

'Nessfeness' At Harvard

MARYA MANNES

THERE HAVE been Negro students at Harvard for many years, and the fact that people go out of their way to welcome them there can mean several things. One is that it is entirely natural for a great institution to accept and instruct all races. Another is that the warm reception of a few Negroes among the thousands of white undergraduates constitutes a kind of self-conscious prejudice in reverse.

The reason that there are not more Negro students in universities like Harvard and schools like Exeter is not because they cannot qualify but because they cannot afford to go. And since the bright Negro student in a segregated Southern school knows that this kind of education is above his reach, the incentive for it ebbs out of him; and he is lost from that greater productivity, both intellectual and economic, which is vital to his race and to his nation.

It is this enormous wastage of intelligence and talent among sixteen million Americans that the National Scholarship Service and Fund for Negro Students (they call it "Nessfeness" for convenience) is beginning to redeem, bit by bit, student by student. For more than seven years it has worked to release Negro intelligence and talent from the stockade of segregation and deprivation so that they can ripen in a free society. In the last two years alone, its Southern Project, financed by a grant from the Fund for the Advancement of Education, has helped 523 Negro students move from seventy-eight segregated high schools to 138 nonsegregated colleges and universities in both North and South.

IT WAS the desire to see for myself what happened to these students after the shift was made that impelled me to Cambridge last month. It was snowing heavily when I walked through the gates of Harvard Yard. The dark-red buildings were wet, the paths across the campus

glistened black, the ground was thinly white, and the branches of the tall old trees, still leafless, twitched in the stinging wind. Heads bowed before it, young men from all the states crossed to their classes, most of them in sneakers and carrying green cloth book bags slung over their shoulders. They seemed very young and confident, knowing where they were going, guarding their private worlds, growing, exulting. It was difficult not to envy them, for the doubts and miseries that may have burdened some were not visible. They seemed at the beginning of everything, with the infinite adventure of choice before them. Yet along with envy was compassion for their youth, and a heavy knowledge of the obstacle course each one would run when he left this fortress and dream, when choice could be agonizing and final. And I could not help but feel that for the young Negroes this course would be twice as long and twice as hard.

In Weld Hall I talked at length with John Monroe, director of Harvard's Financial Aid Office, who works most directly both with Nessfeness in New York and with the students whose support Harvard shares. Intense and black-browed, Monroe spoke with vigorous enthusiasm not only for the project itself but for the young men who profited by it.

"Let's talk about Johnson first, shall we?" he said, taking out a thick file. (I have substituted fictitious names for both of the Negro undergraduates I met in Cambridge.) "Ralph Johnson was born in the South," Monroe went on, "but his family moved to Washington, D. C., when he was a kid. His father's a janitor in a government building. His mother's a housewife. Neither went to college, of course. The family income is about \$3,200.

"The Nessfeness scouts spotted Johnson first as a senior in Dunbar High School—that was one of the best

segregated schools in the country, so maybe Johnson isn't entirely typical. He was in the top ten per cent of the class. Always wanted to go to a Northern college but didn't see how he could possibly afford it. The Nessfeness people took it from there. They worked with his principal and counselors. Gave him a scholastic aptitude screening test. Spoke to his parents and enlisted what help they could give. Got in touch with us and arranged financing. Together we mapped out how he could earn part of his way himself.

"You see, Plaut's outfit [Richard L. Plaut is the executive vice-chairman and moving spirit of N.S.S.F.N.S.] is trying more and more to reach these kids even before they're finishing high school. They want to give these kids a motivation as early as possible, so that they can work steadily toward the goal of superior education in unsegregated colleges."

Monroe shook his head admiringly. "It's a terrific job. Do you know, those Nessfeness people visited the segregated high schools in forty-five of the largest cities of the South—not once but seven times? But it's the only way, of course. You can't do this sort of thing by remote control. You have to *know* the boy, know his background, his people, his teachers, his potentialities. And even these aptitude tests can't always tell you."

He turned to a page of a report. "Look, here's what they found out in their Southern Project: 'For these deprived groups, existing standardized tests of scholastic aptitude seem to measure what students *have* learned rather than what they *can* learn.' And listen to this: 'Hidden reserves of talent among culturally and economically deprived groups' are probably much larger than had previously been estimated."

Monroe bent over Johnson's file again and took out some papers.

"This is an extraordinary boy," he said. "He has tremendous inner strength—a sort of built-in center of gravity, and an instinctive social grace. These are the kind of things his tutors write about him: 'minutely faithful,' 'faintly sad and immensely patient,' 'His humor is always appropriate.'"

