THE ROAD TO INDEPENDENCE

by

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THE UNIVERSITIES OF AMERICA are in a critical state.
This crisis arises, first, from a great obligation which they inherited as a consequence of the war. Before America had true universities, we borrowed heavily from Europe in the intellectual sphere. Even after American universities took their modern form, we imported more pure science and cultural knowledge than we exported. Although thirty years ago we became a creditor country in the economic sense, we still remained a debtor country intellectually; many critical advances in modern knowledge were imported. The disruption and disorganization occasioned by political tyranny and war have so sapped the intellectual energies of European universities that they are no longer in a position to maintain their export market. Our universities alone can make us a creditor nation in this respect.

The universities are in crisis, also, because their fundamental philosophy is still dominated by Europe. In their formative period German scholarly procedures so captivated the minds of those who brought them home after training abroad that our graduate work, though diverging more and more, nonetheless follows the German model. Two wars revealed the weakness of German scholarship; magnificent in its precision, impressive in its thoroughness, it was markedly deficient in a sense of values. Its intellectual prestige was deservedly high; ethical direction was conspicuously absent. Amoral detachment left the road clear for immoral politics, domestic and foreign. Over-attention to method with under-emphasis upon values is
a serious defect which American universities derived from their German inspiration. The time has come to redress the balance of emphasis and eliminate that evil.

The third occasion for crisis is the enormous diversification of university programs. A few institutions, like Brown, have deliberately chosen to maintain a simple structure. But most universities have many kinds of schools and colleges, under-graduate and graduate, many research institutes, and other constituent elements. Their natures are often so different and their controls so various that sometimes the university becomes a mere collection of virtually independent units; the total structure is without coherence. Moreover, as professional associations gained power, in the name of “raising standards,” they subjected institutions to so many requirements that the determination of policy in certain areas is more external than internal. The disintegrating process has reached so advanced a stage that only the greatest administrative skill and firmness can reverse the trend.

The crisis exists in the fourth place because society has laid upon the universities burdens without supplying commensurate resources. They were required to accept multitudes of students when there was no corresponding increase in the number of competent teachers, no adequate growth in libraries, laboratory facilities, and physical properties.

Many agencies of government as well as strong social pressures tend to enlarge attendance. The President’s Commission on Higher Education demanded increases never before seriously suggested for a like period of time. Numbers would contribute much less to crisis if the surge reflected a great intellectual renaissance, vast enthusiasm for humanistic studies and scientific investigation. Unhappily,
it is more a consequence of philosophies of social amelioration and of political sentimentalism than of deep intellectual purpose. In fact, some of the propaganda for enlargement is clearly anti-intellectual. Thus the increase tends in some degree to expand and debase the educational currency, to inflate the program and make it less worthwhile.

There is crisis also because at a moment when the professoriate enjoys less public confidence than for many years, when nervous fear of “Reds” in the colleges is widespread, the nation is dependent upon the universities for experts. Administrators have been harassed by the demands of the military government of occupied territories for the loan of staff members, by calls from Washington for the detachment of professors for specific enterprises, and by the urgency of research for defense and public health. In some institutions extra-academic activities and research contracts have led to dislocation of staff and distortion of program, which culminate in drawing energy away from the teaching function. When the budget of an institution for higher education shows less than one quarter of its expenditures for instructional as distinct from research purposes, the inference that the teaching mission is not receiving adequate attention is inescapable.

There is a crisis, finally, because university expenses have gone up. The costs of heat, light, maintenance, mechanical and other services have advanced sharply. Would that costs of instruction proper had gone up equally! But during inflation the professor is the forgotten man. His standards of living have been depressed to a degree no labor union would tolerate. It is most serious in lowered standards of intellectual life. The historian and humanist need
to travel to their sources; the student of economics, politics, and sociology should make observations at first hand in many and distant places. But with the rapid increase in the costs of travel and the snail-like increase in the remuneration of teachers, the depressing effects are serious to a degree all too little appreciated. Moreover, professors must have books—not just access to library books; they need to own a working library; and the price of the kind of books they require constantly at hand has risen far more rapidly than salaries. Academic poverty inculcates slow, wasteful, ineffective methods of work; such concealed costs are very serious, even though they are not revealed on a university balance sheet.

