

STEPHEN J. TONSOR

## Faculty Responsibility for the Mess in Higher Education

WHEN the time comes for assessing responsibility and establishing guilt overkill is the style in our American society. We have never been content with half-way judgments and uncertain pronouncements. As a consequence, our political and social life and particularly our public debate has been characterized by a series of devil theories which have periodically identified a class or group or even a single individual and have made it or him, as the case may be, into the principle of evil incarnate and responsible for all the ills troubling society at any given time.

We abandon this mythology of guilt very grudgingly, even when there is overwhelming evidence to the contrary. A few years ago, for example, it was argued that everything dangerous in American life was the result of the workings of a gigantic right-wing conspiracy. This notion was so pervasive that when the late President Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, the public, and particularly the press and the news media, generally assumed, and in the course of the first few days, repeatedly asserted, that the assassin was a "right-wing fanatic." How disappointing it was to discover in the course of time that both President John Kennedy and his brother, Robert, were assassinated by avowed Marxists whose involvement in the Left was attested to, not by hearsay, but by their own self-incrimi-

nating activities and writings. Still, it would have been so comforting to believe that the sage of Belmont, Robert Welch, was, like some monstrous ideological Dr. Fu Man Chu, trying to bring the country to its knees through a series of political assassinations and other covert right-wing activities.

I allude to this unhappy penchant of ours because I believe that there is a danger of our following the same course of fixing responsibility through the creation of mythologies of guilt to account for the problems of higher education in America. No one and no group is, or can be, responsible for everything. Certainly administration, faculty, and students are not responsible for the population explosion which has so burdened and transformed our educational system at all levels. In this instance, one does not have to be a Hegelian philosopher to realize that at some point in the past twenty years changes in quantity produced changes in quality. Certainly there is a world-wide restiveness which has gripped all people and all nations, though perhaps the young have felt this restiveness most sharply. The problem, however, of rebellion against institutional forms is not distinctively a problem of youth or even an American problem and to see it wholly in terms of the American institutional situation and American youth is to fall into a dangerous error. Finally, the Vietnam war, the civil rights crusade, the discovery and exploitation of poverty for political purposes all have relatively little to do with the crisis in higher education. Were these particular problems to vanish tomorrow there would still be a serious crisis on our campuses.

Now while it is true that no one factor is responsible for the crisis in higher education we educators ought to examine our consciences and ought to ask ourselves what our responsibility is in these matters. No group in American life is more ready to pass out blame and denounce iniquity than the faculties of our colleges and universi-

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ties. Perhaps that is because so many of us are "spoiled priests and stikkit ministers." Nonetheless, we ought to apply our moral sensitivities to our own condition and ask ourselves where we have erred and to explore what our role on the campus should be and what our powers in the decision making process actually are.



**Stephen J. Tonsor**

**I**n the first place I believe that we have lost sight of what the objectives of college and university education ought to be. Permit me to call an interesting fact to your attention. In the late 1930's, through the 40's and into the 50's there was a very widespread and profitable debate on American campuses concerning education; the nature of education, the role of education, the techniques of education, the purposes of education. Genuine educational experimentation was at an all time high and curricular reform was one of the most hotly contested issues in public discussion. Today those educational concerns have all but disappeared. The debate has dried up. The issues and experiments have been institutionalized. The focus of debate has been transformed.

This, of course, is not to say that there are no experiments. There are experiments in superfluity but they are political rather than educational in their inspiration. I hes-

itate to call the raucous voices I hear on campus debate. The discussions are much too one-sided to deserve that name. Certainly they are not discussions concerning education. Clearly they have a great deal to do with politics. In short, the focus of campus concern has shifted in the past twenty years from educational to political concern. The career of Robert M. Hutchins, erstwhile President of the University of Chicago and now President of the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions at Santa Barbara, is illustrative and symbolic of this shift. Even at Chicago, Dr. Hutchins had certain large thoughts of an activist political nature which he felt impelled to bring to the attention of the world. For example, he was a most important and articulate member of America First and on the eve of World War II did his best, unwittingly, of course, to secure a victory for National Socialism by preventing the prudent rearming of the United States in the years between 1939 and 1941. Be that as it may, there were many who made the same mistake and in those years Dr. Hutchins devoted most of his time to education and to participating in and fostering a genuine educational debate. Those of us over forty recall those crusades and campaigns which gave rise to such an earnest examination of higher education in America.



