

A Generation Is Stirring

JAMES WECHSLER

IN ANY election year Congress wants to go home early; in 1936 you can't blame its occupants for frantic haste. They have much to explain, countless apologies to make. Somehow they must draft new promises that will not be too reminiscent of broken ones. Somehow they must stir renewed faith out of cynicism, disillusion and resentment. Politics is conducted on tiptoes. This is the worst hour to offend anyone.

Suddenly, irritatingly, Congress ran headlong into one of its most dreaded constituents last week: an army of crisis-ridden youth. You can tell your secretary to answer letters from those who want to know whose government is sitting in Washington. You can dictate a reply pledging to "look into the problem at once." You can do these things without feeling too distraught or too aware of the power of those you are evading. They are at least miles away. They seem inarticulate.

But last week a generation, weary of lip-service, drove and hitched and hopped freighters and walked miles; and marched into the high-ceilinged, marble Caucus Room of the Senate to say what no Senator, harried by the "economy" wave and bludgeoned by bold industrialists, can hear with equanimity. For years the politicians have been sentimentalizing over one theme: "the nation's youth." They have sworn to ecstatic audiences that "by God, I'll look after your children if I have to do it out of my own pocket." Suddenly these children—"the hope of the nation . . . our future leaders . . . America's challenge to the world"—descended on the Capitol.

They are growing up now. Many were ill-clothed and hungry and tired long before they arrived. And others were in that gnawing transition stage: falling out of their middle-class security into desperation—terrified because they know what is happening to them. The New York Times ironically reported that they were a "cross-section of the nation's youth." There were the unemployed and the homeless of a generation; there were young workers from the centers of industrial exploitation; there were farm boys and millhands—and they stood together in a room with students, professionals, boys from settlement houses. Some were already poverty-stricken and others wore frayed collars and still others did not yet show outwardly what they were facing. Some were white, others Negro. All of them, in one way or another, have met the degradation and fear and hopelessness of a world in which they have no place to go. Through three days they streamed into Washington, all of them young and alive and seeking the same thing: security. Through three days

they crowded before a Senate committee of well-fed men who were alternately bored, nervous, aroused—and self-conscious because of their unwillingness to serve those who had come to them.

It required weeks of resolutions, letters, telegrams from the thousands whom the American Youth Congress has rallied to insure that the hearings would be held. Who sent the letters, who forced the hearings? Young men and women, most of whom had probably never before sensed their own influence, to whom the Youth Act was the first tangible measure for which they had ever fought on so national a battleground. It was the beginning of a new stage launched three years ago when an ambitious young woman called a "youth congress" to rubber-stamp the New Deal—and succeeded unwittingly in precipitating a real, enduring united front of a dispossessed generation. That generation drafted the Youth Act to provide education, vocational training or jobs for the millions between 16 and 25 who have been victimized by the crisis.

When hearings were granted on the Act by the Senate Committee on Education and Labor, the way was paved for perhaps the most damning indictment of a social system ever delivered in Washington.

A slender, pale girl, daughter of a West Virginia coal miner, testifies at the first session. Standing in a room more splendid than anything she has ever seen, before the committee of a mysterious government hundreds of miles from her home, she is quiet and composed and unafraid:

My father was injured in the mines. He will never be able to work again. . . . We receive \$3.50 a week for four people. . . . Unless the federal government gives aid to the hundreds of thousands of young people in West Virginia, there is little or no hope for their future.

Senator David Walsh, chairman of the committee, listens politely (his conduct at the hearings was eminently fair and sympathetic). When she is through, he comments hollowly:

I am sure anyone who has analyzed the situation so intelligently will succeed.

From an East Side tenement in New York a boy recites the luxuries of life at eighteen dollars a week as the sole support of a family—"and the axe may fall any minute." And an unemployed youth from Philadelphia follows him:

Those of us here from Philadelphia come from all centers of the city. We borrowed pennies and nickels to come here in crowded trucks. Pass this bill and give us a chance to find our place in the world.

