

The Port Huron Statement was written in Port Huron, Michigan, at a meeting of Students for a Democratic Society. Tom Hayden, the driving force behind the manifesto, was a student at the University of Michigan and came from a working-class family. The Port Huron Statement reflects the dissatisfaction and disillusionment many young people were feeling in the 1960s. College enrollments were booming in the 1950s and 1960s, and many students objected to the way college administrators attempted to control their personal lives. Other students were beginning to be involved in the civil rights movement and were disappointed that the mainstream liberals were not supporting those efforts

Port Huron Statement of the Students for a Democratic Society, 1962

We are people of this generation, bred in at least modest comfort, housed now in universities, looking uncomfortably to the world we inherit.

When we were kids the United States was the wealthiest and strongest country in the world: the only one with the atom bomb, the least scarred by modern war, an initiator of the United Nations that we thought would distribute Western influence throughout the world. Freedom and equality for each individual, government of, by, and for the people -- these American values we found good, principles by which we could live as men. Many of us began maturing in complacency.

As we grew, however, our comfort was penetrated by events too troubling to dismiss. First, the permeating and victimizing fact of human degradation, symbolized by the Southern struggle against racial bigotry, compelled most of us from silence to activism. Second, the enclosing fact of the Cold War, symbolized by the presence of the Bomb, brought awareness that we ourselves, and our friends, and millions of abstract "others" we knew more directly because of our common peril, might die at any time.

While these and other problems either directly oppressed us or rankled our consciences and became our own subjective concerns, we began to see complicated and disturbing paradoxes in our surrounding America. The declaration "all men are created equal . . . rang hollow before the facts of Negro life in the South and the big cities of the North. The proclaimed peaceful intentions of the United States contradicted its economic and military investments in the Cold War status quo.

Not only did tarnish appear on our image of American virtue, not only did disillusion occur when the hypocrisy of American ideals was discovered, but we began to sense that what we had originally seen as the American Golden Age was actually the decline of an era.

Our work is guided by the sense that we may be the last generation in the experiment with living. . . The message of our society is that there is no viable alternative to the present. Beneath the reassuring tones of the politicians, beneath the common opinion that America will "muddle through", beneath the stagnation of those who have closed their minds to the future, is the pervading feeling that there simply are no alternatives. Feeling the press of complexity upon the emptiness of life, people are fearful of the thought that at any moment things might thrust out of control. They fear change itself, since change might smash whatever invisible framework seems to hold back chaos for them now. For most Americans, all crusades are suspect, threatening.

CONCLUSION:

The bridge to political power, though, will be built through genuine cooperation, locally, nationally, and internationally, between a new left of young people, and an awakening community of allies. In each community we must look within the university and act with confidence that we can be powerful, but we must look outwards to the less exotic but more lasting struggles for justice.

To turn these possibilities into realities will involve national efforts at university reform by an alliance of students and faculty. They must wrest control of the educational process from the administrative bureaucracy. As students, for a democratic society, we are committed to stimulating this kind of social movement, this kind of vision and program is campus and community across the country. If we appear to seek the unattainable, it has been said, then let it be known that we do so to avoid the unimaginable.

Questions:

1. According to the Port Huron Statement, what problems and paradoxes "rankled the consciences" of its authors? Why? To what extent do similar problems and paradoxes exist today?
2. What is the major obstacle to change according to the authors of this statement? Do similar obstacles to change exist today?
3. According to this statement, who would be the agents of change?