It will not suffice, if we are to master the crisis and strengthen the universities, merely to mouth magic words, old or new. In modern political literature one such word stands out so conspicuously that it could be nominated the "Word of the Half-Century." "Planning" became the shibboleth of liberalism and the verbal solvent of the ills of the world. It meant more than the foresight which is required to operate any continuing enterprise; it represented a belief that political authority could wisely shape the social structure and the economic order.

At the height of its vogue came an unplanned war. Certainly America cannot be accused of planning it; our unpreparedness was adequate proof on that point. Surely Britain, which was driven back to its island fortress and appealed in desperation for obsolescent rifles, did not plan the war. Clearly the French with their ceaseless shuffling of politicians in the name of government did not plan it. Even Hitler and Stalin, playing their devious, cynical games of power chess, did not plan it as it actually transpired. As
for Mussolini, when stripped of his forensic bombast, he turned out to be the very antithesis of a war planner — he was a mere pawn in a deadly game.

As nations did not plan successfully for peace, so also they have not succeeded in planning their economic life. In Britain a socialist government adopted "austerity" as the keystone of planning. Yet the most significant development of the past year was the devaluation of the pound. That was not planned; Sir Stafford Cripps said repeatedly that he would not devalue, and meant it. When the British pound toppled, the currencies of twenty or more nations were dragged down with it. The International Monetary Fund, which was to plan such matters, became virtually a spectator; devaluation, as it actually occurred, was the complete defeat of planning.

The United States supplied a master plan — the Marshall Plan. It has, indeed, achieved great things. It has bought time for moderate elements to hold the reins of government in Europe and let economic systems recover poise and re-energize production. But no one any longer expects it to close the dollar gap by 1952; "integration" remains a slogan rather than a program. In those and other respects the plan is not moving according to schedule, but upon lines quite different from those conscious directions which were set forth.

The agricultural planning of Europe in the most critical year after the war was seriously disrupted by drought. Even where no act of God intervened, the calculations of the planners were wide of the mark. The British peanut extravaganza in Africa, for example, has come a cropper, instead of producing a crop. In less dramatic fashion other European projects have shown that planned
agricultural expansion often means more costly food—and so less food for the marginal consumer.

In the United States the best laid plans of the Department of Agriculture have been upset by unplanned overproduction. The losses of the Commodity Credit Corporation rise in a dizzy spiral. When Denmark sought to narrow the dollar gap (as we demand) by shipping us 4,400,000 pounds of butter at less than the current market, an import license was refused because the Commodity Credit Corporation has 100,000,000 pounds in storage! International planning by E.C.A. and isolationist planning by C.C.C. cancel each other; the State Department plan for reciprocal trade and the Department of Agriculture plan for price supports are in conflict. We call for integration abroad, but practice (in this instance) autarchy at home. This kind of "planning" means higher costs to the citizen as householder, higher taxes to export Marshall Plan money to plug the dollar gap (which involves giving away money instead of selling goods), and higher taxes to meet C.C.C. deficits. Clearly such planning is an incoherent hodgepodge.

The Hoover Commission made it clear that Federal planning for education has been the same kind of patchwork policy.

In the course of ten years, therefore, "planning" has ceased to serve as a reliable touchstone of progress. Indeed, if we look below its surface glitter, we find that it does not overcome the human habit of procrastination or the political tendency to temporize. This fact appears even in absolutist states like Russia, but it is still more obvious where governments hold their authority by the consent of the governed and the politician always keeps a weather eye upon the next election. We can observe the phenomenon
currently in England; it is universally recognized that beneficial effects of devaluation will be transient unless there are correlative actions, politically difficult and even hazardous in an election year, which have not yet been taken save in token form — and time for their effective application is running out.

The era of planning has been marked by a tendency to postpone decision until events have shaped our course. A conspicuous illustration is supplied by Palestine: successive policies stumbled over one another's heels while the realities crystallized and re-shaped the history of the Near East in defiance of the desires of the great powers and contrary to the expectations of all save a small, determined band. If the case of Palestine is notable, it is also reasonably typical.