**Robert M. Hutchins**

Endless discussion "in a kind of California 'Cloud-cuckoo land'"

But alas! the lodestone of politics soon drew the nails out of most of President Hutchins' arguments and he betook himself to a sunnier climate where he could gather a group of dedicated intellectual politicians about himself and discuss endlessly in a kind of California "Cloud-cuckoo land" how many points a politician gets for wearing a doctor's hood. And, strange to say, after debating the twenty-third draft of Rexford G. Tugwell's Model Constitution, it really did not seem to make much difference.

Hutchins' career, it seems to me, illustrates a process which has been at work throughout higher education in America. That process has been the general movement from education and educational questions to politics and the use of the university as a base for political activity.

We delude ourselves if we think that students alone are responsible for the politicization of the university. Indeed, they are late arrivals on the scene. How many times in the past several years has the discussion of genuine educational issues by your college faculty meeting been postponed for months while your would be faculty Senator Fulbrights discussed the situation in Vietnam, or the size of welfare payments, or defense spending, or the desirability of telling the State legislature how to behave?

If your faculty meetings resemble those at the University of Michigan, faculty meetings during the past several years have been increasingly given to political rather than educational concerns.

IT seems to me self-evident that the university is not, in the first instance, a political forum. The role of the professor does not involve providing political leadership. The role of the professor does not include his becoming a revolutionary propagandist. The office of the professor does not make him the moral and political arbiter of his society. To believe any of these things is to entertain a delusion so dangerous as to lead to the destruction of the university.

What then is the legitimate role of the university professor? In the first instance his role is essentially conservative. He is the keeper and transmitter of a cultural tradition. Far from being a cultural revolutionary, society expects him to transmit the heritage of the past, unimpaired, to the next generation. Society does not ask him to be a politician, it does not ask him to have any political view at all, but it does expect him to know Latin or German, Chemistry or Zoology, History or Accounting.



"[Faculty] . . . have been increasingly given to political rather than educational concerns"  
(Teaching assistants and faculty members demonstrate at the University of California.)

In the second instance, the university professor is dedicated to the methods and procedures of rational enquiry. He enlarges the sum total of knowledge, not by an act of faith or through a religious or political commitment, but through an application of his mind to a particular problem. He believes that in the world of reasoned enquiry, truth is not determined by votes or the liveliness of one's sentiments but by existential reality, and he believes, moreover, that there is a method for exploring that reality which can be taught as a discipline. He is quite unwilling to see teaching degraded to an exchange of fuzzy opinions.

Moreover, he believes that exploring the truths of any question requires the open exploration and debate of all the aspects of the question. He does not believe that a genuine social science is possible which excludes from exploration certain assumptions concerning human society. He does not believe that a genuine economics is possible which permits only certain economic views to be heard. He does not believe that a valid American history is possible which excludes, misinterprets, or misappropriates important portions of the American past.

Finally, the professor at his best is a critic. His criticism, however, rests upon his ability to present and weigh alternatives rationally. He should be able to tell us better than most men what the costs of a particular line of action or program within his field of competence will be. It is not his role to choose ends for us but rather to enable us to assess what the consequences will be. He will do this humbly and without arrogance realizing that the unanticipated consequences of rational action must also be reckoned a part of any rational plan. He will not and cannot be a utopian hawking political patent medicines from the privileged and protected podium from which he speaks.

NOW, of course you give your assent to this, for you realize that what I have said is a part of the polite parlance of academic life, but in fact many professors reject the idea of the university as an open forum in which truth is ascertained. Elisabeth Mann Borgese recently voiced a widely held view when she denounced the work of Professor Arthur Jensen in the field of Educational Psychology at the University of California at Berkeley. His investi-

gations were, according to Elisabeth Mann Borgese, racist and ought to be prohibited. What she was saying is that only "socially approved" ideas ought to be explored at the university. Of course, in the Union of South Africa one can find parallel attitudes expressed on the same subject, though ideological content is different.

If this were an isolated instance it would not be a question of serious moment. However, it is not. The possibility of seriously exploring alternatives on the college or university campus has been increasingly vitiated.

