

Prexy's Perilous Job

BY MAX McCONN

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There must be something wrong with the system when fifty-five of our colleges change their presidents in a nine months' period

IT WAS Professor J. McKeen Cattell, of Columbia University, who some years ago described the college presidency as a "dangerous trade." This characterization has just received statistical confirmation which is very nearly startling. Archie M. Palmer, Associate Secretary of the Association of American Colleges, reports, in the November *Bulletin* of that body, that within the preceding nine months 55 colleges and universities made changes in their highest executive office. "Thirty-five new college presidents have been elected since the first of January, 1929, and six others who were elected in 1928 have been inaugurated during this calendar year. In addition, four acting presidents have been designated, while in at least ten other institutions the affairs of the presidency are being temporarily administered by members of the staff pending the filling of existing vacancies."

Since there are only about 750 colleges in the country, these changes represent a turn-over of 7.3 per cent in nine months. Surely this

is an alarming rate of academic mortality.

Mr. Palmer goes on to describe the job as "man-killing." "Few," he says, "survive it for more than eight or ten years. Only a superman can for long meet the constant professional demands placed upon him in such broad and varied fields as those of scholarship, campaigning for funds, balancing budgets, administering educational programmes, hiring and firing, directing building projects, lecturing, personal relationships, representing the institution publicly . . . and incidentally running a college. The strain on the human frame—to say nothing of the strain on mind and spirit—is enough to break any normal man in a short time."

MODERN sociology disapproves of dangerous trades, holds that occupational hazards should be reduced to a minimum; and it bases this position not only on considerations of humanity toward the workers directly concerned but also on the ground that the existence of

such trades is damaging to the general public weal.

In the case of the college presidency, for example, it is sufficiently obvious that a gross overburdening of that office, with the resultant strain upon its incumbents and their periodical breakdown or retirement, must be injurious to the colleges over which they preside and consequently to the whole cause of higher education in this country. Even in business frequent changes of executive personnel are recognized as damaging. They inevitably involve losses in loyalty and *esprit de corps*, confusion over variations in policy, and above all a general sense of unrest and insecurity. In a college or university such results are particularly disastrous, because the activities of teaching and learning require above everything else an atmosphere of tranquillity and stability.

IT MAY be worth while, therefore, to inquire how the college or university presidency has come to be the dangerous trade it is, and what, if anything, can be done about it.

We may begin by considering how other countries manage this matter. How about the presidents of the universities of England and Germany and France and Italy and Spain? Are they, too, constantly breaking under impossible loads?

The answer to this question may be moderately surprising to many Americans who have given little attention to the history of higher education. The universities of Europe (and Asia and Australia and South America) have no presidents at all nor any comparable officer; which fact, broadly considered, may seem

to indicate that an office which the institutions of higher learning throughout the rest of the world are able to dispense with entirely need not, of absolute necessity, be so magnified among us as to be beyond the powers of normal men.

BUT, of course, the universities of the Old World grew up very differently from ours. The more ancient ones consisted originally of little more than groups of students and groups of teachers drawn together in some convenient city. The relationship between these groups was at first very similar to that between the private students of music and the private teachers of music in any American town: those who wanted to learn something sought out those who were able to teach it and paid them fees for instruction. Gradually some little organization was effected, first among the students, later among the teachers; and eventually the two bodies were loosely affiliated in the corporate entity which was called the university. And that is about all there is to it even now.

Yet that is not the American way of doing things. When we want to do anything whatsoever, our first step is to call a meeting of all who are interested (and as many others as possible) and *organize*. Precisely this has been the first step in the establishment of most American colleges and universities. A group of prominent citizens — frequently headed and dominated by some individual philanthropist — have got together and decided that a college or university was needed in their particular town, city, or district. In a very few

cases some of the prominent citizens have been actuated in part by considerations related to real estate values and similar pecuniary matters. But this has been exceptional; in general, their motives have been of the highest: real public spirit and a sincere regard (or respect) for higher education. But the prominent citizens were not themselves, naturally, either teachers or students. Consequently, they could not in their own persons do anything whatever toward opening an institution of learning. All that lay within their power was to contribute and collect sums of money with which to hire others to do this job; and certainly they are entitled to high praise for the generosity with which they have themselves contributed, and the equally impressive zeal with which they have collected from others, for this purpose. Beyond that all they could do was to entrust their purpose and their funds to a permanent committee which should take charge of the enterprise.

SO FAR as I know there is no American college or university which is not controlled and legally owned by such a permanent committee, representing the founders and acting as custodians of the original funds and, of course, of such additional funds as may have accrued. These permanent committees have acquired a generic name: the board of trustees.

