

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

RJB-14
A Summer Experience

846 Broadway-Lot #49
Saugus, Mass. 01906
Sept. 22, 1973

Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
535 Fifth Avenue
New York, New York 10017

Dear Mr. Nolte:

Each year several hundred students apply to Western Electric for summer jobs. The company gives preference to sons and daughters of its own employees. Until recently, because of a selection system based purely on length of service, children of high-ranking supervisors had the best chances of obtaining the limited number of summer positions.

Four years ago when Dave Hilder became plant manager at the Merrimack Valley Works, he instituted a new procedure which gives preference to the children of salaried workers excepting shop and office engineers and low level supervisors.

This past summer, 250 students applied for summer work, and of the 66 who were hired, 37 were the children of shop operatives. They were chosen on the basis of the length of their parent's service with the company. Three of these summer employees reported to work in M2 T12 on June 5th. Each has a father who works as a layout operator and has more than seventeen years of company service.

The people working in M2 T12 seemed to treat these three youngsters with special tolerance. Hard work was appreciated, but poor work or a lackadaisical attitude seemed to be accepted. As one woman said, "Look, they're only kids, they're only here for the summer." Another woman seemed to express a commonly held opinion when she said, "If their job here this summer doesn't teach them anything else, it should teach them how important school is." Shaking her head, she added, "I only wish my Billy would learn that."

Alice Tobin, Joey Adams and Neil Webster are very different people. I tried to find out from each of them what the summer had meant to them and what they had learned.¹

Alice Tobin's hands fidget nervously as she talks of saving enough money this summer to buy a pair of Helix competition skis, of having enough money to share in a ski lodge with twenty other kids from college, of skiing Loon Mountain, Jay Peak, Wild Cat and Killington. She is even thinking of going skiing with her boyfriend in Colorado.

The more Alice talks about skiing, the more relaxed she becomes.

¹Some of the names, including those of the three students, have been changed.

I find it somewhat incongruous to be listening to this small, fragile girl with pale skin talk about trick skiing. "That's what I love best, Dick," she says, "I'm really getting to be good. I only got interested in it a couple of years ago and already I can do all sorts of tricks."

Alice says when work gets to her she lets her mind wander to a winter of skiing from early morning to late in the day. Just the thought of it makes her anxious for winter to arrive. She has already begun preparing for the winter by getting up at 4:00 or 4:30 A.M. in order to run a mile or so to strengthen her legs.

"I can't wait to go back up to the lodge. Last year was my first time doing something like that and it was terrific. At home I can talk to my parents, but it isn't like when you talk to kids. I don't know how to explain it, but I've really opened up with these kids. Even our chaperones are two young teachers from school, and they sit around and talk to us. We stay up real late after skiing sometimes, 'till 3 or 4 in the morning talking. I just love it."

Alice had another job at the beginning of the summer; a girlfriend of hers who was working for a plastics firm got it for her.

"I hated the place," Alice says, "I couldn't believe how filthy it was. It wasn't hard work, and I didn't mind the pay (\$1.75/hr.), but I couldn't get used to the filth. The job was frustrating. Things kept coming down on my finger. It was horrible. Like I said, I could not stand it, especially the filth."

"So, one day, I think it was on Thursday, less than a week after I began work, I told my girlfriend who was working right next to me that I was leaving. She looked at me but she didn't say anything. I said, 'Just tell them I've quit and they can mail me my money.' It wasn't anything I had planned. I was frustrated and decided to leave. I put down my tools and walked out."

"I was lucky though, the next week I found out about the job here at Western Electric. When I started at Western, I was also working at Salisbury Park (a local beach amusement area). I worked several evenings a week as a cashier. I kept the job for a couple of weeks after I started at Western Electric, but then the two jobs were too much for me so I quit the job at Salisbury Park."

"The work here at Western Electric hasn't been bad. The first week I was scared. Everything looked so complicated I was sure I'd do everything wrong. But after a week, I got to know the job pretty well and it got so I could do the boards pretty well."

"As the weeks went by, I got more used to things. I got bored some of the time. I think I hated working in here the most on a nice day. I almost couldn't stand being in here when it was so nice out. I'd just sit there thinking about hiking or skiing. Sometimes, I'd think of doing something crazy like I'd look up at the little fan over my desk and I'd think of putting my finger in it. I never did it,

but I had the urge to do it a lot.