I asked Monroe whether Johnson

was extraordinary as a Negro or extraordinary as a person. He thought awhile. "As a person. He would be an extraordinary white too."

"I'm not saying," he added, "that Johnson is an extraordinary student. He was top at Dunbar, while he's just about in the middle here. But he has a superior ability to relate information—to make sense of it. I would say that he will be a success at anything he does."

'Did You Feel Lost?'

When I met Johnson later in his rooms at Eliot House I kept thinking of all the things Monro had said of him. Here was a quiet, gentle, serious young Negro. The center of gravity was there, all right; this was a man who did not have to prove anything.

We talked of his ambitions. He was a pre-med student and thought he wanted to be a general practitioner, but was not quite sure yet. We talked of his interests: He was president of the Rifle Club and a keen shot. He worked in social-relations projects in Cambridge. For two years he had waited on table in dining halls to earn part of his keep; this year he worked as a porter in a boardinghouse.

He roomed with two white students. I looked at their living room as he spoke. It was bare, shabby, dusty, and airless, with the mouse-nest quality of most sanctuaries of the young male. The shade of the one big window fronting on the quadrangle was pulled far down. A row of dirty glasses stood on the mantelpiece. There were no pictures, but assorted records, classical and jazz, lay on a table. On another table was a glass aquarium, smudged outside by fingerprints and inside by the tracks of its three inhabitant snails.

"What are they for?" I asked.

Johnson smiled. "We're making experiments with them. Feeding experiments." As in all his answers, there was a definite halt; it was difficult to pursue anything beyond a certain point.

"What about your social life—nights and weekends? What happens?"

He said that evenings after dining hall he usually had to work. On weekends he had dates.

"Do you date with your college friends or roommates, or with friends outside the college?" I asked.

He smiled and said, "Both."

We went back to his first year at Harvard. "Was it tough?" I asked. "Did you feel lost?"

"I felt lost in one way," he said, "but I guess that was the way any freshman feels—getting the hang of things, and studies and all that."

"What about this free atmosphere—this unsegregated life for the first time?"

"It was wonderful," he said. "I'd never seen anything like it."

"Tell me," I asked, "would you recommend this experience of yours to any bright Negro student who qualified?"

He thought a moment. "Maybe not any," he said. "It takes a little preparation. Now, the boys who've had a year or two at an unsegregated prep school—I know one at Andover, places like that—they get on easier here. It's less of a jump."

"Have you ever had the slightest problem or difficulty here being a Negro?"

He shook his head. "I can't remember one," he said.

"What happens when you go back to Washington and your family, and life isn't like this? Does it disturb you?"

He laughed. "When I go home I just sleep and relax and take walks," he said. The end again, I thought, but pursued him.

"Don't you find that your old friends—the ones that haven't had this sort of experience—don't they and you have less in common now?"

He hesitated a moment. "Well, maybe so. The kids who have gone to Negro colleges don't seem as ambitious . . . they're not so stimulated as the fellows here."

"Why is that?"

"Well, maybe it's the teachers. They just don't stimulate you the way Harvard teachers do." He chuckled. "It's almost too stimulating here!"

A Chat with the Tutor

Shortly after leaving him, I went to Kirkland House to see the senior tutor of another Negro boy who had come to Harvard under the combined aegis of N.S.S.F.N.S. and Harvard scholarships.

The tutor, pipe in mouth, had little to say about William Baxter beyond the reports Monro had already given me. Bill was a good average pre-med student, cheerful, lively, pleasant, and very diligent both at learning and working to help himself. He came from one of the border states, his father was a sandblaster, the family income was just over \$3,000. As in Johnson's case, he was a protégé of the Harvard Club in his city; like Johnson he learned of the National Scholarship Service at his segregated high school, where the Nessfeness staff had helped him on his way.

"Bill is always on the go," said the senior tutor. "He's president of the Harvard Society for Minority Rights, he's on our house committee, he's on the house track team, he's on the band, and at nights he has the milk-and-doughnut concession. When he isn't doing any of those, he's taking odd jobs like painting or baby sitting."

"He's really a typical undergraduate—not brilliant in any sense but up to our standards. He and Johnson will be successful guys in their communities."

BAXTER'S quarters were far more cheerful than Johnson's, although no less dusty. "We used to have cleaning women," he said, "but they've stopped that now and we only have a student cleaner once a week. You can't tell them what to clean, naturally!"

There was a green rag rug on the floor, French travel posters on one wall, the reproduction of a good abstraction on another. Ranged along shelves and mantel were empty liquor bottles, also for purposes of decoration. In one corner stood a parking meter with the red VIOLATION flag up.

