The Amherst Student

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Chris Coons: The Making Of A Bearded Marxist

by CHRIS COONS

College is supposed to be a time of change, a time to question our assumptions about the world and define our basic values. For me, the transformations of the last few years have been especially acute. I came to Amherst from a fairly sheltered, privileged, and politically conservative background. I campaigned for Reagan in 1980, and spent the summer after freshman year working for Senator Roth (of Kemp-Roth ta- cut fame). In the fall of 1983, I was a proud founding member of the Amherst College Republicans. In November of 1984, I represented the Amherst Democrats in a hotly contested pre-election debate against my former roommates, cofounders and leaders of the Republicans. As the debate progressed, it became obvious how unreconcilably different our opinions had become. What caused such a shift in only one year?

I spent the spring of my junior year in Africa on the St. Lawrence Kenya Study Program. Going to Kenya was one of the few real decisions I have made; my friends, family,and professors all advised against it, but I went anyway. My friends now joke that something about Kenya, maybe the strange diet, or the tropical sun, changed my personality; Africa to them seems a catalytic converter that takes in clean-shaven, clear-thinking Americans and sends back bearded Marxists.

The point that others ignore is that I was ready to change. Experiences at Amherst my first two years made me skeptical and uncomfortable with Republicanism, enough so that I wanted to see the Third World for myself to get some perspective on my beliefs. Certainly Kenya provided a needed catalyst; I saw there poverty and oppression more naked than any in America, and I studied under a bright and eloquent Marxist professor at the University

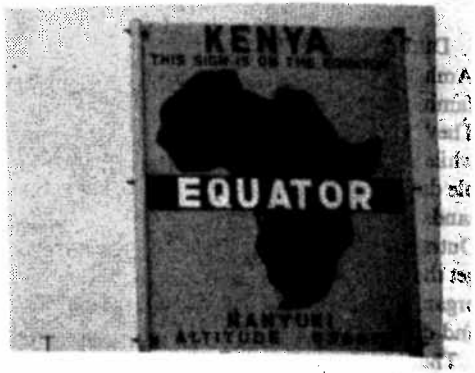
A clean-shaven Christopher Coons.

of Nairobi. Nevertheless, it is only too easy to return from Africa glad to be American and smugly thankful for our wealth and freedom. Instead, Amherst had taught me to question, so in return I questioned Amherst, and America.

When I first arrived at Amherst, I was somewhat of a Republican fanatic. I fit Churchill's description, namely, that a fanatic is "someone who can't change their mind, and won't change the subject." While other freshmen shared care packages from home, I was equally generous with my inherited political opinions giving them to anyone who would listen. It was in this manner that I soon met a creature I had never known before--a Democrat, several of them. Some of the "Leftists" that I met early on were terrifyingly persuasive, although I never admitted that. A few became my friends and provided a constant nagging backdrop of doubt, for which I am now grateful.

More importantly, during sophomore year, several professors challenged the basic assumptions about America and world relations with which I had grown up. Cultural Anthropology inspired a fascination with other peoples, and undermined the accepted value of progress and the cultural superiority of the West. In examining the role of myths in "primitive" cultures, we also studied the myth of equal opportunity in this country, a myth I had never questioned. A course on the Vietnam War painted in gory detail a picture of the horrible failures made possible by American hubris and dogmatism. I came to suspect, through these and other courses, that the ideal of America as "a beacon of freedom and justice, providing hope for the world" was not exactly based on reality. So, I went to Africa, hungry for a break from Amherst and eager to gain some broader political insight from the brutally real world. What do other nations think of us? Can private enterprise and democracy solve the problems of developing nations? Is Marxism an evil ideology, leading millions into totalitarian slavery? These were some of the questions in the back of my mind as I left for Kenya.

What I learned in Africa unsettled me. I saw the deprivation and oppression of the poor and the politically disfavored in a way not possible in the U.S. In Kenya, my position was not at stake; I was not directly benefitting if the underprivileged had little hope of advancement. I lived with a struggling African family for a month and came to know the hardships that they face. What surprised me was the attitude of the elite; I became friends with a very wealthy businessman and his family and heard them reiterate the same beliefs held by many Americans: the poor are poor because they are lazy, slovenly, uneducated. "Kenya is a land of opportunity," they said, "Those who work receive their just reward." I knew this was not true in the case of many



Kenya: the "catalytic converter."

black Kenyans; this story merely served to justify the position of many who had done well only by working for the British colonialists. I realize that Kenya and America are very different, but experiences like this warned me that my own favorite beliefs in the miracles of free enterprise and the boundless opportunities to be had in America might be largely untrue.

When I returned last summer, I traveled all over the East Coast and saw in many ways a different America. Upon arriving at Amherst this fall, I felt like a freshman at an unfamiliar school all over again. Many of the questions raised by my experiences of the last year remain unaswered. I have spent my senior year reexamining my ideas and have returned to loving America, but in the way of one who has realized its faults and failures and still believes in its promise. The greatest value of Amherst for me, then, has been the role it played in allowing me to question, and to think. I had to see the slums of Nairobi before the slums of New York meant anythng at all, but without the experiences of Amherst, I never would have seen either.