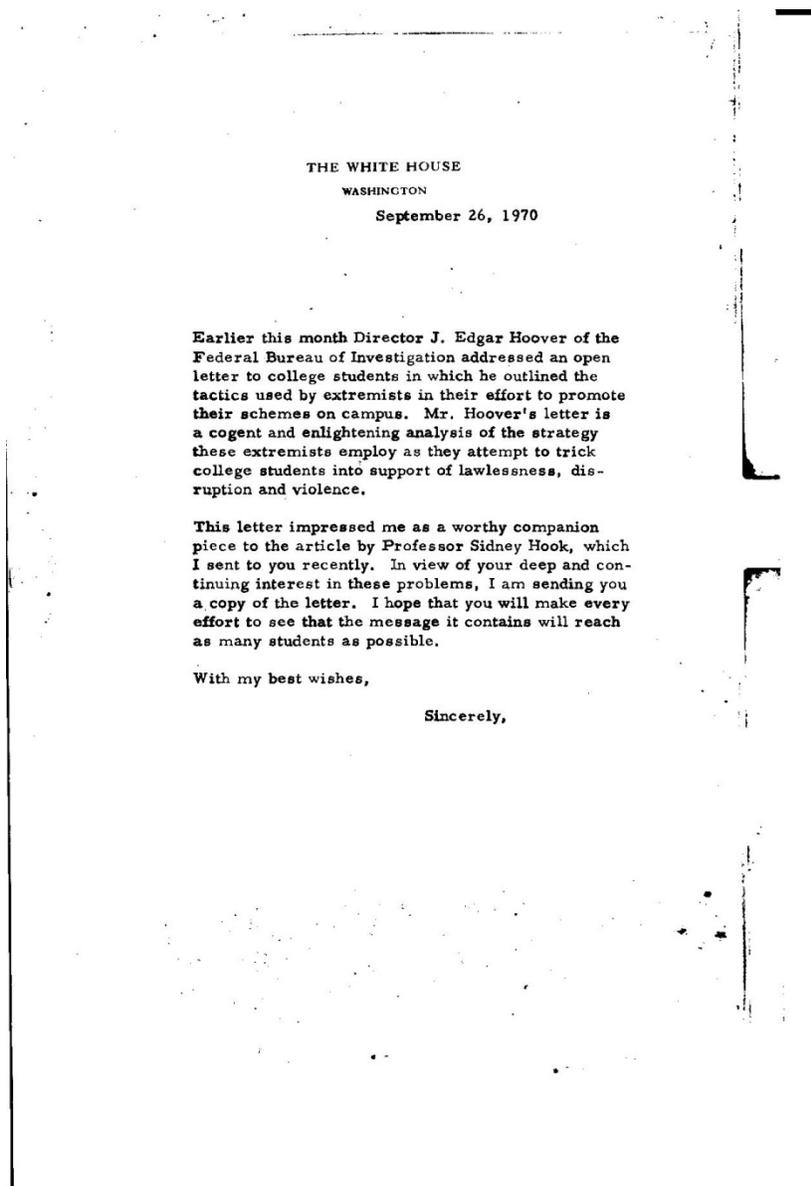
An Open Letter to College Students from J. Edgar Hoover, September 21, 1970, with cover letter from President Richard Nixon. (Nixon Library and Museum, Folder Campus Unrest [3 of 8]; Box 20; Subject File 1; WHCF: SMOF: Daniel Patrick Moynihan, online at <https://www.nixonlibrary.gov/sites/default/files/virtuallibrary/documents/jul10/58.pdf>)

Questions for Discussion

1. Explain why FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover specifically addressed his letter to college students.
2. How did J. Edgar Hoover define "legitimate" protest? Was it a matter of the issue, the form, or the scale of protest?
3. Why did President Nixon support Hoover's message?

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Image



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OFFICE OF THE DIRECTOR



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE
FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20535

September 21, 1970

AN OPEN LETTER TO COLLEGE STUDENTS

from

John Edgar Hoover, Director
Federal Bureau of Investigation
United States Department of Justice

As a 1970 college student, you belong to the best educated, most sophisticated, most poised generation in our history.

The vast majority of you, I am convinced, sincerely love America and want to make it a better country.

You do have ideas of your own - and that's good.

You see things wrong in our society which we adults perhaps have minimized or overlooked. You are outspoken and frank and hate hypocrisy. That is good too.

There's nothing wrong with student dissent or student demands for changes in society or the display of student unhappiness over aspects of our national policy. Student opinion is a legitimate aspect of public opinion in our society.

(This open letter to college students from Director Hoover pinpoints eight ploys used by radical extremists in their efforts to steer justifiable campus protest into violent and destructive channels. It was furnished to United Press International on 9-21-70 and is reprinted with permission.)

