

# MILITANCY OR COMMITMENT?

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**W**ORDS and emotions are inexorably entwined, and some words carry an emotional wallop far beyond their terse, four-letter length. Even respectable words like *commitment* have strong emotional overtones; and the same is certainly true of a "less respectable" word such as *militancy*. The values each of us brings to an experience determine our response to that experience. To Max Rafferty fans, this essay will read like the bleatings of a misguided professor. To more enlightened persons, some of the thoughts here may be "right on." To still others, this may be far too mild a discourse. Whatever our socio-psychological stance, *militancy* and *commitment* are words much in vogue in educational discourse. We would suggest that their meanings greatly overlap.

Let us begin with some gross connotations. Commitment has a positive ring to it. It suggests steadfastness of purpose, onward and upward, pureness, truth, and everything that the image of Jack Armstrong with an Ed.D. from Columbia might convey. If a recommendation states that a candidate is a bright, young, and committed person, we are ready to hire on the spot. The only time the word has negative implications is when it is used as a verb. To be committed to an institution, even if it has a euphemistic name like "Happy Acres," is not very good news.

Militancy, on the other hand, is a threatening word to Mr. Nixon's silent majority. It connotes confrontations, strikes, protests, marches, fanaticism, action for action's sake, and other pejorative meanings. It is a proud word to a growing number of people, how-

ever. It is used here as a positive concept—as something in too short a supply and therefore very valuable. While it will not be used positively on recommendation forms for a long time to come, one can always hope for the best. In our view, (a) militancy is a logical next step for anyone truly committed to social justice and educational reform; (b) the teaching profession needs many more militant persons; (c) the issues lumped in the phrase "urban education" will be frontally assaulted only with a dramatic increase in the number of militant students, administrators, teachers, and professors.

## A Range of Meanings

First, a few thoughts on the range of meanings ascribed to militancy. As this is written, our nation has witnessed near hysteria on the part of governmental spokesmen as they gloomed and doomed plans for anti-war parades on November 15. Being peace marches, it is not surprising that they were overwhelmingly peaceful. Yet the propagandists stressed the potential for violence as the anti-war "militants" gathered. Violence and militancy are not synonyms despite the determined efforts of establishment types to force a marriage of the two. In essence, militancy suggests a dedicated commitment to a cause, to an ideal.

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Violent means may indeed be utilized by some militant individuals, but that is not typical militant behavior. Militancy more likely implies a determination not to quit; to keep working; to keep trying; to keep pushing. The media lead us to believe that militants are reincarnations of caricatured Trotskyites, bearded fanatics carrying bombs. What the media seldom portray is the majority of militants—persons sacrificing their careers, comforts, and sometimes their families because they take at face value many emotion-laden words found in the Declaration of Independence and the UN Declaration of Universal Human Rights.

At this point it must be perfectly clear that any discussion of militancy and commitment is pointless until a frame of reference is established. We have suggested that being committed to a cause is a good thing, but our frame of reference does not include supporting Ronald Reagan. Yet other persons are committed to the views of the California governor, and one can certainly become a militant supporter of Mr. Reagan. I would suspect that the silent majority would approve of such militancy. If that is the case, then it really is not militancy *per se* that is at issue, but what one is militant about.

Rather than playing games with the meanings of words, however, let us deal with the logical progression that unites commitment and militancy. The story is fairly simple. A group of persons are committed to social justice, to righting some wrongs, to making institutions like schools and universities relevant and responsive to glaring social needs. They hold meetings, write letters, visit officials, develop proposals, and so on. They win some small concessions, but they mainly learn that serious reforms are very difficult to attain. They run into legal hassles, they work with two-faced individuals, they encounter public apathy, and even offers of help are nullified by the bureaucracies that engulf us all.