"It wasn't bad when there was someone you could talk to while you worked. The day would go by pretty quickly if you could talk and work. When there was no one to talk to, I'd make up all these little games. Sometimes I'd try, as I was cutting the leads on the back of my boards, to hit Joey or Neal with them. (A game the company would consider a serious safety violation.) I actually got to be a pretty good shot. Sooner or later, though, they'd tell me to cut it out and I'd have to think of something else to do."

"Would you work here again?" I asked Alice.

"Yeah," she said, "I think so, if I couldn't get something better. If it was a choice between working in a restaurant and working here, I guess I'd work here. I mean where else could you make this kind of money for doing this kind of work? I've saved almost all my money this summer, but I won't have that much at the end of the summer because I've had to pay off doctor's bills for \$800.00. I broke my leg skiing last winter.

"You know what this summer has taught me the most?" Alice asked, "It's made me realize how much I want to go back to school. I think I'll be more serious in school and not fool around so much. I can see now how much having a college education means. When I was a senior in high school, I didn't really think about going to college. I just thought I'd graduate from high school and get a job.

"My parents had a talk with me one night. My father told me that if I went to a community college he would pay my tuition for two years while I got my associates degree. He said if I wanted to continue my education after that I had to pay for it myself, but he wanted me to go to school if I could.

"He asked me what I thought about what he's said, was really surprised; I guess I never expected something like that. When my dad asked me again what I thought, I told him it was fabulous. I got some applications and I got into NECO (Northern Essex Community College).

"I guess I haven't worked as hard as I could there, but now I'm really going to work when I go back. Now I want to get an associates degree in business, and maybe go on in school and get a degree in child care.

"This may sound corny but working here, I've learned to respect my father. I mean, I love my father, but I never imagined what his work must be like. Working here has shown me what he must have put up with over these years. I know it has changed my behavior at home. Sometimes my dad used to come home and ask me to do something. I might do it, but sometimes I felt a little resentful. I felt I was tired too, and why should I do it. Now I'd do what he asks. It's not that I pity him, but I realize what he's done so that I could have a good life, and I guess I appreciate that more now."

"Have you learned a lot from the people you've worked with over the summer?" I asked.

"Well, most of the time I'm with the other kids in here, because I feel I can be freer with them. Some of the older people warned me that if you tell people anything in here it will be spread all over and that I should keep my mouth shut. That made me sort of shy, but a lot of the people have talked to me, especially about school.

"A lot of the women tell me how lucky I am to go to school. They tell me they'd love to be going to school. I guess they're right. They also say how they don't like work, but it doesn't seem like it when they work. The women seem to me to be relaxed. The older women say they don't like their work, but they take the job seriously. They try to get their work out and I know they were unhappy when last month's bonus was so low.

"You know what's so strange? In here almost everyone is pretty friendly. They're really nice to you, but once they leave it all changes. You wouldn't believe the people outside in the parking lot, the way they cut each other off and yell at each other. A couple of days ago, this man cut in front of us. He called the woman I drive with a bitch. You really see a horrible side of people in the parking lot."

"Did you work during the vacation?" I asked.

"Yes, I did. When Al asked me if I wanted to work, I said I would because I could use the money. I think I liked working during those two weeks of vacation better than anything else. We worked in a small group, and everyone was real close, including the supervisor and the engineers. There were maybe twenty-five of us. We all took lunch together, even the supervisor. We'd go across the street and get a pizza or some subs. People really sat and talked to you. Our supervisor let you know what he expected and we tried to do it. Everyone was really nice, and you didn't feel you were being watched every minute. If the supervisor took a break, well I felt I could take a break. I really enjoyed working those two weeks."

Joey Adams strides rather than walks, carrying his 5'11", 160 pound frame well. He often comes to work in cutaway tee shirts which expose his well-developed arms. The gait and the physique are cocky, arrogantly sure, and yet, there is the odd dutch-boy haircut, and when Joey talks, one is immediately aware that a somewhat insecure boy stands inside this man's body. His speech is full of long words, which more frequently than not are incorrectly used. He awkwardly grabs for the spotlight in a group conversation. He defends himself with the putdown. Paradoxically, he seems both acutely aware of the often disastrous effect of his act, and shamelessly unaware of it.