"Who decorated the room?" I asked, knowing that he lived with two white boys. (He shares a small bedroom with one of them.)

"I did," he said, with some pride, "but we're getting new stuff soon. We're tired of looking at those old chairs."

Baxter seemed freer of his background, more integrated externally. This may have been because of his natural gregariousness and optimism; he was a good mixer, while Johnson

kept himself apart more, nursing his resources and his strength.

Yet Baxter was well aware of his present good fortune and his future problems. Like Johnson, he said that before he came to Harvard he didn't believe this kind of life existed. It was a new world, a wonderful one.

No, things weren't the same when he went back home now. He and his noncollege friends didn't have so many interests in common. They had grown apart a little, but that was natural.

Any problems from being a Negro at Harvard?

"I really can't think of any. Funny thing," said Baxter, smiling, "the first day I got here, a white boy from Texas and I came up together from South Station. He was a little surprised then, but we're good friends now."

And he spoke of his roommate from Indiana. "I think this is the first time he's ever felt this way before—that there's no real difference."

'They're Good for Us'

I walked up Dunster Street and back to my hotel in the cold and clearing air, thinking of how little I knew of Baxter and Johnson and their real thoughts. For I had seen them in a very special world, the hiatus of campus life. The air they had never breathed before they came they might not breathe again in their lifetime. This I think they knew; neither had any illusions about the future challenge. What they may not have permitted themselves to accept, however, was the size of the gap they and so many others were trying to close: the gap of centuries of difference. Instead they had adopted the "right" attitudes of a liberal society because it was the best shield for a long passage of arms. Ultimately it would not be a shield but a part of their being as free and intelligent Americans.

Before I left Cambridge I saw Monro again briefly. "You know," he said, "I wish we had a lot more Johnsons and Baxters. We want Negro students because they're good for us. The more Negro kids in segregated schools that the National Scholarship Service can find and help us place here, the better off we'll be as a great liberal institution—quite aside from what it does for them."

A DEBATE (CONTINUED)

The Future of Liberalism—II

'The Problems Overlap'

A. A. BERLE, Jr.

DEBATE on the future of liberalism is of first importance. Every major advance in the American structure for the past seventy-five years has come directly from measures based on liberal thinking, consummated by the victory of a political party pledged to put them into law and institutions. This has been true from development of the Interstate Com-

merce Commission (1887) to current public housing; from the first anti-trust laws (1890) to current Federal Reserve operations; from the Pan American Union (1890) to NATO, the Organization of American States, and the United Nations. When Arthur Schlesinger and Max Ascoli square away to define the next phase of liberal action, they are likely to be making future history.

Liberalism stems from a fixed philosophical premise, commonly miscalled a "point of view." Liberals consistently insist that realizing human values must be both the first concern of politics and the final test of its products. (Free human minds and hearts, after all, are the only instruments we know able to pursue the timeless search for cosmic order and beauty.) Therefore, liberals now, as always, must observe conditions, ascertain and communicate facts, and, analyzing them, draw the issues between those forces which at any time deny or obstruct realization of human values and those which foster and develop them. Having stated the issues, liberals propose solutions.

The Schlesinger-Ascoli debate implicitly accepts the philosophical premise. Their difference lies in the second rank: Where are the main issues today? Schlesinger finds them chiefly in America, and in the economic field. American prosperity is immense but leaves out certain groups; this must be rectified. In certain respects, our faulty services constrict freedom: So we need better education, medical care, opportunities for minorities, better mass media, a lifting of the quality of American civilization. "Big business" produces well, but is still dangerous. Affairs are increasingly carried on by great

I have read with great interest the pair of articles on liberalism by Arthur Schlesinger and Max Ascoli in your recent issue. This debate will, I hope, be the start of a searching public discussion of the issues of the day.

It is time that the liberals did some hard thinking about the problems that confront the country. One does not have to be a professional liberal to recognize that some of the best ideas for solving our national problems have come from the liberal side of the political fence. Right now our biggest problem is our foreign policy—and the search for world peace, and I am deeply concerned at the way things are going in that field. Our other problems include the farm depression which is a lot more serious than our Eastern liberals seem to understand, and our deficiencies in health, education, roads and welfare. Other basic problems—and here I agree with both debaters—lie in the realm of equal opportunity, and the exercise of our civil liberties and civil rights.

On all these questions I would like to see our best liberal minds set to work, not for idle speculation or mere theorizing, but to produce some concrete, practical recommendations.

—HARRY S. TRUMAN