

The class of 1984

By ELLEN GOODMAN

Somewhere, behind the relentless refrains of Pomp and Circumstance that dominated commencement season, there were echoes of the 1960s. An occasional armband tied around the sleeve of a black robe. A political message pinned to a mortarboard. A single protest on a placard.

The echoes were dim (as in diminished), sometimes ironic and sometimes even forlorn. On the West Coast, Mario Savio, a 40-year-old father of two who once founded the student free-speech movement in Berkeley, got his degree *summa cum laude*. On the East Coast, an almost-protest was launched at Harvard because the hats for the 25th reunion class members were made in South Africa. These moments were duly recorded by those who will always compare students to The Students.

On the podiums, a thousand commencement speakers exhorted the graduates of this more dutiful, less involved generation to make commitments, to believe in something, to change the world. In private, one member of the noisy class of 1969 said of the quiet class of 1984, "They are afraid of being suckers."

In or out of commencement season, it's impossible to spend much time on campuses without feeling the wariness, the holding back from cause or commitment. These are the young who watched the course of illusions and disillusionment run by the formerly young. From their post in the mid-'80s, it's understandable if they regard the idealism of the Sixties as reckless and see their own reservations as a safety precaution.

OR THEY MAY INDEED feel that deep political commitments make suckers. Or, more gently, they may just be struggling to create a life that balances public and private ideals and pleasures. It isn't easy to create balance out of passion.

In "The Big Chill," that movie about Sixties people living in the Eighties, we saw the campus radicals who had toned down their idealistic passion and become successful: a lawyer, a gossip journalist, a manufacturer of running shoes, and a TV star. Yet they were all somewhat uneasy with their apolitical lives.

In contrast, the stars of Rosellen Brown's deeply textured new novel, "Civil Wars," are Sixties activists who

went on trying to live their political ideology. Jessie and Teddy, the flip side of "The Big Chill" cast, are somewhat uneasy with their personal lives.

"Civil Wars" is too rich, too wonderfully layered and complex a novel to reduce to a paragraph or an idea, but some difficult questions about living with political passion are woven through the plot. What happens during big, chilly years when, as one character in the book says, being a civil-rights organizer "feels like we're Making horseshoes or piano rolls or something these days...." What happens if you are a confrontation hero who cannot adapt to "a long quiet time of unflamboyant action and behind-the-scenes tinkering...."?

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN there is a conflict between political and personal commitments? In "Civil Wars," Teddy repeats from a difficult, needful family life into political action, saying that, "I'm teaching them there are larger groups than the family that you can sweep loyalty to." But his wife, Jessie, believes he is deserting them: "What about this world right here under your roof?"

The current generation of students has spent its life in such civil wars of the past 20 years. They know something about the conflicts between the ideal and the real. The conflict between cynics and suckers. The conflict between work and pleasure, public and private life.

If they don't suffer from ambivalence, perhaps they suffer from maturity, or prematurity. They talk more about this "balanced life" than any young people I can remember. It is a life that includes many parts, is enriched by multiple ingredients. If they are wary of making deep, plunging commitments, political or personal, it may be part of their own elusive ideal, that easy, comfortable balance.

Thinking of these graduates, I am struck by a scene from "Civil Wars" which said a good deal about the passage from one generation to another. The son of a black woman who fought for her rights through the heat of the Sixties and the chill of the Eighties turns to his mother and says, "You got a son who's going to learn to settle for a few good things and relax."

In some ways, he is an honorary member of the class of '84.

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