Alone, away from the crowd, Joey talks about himself and his feelings without using either big words or putdowns.

I ask Joey what he thinks of the work he has been doing here.

"The job is nothing," he says, "it's incredibly boring. There's no challenge to the work. Almost as soon as I came in I knew I didn't

like it. I sized up the situation and decided I wasn't going to kill myself. I'd do enough to get by and that's it."

"Was the place any different than you expected?" I asked.

"No, not really," Joey says. "This past year at Merrimack (Merrimack College--a four year Catholic college) I had a 2nd division history course. Our teacher taught us about the dehumanizing aspects of industrialization. We learned about punching a clock, the monotony of work. In the class the teacher pointed out that in the old days it was better to be a farmer than a worker, even if you made less, because you'd be happier.

"Really, I don't think it's very different here. This place is a little cleaner, I'll grant you that, but it's monotonous, and anybody could do the work.

"Basically, the work doesn't change, day after day. I found I had to play all these mind games to keep going. Sometimes my mind will go off--on a tangent. I'll think that I'm sitting on some rocks that are tarnished, or maybe I'll think of the glitter of a lake. I'll think I'm all kinds of places but here. Other times, I'll talk to someone near me, I'll try to figure them out.

"That's something I enjoy the best. I like to see how people react, even if they react negatively. I'll put something out just to get a reaction, to see what they'll say. That's how I learn."

"Have you ever had another job like this?" I ask him.

"Yes, the summer before this I worked in a clothing factory."

"Did you act the same way there?"

"No, not really. I was younger then, more submissive. I was scared and aware of the bosses all the time. I worked, not because I liked it, but because if someone gave me an order I did it. Some of the kids would sneak off to the back and catch some sleep, but not me, I never did that. But as I matured I knew I didn't have to put up with that crap anymore. See, I went to Catholic schools, and you learned about following orders, and that's how I acted, but now I know better."

"Do you think that Al (our supervisor) is aware of your attitude?"

"Yeah, I know he is. He hasn't ever said anything, but like he put both Neil and Alice on the big boards. He didn't put me on them because I guess he knows I didn't give a damn, and he can get more work out of them than me. It isn't that they like the work any more than I do, they're just more submissive."

"Do you think that most of the people approve of the way you act?" I ask.

"Some do, but I know other people don't like me though I can't

understand it. This one woman, Fay, won't even talk to me. And the other day this woman came up to me and she asked me, 'Well Joey, have you done anything today?' Well, I was just kidding around with her, and I waved her off, you know, like this with a little wave of my hand. Well she turned around and she looked at me with real hatred and then she told me she didn't want me to talk to her ever again.

"I couldn't believe it. Later, I told her I had only been kidding around, but she still didn't seem to want to have anything to do with me. I don't know, I think her behavior was kind of immature. She was kidding around with me and I took it, but when I kidded her she got mad. Now what can I do about that?

"So, I guess some of the women don't like how I act. But I can't really understand why. I'm not asking them to act like me. I'm trying to be honest about the way I feel. I don't try to hurt anyone. But these people don't say things straight out. Even Al, will occasionally put you down, but it isn't straight out. Like one day me and Neil had to go to another area. Well, Al said, 'Don't get lost!' And then he said, 'If you do, call.' Well, you see, he was just putting us down. So I told him, 'Don't worry, if we get lost I'll call.' He laughed, see, but I let him know I knew what he was saying.

"But these kinds of games are going on all the time. I must admit I play them too, you've got to. Sometimes I do stuff just to get a reaction. Like the other day, after I emptied the waste basket in the back row, I left them in the front row. Well, a couple of the women got real mad, wanted to know where their baskets were. People were yelling at me, it was vicious. I really didn't think they'd get that mad over some dumb waste baskets."

"Do those kinds of reactions ever make you think that people have different feelings than you think?"