But the board of trustees — the permanent committee of prominent citizens — are permanently in the same fix as the original group of founders. They are not themselves either teachers or learners, but very busy men, pressingly engrossed in

the activities through which they have become prominent. And these activities, of course, have practically never had anything to do with higher education or any other kind of education. In short, they have very little time to devote to the college and know very little about colleges anyway. Consequently all that can be, or is, expected of them is to hire other men to do the work of the college, using the funds committed to them for this purpose.

YET even this — the mere hiring of all the persons needed to run a college — is a large and troublesome job. In the early days of the very small colleges some boards of trustees tried to handle it themselves; but they soon found it took more time than they could spare from their own business, and most of them had the good sense to perceive also that it required an expert knowledge of academic affairs beyond what they possessed.

They were not long, however, in finding a solution. The obvious thing was to hire a manager or foreman, just as they were accustomed to do in their own offices, factories, and shops, and to make him responsible for the hiring of his subordinates and in fact for the entire management of the college. Out of their great respect for higher education they have accorded their manager or foreman a well-sounding title: he is called either "president" or "chancellor." Practically all boards of trustees at the present time limit their actual personal activities to the finding, as often as may be necessary, of a new president. Having appointed him, they give him full authority and hold

him responsible only for results — in accordance with approved administrative maxims. So long as everything goes smoothly, they approve his recommendations substantially *pro forma* and read his reports if they have time. If trouble brews, they will usually support him in quashing it if they can. If the trouble becomes too serious, they can only fire him (*i.e.*, “accept his resignation”) and hire a new one (“call another distinguished educator to executive responsibility”).

THE foregoing is a brief but, I believe, accurate account of the origin of the American system of college and university government — the trustee-president system. It is easy to see how it happened. Given our American habits of thought and procedure, it could not have happened otherwise. So nobody is to be blamed; in fact all the parties concerned are entitled to praise for high motives and doing the only thing that could be done.

But the resulting office of president is really pretty rough. The president is given full authority for hiring his subordinates and directing them. But who are his subordinates? Not clerks or mechanics or minor administrative officials, such as other managers may employ and rule, but a body of teachers and scholars — men, in other words, of high intelligence, strong individuality, and distinguished attainments. Rightly or wrongly these men do not like to have a manager hiring and firing and bossing them. In no other country on earth has such a group ever submitted to such a manager or been asked to do so. In other countries

they are given a large measure of individual and collective autonomy, and have succeeded in handling their own affairs, not very “efficiently” perhaps, but in the long run with greater satisfaction to their students and the public, as well as to themselves, than our system has yielded.

SO THE president’s troubles usually begin with his faculty, not through any real fault on either side, but because he is put in a false relationship to them — a relationship such as no man ought to be asked to assume towards such a group.

But this is only the beginning. The full responsibility which the president receives from the trustees is indeed full. Let us consider the items of business which may pass across his desk within a single half day.

When he arrives at his office at 9:30 the architects are waiting for him with plans for the new botanical greenhouses, including a new system for the regulation of temperature which is extremely expensive but which the professor of botany claims is essential for the type of research on which he is engaged; also plans for an enlarged swimming pool for the gymnasium and a new set of roads and walks on the South Campus. All these projects will cost more than previously estimated, but surely in view of their obvious desirability the president can find the money.

Next comes the alumni secretary with the preliminary layout of a “drive” for an additional ten millions of endowment — a matter involving a multitude of most delicate details.

Then perhaps the dean slips in with a particularly nasty case of

student discipline, a case which must be handled firmly in the interest of student morale, yet discreetly if the name of the university is not to be smirched. The dean probably knows what he wants to do, but must assure himself before he acts of the president's concurrence and support.

After the dean, Assistant Professor Jones, with the double purpose of pleading for an increase in salary and sowing a few innuendoes against the head of his department, whose responsibilities, it may be inferred, could be infinitely better discharged by Professor Jones himself.

Jones is eventually thrown out, but is promptly succeeded by the director of athletics, with a subtle plan for so handling Sub-Freshman Day that it will attract the largest possible number of desirable football candidates without appearing to seek that end or drawing animadversions from the Carnegie Foundation.

MEANWHILE the president's secretary has brought in the morning's mail, including, beside seven questionnaires and ten advertisements of new educational treatises which no college president should fail to read, a request from a magazine editor for his views on the Younger Generation, three complaints from parents of the faulty instruction and unjust treatment their sons are receiving, two explosions from alumni who are rabid because the team lost the last big game, and a postal card from "A Citizen and Taxpayer" denouncing the whole institution as a sink of iniquity and a breeder of irreligion and sedition.

