

MODERN AGE

A QUARTERLY REVIEW



Foreword

IN THE FIRST ISSUE of *Modern Age* the founding editor informed his readers that one of the means by which he hoped to stimulate discussion of the great issues of the day would be by "debate and the symposium." Few recent books have aroused more serious discussion or have raised more basic issues than Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*, which makes the following symposium particularly welcome and appropriate. It seems proper to ask a question here, because it is really outside the book itself: How does one explain the enormous and unprecedented success of this scholarly book of nearly 400 pages, which makes no concessions to its readers—it contains a chapter of sixty-nine pages entitled "From Socrates' *Apology* to Heidegger's *Rektoratsrede*"—and induced more than one-half million people to buy it? This question almost inevitably leads to a second: What lasting effect will it have on the universities?

The answer to the first question seems fairly obvious. Consider parents, wishing the best for their son—we will speak of a son not for reasons of male chauvinism but rather for the sake of simplicity—who urge and cajole him to get good grades and are overjoyed when, after doing well in his SATs, he is accepted by a prestigious university. After having made considerable sacrifices to pay the cost of it all, they later find that their son comes home bristling with ideas that are incomprehensible, if not repugnant to them. Indeed they may even discover that while in college he had belonged to a campus homosexual society. Such parents (and the universities have certainly seen to it that there are many of them) provide a ready market for a book which bears the sub-title *How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students*. The success of *The Closing of the American Mind*, one can say with some confidence, is a greater indictment of the American university than anything in the book itself.

The answer to my second question—What lasting effect will it have on the universities?—is more difficult, but based on the influence of books in the past which also undertook to point out the fallacies and failures of American education and were widely read and talked about, it seems probable that Professor Bloom's book, for all its success, will have little positive effect on American education. As a rather striking, if much more modest, example consider Rudolf Flesch's book *Why Johnny Can't Read—and What You Can Do About It*, which was published in 1955. It caused a mild sensation and considerable indignation, with demands that something be done about the failure of the public schools and primarily about the teaching of reading.

In 1949 I published a book by a former member of a Connecticut school board who, in the course of his duties, had become rather thoroughly acquainted with the influence on public education of such institutions as Teachers College at Columbia University and the National Education Association. This was *And Madly Teach*, and its author, Mortimer B. Smith (1906-1981). It was a witty, modest little book, written in clear and elegant English—Mr. Smith had never gone to high school—and described the situation exactly

as it was. To the great surprise of the author and me (he was as unknown as a writer as I was as a publisher) the book was a decided success. *Time* magazine devoted its education section to the book, it was widely reviewed and much talked about, but also sharply criticized by the educational establishment. We received, I remember, a number of letters expressing gratitude for the book from educators, the remnants, very likely, of an older generation of teachers.

Mr. Smith soon followed the success of the book by founding the Council for Basic Education, which is much respected and still in existence. It issues well-written, sound studies on subjects concerned with education and organizes seminars and discussions. But while it undoubtedly has had some positive influence on secondary education, for all its efforts, and also the general consensus that "something must be done," the public schools appear to be no better, and may probably be worse, than they were when *Why Johnny Can't Read* and *And Madly Teach* were first published, the latter nearly forty years ago. The American public, it seems, has a great capacity for indignation, which it is inclined to express by reading a book about the subject, but then forgets until another subject for indignation comes along.

A particularly glaring and depressing example of what I am talking about is the failure of the efforts of Robert Maynard Hutchins (1899-1977) to have any noticeable lasting influence. One doesn't have to agree with every position he took to admire and respect him for his efforts on behalf of education. For a period of many years he devoted his considerable rhetorical skills, the dignity of his person, and the prestige of his position as president (1929-1945) and then chancellor (1945-1951) of the University of Chicago to restore seriousness, dedication to learning, and structure to American education. Now I find, to my dismay, that one of his most provocative and constructive books, *No Friendly Voice* (1936), a collection of speeches on American education given in the 1930s, is currently only available in a very expensive (\$50.00) reprint edition.

One must assume from Allan Bloom's book, as well as from the behavior of students and faculty during the disruptions of the sixties, which without too much exaggeration can be said to have been the direct result of policies which Hutchins had deplored, that the latter's efforts were without lasting effect. With this unimpeachable record before us, it is too much to expect, as much as we wish we could, that Bloom's insistence that the university should stand for something and that there should be "solidarity in the defense of truth" is ever to be realized.

—Henry Regnery