Realism Tempers Student Idealism

By FRYAR CALHOUN

The author of this article, a junior history major, was one of three Rice delegates to the eighteenth Student Conference on National Affairs held last week at Texas A&M College. Other Rice participants were Eugene Kellin, junior history and philosophy major, and Lindsay Buchanan, graduate exchange student from Cambridge University.

How can idealists live with the unpleasant realities of today's world? Perhaps this question represents, as well as any one question could, the major concern of the students from the United States, Canada, Mexico, and India who gathered last week in College Station.

If many of the SCONA delegates were truly idealists, as I believe they were, they were usually reluctant to admit it. Few exhibited the sort of starry-eyed enthusiasm which one associates with those who followed Wilson in "making the world safe for democracy" or the ideological assurance of the liberals of the 1930's.

The Dreams of Today's Students have been tempered by a bitterness about 20th century history and a resentment toward the complex and treacherous prospects for tomorrow. Consequently, their hopes for a peaceful and prosperous world are cloaked in a tough-minded realism which is immediately suspicious toward any vague hint of Utopianism.

This similarity of attitude perhaps explains the large measure of agreement which appeared in last week's conference. Although there was plenty of lively discussion on specific issues, there was a strong concurrence on the wide range of major issues—the arms race, nationalistic aspirations, population, economic problems, the UN, etc., indeed striking.

Thus, practically all members of my round table agreed that while complete disarmament is at present a possibility, the arms race must not be allowed to continue unchecked. Most felt that real peace would be ultimately possible only through the emergence of some sort of world government.

But the delegates did not generally evince the sort of "ban-the-bomb" liberalism which is present in large quantities at every NSA convention. While they felt sympathy toward the theme of former American ambassador to UN, Charles P. Ross's speech—that man must have peace—many were quick to criticize his lack of realistic suggestions for US action.

And While the few students who advocated a Goldwater-type policy of "winning the Cold War" were treated with amusement of scorn, few of their adversaries expressed a desire to abandon Southeast Asia or the Turkish missile bases; and no one, to my knowledge, criticized Kennedy's recent action on Cuba.

As one of my round table's co-chairmen, a Mexican engineer, pointed out, the word most often heard last week was "education." The mediocrity of success of foreign aid and economic development in emerging nations, the delegates felt, has been largely due to failures in adequate training of native peoples.

OAS President and Costa Rican Ambassador Gonzalez Farrow received the group's warmest acclamation for his speech on Latin American tensions. But, although the students were obviously happy to hear his pro-US sentiments, they were almost as quick to question his glowing picture of Latin American progress. Few believed that the Alliance for Progress is doing as well as he said, and the Mexican delegates corroborated this suspicion.

Generally, then, these students retain hope for the eventual peace and prosperity of mankind but harbor few illusions about the obstacles confronting them. Their optimism lies in their trust in education and the proper use of technology.

Unwilling to be bound by any complex ideology, they unhesitatingly advocate that the most effective means be used to meet a specific problem. If this means some form of socialism in underdeveloped countries, or strong action against Cuba, then so be it.

The most liberal delegates were the Canadians, who described themselves as "fairly moderate" in terms of their own students' bodies.

The Mexican students, some of whom are studying at Texas A&M, epitomized the pragmatic attitude of the conference with, for example, their defense of Mexico's one-party rule by an "intellectual aristocracy."

If there really exists a "young conservative revival" in America, it was barely in evidence at A&M last week. Only a handful of students took positions on a Goldwater; and occasional reference to the junior senator from Arizona met with general amusement, even though the delegates came largely from Southern schools.

The Emphasis was definitely on ability and knowledge, and the participants—whether engineering, mathematics, or liberal arts students—were obviously intelligent and well-informed. Knowledgeable, convincing speakers were well received, but rambling performances such as Wadsworth's speech or Vice President Johnson's question session met with criticisms.

While few felt that they had solved any major problems, they were just as unwilling to admit that these problems are insoluble. And insofar as rational discussion, investigation, and dedication avail, the SCONA delegates mean to seek their solution.