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THE COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS
EXECUTIVE DEPARTMENT
STATE HOUSE, BOSTON 02133

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- Jack Flannery

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HOLD FOR RELEASE 1:00 P.M., SUNDAY, JUNE 13, 1971

RELEASE # 1/JE/78

STATE HOUSE, BOSTON - Governor Francis W. Sargent today addressed the Commencement Exercises of Suffolk University held at the Hynes Civic Auditorium, Boylston Street, Boston. The full text of the Governor's address is attached.

One of the things it is currently fashionable to puzzle over publicly is the change of mood on our college campuses.

Why this eerie and unexpected calm? America is anxious and wants to know.

As usual, there has been a chorus of glib commentary on the subject, from commencement speakers and others.

Some say it is the sound of sheer exhaustion.

Some say the uneasy quiet before the storm.

Some say the symptom of utter apathy.

Some say the stillness of despair.

All have probably guessed a part of the truth; none has greatly reassured us.

We remain struck by a very unsettling thought - the thought that America's youth, having jarred our complacency by challenging so many of our basic values and assumptions, is suddenly doubting its ability to furnish sturdy alternatives. Having raised so many difficult questions, you are suddenly short on answers.

Your silence is deafening, for it comes at a time when America is desperately unsure of itself, reeling from a decade of turmoil.

And now a change of mood, in the nation as well as on college campuses. Why? And what to make of it?

Before we guess further at the answer to this question, we would

do well to look backward a moment, and try to know how we have come to our disillusionment.

Looking backward, we will be impressed that never in our history have we tried so hard and seemed to cover so little ground as in the past ten years.

Small wonder. We have been grappling with problems of unprecedented complexity. Yet our response has been to see those problems in sweeping, simplistic terms. Our habit has been to hunt for sweeping, simplistic answers.

Perhaps it is a legacy of the just causes we have fought for in the past, a yearning for the unambiguous truth we claimed so recently in the defense of freedom against tyranny.

Perhaps it is the last evidence of our naive youth as a nation, to try to overpower the harsh realities of life with the sheer energy of our idealism.

Whatever the cause, we have bartered away much of our reason by trading in slogans, labels, catch-phrases, and generalities.

Slogans. They are the tactics of those who believe that if something is repeated enough times and charged with enough emotion, it will somehow resemble the truth.

Labels. We have been eager to categorize each other, and call each other names. Some of us do it politely, imagining that we have

clarified matters by sorting ourselves out as liberals and conservatives, middle Americans and new leftists. Some of us do it scornfully, for effect, and call each other hard-hats, freaks, and pigs.

Little is accomplished by labelling and calling another man a name, little other than to rob him, in our own minds, of humanity and compassion, of the ability to change his views.

Catch-phrases. They are the assassins of our legitimate concern. They cut short our interest in real and important issues, like the Environment, by turning those issues into passing fascinations. It is a familiar pattern: the idea becomes the fad, the fad becomes the cliché, the cliché is soon an empty and odious reminder of last year's vogue.

Generalities. The theory, too often valid, is that our votes can be bought by vast over-simplifications that appeal to prejudice and self-interest. The technique is to paint our difficulties in black and white and then to point the easy way out. If we can only be made to believe in the good and evil sides, we can be trusted to climb aboard with no questions asked, without actually troubling ourselves to think.

The practitioners of this technique are those who would prey on our fears in order to exploit the issue of law and order. They are those who rage against the system, and babble that all American business

enterprise is monstrous, brutal, and self-serving.

And they are those who tells us that the problem of welfare is no problem at all, but simple proof that government is corrupt and the poor are lazy and greedy.

Small wonder that the work we have done with these crude tools has left us unsatisfied, left us instead with a sense of frustration, of being frantically adrift.

We have hunted for sweeping, simplistic solutions, and we have failed to find what was not there.

And more has been put in jeopardy than our peace of mind.

Our future as a free society hangs in the balance.

To know this we need only remind ourselves that democracy is still an experiment, an experiment that has not been finally proven successful.

We are not at all sure that it will bear the full weight of our national maturity - wealth, power, enormous size and bewildering complexity.

For it is as if we have become so drugged with power, so consumed with great issues of war and peace, that we are not fit for the unromantic work ahead of us.

That work is the work of continuing our experiment in self-government, reforming and renewing it constantly, making it rational and responsive.

The issues involved are precisely the kinds of issues we seem unable to deal with. They are not stark and sensational. They cannot be stated in a headline, or fully explored in five minutes of the evening news. And so they often languish at the periphery of our concern.

A case in point I am particularly familiar with is at the State level. We badly need the Reorganization that was planned for implementation on April 1st of this year. It has not been implemented, because it is caught in a legislative tangle. It will stay there until it is dislodged by the understanding and support of the people.

Unfortunately, there are no slogans or catch-phrases for reorganization, no facile way to catch the public's interest, and that interest has not been apparent.

No. We have not had a taste for issues as unglamorous as this one, even though they are the vital issues, issues we will either come to grips with or go right on becoming still more confused and frustrated, numbly aware that our system of government is somehow failing us.

These are a few of the reasons we are disillusioned and adrift.

Ponder them. And in their context ask again, "Why this eerie and unexpected calm?"

Perhaps we will find encouragement.

Perhaps you, on the college campuses, are suddenly short on

answers because you are learning that there are no easy answers.

Perhaps the rest of the country is not far behind you in reaching the same conclusion.

Perhaps our voices are muted because we are taking stock in ourselves.

Perhaps our mood has changed to a more reflective one.

And perhaps we are realizing certain things.

Realizing, painfully, that the problems have not been dispersed by our shouting at them.

Realizing, slowly, that people will not oblige us with predictable behavior. They almost never display the base, uniform motives that name-calling imputes to them. On the contrary, they persist in proving that they are so many different and individual human beings.

We may be realizing also that problems are not solved merely by focusing our national attention on them, briefly and intensely.

We may be realizing that the easy way out leads us nowhere.

It is heartening to hope that we are realizing these things, that some progress has been made.

And if we wonder what has brought about this change, we may find that, paradoxically, it is the good that has come of tragedy in our recent past. Sadly, we find ourselves observing, more and more, the anniversaries of riot, assassination, and war. And when we do so, when we pause to reappraise the meaning of these events, we must doubt their simplicity.

It is hard, one year later, to look back on the deaths at Kent State and choose sides. The passion and outrage we felt at the time are cooled. Blame and virtue in that tragic episode have faded with time. No heroes or villains survive, only the sobering fact that American society is indeed complicated and perplexing.

If the clamor is stilled in some measure by such awareness, then there is much to hope for. Perhaps the silence may even be great enough for the clear, small voice of reason to be heard.

It will not call us to arms, or stir our righteous zeal for great new causes.

It will not surrender up the truth, or unlock the simple solutions we were sure barely eluded us.

It will speak to us only of the complexity of events, of the absence of easy answers, of the long work and perseverance that alone can rebuild our society, of the tolerance and goodwill and private morality that alone can dignify our lives.

Here is more profound encouragement still.

It is a bold conjecture, but if we dare to think that reason and not madness will prevail, we will say that this has not been a bad time, but merely a difficult one, which tempered and brought forth what was best in us.

We will say that hope has not flickered and finally died, but that it has been reborn on surer, better footing.

We will say that we have not turned away in despair from a blank and bitter future, but find that future brimming with promise that we can make it ours.

And having said these things, we will roll up our sleeves and set about our work in earnest.