Gray's divestment policy is insulating

Column/Robert E. Malchman

Editor's note: The charge to the Class of 1985, President Paul Gray, was last issued to the graduates by attempting to link his decision not to let MIT be an SDI proponent to his handling of the divestment issue. Gray has decided in what companies it will invest, and on the use to which the company will put the research or investment. In the SDI case, MIT has made a decision to accept certain research, but will not allow others to impose their interpretation on that decision. Gray can successfully claim that SDI research satisfies MIT's agenda of free scientific inquiry and is therefore not necessarily an endorsement of its political aspects.

In the divestment case, there is no way MIT can avoid making a political decision. It has decided to support companies which do business in South Africa. The direct effect of that decision is to support the South African economy.

To claim that divestment is a political statement, while retention is not, is ridiculous. Maintenance of the status quo does not imply political neutrality, as Gray would have one believe.

To extend Gray's argument, one must presume he would have no qualms if MIT had invested in companies that made drug paraphernalia or produced sexually explicit films.

The Germany of the 1930s and the South Africa of the 1980s are both known for certain objectionable social policies. Gray's remarks suggest that he had been president at the time, he would have been so profoundly disturbed from companies doing business with Nazi Germany. He would instead urge companies... to consider themselves in ways which improve the status and condition of their... employees. He would have had as much effect then as he will now.

Gray condemns apartheid, as most of the rest does. His condemnation, however, begins and ends with his hand-wringing. The fact that he does nothing is a decision itself. MIT, as a powerful, supposedly ethical institution, must make an institutional decision as to what companies it will support.

Gray has declared that MIT supports the economy of South Africa. No amount of rhetorical obfuscation can successfully hide that fact.

Advice from a veteran of MIT

"I suppose this is the time I should give you some advice... I wish I had some for you, but I haven't."

- Evelyn Waugh, Brideshead Revisited

The last thing you need right now is more advice. You're going to get far too much of that between now and the end of R/O Week, and almost none thereafter. But that's true of lots of things: new acquaintances, decision to make parties. As Dave Scrimshaw '83 once said, MIT is like a movie where the action happens some before the title credits. Students sometimes feel subtly betrayed at first because MIT does not "live up to" their pre-conceived notion of college. MIT has no ivy-covered red brick buildings to speak of, pasted libraries with leather-bound books, and matching leather-bound classrooms, Old Masters in the college museum, or national football teams.

Instead, we have gray concrete buses, pink sent-sheaves full of engineering journals, modern sculptures the size of jungle gyms, and a winning women's volleyball team.

We also have an artificial intelligence lab full of pianos, a mechanical engineering design contest reminiscent of Isaac Asimov's short story Profes- sion: student groups for disarmament and against hunger, and an active Amnesty's Guild.

By the end of a term, all this will seem perfectly natural. But at the end of a year, you will be warped forever. MIT marks people for life with gruffness, opinions, faith in numerical modeling, its own peculiar slang... when this random comes over to my terminal and starts flaming "J", a pantom for practical jokes (only we call them "hacks"), and a clumsy Brass Rat on my door.

I've just graduated, so I feel as if I ought to have something of distant perspective on the Institu- tion. I don't, I'm going to try describing MIT culture to you: it's going to be very dif- ficult, sort of like describing a game of Monopoly to a being from Mars.

Acedemics. I double-major in materials science and human- ities. I can't really recommend either. One of the main requirements of the first was being able to explain what it was; of the second, being able to explain what I was doing at MIT. I spent most of my time taking core courses in other majors, and the courses I learned most and had the most fun were in the School of Science.

One of the advantages of MIT is that you will never exhaust it creatively. When you run out of major courses, you can routinely take courses out of your major, graduate courses, even graduate courses out of your ma- jor. And you can always do more research; at some point, almost everyone does a research project for credit or works in a research lab for pay.

Living groups. MIT social life is very living-group oriented. And as my roommate said, everyone is convinced his living group is the "best" place for him and forms negative stereotypes of other living groups in order to re- asonize himself that he "chose right."

Clothes. Five percent of the stu- dents appear to run all the activi- ties. The social life of much of that five percent revolves around the fourth floor of the student center, where the activities offices are. Athletics are different; a much broader range of people participates in sports.

Clothes. I was going to write that everyone at MIT wears jeans and T-shirts, but I just looked around and most of the people here are wearing blue button- downs or Lacoste-type shirts.

It's still true that you will prob- ably acquire a collection of T-shirts indicating your member- ship in various MIT subclasses or participation in MIT events. As you won't be able to wear a "Saratoga Fifth Toodle '69" T-shirt with a straight face after you leave MIT, you might as well wear it while you're here.

Art. At the art gallery, MIT probably looks like nothing you've ever seen before, and everybody dis- cusses it. If you say you hate it, all you're thought disclosed--if you say you love it, all you're thought undisclosed. The bear-move is to like a few well-chosen pieces.

The Great Sail is considered okay because it's functional—it breaks up the wind tunnel under the archway behind it. No one likes Transparent Horizons. (Please turn to page 6)