A barrage of statistics—lifted from dullness because those in the room dramatize them—begins. A young Negro, Edwin Strong, speaks for the millions of Negro boys and girls whose misery has been rendered double.

There are 900,000 unemployed Negroes in the nation . . . in many cities sixty to eighty per cent of the Negro population is unemployed. . . . The N. Y. A. aided 19,000 Negroes in school out of hundreds of thousands who needed help.

From the South, from areas of pitiless struggles, Edwin Mitchell, Socialist leader of the Southern Tenant-Farmers' Union, reports. He is barely nineteen—"when I was ten years of age, it was nothing unusual for me to have to go out and work in the field"—but in this room he is unflustered, resolute. When you have faced the terror of Arkansas landlords, you do not fear the badgering of Senators. He parries their questions fluently. He recites figures to demonstrate the plight of Southern education.

The throng—more than 300 have gathered already and this is the first day—cheers him. The committeemen—there were never more than four present at one time—do not reply. All that they are hearing is truth and they cannot demolish it.

There is a flurry when Professor Charles A. Beard rises to testify:

If a flood or an earthquake or a trainwreck destroys a few lives, newspapers are filled with flaming headlines and full-page reports. . . . The nation can survive calamities of nature. . . . But if it is to endure, carry on its great traditions and accomplish better things, it cannot allow the hope and faith of youth to die.

Through three mornings and one afternoon this testimony is heard. Francis Gorman: "Young people are being used as a bludgeon to defeat those things for which the trade union movement has fought. . . . They are hired at non-union wages; they are put into the National Guard and taught to fire on picket lines and they are taken out of colleges and used as strike breakers in time of strikes." A Pennsylvania teacher: "I've seen high school kids kept home for ten days at a time because they didn't have clothes to wear to school." A young Negro from Harlem: "Hundreds of Negro families are being broken up by poverty . . . we face constant discrimination on relief." Gil Green, speaking for the Young Communist League: "We support this bill just as we support every measure which will improve the conditions of young people. Is the bill 'too expensive'? We say that the Morgans and duPonts and Rockefellers can and should pay for it." Hayes Beall, speaking for 1,500,000 Methodist youth: "Millions of young people

are facing degradation and demoralization every day." A young Progressive Democrat from Texas: "Fellows in our state have had to go to school half-hungry even before the depression." A spokesman for the International Ladies Garment Workers' Union: "40,000 young people in our union are going to fight for this act." A procession of students testifies to the woeful inadequacy of the National Youth Administration, itself threatened with withdrawal in June; they cite the one fruitful occupation remaining open to them: "scabbing." A spokesman for the Young Men's Protective Association: "Senator Walsh, if you are really sympathetic to the plight of youth, we urge you to lead a demonstration in New York on April 4 for passage of the Youth Act." The Senator gracefully declines.

The press "authoritatively" reports that the committee is "cool" to the Youth Act. The bill is "impractical"—not because it

won't work, not because the sum required cannot be raised through steep income and inheritance taxes but because the Liberty League chorus has dictated "economy." The President, who said one year ago that he was "determined to do something for the nation's youth because we can ill afford to lose the skill and energy of these young men and women," is once again making his peace with Wall Street. He does not dare deliver an *open* attack on the Act. Neither did those who unofficially represented him at the hearings. When his own N.Y.A. administrator confesses that "five to eight million young people between the ages of 16 and 25 are wholly unoccupied" and almost three million people are on relief and "70,000 had to quit school last year before they had finished high school" and "thousands graduated from school and college into a labor market that was greatly surfeited," Roosevelt can only retreat to ambiguous reassurances.

But those voices that were heard in Washington will multiply. They are gathering strength, conviction, purpose. They are becoming aware of their own power. Can we pass the Youth Act now? Certainly the parliamentary odds are against us. Must it be reserved for the distant future? Emphatically no. The need is too great and youth requires action. If you had been in Washington, if you had seen the grim faces and the strong arms, if you had heard those voices, if you had watched the committee stir from its boredom and shift uneasily in its seats, this would be plain.