And all the time the poor president has been hoping against hope that he

might get at least an hour *this* morning to tackle the tremendous job of assembling the annual budget. But now he must hasten away to the monthly luncheon of the Chamber of Commerce and must make up his speech as he drives over, because last night he was entertaining a distinguished visiting lecturer who did not have sense enough to turn in until 1 A.M.

IT WILL be seen, I trust, that few other positions, public or private, involve more numerous and difficult contacts or a wider range of complicated problems. But that is not the worst of it. The worst is that in handling all these matters a college or university president must stand alone, bearing sole responsibility and sole authority, except for the merely formal support of the board of trustees. The Governor of a State may be confronted by questions equally multitudinous and baffling, but no Governor stands alone, a solitary autocrat. He shares his responsibility with a legislature and also with other State officers who are independently elected by and responsible to the people. Of course a college or university president has assistants — deans, registrars, architects, alumni secretaries, and many others, — but all of these are his own creatures, his own appointees, and necessarily, therefore, to some extent, his yes-men, as are likewise the professors. None of them has independent status or authority, and none of them, consequently, can really stand up to him or really check him when he needs checking — as any man does sometimes. This status of isolated autocracy is the great

evil in the college presidency, the underlying cause of its strain and its mishaps.

Please understand that the presidents themselves have not sought or desired such solitary authority. To many of them it is profoundly distasteful and to all a grievous burden. And nearly all, being men of fine character as well as great ability, are as scrupulous as a man can be not to abuse their power. But no man given despotic authority can avoid abusing it: he overrules without knowing it; his casual expressions of opinion stifle debate and head off proposals and smother protests. And so, though striving earnestly to be just, he works injustice here and there; seeking faithfully to do the best for the college, he makes mistakes which his colleagues see to be mistakes but of which they can not effectively warn him. And thus harm results to individuals and to the institution, and, though the president may do many fine and wise things also, dissatisfaction accumulates, until presently it seems best to get a new president — who can not escape repeating the same process.

WHAT can be done about it — if anything?

Here we are saddled with our boards of trustees, all legally established with legislative charters in perpetuity, and all regularly appointing presidents, and certainly incapable of discharging their function in any other way. Even those who will grant that the system has its flaws may be inclined to shrug and say we may as well make the best of it.

That is undoubtedly what we shall do, in general, for a long time to

come. Yet I think it is not difficult to envisage a better plan nor in any way impossible to try it out, experimentally, in a college or two; and if this should be done and the results should be happy, — well, we Americans are not the slowest among peoples in the general adoption of improved devices.

WHO really ought to rule the college or university? Who, in other words, could probably do it best? The existing boards of trustees — the permanent committees of prominent citizens — simply can not resume the function themselves. They have neither the time nor the expert knowledge. Who else is there in sight? Who that has, or could have, the time and the knowledge and sufficient interest?

Casting about, we might light upon the faculty — a highly selected group who are devoting their lives to teaching and learning. They must know something about colleges (most presidents, in fact, are drawn from their ranks), and surely they are vitally interested; though at present they are merely employed and directed by the trustees' manager, with practically nothing to say about the broad policies of the institution. Casting still further, there are the students. Of course they are pretty young; but after all most of the seniors are voters, and they have had two or three years' experience of college, and they know the real facts about many important matters as no one else can. And then there are the alumni, who also have much knowledge of the institution, viewed from a perspective of greater maturity and extra-collegiate experience.

It seems to me that the governing body of a college or university could best be drawn from these three thoroughly informed and keenly interested groups. To be concrete, let me propose a board of twelve: six members of the faculty, elected by the faculty; three honor seniors, elected by the class; and three alumni, elected by the alumni association.

I SEE no good theoretical reason why such a board should not take over all the functions of the existing boards of trustees, with complete jurisdiction and final authority in all matters whatsoever.

Such a group could be a real working board, as the existing lay boards are not and can not be. They would still need a president, to be chosen by them, and to serve as their educational adviser and executive officer, and he would need to be the ablest man they could find, and would have plenty to do and much responsibility and prestige. But such a board could be really helpful. Its committees could actually take over large segments of the necessary work. But especially it would be helpful as a well-informed and definitely interested reviewing board, which could canvass all the president's policies and recommendations to some real effect. It could save any president from innumerable errors, injustices, and partialities, which no human individual who must act practically alone in numerous and delicate matters can possibly avoid.

And think of the educational effect, upon the faculty and students, of such effective participation, through their representatives, in their own government! This in itself

would be sufficient first to remake and then to maintain the morale of any college.