"I guess so. Sometimes I think I talk too much and that I kill myself with my mouth. Maybe that's something I've learned; That I ought to have kept my mouth shut. Maybe I should say things in a different way. Somehow I don't get my meaning across sometimes. I know some of the time it's because I'm speaking over people's heads, but other times it's because people have already formed an opinion about me and they don't give me a chance. There's really nothing I can do about that, is there?

"I'll give you an example of what happens. The other day we were sitting outside and a woman from another department came by and said to me, 'Joey, what else do you do but look handsome?' Well, Jean said, 'He doesn't even do that.' See, she was putting me down. But I let it go because I think she was putting me down because she likes me.

"I can tell from your look, Dick, that you think I'm wrong. But with all the girls I've known, I've been wrong maybe once about saying one liked me. Come to think about it, I can't even think of one time I was wrong."

"What is it that you want to do, then?" I ask.

"I'd like to go into special education. You know, I've worked at an orphanage for the last year, and I love it, really I do. Those kids are really honest. Let me tell you about something that happened there the other day, because it sticks in my mind. These two kids, Gino and John, were standing around. Well, Gino ripped this bat away from John and just went off with it. I went up to Gino and said, 'Why'd you take Johnny's bat?' He looked at me and said, 'Because I wanted it.' I thought, wow, that's really honest. He didn't give me any phony answers, he just said because he wanted it. I mean, that was really honest. I asked him, 'What if I want the bat and take it from you, that isn't right, is it? Why don't you give it back to Johnny?' He said ok, and gave it back. Well, that honesty meant a lot to me, and I'd like to work with those kids, or kids in school who are in special classes and don't have enough people who care about them. I want to do something important, something to help other people.

"This summer has been good, because it's made me think about myself and how I've changed. I used to be pretty submissive. But about two years ago I grew about four inches and put on about twenty pounds. It made a lot of difference. I could tell from the way my peer group treated me. My size has helped give me a lot of confidence."

Just as height has been important for Joey Adams, it has been important for Neil Webster. Neil says he's 5'6", but he may be an inch or so smaller. He is acutely aware of his lack of height.

"You know," he says, "I used to pray when I was younger that I would be taller. I was always smaller than my friends. It's made me shy. It's especially affected me with girls. I can't really impress them with my size, so I have to get to know a girl pretty well before I'll ask her out. I guess I want them to know I have a good personality, to overcome my physical impression.

"Being short really has its disadvantages. Now they have some laws about discriminating against people because of their height, but people are mean to you and they don't even mean anything by it. Even my younger brother. For crying out loud he's only sixteen and he's almost six feet tall. Sometimes he'll say something like, 'How's my little brother doing?' I never say anything but it gets to me. The only thing is he's a little clumsy, so when he says stuff like that I suggest we go out and play some basketball, one on one. I always beat him, and then I say something like, 'I'd rather be small and quick than big and clumsy.'

"Anyway, I think I deal with my height better now than I used to. I mean for crying out loud, I'm not going to get any taller. I've tried hard to do things well to make up for not being tall. I found out that I could do pretty well in school, and I've worked hard at it."

"Someone told me," I say, "that you were first in your class in high school."

"No, I don't know who told you that, but I was third in a class

of 223. I graduated with a 96.5% average."

"How did you select Merrimack College?" I ask.

"Actually I had thought of applying to MIT or Harvard, or places like that. I talked to my parents about it, because they couldn't afford to send me to college. I've got two older sisters, and one would have liked to have gone to college, but neither did. We couldn't afford it and my mother felt it wasn't so important for a girl.

"Anyway, money was a big thing. My father has had to hold two jobs to have us get by. He's worked very hard. But I told them that my advisors thought maybe with my record I could get a scholarship at one of these colleges. Well, my mother said she didn't want me to go away from home. Kent State had just happened in my junior year of high school, and she said she would always worry about me if I lived away from home. She said she'd be scared all the time, and my being away might cause her to have a heart attack.

"She asked me couldn't I find a place around here to go to school, so I picked Merrimack. It has a good physics department and I've got two scholarships for \$2,800. That means that I actually have a little extra after paying the \$1,900 for tuition and \$150 for fees.

"Occasionally I feel gypped, but I plan to go away to graduate school to study astronomy. My mother says she doesn't worry so much about me now that the campuses have quieted down."

