

Students Attend Anti-War Conference

The conference was called by Student Mob to plan anti-war strategy for the spring. By the end of the conference it was expanded to "anti-imperialist" strategy, which is a good indication of what happens at such gatherings. At times, it seemed more like a convention—slogans, hoopla, a show of strength in the mid-winter lull.

We sailed out to Carl Stokes town packed in a station-wagon loaded with 5,000 back issues of "Rat." Mal was planning to sell or give away every one of them. Mal is an ex-Viet Nam vet, thoroughly committed to what he is doing, nothing escapes his analysis. From New York to Cleveland he gave us a running monologue on everything destructive that America is; including his own personal nightmare of a countryside covered with concrete. He berated one passenger severely for throwing an empty soda-can onto the highway — "pollution—mounds of shit—biodegradable cans—" I saw him often and heard his voice more often the next few days; a prophet to be reckoned with, he chided the self-righteous, convinced the doubtful, and proselytized the revolution from dawn to dawn.

Others who came were not always so energetic, they came muddled in ideology. The "campus radicals"; self-confined to colleges they hate, producing ever deeper analyses of what's going on around here, to the point of alienation of most extra-campus reality. Middle-class, middle-income, far from middle-earth, often serious to

the point of blindness. One girl charged into a diner between conference sessions demanding a salami sandwich, "I'm in a hurry," she said. "What kind of bread on that?", said the waiter wearily, after about ten hours of hassling customers. She looked at him incredulously. "Rye bread," of course, her face said—what's the matter with you. She split with her sandwich back to a meeting on how to relate to the working class.

We crashed at an off-campus house, full of students and non-students, most of whom hadn't much interest in the conference. Stoned, talking, drinking a lot of beer—Ambrose, who had a leather shop in the basement, Mary who made very beautiful tie-dyes, John who ingeniously wired the house for sound using discarded old radios as speakers, a cowboy, Bill a campus janitor, Ann-Marie, Mal, Steve and myself describing the evils of New York and in the same breath inviting everyone out here. And there was Rick—the philosopher, calm, soft-spoken, but deeply resentful of these "inexperienced," sheltered radicals. "Who's to say that someone isn't a victim?", I asked him. He was adamant. One of the most thoughtful persons I've ever met, what the hell had these "revolutionaries" done to him to turn him off so much.

Like some friends in communes in Vermont and Woodstock, these people are sort of pioneers — patient, rarely dogmatic, but almost irreconcilable with these "revolution-

aries" at the conference, who didn't understand them.

The conference itself had workshops (though not the educational sessions one thinks of), caucuses, and the best sounding was the 'Plenary' sessions (didn't the Vatican council have some of these?). The Y.A.S., who were the conference villains, packed the podium, the Yippies would let out Indian-whoops every time the shit hit the fan, and sometimes just for the hell of it. They were the only people who didn't take themselves so seriously. There were some perverse thrills in seeing them get under the skin of the campus radicals. I admit it would have even been enjoyable to see the Hare Krishna beggars at the conference, as another alternative.

The "participatory democracy" of the gathering was structured by flexible use of Roberts Rules. It was very gutsy of everyone to risk the disorder and lowness of hand-counts, rebuttals, etc. There was a wise understanding that doing everything by committee—the usual alternative—is authoritarian, humanizing delete, bullshit, though more efficient, and that "the body" should have a say in everything, even if nought is accomplished. Very good sense prevailed on another occasion, at a chaotic (and very much alive) caucus of "independent radicals"; when hassling over a possible proposal to present to "the body,"

there was a tendency to present any half-ass thing, simply to be heard. But, someone very perceptively and articulately argued that this was exactly the infamous tendency of the New Left, and that real political analysis is what's needed, not more noise, even if it nets nothing immediately. There was solid approval and a pointless proposal was dropped.

This scene was a good projection of some basic New Left foibles. Namely, a good, articulate speaker—regardless of motive—has his views heard and acted upon, few others can; neither left, right nor middle are ever spared this.

The New Left is compulsive. This isn't spontaneity, but rather an understandable desire to do something—anything, now.

Fortunately, the people with sense enough and the ability to say that the movement base must be broadened were prevalent. "Co-optation" was rarely mentioned.

Seeing a large gathering of people emotionally aroused, and bickering over sincere sentiments is always startling. Life, or the human condition, if you want. Someone, however, was less than disturbed about it, and was very cool and arranged a showing of "Planet of the Apes" during one of the Plenary sessions. Though reeking with cliches, the film was naively honest, and we who saw it realized how foolish we were to feel guilty about missing the Plenary. The film was instant transcendence, a trip; anything in this self-indulgent conference was now open for criticism as human and even environmental destruction. We knew then that a conference like this must not only plan revolution but be revolutionary in itself, or fail.

Crashing with us at the house of Peggy the Pisces, was Barbara, a high school student from D.C. Without sleep for two days, excited about the conference, the people, and a weekend of freedom, she Pepsi-generation bubbled about her life. Without sleep for two days, I asked her

absurd things like "What do you plan to major in at college?" Her reply was "Art, music and dance . . . But I also want to be a social worker"—(America, do you suspect what's in store for you?)—"Far out," I said, then shut my mouth, silently swearing never to force someone into such a category again, and tried to sleep.

Sunday afternoon, when the second Plenary session got monotonous, Ann and I visited the United Presbyterian Church of Euclid Avenue, Cleveland, for a music program we'd heard about. After a few traditional choir pieces, a short Afro-haired student in choir outfit carries a bass to the front of the altar and in a moment began to lay down a smooth down-beat. Another costumed figure began playing the vibes. Several trumpets wail. The choir-master bounces uncontrollably with the beat. The congregation suddenly sat very still, a few tapping their feet lightly. Holy Moses, the church is still trying! Here it was. A man and a wife and their two beautiful kids, sat in front of us, just radiating faith and sincerity: a Norman Rockwell painting. The pastor gave a clever, thoughtful sermon sprinkled with words like "sensitivity" and "confrontation." The new revolutionaries were just across the campus, but this pastor had never neglected Jesus' revolution.

Something struck me about the necessary aloofness and alienated posture of these radicals; along with their desire to do something, to feel alive in this polluted society, they are also committed to a self-destructive ideal—a constant "objective," scientific analysis of political society at the price of often accepting a role as a tool, manipulating themselves — for the revolution. The old danger of becoming a partisan, rigid, in the scene. I guess that in a similar vein I went to Cleveland, wrote this article, pressed by a need to witness; to put down in black and white what is really the politics of experience.

John O.