Such a governing board would undoubtedly be "inefficient" in some matters. It would make mistakes, of course, and it would almost certainly slow up some kinds of development, especially programmes of "expansion." But I am willing to predict that it would be more rigorous in discipline, stricter in its maintenance of qualitative standards, bolder in educational experimentation, and stronger in standing against deteriorating influences from outside, than the trustee-president combination has ever been or is likely to be.

AND its executive officer, the president — although he would have his troubles, like any public servant, — would nevertheless be, as compared with other presidents, a happy man. No longer a lonely autocrat, unwillingly admired, ignorantly slandered, diffidently approached, skillfully cajoled and managed by the deft among his subordinates, and so far as possible ignored by all the rest. He could know the joy of real coöperation, of fighting for his projects with equals whose opposition could be open and whose approval when given would be sincere. He could not move as fast in many matters as our existing presidents move, but when he did move he would have his community with him instead of, half the time, against him; thus progress might be slower but would be surer and sounder. And there would be no accumulating reservoir of rancor, the result of injustices and errors unwittingly committed and suffered necessarily without protest.

But what chance have we of even trying any such plan under the existing conditions of law and custom in this country?

WELL, our college and university system is by no means so rigidly set today as it was even ten years ago. We have come into a period of experimental and experimenting colleges. Different institutions are already engaged in trying out many innovations in courses of study, methods of instruction, and living conditions — honors courses at Swarthmore and elsewhere, preceptorial or tutorial instruction at Princeton and Harvard, the English collegiate system of residence at Harvard and Claremont, supervised study at Rollins, and an entirely new curriculum and approach under Dr. Meiklejohn at Wisconsin. There is no reason why *some* college should not experiment with this vital matter of government.

It need not be so difficult to arrange for trial purposes. Any board of trustees, on the recommendation of any interested president, could at any meeting authorize an executive committee of professors, students, and alumni, and delegate to such an experimental board, for a specified period — say, five years — exactly the same powers which it has heretofore delegated to the president alone,

i.e., full control of the institution, subject only to the formal ratification of budgets and other measures by the legal board at a perfunctory annual meeting. Most boards of trustees contain some alumni members; several of these might be designated as the first alumni members of the experimental board; thus the new trial governing body could be considered a joint committee of the faculty, the students, and the legal board itself. Such joint committees as this have not been unknown in the past, though only for temporary purposes and with powers limited to recommendation. Of course, for the experiment here proposed, the legal board would have to adopt and adhere to a rigid policy of self-denial in the matter of interference during the stated period of the experiment; but many weary and bored trustees would be only too glad to do that.

So, you see, the thing is by no means impossible of trial. In fact I think we may expect that within the next decade or two it will be tried in some form. And if the experiment should be conducted with reasonable fairness and patience, I am almost sure the results would be very fine — in which case the new plan would certainly be widely imitated, and the American college presidency might cease to be a dangerous trade.

Counting Heads in the Nation

BY OLIVER MCKEE, JR.

The Fifteenth Census blazes a new trail in methods of accumulating the greatest mass of facts a nation ever acquired

OUR national passion for facts will build its greatest monument when, on April 1, an army of 100,000 enumerators begin to gather the data for the Fifteenth Census. The magnitude of the undertaking, the most colossal statistical enterprise in history, shows that the American people are endowed with a greater curiosity about themselves than are any other people. As the United States marshals, on foot and horseback, set out to count heads in our first census in 1790, George Washington and his contemporaries no doubt had their share of the curiosity which is common to mankind. Yet, compared with their descendants of today, they could gratify that passion but in part. Why? Because statistical science was virtually nonexistent, and because the marvellous tabulating machines of our time were not in their hands.

A few figures will suffice to indicate the extent of this fact-finding operation. Enumerators will collect data for a population of 120,000,000, and in doing so will ask the head of each household about twenty-five questions. They will interrogate

about 6,500,000 farmers, about the farm, its crops, and its equipment. Each of the 20,000 mines in America will undergo an examination no less searching. The Fifteenth Census will blaze a trail into two new fields of inquiry, distribution and unemployment. There are 2,500,000 mercantile establishments in the United States. The distribution census will give a classified count of merchants, the types and sizes of retailers and distributors, their sales, expenses, inventories and employees. Facts such as these have never been brought together for the country as a whole. The second new field of inquiry, unemployment, will tell us how many men and women are out of work at the time of the census, where they are, and in what industries or occupations. Over 20,000 individual questions find a place on the various schedules, covering the whole range of our national life.

THE American appetite for facts grows steadily keener. What would satisfy our forbears in the time of Abraham Lincoln, seems strangely inadequate today, as we compare the