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But there is real ground for concern about the extremism which led to violence, lawlessness, and disrespect for the rights of others on many college campuses during the past year.

The extremists are a small minority of students and faculty members who have lost faith in America. They ridicule the flag, poke fun at American institutions, seek to destroy our society. They are not interested in genuine reform. They take advantage of the tensions, strife, and often legitimate frustrations of students to promote campus chaos. They have no rational, intelligent plan of the future either for the university or the Nation.

The extremists are of wide variety: adherents of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) including the Weatherman; members of the Young Socialist Alliance (YSA), the Trotskyist youth group; the Communist Party's Young Workers Liberation League (YWLL). Or they may be associated with the Student Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam (SMC), a Trotskyist-dominated antiwar group.

Many are not associated with any national group. The key point is not so much the identification of extremists but learning to recognize and understand the mentality of extremism which believes in violence and destruction.

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Based on our experience in the FBI, here are some of the ways in which extremists will try to lure you into their activities:

1. They'll encourage you to lose respect for your parents and the older generation. This will be one of their first attacks, trying to cut you off from home. You'll hear much about the "failures" and "hypocrisy" of your parents and their friends. The older generation has made mistakes but your parents and millions of other adults worked hard, built, sacrificed, and suffered to make America what it is today. It is their country too. You may disagree with them, but don't discredit their contributions.

2. They'll try to convert you to the idea that your college is "irrelevant" and a "tool of the Establishment." The attack against the college administration often is bitter, arrogant, and unreasoning. SDSers, for example, have sought to disrupt the colleges by demanding the right to select professors, determine the curriculum, and set grading standards.

3. They'll ask you to abandon your basic common sense. Campus extremism thrives on specious generalizations, wild accusations, and unverified allegations. Complex issues of state are wrapped in slogans and cliches. Dogmatic statements

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are issued as if they were the final truth. You should carefully examine the facts. Don't blindly follow courses of action suggested by extremists. Don't get involved in a cause just because it seems "fashionable" or the "thing to do." Rational discussion and rational analysis are needed more than ever before.

4. They'll try to envelop you in a mood of negativism, pessimism, and alienation toward yourself, your school, your Nation. This is one of the most insidious of New Left poisons. SDS and its allies judge America exclusively from its flaws. They see nothing good, positive, and constructive. This leads to a philosophy of bitterness, defeatism, and rancor. I would like you to know your country more intimately. I would want you to look for the deeper unifying forces in America, the moods of national character, determination, and sacrifice which are working to correct these flaws. The real strength of our Nation is the power of morality, decency, and conscience which rights the wrong, corrects error, and works for equal opportunity under the law.

5. They'll encourage you to disrespect the law and hate the law enforcement officer. Most college students have good friends who are police officers. You know that when extremists call the police "pigs" they are wrong. The officer protects your rights, lives, and property. He is your friend and he needs your support.

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6. They'll tell you that any action is honorable and right if it's "sincere" or "idealistic" in motivation. Here is one of the most seductive of New Left appeals - that if an arsonist's or anarchist's heart is in the right place, if he feels he is doing something for "humanity" or a "higher cause," then his act, even if illegal, is justifiable. Remember that acts have consequences. The alleged sincerity of the perpetrator does not absolve him from responsibility. His acts may affect the rights, lives, and property of others. Just being a student or being on campus does not automatically confer immunity or grant license to violate the law. Just because you don't like a law doesn't mean you can violate it with impunity.

7. They'll ask you to believe that you, as a student and citizen, are powerless by democratic means to effect change in our society. Remember the books on American history you have read. They tell the story of the creative self-renewal of this Nation through change. Public opinion time after time has brought new policies, goals, and methods. The individual is not helpless or caught in "bureaucracy" as these extremists claim.

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8. They'll encourage you to hurl bricks and stones instead of logical argument at those who disagree with your views. I remember an old saying: "He who strikes the first blow has run out of ideas." Violence is as ancient as the cave man; as up-to-date as the Weatherman. Death and injury, fear, distrust, animosity, polarization, counter-violence - these arise from violence. The very use of violence shows the paucity of rational thought in the SDS, its inability to come up with any intelligent critique of our society.

Personally, I don't think the outlook for campus unrest this year is as bleak as some prophets of pessimism proclaim. The situation at some colleges is serious, but certainly not hopeless.

Along with millions of other adults, I'm betting on the vast majority of students who remain fair-minded, tolerant, inquisitive, but also firm about certain basic principles of human dignity, respect for the rights of others, and a willingness to learn. I am confident our faith has not been misplaced.