



STOP THAT TEENAGER BEFORE HE VOTES

By ELLIOT ROSENBERG

Each fall I commit an act of willful sabotage. It is premeditated, unabashed and performed in an American classroom beneath the Stars and Stripes. And when the deed is done, I harbor no feelings of guilt. For in weakening, ever so slightly, one pillar of democratic mythology, I have helped preserve the Republic.

New York City's Board of Education would disagree. My high school's administration would, too. Also, my union, the United Federation of Teachers, and every Republican and Democrat who has ever run for public office, anywhere. And, most vehemently of all, the League of Women Voters.

What is this act of possible sedition? Through tactically indirect means, I discourage some teenagers from voting, checkmating the vigorous campaigns to register them and get them into those curtained booths. I do it for a good reason: Many teenagers do not deserve to vote. Their teacher should know. Let me explain: Each campaign season my immediate superior, the Social Studies Department chairman, asks whether any of my classes hold sizable numbers of 18-year-olds. Instead of taking the cowardly way out and simply saying "No," I welcome two genteel, well-dressed women from the League of Women Voters into my classroom. As the well-meaning pair talk about citizen responsibility, the duty of all eligible teenagers to make their collective voice heard across the land, their opportunity to make democracy truly work, they never take note of the fidgeting body-language signs before them. Nor the subtle eye-to-eye contact by which students query me: "When they gonna finish?"

When the lecture ends, the women distribute several pamphlets and a manila voter-registration form to all the

18-year-olds. Self-addressed by the Board of Elections, it spares teenagers any inconvenience on the road to becoming good citizens. And it's marked, "No Postage Necessary If Mailed In The United States," fulfilling one's civic duty also becomes financially painless. And if a journey to the nearest mail box might prove arduous, arrangements are in place for a table-top "drop" site in the school lobby.

Then the women make their first major mistake. Instead of leading their quarry line by line through the rows of questions on the registration form, they depart.

"Hey, what's the color of my eyes for item 7?"

"Can I get in trouble if I sign the aff-i-dav-it?"

"What do I write in the box marked 'For Official Use Only?'"

Possibly the league representatives figure any 18-year-old can fill out a simple form. That seems a logical conclusion by any group also capable of presuming all 18-year-olds belong in a voting booth. Or perhaps they assume I'll enthusiastically pick up where they enthusiastically leave off.

Another grievous mistake.

I'll go this far: "Your eyes are hazel... you won't get in trouble if your answers are honest... don't write anything in the box marked 'Official Use.'" But not a step further.

"Mr. Rosenberg, I don't want to register and I don't care about voting. Do I have to?"

"Say, If I fill this thing out, will you give me extra credit?"

Effective sabotage need not be violent. It can be as subtle as an ambiguous shrug or its verbal equivalent.

"I'm not telling you to vote; I'm not telling you not to vote. That's your decision to make."

Then I add the fatal caveat: "If you decide to vote, take the trouble to be

informed, *learn* the candidates' backgrounds, *learn* the issues, *learn* where the candidates stand on those issues."

That strikes some in the room as too much spinach, not enough candy. So the number of uncompleted manila registration forms I find in the waste basket at the end of the school day never alarms me.

If we hesitate to let teenagers drink until they're 21, why entrust them with shaping the fate of the Republic at 18? Since the 26th Amendment's ratification in 1971, about 400 youngsters have passed through my economics and history classes each school year. Many I'd happily escort, umbrella in hand, to the polls on a stormy day. But many others constitute a sleeping giant best left unawakened.

After marking a few tests, a teacher is a better judge of a youngster's readiness to share in his country's governance than any voter-action group, however well-intentioned. In social studies class, a platter is placed before the student containing the roots and structure of American government, the essence of our Constitution, its evolution, its enduring issues. And if he leaves his plate untouched, the nation will be better served if he also leaves no fingerprints on a voting booth lever.

Consider an essay on government that informs the reader that the president "passes" laws but Congress can veto them and the Supreme Court can make the law work anyway by overriding Congress's veto. Or a history essay that affirms Franklin Roosevelt was to blame for the Depression that took place in the 1930s, but he made up for it by winning World War II after the Chinese bombed Pearl Harbor.

"Getting Out the Vote" is an important endeavor. To my mind, "Keeping 'Em Away" is often just as necessary.

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