Some issues are simply ignored. Although religion plays a major role in the life of our society most State universities refuse to acknowledge its existence and refuse to treat theology as a science.

Some groups are prohibited from taking part in the discussion. Until recently it was difficult for a Roman Catholic to be appointed to a post at a major university. The *bon mot* that "anti-Catholicism was the anti-semitism of the Liberals" was not without its basis in academia. The University of Michigan, for example, did not appoint a Roman Catholic in the history department until 1954, more than one hundred years after the University came into existence. Now it is possible, of course, that Roman Catholics don't make good historians, though there is a good deal of evidence to the contrary.

Some views are subtly, or not so subtly, excluded. How does it happen that in the history department to which I belong, out of over fifty faculty members, only one is an identifiable Republican? Is it that Republicans are as the English say simply not "clubable" or as the Germans put it, "*Gesellschaftsfahig*?" I think that unlikely. I believe it is far more likely that a process of selection and exclusion has been at work for nearly sixty years which has now produced a marvelous homogeneity of viewpoint. No wonder students don't really want to debate; want simply to have their prejudices confirmed. They have picked up their bad intellectual habits from their elders.

AND finally, through the operation of what I call "misplaced expertise," some professors, men, indeed, who possess acknowledged stature in the world of intellect, believe that their achievement in one field of intellectual endeavor qualifies them to speak in every instance and on all sub-

jects with unquestioned authority. Not only do they believe they have the right to speak in such a fashion but that the authority of their voice ought to silence any opposing views; indeed that these views ought to be silenced by force if necessary.

Let me call your attention to a recent example of "misplaced expertise" and the way in which authority derived from a wholly different field is employed to stifle debate in the area of public policy. In an article in the September issue of *Encounter* magazine, Dr. Bruno Bettelheim has a fascinating article entitled "Obsolete Youth. Towards a Psychograph of Adolescent Rebellion." In a footnote, Bettelheim calls our attention to an instance of "misplaced expertise" and its implications. Dr. Bettelheim says:

*In this speech (which was widely reprinted all over the U. S.) Professor Wald quoted a U. S. Senator who remarked on the floor of the Senate that if it came to nuclear war he would prefer that the survivors be Americans. Many (including me) would take exception to such a statement. But Professor Wald called it "criminally insane," and said he called it that speaking as a "Nobel Laureate" (in biology), a reliance on titular authority he would normally shun when not speaking as a "true believer." Since a criminally insane person should be locked up, Wald's remark suggests that the Senator be denied free speech. It is examples like this where illustrious faculty members would deny freedom of speech to those they disagree with on grounds of their own higher truth — that disruptive students emulate when they deny the right to speak to those with whom they disagree.*

Let's take a second example, chosen, one might say, almost at random from the *New York Times* of October 10, 1969. The quotation which is both long and amusing is from an interview with Dean Acheson, former Secretary of State in the administration of President Truman. Dean Acheson said on that occasion:

*Immediately after the war I had a great deal to do with nuclear scientists. There were people like Robert Oppenheimer, whom I admired very much. Oppie was one of the most naive people I knew. How he reached*

*his age and knew as little about the outside world as he did, I don't know — though he was extremely cultivated and read widely in many languages.*

*I accompanied Oppie into Truman's office one day. Oppie was wringing his hands, and said "I have blood on my hands."*

*"Don't ever bring that damn fool in here again," Truman told me afterward. "He didn't set that bomb off. I did. This kind of sniveling makes me sick." It made me slightly sick as well.*

*What also made me sick was the scientist's feeling that by making a bomb they knew everything there was to know about foreign relations and could bring peace to the world. The **Bulletin of Atomic Scientists** is the greatest bit of nonsense since the New Republic.*

*The intellectual, strictly channeled into one discipline, wants to run them all. Mr. Acheson went on. This is why Dr. Spock gives me a pain, why Bill Coffin — a hell of a nice fellow — by being a Protestant clergyman knows everything about international affairs. He doesn't. When I was a trustee at Yale I wanted to give him a hemlock cocktail to relieve him of some of his responsibilities.*



Dean Acheson

*"The intellectual, strictly channeled into one discipline, wants to run them all."*

PERMIT me to drive home the point and its implications by a third quotation. This time my quotation is from an article by Professor Sidney Hook in the Spring issue of *The Public Interest*. In that article, "Barbarism, Virtue, and the University," Hook quotes Professor Carl Schorske who says that the individual scholar can be protected in the pursuit of truth only if the scholarly community recognizes "a responsibility of the implications of its findings for society and mankind." What Professor Schorske is saying is that academic freedom is a value and ought to be protected only when the professor is in agreement with his colleagues. Or, to put it in a blunter and more forthright fashion, "Professors ought to be permitted to teach only so long as they find themselves in agreement with the current orthodoxy."