We all recognize that there are legal, traditional, and sanctioned means for change in our society. All of these means have one thing in common: they take time—and time is what the truly committed person eventually

learns is the shortest commodity in the world. Poverty, disease, hate, racism, and injustice have time on their side, but man is mortal—and committed persons are only human. Frustration, delays, lack of funds, and public and official apathy can force one to quit, or they can lead one toward greater militancy. The demands for freedom *now*, for reform *now*, for ending the war *now* are the cries of persons who want a better world *now*.

Most militants are realists who know the complexity of social problems. Their realism includes the realization that democratic processes *can* be speeded up if enough people really press for change. They know that decision makers must be put into positions where they cannot backslide, evade, pass-the-buck, or otherwise cast off their responsibilities. Hence *now* becomes the watchword for all militants and their tactics are focused on those who are responsible for decision making.

"Militancy or commitment," in our view, is a false dichotomy, as archaic as mind-body controversies. Militancy and commitment blend at some point and it may well be that the committed person who is not prepared to become militant is essentially a fraud. Militants distrust liberals for exactly this reason. If this is too strong an indictment, let us suggest that the committed person who is able to avoid confrontations, no matter how mild, is probably doing a great job of maintaining the status quo. If he is a reformer or an innovator, he must chafe an elbow or rub a sore sooner or later.

## Need for Militants

We have also stated that we need many more militant persons in education. Let us briefly examine a few aspects of teacher education in order to demonstrate this need. Let us agree that there are many dedicated, committed persons in education who have sought to improve teaching practices and to make the profession democratic. They have done some good for some people in some time and place, and that is a good thing. We also know that we now live in an era of models, new designs, and innovations which offer some

hope for improving teacher education. Going beyond public relations materials, conferences, institutes, books, and especially beyond pilot and experimental programs, how much has really changed? Is it too caustic to answer that we have barely scratched the surface of serious reform? Teacher education in the '70's is very much like teacher education in the '60's, which was but slightly modified from teacher education in the '50's, the '40's, ad nauseam. Teacher education is still a low prestige, amorphous mammoth avoided by many capable persons who perceive it as being dull, low level, and hardly worth the effort.

These are harsh words to those of us who are doing our best to improve teacher education, to respond to the urban crisis, to recruit activist students into the field, and so on. Harsh words or not, they are essentially true—and *that* is why militancy is the next logical step for those of us in teacher education who would try to live up to what we profess. We are at a stage when faculty members must actively challenge their colleagues to reform teacher education. Anything else is a capitulation to institutions and persons who have no sense of urgency—who can all too often out-wait and out-maneuver those who will not put their commitments on the line.

How many more conferences must we attend at which community leaders, school system spokesmen, and our graduates tell us that much of what they experienced in teacher education was not realistic, not geared to the field, and virtually devoid of any commitment to school reform? How often must we hear that teacher education should be based in the schools, and that professors must demonstrate what they preach? How often must we be told that black and other minority group students and faculty must be recruited *now*? Will we as academics ever really learn that we cannot stand on the sidelines if racism and poverty are to be overcome? Will we ever coalesce behind those few teachers who challenge the schools when they are wrong? Will we ever acknowledge that Mickey Mouse is indeed alive and well—not in Argentina—but on our campuses?

And in the heat of acrimony as these and other charges bombard us, it is easy to ignore the good things that some people are doing. Hence, the reply: "Ah, we are trying to answer these charges. We have an urban education program second to none! We have recruited two new black faculty members just this year! We have just devised a course in minority group educational problems! We even have a graduate and an undergraduate student on each committee! We also have submitted proposals to the U.S. Office of Education, to the Ford Foundation, and to the Wheaties Company which (if funded) will permit us to move forward as never before!"

### **The System Needs Surgery**

These are fine responses as far as they go. Yet how far do they go? If we are honest, we will have to admit that the mainstream of teacher education simply flows on, virtually undisturbed by 10 years of pilot programs, special projects, much money, and a fantastic outpouring of words. The rhetoric and pressures of the past decade urging drastic improvements in teacher education so as to make it responsive to social needs have not paid off. We have not turned the corner. Pilot and experimental projects are to universities what compensatory education programs are to public education: a veneer over tradition-bound curricula and organizational forms.

