

A Question of Values

THE giant hotel is strangely silent. In the solitude of their elevators, the operators yawn. The lobbies, once thronged, are almost empty. The 1961 conference of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development has come and gone. During the peak days of the conference, more than 3000 registrants had crowded the hotel. Now, in the early hours of Sunday morning, only a handful of ASCDers remain, leftovers from the post-session of the Executive Committee.

In a quiet hotel room, I am sitting by a television set tuned to an "open end" type of program of conversation called "At Random." I am listening to and watching Mr. Gennadi Gavrikov of the Russian Embassy. I am also listening to and watching me. Thanks to the doubtful blessings of the electronic age in which we live, and especially to taping of television programs a few days in advance, one has the eerie opportunity to sit alone in a hotel room and watch a moderator, fellow panelists, and himself on the flickering screen. At the moment, my facsimile is disputing the viewpoint of the Soviet Russian diplomat. Now the other two panelists join too.

Mr. Gavrikov is pressed by a historian to name five prominent Russians who are critical of Mr. Khrushchev's basic

position. Mr. Gavrikov says, "I don't think there is a divergence, because we think that basically our approach is very right." The question is pushed again. Mr. Gavrikov suggests no single name, much less five. In effect, we are asked to believe that everyone in the Soviet Union agrees with Mr. Khrushchev. Why do they all agree with Mr. Khrushchev? Because Mr. Khrushchev is right. The historian asks, "Are you willing to indicate any major position of Mr. Khrushchev of which you have been critical?" Mr. Gavrikov responds, "I think Khrushchev represents our interest, the interest of the Soviet people, brilliantly."

In the quiet room in the almost empty hotel I think of the amiably contentious ASCDers as they argued over the basic positions taken in addresses by ASCD President Arthur W. Foshay, former Harvard President James B. Conant, economist Theodore J. Kreps, and minister James H. Robinson; as they debated amicably yet intently in the small work groups and in the corridors, lobbies and lounges; as they accepted, rejected, modified or tabled at the business meeting a number of resolutions which had been developed by members just within the past few days. I thought of the conference participant from the Philippines who asked me, "How are you people

able to differ, yet retain good working relationships with each other?"

What is the essential difference between Americans like the ASCDers and Soviet Russians like Mr. Gavrikov? Is it simply different national interests? I think not. Is it that we have many social and economic interests and they have an uncoerced unity? I think not, though Mr. Gavrikov would have us believe so. The fundamental difference is one of values.

At our best, we in America prize the individual and cherish the worth and dignity of each person. At our best, we prize the importance of inquiry. At our best, we have a faith that, in the long run, life is better for all of us when free individuals exercise their right to agree and disagree. The difference may be as simple—and as complex—as that.

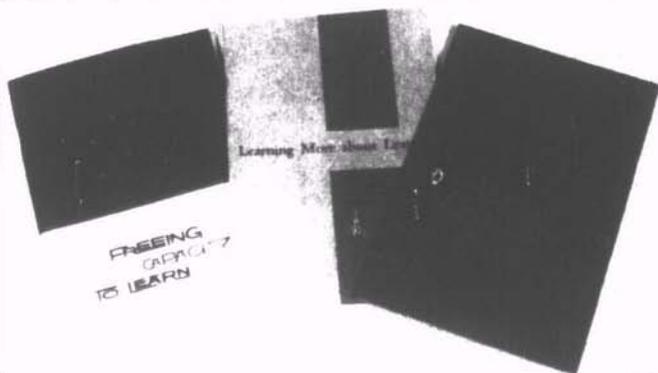
On the TV screen we try to explain this to young, blond, piercing-eyed Mr. Gavrikov, Moscow University 1953. He listens carefully enough. But he cannot really hear us. His is a different world. He tells us that we really do not understand. He explains to us about "the vested interests . . . the capitalists . . . the imperialists . . . the class struggle."

The coffee on the living room table on the studio set grows cold, as cold as our polite, living room version of the Cold War. So, after a while, we try to search for common ground. Disarmament? No real agreement. Cultural exchange? Maybe.

As I click off the television set in the small hours of Sunday morning and the hotel room becomes noiseless, I think of what Mr. Gavrikov asked after we went off the air, safe from the curiosity of these strange Americans, the television audience, who even hear out their avowed enemies. "You gave me a hard time," he said. We assented. We had. There was genuine wonderment in his voice and the tenor of the Organization Man in his tone as he asked incredulously, "You want me to disagree with my boss? Would you disagree with *your* boss?"

The fundamental difference is one of values.

—WILLIAM VAN TIL, *Chairman, Department of Secondary Education, New York University, New York, N. Y.; and President, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, NEA.*



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