

REBELLION & MEDIOCRITY*

by Doug Bowers

MEDIOCRITY exists in virtually all phases of American life though more significantly in some aspects than in others. Consider, for example, the relative unimportance of such mediocre situations as poor housekeeping, long yard grass, or uncut shrubs. Yet, few facets of American life have this irrelevance to the total scene. Mediocrity, per se, is not a social ill as any militarist or bureaucrat will quickly assert, but the average, the "less-than-the-best," the commonplace in several particular fields may be considered contrary to the general welfare and therefore socially degrading. Two such fields are education and race relations.

As Dr. James B. Conant has proposed in his book, *Slums and Suburbs*, one of the most mediocre facets of the American educational system is its inability to supply all youth with equal educational opportunities and facilities regardless of where the students are physically located, be it slum or suburb. Having studied the differences that exist between lower-class slum schools, often staffed with stagnant, security-seeking, old teachers or with less able young teachers, and higher-class suburban schools, where the dynamic, youthful ingenuity of well-paid and challenged teachers produces unheard of results, Dr. Conant and his researchers also have come to the conclusion that education must overcome its courtship of the below average before truly dynamic teaching methods and practices will be of significant value. Mediocre curricula in high schools, which interest few and challenge even fewer, must give way to highly integrated programs that set the students' goals high enough to assure both a challenge and a sense of achievement. Speaking of integrated programs, allow me, parenthetically, to express a personal opinion concerning the general topic, guidance programs. To be entirely truthful, most guidance work is a farce, often characterized as piecemeal, unorganized, superficial, and incompetent. Nevertheless, the strange aura that surrounds most guidance counselors indicates that they consider themselves practical psychologists, people of real training and ability, whose sacred task it is to direct the leaders of tomorrow in the correct paths. The majority of such

* Freshman Writing.

people that I have known have been so college-oriented that they perceive very few students as being non-college material, often leading students so far astray that they never fully recover. Contrary to popular guidance office hypotheses, not all youth are potential college material, nor do they *need* to be. In this era of rising technological advances, the need for the specifically trained mechanic is just as great as the need for the designer or the engineer. Not all people can be president of General Motors: some have to work on the assembly lines.

The major education problem concerning mediocrity, then, is one of direction. Many educators fear that too many good minds are not being challenged, are not being developed, and are not being catered to. Too few really great thinkers have been produced by American education in the past few decades, and unless a drastic revision of teaching norms occurs, this trend will continue, possibly with tragic results.

Turning to an equally vital issue and one that is related to educational reform, we are faced with mediocrity in race relations. In a nation that has deemed itself "the melting pot" of the world's races, it is ironic that racial discord, especially concerning Negroes, has been such an insoluble problem and such an historic "crown of thorns" to our country. Perhaps mediocrity will help to explain why the approach used until recently has been so ineffective, inasmuch as the general trend today is toward a recognition of our historic mediocrity in racial issues. In the past many people perceived the race problem as being analogous to a nest of bees, something that should not be stirred up nor openly attacked. After the Civil War stirred up the problem, however, no attempts were successful in quieting the uproar—not even total disfranchising of the Negro race in politics during the "Bourbon" years. The mediocre approach to the "smoldering" racial problem continued through the first half of the twentieth century, the general policy being "don't discuss it—don't get involved—and above all, keep the government out of it." The belief, still held today by some conservatives, that a government cannot successfully legislate against prejudice, is sheer nonsense. As Horton and Hunt explain in their sociology text, it is not against prejudice, but rather against discrimination, that legislatures can validly legislate: yet, each is a causal factor for the other. "Most Americans may be unaware that, to a great extent, 'social patterns of segregation were created by law, and not the other way around.' Within recent years, a number of United States Supreme Court decisions have overthrown many state segregation laws and have interpreted the Constitution to forbid many kinds of segregation practices. Segregation, established with the help of law, is now being destroyed with the help of law." Since this new approach to the entire race question has been initiated, the mediocre

folkways and traditions have become less important and more obscure, and the trend looks as if it will continue. Mediocrity can be overcome, even in areas where discussion seems taboo and exposure irresponsible, as the revolt in the race question illustrates.

The average mind, the average belief, the average prejudices have definite roles to play in a free democracy, but it is not by envisioning these attributes as noble that a society advances, as it ultimately must if it is to survive. Why should the average view concerning education or race relations be what it is, rather than a little more wise or knowing? Why not cater to the excellent, raise the average, and provide for the below average? Such a plan is no more impossible than sending a man into space for several days—or is it? One must recognize that the mediocre citizens of our country are comfortable and secure in their positions; therefore, change can come only through a revolution that challenges such positions, security, and static beliefs. Mediocre individuals must be forced to seek self-improvement, which can only be accomplished by placing them in a state of flux, in an environment that is strange to them and that lacks traditional comforts and security so that they will be forced to rise to the occasion. A rebellion of the mind is necessary before mediocrity can be eradicated; the rebellion *will* come!

Days pass like clouds in the sky,
You cannot catch them,
You cannot stop them.
They go on and on.

ILJA SCHOLTEN*

* Freshman Writing.