Professor Schorske is not, as one might legitimately suspect, a discredited fanatic. He is not the representative of a minority position. He is the finest sort of representative of the liberal establishment, an establishment which defends its own right to speak with the rhetoric of academic freedom, but demands censorship and silence from every other view, group, or position in society. Little wonder our youth is totalitarian when they drink daily from such poisoned springs.

The only place where the professor has a

right to play a determinative role in decision making is in the classroom, and it is precisely in the classroom that he has made such egregious errors. In the final analysis, there are few policies in the College or the University, other than academic policies, which are not legitimately the province of administration and trustees. It is only within the classroom, and those areas of education which are contingent upon the classroom, that the professor has a right to speak and be heard.

Why is that right not exercised more carefully, more effectively and more decisively? I have suggested that a most important reason for the failure of the professor to really determine what should happen in his classroom is that he really does not believe in academic freedom, that he is more interested in what happens in the classroom of his colleague than he is in inculcating the virtues of reasoned enquiry in his own.

However, there is another and perhaps equally important reason for the failure of academic freedom in America. To put that reason in its bluntest terms, it is timidity and cowardice on the part of the professor. Tenure is a mask for mediocrity and timidity. Why, if a University violates the consciences and the rights of professors, do they not protest with their feet? There is plenty of academic protest in America



"Little wonder our youth are totalitarian when they drink daily from such poisoned springs."  
(University of California's administration center after student sit-in.)

today, but few professors are fighting to get out, rather than to stay in. Nearly two years ago, a regent of the University of California remarked to me: "They said that if we fired Clark Kerr every 'name' professor at the University of California would resign. Well, we fired him and not even Clark Kerr left."

Little wonder students feel they should be able to behave irresponsibly and without accountability to the institution, or the parent society, when their intellectual mentors cloak themselves in the medieval robes of tenure and insist on their right to do as they damn well please. If there is one pervasive movement in American life at the present moment, it is a movement in the direction of the abolition of all special privilege. Those, who believe that the future belongs to groups seeking to enlarge the privileges of either students or faculty, misread completely the signs of the times.

As tenure now operates within the academy, it only serves to strengthen the forces that help to keep in place the liberal establishment; it only serves to hasten the complete homogenization of thought within the academy. It operates to exclude those, who entertain views which diverge from those of the orthodox position, for these neophyte rebels never receive tenure. And once the conformist has received tenure, he is absolved from all further institutional and social responsibility. The purposes of academic freedom are not well served by academic liberal court jesters, who know, quite well, the limits of permissible criticism of the prevailing orthodoxy and are careful to keep within those limits. There are, even on

our otherwise liberal faculties, the equivalent of the German 18th century "*Hof Jude*," the "Court Jew;" a conservative who is here and there tolerated in order to keep up the generally "enlightened" tone of the faculty.

THE academy is not an asylum, or a refuge. It is a place of daily, hourly contention. The engagements are intellectual, and mastery, within the framework of a clearly defined set of rules, should be dependent upon superior knowledge and more adequate experience. As faculty we transmit the past, we are critics of the present, and we anticipate and prepare for the future. We are able to perform these functions, not because our intuitions are sounder, our morals better, or our enthusiasms healthier (though all of these may assist us), but because we have subjected ourselves to the discipline of a science which arms us against the inadequacies of the person, and the illiberalities of the passions and their momentary enthusiasms. Ultimately, those rules of enquiry which govern our discipline are the only methods by which the life of reason can be maintained. The only determinative rights which we, as faculty, possess are those by which we maintain the process of reasoned enquiry. If we are untrue to those rules and if we are unwilling to defend them, even at the price of professorship and position, then, indeed, we shall have sinned against the Spirit and shall have to pay the retributive price.