The Port Huron Statement

Tom Hayden

OVERVIEW
In 1962 students active in the civil rights movement and the peace movement formed Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). The organization came to represent what was called the “new left”—a rebirth of radical American politics. At its first meeting in Port Huron, Michigan, Tom Hayden (a student from the University of Michigan) and other students wrote a manifesto that severely criticized the economic and social situation in the United States. The introduction to the statement appears here. The manifesto sparked a political awakening of a generation of students and the beginning of an era of student activism.

GUIDED READING As you read, consider the following questions:
• Do you think this introductory statement conveys a sense of hope?
• What do you think the SDS was trying to accomplish in drafting such a manifesto?

We are people of this generation, bred in at least modest comfort, housed now in universities, looking uncomfortably to the world we inherit.

When we were kids the United States was the wealthiest and strongest country in the world; the only one with the atom bomb, the least scarred by modern war, an initiator of the United Nations that we thought would distribute Western influence throughout the world. Freedom and equality for each individual, government of, by, and for the people—these American values we found good, principles by which we could live as men. Many of us began maturing in complacency.

As we grew, however, our comfort was penetrated by events too troubling to dismiss. First, the permeating and victimizing fact of human degradation, symbolized by the Southern struggle against racial bigotry, compelled most of us from silence to activism. Second, the enclosing fact of the Cold War, symbolized by the presence of the Bomb, brought awareness that we ourselves, and our friends, and millions of abstract "others" we knew more directly because of our common peril, might die at any time. We might deliberately ignore, or avoid, or fail to feel all other human problems, but not these two, for these were too immediate and crushing in their impact, too challenging in the demand that we as individuals take the responsibility for encounter and resolution.

While these and other problems either directly oppressed us or rankled our consciences and became our own subjective concern, we began to see complicated and disturbing paradoxes in our surrounding America. The declaration "all men are created equal . . ." rang hollow before the facts of
Negro life in the South and the big cities of the North. The proclaimed
peaceful intentions of the United States contradicted its economic and military
investments in the Cold War status quo.

We witnessed, and continue to witness, other paradoxes. With nuclear
energy whole cities can easily be powered, yet the dominant nation-states seem
more likely to unleash destruction greater than that incurred in all wars of
human history. Although our own technology is destroying old and creating
new forms of social organization, men still tolerate meaningless work and
idleness. While two-thirds of mankind suffers undernourishment, our own
upper classes revel amidst superfluous abundance. Although world population
is expected to double in forty years, the nations still tolerate anarchy as a major
principle of international conduct and uncontrolled exploitation governs the
sapping of the earth’s physical resources. Although mankind desperately needs
revolutionary leadership, America rests in national stalemate, its goals
ambiguous and tradition-bound instead of informed and clear, its democratic
system apathetic and manipulated rather than "of, by, and for the people."

Not only did tarnish appear on our image of American virtue, not only did
dissillusion occur when the hypocrisy of American ideals was discovered, but
we began to sense that what we had originally seen as the American Golden
Age was actually the decline of an era. The worldwide outbreak of revolution
against colonialism and imperialism, the entrenchment of totalitarian states,
the menace of war, overpopulation, international disorder, supertechnology—
these trends were testing the tenacity of our own commitment to democracy
and freedom and our abilities to visualize their application to a world in
upheaval.

Our work is guided by the sense that we may be the last generation in the
experiment with living. But we are a minority—the vast majority of our
people regard the temporary equilibriums of our society and world as eternally
functional parts. In this is perhaps the outstanding paradox: we ourselves are
imbued with urgency, yet the message of our society is that there is no viable
alternative to the present. Beneath the reassuring tones of the politicians,
beneath the common opinion that America will "muddle through," beneath
the stagnation of those who have closed their minds to the future, is the
pervading feeling that there simply are no alternatives, that our times have
witnessed the exhaustion not only of Utopias, but of any new departures as
well. Feeling the press of complexity upon the emptiness of life, people are
fearful of the thought that at any moment things might be thrust out of
control. They fear change itself, since change might smash whatever invisible
framework seems to hold back chaos for them now. For most Americans, all
crusades are suspect, threatening. The fact that each individual sees apathy in
his fellows perpetuates the common reluctance to organize for change. The
dominant institutions are complex enough to blunt the minds of their
potential critics, and entrenched enough to swiftly dissipate or entirely repel
the energies of protest and reform, thus limiting human expectancies. Then,
too, we are a materially improved society, and by our own improvements we seem to have weakened the case for further change.

Some would have us believe that Americans feel contentment amidst prosperity—but might it not better be called a glaze above deeply felt anxieties about their role in the new world? And if these anxieties produce a developed indifference to human affairs, do they not as well produce a yearning to believe there is an alternative to the present, that something can be done to change circumstances in the school, the workplaces, the bureaucracies, the government? It is to this latter yearning, at once the spark and engine of change, that we direct our present appeal. The search for truly democratic alternatives to the present, and a commitment to social experimentation with them, is a worthy and fulfilling human enterprise, one which moves us and, we hope, others today. On such a basis do we offer this document of our convictions and analysis: as an effort in understanding and changing the conditions of humanity in the late twentieth century, an effort rooted in the ancient, still unfulfilled conception of man attaining determining influence over his circumstances of life.