"My advisors think that I should be able to win a scholarship; I hope I do, but I'm trying to put away enough so that I could afford a year away at school even if I didn't get a scholarship. What with my scholarship, summer work, and work during the year, I hope to have \$4,000 saved up by the time I graduate.

"I've worked during school, and during summers. I had my first summer job as a janitor when I was thirteen. I've had other jobs during the summers: once I worked for Kentucky Fried Chicken. The last couple of years, starting while I was a junior in high school, I worked for DeMoulas (a large local grocery store). I began as a sacker. I worked the whole summer, and then during the school year I worked on Friday and Saturday night. They started me at \$1.80/hr., and I just quit this past spring after 3 years and I was making only \$2.10/hr.

"Each year they gave me a dime raise. After I worked there for awhile, they made me head sacker, and then this past year they made me assistant cashier. Well, I liked that, but I thought they should be giving me some more money if they wanted me to take on the extra responsibility.

"I asked them about a raise several times. They gave me a run-around and never did give me any more money. They didn't give me more money, but they kept telling me to cut my sideburns. They weren't real long, but they wanted me to cut them back to my ears. I figured they had no right to ask me that. I never did cut them. Finally I quit.

"I needed a job for the summer. I put in applications at Gillette,

Raytheon and Western Electric. Raytheon said no right out. Western Electric and Gillette put me on the waiting list. I heard from Western Electric in May. Gillette called me in July and said there was work, but I already had begun work here, and there was no reason to change."

"Would you work here again?" I ask.

"Now that the summer's over, I can say that unless I found a job in my profession, you know, something to do with astronomy, I'd take a job here again next summer. It's not that I found the job all that exciting or interesting. If anything, it's boring. But the pay is decent and the people were ok. Like I said, the job itself wasn't much, but there was an obligation which was important. I mean, for crying out loud, you've got to respect their rights. You can't take their money for nothing. I mean, they aren't paying you to sit around. I figured I kept my part of the bargain. They gave me a decent job at a decent wage.

"I didn't find it that hard to get through the summer. Once in a while I'd start day-dreaming or wishing I was somewhere else. But I realized I was here to make money. If I didn't have this job, what other job would I have? There wasn't really anything. And if I wasn't working I'd be bored, and spending my money, which I really can't afford to do.

"So I figured I'd put in my eight hours. I'd be out of here each day at 3:00. A lot of the time I played this game with myself. Each day I'd try to break my previous day's record for work. It made the time go quicker. I found the busier I was, the faster the time went. When I worked, I tried to work hard. That way I didn't feel bad when I got up to go to the bathroom or for a walk. I think I handled myself maturely. I had to look at the situation, and had to decide what to give. I was really on my own.

"It wasn't that way the whole summer. The first two weeks were the hardest. I felt I might do something wrong. Orientation wasn't very good. I came to the department feeling insecure, not knowing what to do. When I came into the department they sat me down with a board. For crying out loud, it was like being blind. I sat there for five minutes not knowing what to do. Sarah came and talked to me. She broke the ice when she told me that she was, like me, from Methuen. That helped. Slowly I got to know people; A couple of them gave me a little encouragement, and that helped a lot.

"But I'm glad the summer is over. I learned this summer how much I really like school. I'm anxious to get back. This is the first time I've had this kind of regimentation. I mean, the alarm goes off at 5:15. At 6:30 a bell goes off, and you're supposed to begin work, and there are bells all day long. Really, I wouldn't mind staying in school for the rest of my life.

"Did you like working in this department?"

"Yes," he says, "even though I was in here for a pretty short time I did work in a couple of different areas, and I'm glad that I worked in our area for most of the summer, because it was a miscellaneous area, there wasn't so much talk about rates, and work was less repetitious in this area.

"It wasn't that way in one of the areas I worked in. You know, Al lent me, Joey and Alice out to help Joe X., who had a big shipment and needed some extra people, I didn't like it there from the first day.

"I was sitting next to this woman doing some work. She talked a lot, because she told me there hadn't been anyone in her row for a long time. We talked but we both did our work. Anyway, the next day the supervisor called me over and told me he hadn't brought me over here to bullshit, and slow down his people. Well, I could have said it wasn't me who was doing the talking, but he scared me a little and I didn't say anything.

