

JULY 4TH

This year, for the first time ever, demonstrators against the U.S. and Australian Vietnam policy became militant enough to burn the U.S. flag and throw stones through the windows of the U.S. Consulate. For the first time demonstrators defied the police and faced them with a united front of opposition which virtually allowed them to control the streets of the city for a period of about three hours.

Since then there has been much criticism levied at students for inciting and participating in what has been called a riot. As one of the student organisers, I feel I must explain the position of the students without sounding as though I am apologising for them.

The first point that must be realised is that we aim to change society - not demolish it.

We are fighting against a filthy, immoral and unjust war. A war which was instigated and continually accelerated by the U.S. and which is fully supported by the Australian Government. This war is wrong and it is up to us to stop it.

We do not sit in a cold ivory tower making meaningless pronouncements about the immorality of the Vietnam war. We are emotionally involved in our protest. We feel deeply for those tens of thousands of women and children who are napalmed by U.S. planes.

We have had hundreds of marches, petitions, letters to newspapers, and other legal displays of our dissent over our government's Vietnam policy. But we have seen no effect. The war continues at an ever increasing pace despite the so-called "peace talks".

Maybe we shouldn't smash windows, but what the hell is this compared with the napalming of children or the defoliation of crops? World leaders are urging the U.S. and Australian Governments to withdraw their troops. The Pope urged that there be an immediate cease-fire. Yet the U.S. and Australian administrations continue to ignore these pleas for peace - instead the bombing of Vietnam is now at a higher level than ever before. If our governments continue to ignore world opinion and the wishes of many of their own citizens then they should not be surprised if more forceful methods of dissent begin to be employed.

Perhaps some students did come with the express purpose of inciting violence, but there is no real evidence of this. All that has been shown is that different groups of students employ different methods of showing their dissent. Most of these methods are illegal. For instance, the Melbourne University students marched through the City with placards, without permission, they washed a blood-stained U.S. flag in City Square without Council permission, then, marching on the road, they went to the shrine where they held an illegal gathering and observed a minutes silence for the Vietnamese people. All these things were illegal yet the police did not interfere.

Some students felt that the time had come to burn the U.S. flag and stone the U.S. Consulate to show their disgust for the U.S. Vietnam policy. Obviously this is just as illegal as obstructing traffic by marching on the road. In contrast however, when the flag was burned, the police immediately and very forcibly attacked the demonstration and tried to break it up.

There is a very large difference between the dubious violence in burning a flag or even in throwing stones, and the definite violence in dragging a student along the ground or charging a horse into the crowd.

The trouble began when the police manhandled the demonstrator who burned the first U.S. flag. From this stage on, there was complete antagonism between the demonstrators and the police. Had the police not followed this up by further violent action against demonstrators throwing stones, the situation may not have developed as it did.

I am not trying to justify the throwing of stones but rather trying to clarify the situation before and after the stoning of the Consulate. Before the stone-throwing, the demonstrators were already incensed at the police violence shown

when they "dealt with" the flag-burning. At this stage horses were being used to "control" the crowd - even though the demonstrators were still quite law-abiding. The emotional effects, such as fear and anxiety, produced in people when faced by the possibility or the actuality of a charging horse, are quite considerable. The introduction of horses caused the fear and resentment which was the beginning of the emotionally charged, explosive atmosphere that followed.

This atmosphere was heightened to flash-point by the unnecessarily violent arrests made by police, by riding horses through the crowd and through the demonstrators sitting down in the Consulate driveway, and by the completely aggressive attitude shown by police throughout the night.

This is not to say that I am blaming the police for the violence on Thursday night, but neither am I laying the blame on the students. Rather, I think the blame lies in the attitudes and actions caused by the lack of experience and understanding of the behaviour of large demonstrations.

In retrospect, it can be said that the police should not have reacted to the flag-burning or the stone-throwing. Their reaction only caused further stone-throwing.

But not only did the police react when they should not have - they over-reacted. Immediately the police thought they were "losing control" of the demonstration they tried to clamp down on the demonstrators and make the demonstrators follow police orders. Police must realise that demonstrations are never fully controlled by anyone and that the best way to lose what control does exist is to "over control" something. And this is largely what happened on Thursday night.

The police had the choice of ignoring the flag-burning and rock-throwing, or of perhaps peaceably and calmly asking for the names of those throwing the rocks or sending the bill to the organisations involved, or of violently opposing the demonstrators and precipitating police/student clashes and an atmosphere conducive to violence on a scale that would never happen if the police did not intervene.

True, the police must protect property; they must draw the line somewhere. But this line must be flexible to a certain extent because if it is not, then the police will be playing right into the hands of any demonstrator wishing to cause a riot.

The police are prepared to divert traffic when there is a visit by some V.I.P. and they are prepared to hand an armalite rifle to a "madman". Surely they should be prepared to negotiate with demonstration organisers before a demonstration and thereby prevent a further display of student/police violence due to lack of insight into the situation.

(I personally tried to negotiate with the police the day before the demonstration but no-one would speak to me.)

We are now at the stage where we have to make a decision: do we abandon the demonstrations; do we return to the ineffectual, ultra-legal demonstrations of a few years back because of Sir Arthur Rylah's statements about increased police toughness; or do we refuse to be intimidated away from our position and prepare ourselves for guerilla warfare with the police, knowing that eventually we must lose? I am frightened that Prime Minister Gorton and Sir Arthur Rylah may be forcing us to turn to the last proposition.

Therefore it is important that the following propositions be given every consideration by the police and their superiors:

1. Police should be prepared to talk to demonstration organisers before a demonstration takes place so that some form of understanding can be reached - an understanding that does not compromise the position of either party.
2. Horses should not be used because they precipitate an atmosphere of fear and anxiety which will often lead to the very situation they are meant to prevent.
3. Traffic should be diverted if there is a chance of violence due to the "inconvenience" to the public caused by the demonstration.
4. The demonstration should not be interfered with if possible - this will allow the demonstrators to discipline the demonstration themselves.
5. Arrests should be made in a quiet, civil fashion, and where possible, names should be obtained and summonses issued later.
6. All photos and films taken of demonstrations should be made available to the public, especially where there are accusations of police violence.

I feel that these proposals can be met without a loss of power, control, or face by the police. Unless they are met, I fear that there will be larger and more serious police/student clashes at future demonstrations.

As Vice-President of the Melbourne University Pacifist Society, I urge the Prime Minister, the Attorney General, the Chief Secretary and the Police Department to seriously consider the above and attempt to help prevent a recurrence of the futile violence seen on Thursday night.

Harry van Moorst.

One of the organisers of the July 4th Demonstration.