

In May, 1970, then-Secretary of the Interior Walter J. Hickel wrote a famous letter to President Nixon concerning the Vietnam War, the extension of the war into Cambodia, and the Nixon Administration's attitude toward the nation's young, many of whom were protesting the war. The letter, meant to be private, was leaked to the press and was the subject of national news for months until Hickel was fired by Nixon in November of 1970:

THE SECRETARY OF THE INTERIOR, WASHINGTON

May 6, 1970

Dear Mr. President:

I believe this Administration finds itself, today, embracing a philosophy which appears to lack appropriate concern for the attitude of a great mass of Americans--our young people.

Addressed either politically or philosophically, I believe we are in error if we set out consciously to alienate those who could be our friends.

Today, our young people, or at least a vast segment of them, believe they have no opportunity to communicate with Government, regardless of Administration, other than through violent confrontation. But I am convinced we--and they--have the capacity, if we will but have the willingness, to learn from history.

During the great depression, our youth lost their ability to communicate with the Republican Party. And we saw the young people of the 1930s become the predominant leaders of the '40s and '50s--associated not with our party, but rather with those with whom they felt they could communicate. What is happening today is not unrelated to what happened in the '30s. Now being unable to communicate with either Party, they are apparently heading down the road to anarchy. And regardless of how I, or any American, might feel individually, we have an obligation as leaders to communicate with our youth and listen to their ideas and problems.

About 200 years ago there was emerging a great nation in the British Empire, and it found itself with a colony in violent protest by its youth--men such as Patrick Henry, Thomas Jefferson, Madison and Monroe, to name a few. Their protests fell on deaf ears, and finally led to war. The outcome is history. My point is, if we read history, it clearly shows that youth in its protest must be heard.

Let us give America an optimistic outlook and optimistic leadership. Let us show them we can solve our problems in an enlightened and positive manner.

As an example, last December 16, I wrote to you suggesting that April 22, Earth Day, be declared a national holiday. Believing this would have been a good decision, we were active on university campuses over the Christmas holidays with a program called SCOPE (Student Councils on Pollution and the Environment). It was moderately successful, and it showed that it was possible to communicate with youth. I am gratified that on April 22, I, and approximately 1,000 Interior employees, participated in Earth Day commemorative activities all over the United States.

I felt, after these meetings, that we had crossed a bridge; that communication was possible and acceptable. Likewise, I suggest in this same vein that you meet with college presidents, to talk about the very situation that is erupting, because before we can face and conquer our enemies, we must identify them, whether those enemies take physical or philosophical form. And we must win over our philosophical enemies by convincing them of the wisdom of the path we have chosen, rather than ignoring the path they propose.

In this regard, I believe the Vice President initially has answered a deep-seated mood of America in his public statements. However, a continued attack on the young--not on their attitudes so much as their motives, can serve little purpose other than to further cement those attitudes to a solidity impossible to penetrate with reason.

Finally, Mr. President, permit me to suggest that you consider meeting, on an individual and conversational basis, with members of your Cabinet. Perhaps through such conversations, we can gain greater insight into the problems confronting us all, and most important, into the solutions of these problems.

Faithfully yours,

Walter J. Hickel

Secretary of the Interior

The President

The White House

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