

In a Time of Value Crises

William Van Til

CONFRONT—"1. to come face to face with; stand in front of. 2. to face with hostility; oppose defiantly. 3. to bring close together for comparison or examination; compare."¹

Confrontation—in schools and universities, at political conventions and organization meetings, among social classes and ethnic groups, between generations and family members, in buildings and on the streets. How is confrontation seen by the confronted? How is it seen by the confronter? And what have we learned from the clashes of the recent past?

As Seen by the Confronted

"Why us? We're trying to do the best we can. They know no history. They have no knowledge of the good we have already done. They certainly could do no better than we do. And we did not create the evil against which they are reacting. If blame belongs anywhere, it is with the total society. We did not make things as they are—yet we alone are being blamed and attacked."

"There are channels and procedures estab-

¹ *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*. Boston: American Heritage Publishing Company and Houghton Mifflin Company, 1969. p. 280.

lished for making changes. We're not rigid; we'll change if the need is demonstrated. Of course protest and protesters should be heard, but in an orderly context and setting. There are rules of the game which must be followed. The alternative can only be chaos, the jungle, anarchy."

"All these unreasonable statements and nonnegotiable demands. This profanity and obscenity. These veiled or open threats of disruption. The recourse to violence, actual or threatened. Civilized people don't behave like this."

"Who are these people anyway? We have never seen most of them and now they descend upon us. Look at them."

"We won't give in to them. They can sit-in as long as they like; they can demand until the cows come home. And if they become violent, we'll call the police. But only as a last resort. We really don't want to call in the police. But human beings must be governed by law."

"Be reasonable. Think with us. We're willing to talk things over with you. But don't try to push us around."

As Seen by the Confronter

"For years we've tried to change things in this cesspool. We've tried everything—letters, petitions, political action, peaceable demonstra-

tions, the whole bag. But you and people like you paid no attention. Your establishment went on running things as it always had."

"You have the skill to outmaneuver us through your mechanisms. So we deny the legitimacy of your institutions and the crap about processes and channels. By all means try to bust us with your hired pigs—when the cops move in, your neutrals become radicalized and we both know it."

"Who do you people think you are anyway? What gives you the right to run our lives? Look at you."

"Now we're no longer asking. We're demanding. We're telling it the way it is and you're going to listen. And you don't get out of this room till you meet our nonnegotiable demands. All of them. Or else. . . ."

"Don't give us that LBJ stuff about 'come, let us reason together.' That's your game, not ours. You have no feeling for life; your rationality has led all of us into this dead-end street."

"Sure, you've got the power. And we are the powerless. But we've got our bodies and we're willing to put them on the line. So give."

The Resultant Confrontation

So they clashed and sometimes one side won or lost. Often everybody lost.

Somehow—and nobody really knows exactly how or why—confrontation has ebbed in the early 1970's. Maybe the realization grew on many Americans that confrontation often results in stalemate.

What Should We Have Learned?

We should have learned that the grievances which came welling up in the confrontations were real. The grievances grew out of the hostility and anger generated in an era of the Vietnam quagmire, of rebellion by world youth against obsolete educational practices, of alienation of protesting students, of decay of the inner cities and the black ghettos, of persistence of poverty in the richest nation the world ever knew, of fouling the air we breathe and the waters that lap our shores, of assassination of such magnificent human resources as Martin Luther King

and the two Kennedy brothers. Our priorities were garbled, and confrontation was the price the social order paid. We should have learned to go the extra mile to remedy the grievances without explosions.

We should have learned that communication is even more difficult than any of us assumed. We are fairly competent in communication with those who are akin to us in ideas, experiences, and background. But confrontation forcibly reminds us of the existence of formidable problems of communication across social class, racial, ethnic, political, philosophical, and generational lines. In confrontation we often speak different languages, and always there are wide differences in what our lives so far have taught us. Confronted and confronter alike should have learned that each must surmount the communication barriers.

We should have learned that the mechanisms for change which the confronted claimed to be fully workable often have turned out to be muddy processes and constipated channels. In addition, they often have been interminable in length. Change gets lost in the labyrinths of the establishment. Too often the procedures are ponderous and the channels are unmarked. Yet we also should have learned that when the channels are or can be opened and the processes are swift or can be speeded, it is better to use them than to play into eternity a child's game called king of the hill.

We should have learned that those engaged in confrontation are whole persons in whom the intellect and the emotions are interrelated. To try to put all relationships on the cold, cool, objective basis of reason is quixotic because the realm of the emotions is inescapable. Yet to deny all rationality and to accept the complete denigration of intellectual processes which some propose is to risk adoption of the storm trooper approach of thinking with the blood.

We should have learned that, despite the defensiveness of the confronted and the rhetoric of the confronter, both are often devoted to achieving a better institution than the one which is under attack. When the doors are forced open and the confronter be-

comes a participant, he often responds with constructive contributions. To his surprise, he learns to accept responsibility and even to sacrifice complete uncompromising ideological purity for demonstrable social gains. When the confronted shares his monopoly power, he often abandons defensiveness and accepts some changes. To his surprise, he discovers that the world has not ended but has merely changed; he even finds that his former opponents have some merits.

We should have learned the lesson of the Declaration of Independence. This is a dual lesson, but each side stresses one message and ignores the other. Jefferson and his fellow signers wrote: "... whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends [Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness], it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundations on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness." The con-

fronted chose to ignore this lesson. Jefferson and his fellow signers also wrote in the next sentence: "Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes." The confronters chose to ignore this lesson.

Whether or not we have learned from confrontation, I do not know. But if we have learned, the travail of the past few years may not have been in vain. For a confrontation must not be judged by whether the confronted or the confronters won or lost; a confrontation, like other human actions, must be judged by its consequences. Let us hope that learning from the past is one of the consequences of the recent confrontations. If, in the spirit of the democratic way of life, we continuously reconstruct our experiences, however traumatic, then with greater confidence we may go down whatever road lies beyond confrontation.

—WILLIAM VAN TIL, *Coffman Distinguished Professor in Education, Indiana State University, Terre Haute.*



Barbara Krohn, president of the Educational Press Association of America, presented two awards for Excellence in Educational Journalism to Robert R. Leeper, editor of *Educational Leadership*, at the 1972 EdPress Awards luncheon in Atlantic City, New Jersey, in June.

The Laurence B. Johnson Memorial Award was presented to *Educational Leadership* magazine for editorial excellence. The ASCD journal also received an All-America rating in the "Best Editorial" category for nonprofit magazines. This award honored the April 1971 editorial, "The Changing of the Grad," by Fred T. Wilhelms, recently retired ASCD Senior Associate.

Copyright © 1972 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.