Michigan conference considers changing society, morals

(The following article is Lee Horstman's report on a student conference he attended March 22-23. Half his report was paid for by the Student Senate.)

By LEW HORSTMANN

Twenty-two students discussed such diverse topics as the New Morality and America's space program at a three-day conference on "Society in Transition: Where Do We Stand?" held at the University of Michigan in late March.

Speakers at the conference were Dr. Joel Isaacson of Michigan's art school; Dr. Henry Aiken, philosophy professor at Brandeis University; Senator Edmund Muskie, Democrat, from Maine, and Captain Robert Freitag, Director of Manned Flight at NASA.

Man, war, conformity, U.S. over-analogy between art and society, showing many slides of the works of contemporary artists specifically interested in socio-comment.

"New Morality"

These works, he pointed out, make statements about such things as civil rights, the Vietnam war, conformity, U.S. over-commercialism, and the "God is Dead" theology.

Afterwards, the first of the delegate panel discussions was inconclusive, as many students took subjective viewpoints in defining art.

Aiken's lecture was considerably more vigorous. He carefully hedged his topic by implying that the "New Morality" is even less popularly espoused than the old one was and a good deal more emotionally problem-oriented than aesthetically principled. As an example of the old morality, many Americans experienced guilt arising from a sense of moral responsibility at Kennedy's assassination, but little guilt has arisen over the Vietnam war.

Sprung from Science

The New Morality is concerned with extreme situations previously implausible: the extinction of mankind by nuclear holocaust, rapid overpopulation, military occupancies, omnipotent machines.

In response to these pressures, the New Morality espouses actitudes such as universal tolerance and free love, birth control, the death of ideology, and continuous education of the self.

Aiken approves this New Morality as the only practical one for solving modern dilemmas. He feels it sprang from the sophistication of science and education, for example, physiological knowledge of sex processes), the "Death of the Gods" (not only Christ but the Almighty Dollar), and the continuing savagery of political revolutions (the Hungarian Revolution, Dominican Crisis, and Vietnam).

Dropout Swingers

Aiken believes the New Morality is characterized by a "lack of a sense of humor, a return to Greek self-sacredness --- the most authentic sort of idealism, and disillusionment with vast organizations and systems.

Students later asked whether social humor today implies a hopeless situation, the idea being that we tend to laugh at distasteful things which we cannot change. The delegates agreed, at any rate, that reform-minded rebels are today considered "square," and social dropouts are the "swingers."

Senator Muskie was a walking press release. He deftly avoided controversial issues and delivered a friendly Dale Carnegie-style lecture on how to be a successful politician. He put theory into practice by fielding hot questions about the draft and domestic policy with remarkable aplomb, managing to support the administration in each reply.

Honest Abe

Students later agreed that political dynamics have not changed qualitatively in quite a while. After all, Abraham Lincoln grew his beard to improve his image.

Captain Freitag matched Aiken for wit and pertinence. He discussed reasons for the space program, and stages in the program.

He cited improvements in military and domestic technology, in world status, and in the nation's employment situation as reasons for the program. In other words, it "pays off handoemly to satisfy our innate curiosity."

Preparation for long-duration space travel promises to develop psychological and technological treasures-trove of knowledge.

How do we use this knowledge? "We need values," said Freitag. Satellites can be used to wreak subtle damage on nations, but they have a converse potential to greatly assist the community of man. Science is indeed forcing a New Morality.

In the discussion afterwards, Dr. Bunning of Michigan's Aero-Space Department, emphasized problems of environment-adaptation that will arise when many types of people have occasion to travel in space.

The last student discussion of the conference concerned two theories of student government on campus. One approach has student government constantly press for student rights. Another approach suggests that student governments should act as buffers between the administration and students, letting the administration change things at its own pace (which is what it does anyway).

According to the second theory, if the administration gets pressured too much, it will backtrack into an even worse stance, as has occurred at Berkeley. Students also pointed out that reformation is hampered by the fact that some of the most ardent reformers have dropped out of college, or else feel totally frustrated by the immobility of their colleges.

A meaningful exchange of ideas occurred, in the opinion of most of the delegates, despite ineffective planning of the conference by the student government at the University of Michigan.