"I worked hard for the next couple of days. The supervisor called us over again and told us that he hadn't borrowed us to help Al; that he had production to get out and we weren't making the rate. I'll say this for Al, as soon as he heard what was happening he pulled us off the job and took us back.

"I didn't like working for that man. He pushed you all the time. He was always talking about the rates. I'm willing to work hard, but not like he wanted. I know if I had worked there all summer I wouldn't want to come back.

"I also had the chance to work for another supervisor. Since we weren't entitled to any vacation I decided that I would work for one of the two weeks that the plant was closed. We were sent over to help Jerry Q. right on the other side of our group. I liked him. He explained on Monday what we were to do, and said if we could complete 64 boards by the end of the week he would be happy. You know, he didn't say what the rate was or anything, just what he'd like us to complete. Well, I got my 64 boards finished early Friday, and I was pleased with myself.

"He told me he was real pleased, and that he'd always have work for me if I needed it. Originally, I had planned to take off that entire second week, but I worked for him another three days. The place was a lot more relaxed during vacation."

"How about our area?" I ask again.

"Like I said, I liked working in this area. Al never told us we had to make rates. You could tell from the way he acted that he knew how you were doing, but he didn't push you. He left it up to you. Even today, my last day. He called me over to talk to me. He told me he couldn't really judge my work in this period, that I'd have to be the judge. He told me that I would know whether I had done a good job or not. I think that's right."

"What did you learn about the work and the people this summer?"

"I learned a lot about people, working here for the summer. It really is the first time I've worked with grownups, and especially grownups who treated me like a grownup and not like a child. I mean, the only really older person I knew before was my grandmother. The women who worked at DeMoulas always made you feel like a kid and treated you that way. Here, they seemed to treat me just as another person. They'd ask me about courses and stuff. It may sound silly, but it was like a

bunch of guys hanging out. They would sit and talk and you could join in the conversation.

"I learned that most of these people want to do a good job. For me it's a summer job, but for these people it's their lives. They want to do well, I know they do. You could tell how disappointed they were when they only earned a 5% bonus last month. Even though they were paid more I know from what a lot of them said that they were really upset. They thought they should have made a bigger bonus.

"It reminded me of something my Dad told me. Once a long time ago when they were starting a new job, they asked him to make the rate, which was 20 boards a day. He tried his hardest and just did make 20. The next day they asked him to do 21 boards. He and all the other people never did make even 20 boards again. The best they did was 18 or 19 boards. He said no matter what they asked, if you did it, they'd ask for more. So, instead, just do what you think is fair, because a lot of them don't appreciate what you do."

"Have you talked to your Dad much about his work here?"

"My dad is kind of quiet. We don't talk all that much. Even in here he doesn't talk much. I've gone over to visit him in his group, and people will be talking during a break, and he'll be off reading. Sometimes we don't even talk on the way in. He used to tell me how he wished he'd had the chance to go to college. His family was poor and he had to quit school at 16. Even when I was a kid he often held two jobs. We never had much, but we did ok, he saw to that. I don't think he loves his job, but I know he doesn't dislike it. I think he thinks he's doing pretty well. For him, anyway, it's a good job, maybe the best he could get. Anyway, who am I to judge him?"

"I tell you one thing, I appreciate my Dad a lot more after working here. I've always tried to help out at home. I've always given my folks some of what I've made. This summer I gave my mother \$30.00 from my weekly paycheck. When I was working during the year at DeMoulas I was clearing \$30.00 a week, and I gave her \$8.00. It made me feel like I was contributing. My sister, who isn't married and lives at home, still gives my Mom something every week.

"I came to like a lot of the people, some of them are really bright. I learned a lot from them, but one thing I could never figure out was their attitude toward work. One way or another, many of them would tell you they didn't like their job. I sort of believed them, but when I watch them they seem not to mind it. They seem to have their friends and do a lot of talking. It doesn't seem to be really drudgery. I don't know, if I hadn't talked with them I'd say some of them seem to like what they're doing.

"Anyway, I'm glad to be going back to school. You know how a lot of people say everyone should spend time in the service, well, I think everyone should work in a factory like this for a while."

Richard Balgo