In cities and towns a generation is stirring. I never knew the extent of its rising and its impact until I saw the hundreds troop into the Senate chambers. They march slowly but with a dignity which left a Senate committee ill at ease. They have entered confidently once and the door cannot be closed in their faces again.

"In the Name of the Great Jehovah"

ROCKWELL KENT

TICONDEROGA; night. The men from Vermont are swarming up the outside stairway to the officers' quarters. A door opens at the top and a man with his pants in his hand steps onto the landing. "Come out of there, you damned old rat!" shouts Ethan Allen. "By what authority?" "*In the name of the Great Jehovah and the Continental Congress.*"

And by that act of eviction by the forces of Vermont was the Revolutionary War precipitated.

Vermont in those days was a wilderness of forest-clad mountains and inundated valleys. New Hampshire and New York laid claim to it. To the court action on conflicting claims that was brought in Albany went Ethan Allen, heading a delegation of Green Mountaineers. The lieutenant-governor, the presiding judge, the attorney general and the lawyer for the New York plaintiffs were all grantees of large tracts of Green Mountain land. So New York won.

"The Gods of the hills are not the Gods of the valleys," said Ethan Allen and went home.

When the first New York grantee moved in, cleared land and built a cabin, armed mountaineers came down on him. They kindled fire round the settler's cabin while Ethan Allen dragged him out.

He said to him: "Go your way now and complain to that damned scoundrel, your governor. God damn your governor, laws, King, Council and Assembly."

"God damn your soul," he added then and let him go.

The settler fled.

A New Yorker came to Bennington and read a proclamation outlawing Allen. Allen came up; struck him three times. He said, "You are a damned bastard of old Munro's. We shall make a hell of his house and burn him in it and every son of a bitch that will take his part."

When the New York Governor's name was pronounced, Allen, as though addressing the Governor, said: "So your name is Tryon. Try on and be damned."

Allen, freebooter for settlers' rights, turned pamphleteer. "Can the New York scribblers," he wrote, "by the art of printing make wrong into right or make any person of good sense believe that a great number of hard-laboring peasants, going through the fatigues of settlement and cultivation of a howling wilderness, are a community of riotous, disorderly, licentious, treasonable persons?" and he added: "Women sobbing and lamenting, children crying and men pierced to the heart with sorrow and indignation at the approaching tyranny of New York."

Well, Allen and his boys held their Green Mountains.

Fourteen months before the Declaration of Independence they took Fort Ticonderoga and brought upon themselves the reproof of the Continental Congress. In 1777 Vermont, in defiance of the law, declared itself an independent commonwealth. In 1790 the State of New York recognized its independence. And in 1791 Vermont, the only free and independent commonwealth on the North American continent, joined the United States.

In the one hundred sixty-six years that

have elapsed since the settlers of what is now Vermont declared their independence, Vermont has emerged from wilderness to be a region of cultivation. Its valley lands are cleared, its swamps are farms. Industry has come to thrive. Today, its products, in the inverse order of their value, are knitted goods, lumber and timber products, metal working machinery, dairy products, cereal products, paper and wood pulp, woolen goods and granite, slate and marble. More than one-quarter of the total marble output of the United States in quantity and more than one-third in value, is of the State of Vermont. Marble is Vermont's great industry.

With the growth of the marble industry in Vermont men were drawn to its center, Rutland, to work in the quarries and shops. They settled there. And their sons and grandsons grew up to take their place.

On November 4, 1935, over six hundred workers in their state's chief industry having, through a period of many months, argued and pled in vain for such improvements in the terms of their employment as they claimed they must have to exist, went on strike. That they struck at a moment when their employers would not be too seriously hurt by their withdrawal from work and on the threshold of winter, is evidence that the workers felt themselves to be in desperate straits. And that throughout the hardships of the particularly severe succeeding months they have maintained their solidarity as strikers almost to a man may be taken as indicative of their own belief in the justice of their cause.

How few people—even of the nearby East-