We must acknowledge that there are only small clusters of teachers, professors, students, and even administrators who are pushers, probers, innovators, and/or critics of the status quo. The rest of us may work very hard, but we are not answering demands for reform and social justice all about us. Keeping an old machine working is not worth the energy if that machine is no longer useful. Most students preparing to be teachers still get a bit of observation, a dash of educational psychology, a once over lightly of methods, and a modicum of student teaching. Most students are still jumping the same tired hoops most of us did in the '40's and '50's. And most teacher educators continue to earn a decent living maintaining a system

that needs surgery at every point. It is doubtful that we will all agree on these remarks. But that is of little matter. The real test is to talk to students on our campuses about these issues: I would predict overwhelming confirmation of these and other weaknesses.

The simple truth is that if we are truly committed to improving teacher education so that it is responsive to urban needs, so that it is based in schools, so that it sheds racist hiring practices, so that it challenges the Mickey Mouse image, and so on, we must become far more militant in our actions. Books and articles are not enough; committees are not enough; an occasional federal grant is not enough; and pilot programs are not enough. To revitalize teacher education we will have to confront openly our colleagues, division heads, chairmen, deans, presidents, and/or regents if they resist the reformation of current practices. We will have to join students as they protest university policies and delays. We will have to quarrel with state departments of education and with accreditation agencies. We will have to sit-in, picket, and strike.

These are militant actions, but they are also the means used by groups throughout our history. Would we have unions and collective bargaining if union leaders had only been willing to talk and form committees in the 1930's? While some of the events of the 1930's had violence associated with them, the violence was *not* caused by the humanitarian values and basic human rights at stake. The parallel to the protest movement of the 1960's is strongly evident.

Undergirding all of these militant actions is the one form of commitment abhorrent to most of us: we must be prepared to risk losing our jobs. Anything less merely begs the issue. Reform demands involvement and intervention; words are only a prelude; and words are an insufficient response to massive social and educational needs. Yet words, written and spoken, are how most professors earn a living. Since this is a social fact, the perception of universities as essentially ivory towers should not be surprising. Despite the efforts of many fine individuals, the overwhelming response of universities to

social needs has been tentative, grudging, sometimes negative, and always too late. In short, if the committed individual is satisfied with small gains and little victories, we are making "progress." But if one wants reform *now* and social justice *now*, come on in, the frustration is fine!

## A Price Must Be Paid

Let us conclude by noting just a bit of real life that we academics and schoolmen like to pretend does not influence us, for, after all, we are "professionals." Getting a paycheck regularly is a nice thing. Promotions are nice things. Being a full professor is a nice thing. More money is a nice thing. Being selected to "lead" professional organizations is a nice thing. Gold watches after 40 years are nice things. Most teacher educators are nice people, who like nice things. Most militants are also nice people, but they have consciously given up some nice things.

We can only conclude that there is no honest choice between commitment and militancy; true commitment must lead to militancy sooner or later; and being militant means giving up some goodies. If we are not ready to part with some goodies, our commitment is essentially a fraud—a nice fraud that is rewarded by our employers quite regularly. The more people have to lose, the less they are likely to become militant. One cannot blame them but one also cannot depend on them.

A price must be paid for reform, and it is a price that no federal guideline or curriculum guide will ever reveal. It is a price that militants are prepared to pay: the commitment of one's very being to a cause. That is a choice that our very own educations, positions of "leadership," status and role hang-ups, family responsibilities, and so forth make very difficult. Educators have never been known to be leaders except in a ritualistic and institutional sense. We are beginning to see a few educators trying to break out of this mold and perhaps the '70's will be better. Yet one thing is certain. "Commitment *or* militancy" is a false premise. Commitment *and* militancy are what is needed. □

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