What is true in economics and politics is true also in education. We have hesitated to make up our minds about several elements of the current crisis; meanwhile events outrun decision and force the pace; unplanned realities loom up out of the muddle of indecision. Federalization of American higher education is coming by drift, not by design.

Medical education supplies a pertinent example. There is to be a Federal subsidy for medical schools. The authorization passed the Senate, had a favorable committee report in the House of Representatives, and is desired by the Executive. It did not get final consideration in the House in the crush of business on the eve of adjournment. After minor modifications the bill is likely to be adopted without serious opposition. This action is being taken without much public discussion, indeed, virtually without public awareness. Not all universities urged such an appropriation, but none is resisting it.
This marked change in the tradition of our government and in the management of our universities is taking place without regard for its ultimate effects. Attention is concentrated upon instant relief; eventual implications go unheeded. So far as political interference with educational matters is concerned, the bill, as drawn, is reasonably innocuous; the amount of the initial appropriation is small, so its leverage will not be decisive in most institutions. These sugar coatings conceal the fact that as appropriations grow, as the procedures for their administration develop in bureaucratic detail, as the medical schools become more and more dependent upon Federal revenue, universities may find themselves in a wholly unplanned situation, with impaired capacity to discharge the educational trust committed to them.

We shall shortly have a National Science Foundation. The bill to establish it was passed by Congress but vetoed on administrative grounds. There is reason to expect that a formula will be found; and large appropriations for research in the universities and colleges will become available.

Federal aid to higher education has long existed in the land-grant colleges and to some extent through other programs in publicly owned institutions. There is every indication that it will continue to grow for many pressure groups urge larger appropriations and it is difficult for recipients to decline what appear to be gratuities.

Under all these circumstances a vigorous movement to subsidize higher education generally is only a matter of time. Indeed, the President's Commission on Higher Education proposed a subsidy for public institutions and a minority of that body protested against the exclusion of private institutions. It is significant that they did not pro-
test a subsidy, but only its restriction to public institutions. There is no such limitation in the bill to give Federal aid to medical education. That precedent may become decisive in setting subsidy policy. If the trend continues as it has been developing in recent years, a general Federal subsidy will be established by the cumulative force of specific instances.

So far we have only the thin edge of the wedge. Initial Federal programs involve modest figures; they seek to avoid political interference with educational, scientific, and cultural activities. Fears are quieted by pointing to the British University Grants Committee as a model which demonstrates how a national treasury can contribute to the support of higher education without controlling its program or policies — in short, its academic freedom.

Citing the British Grants Committee as a sound precedent for Federal subsidies to American higher education is misleading in at least three respects — all of critical importance. The first is the difference in scale. This may seem to be a matter of operation rather than of principle. But differences in size often produce differences in kind. The British Grants Committee, for example, is made up of part-time personnel, only one member being a full-time officer, and the entire staff consists of eighteen people. The number of institutions subsidized is only sixty-five so that every member of the Committee can be reasonably familiar with every one of the institutions. Any such enterprise in America would subsidize anywhere from eight hundred to eighteen hundred, scattered over an area many times that of Great Britain, with much wider variations in climate, traditions, habits, and points of view than exist in that country, and there would be complex formulae to make certain that
all regions in the United States were treated alike. In short, the entire procedure, which is operable with sixty-five institutions in a tight little island, would be totally unsuited to a continental nation with a vast number of institutions. Differences in procedure would produce important differences in results.

The second consideration is that under our political system Congress plays a role in appropriations which contrasts sharply with that of Parliament in Britain. Parliament makes appropriations in general terms and leaves wide discretion to the Treasury. In the United States, on the contrary, appropriations are specific and Congress may at any time (and almost certainly will at some time) dictate detailed and precise limitations. In Britain the interference of Parliament in the administration of a grant would result in upsetting the Government, whereas in America such legislative interference is a matter of course.

We have a clear instance right at hand. The Atomic Energy Commission set up a system of fellowships. The National Academy of Sciences and the National Research Council, as its agent, were assigned the task of independent, non-political selection of fellows. Those bodies, in their concentration on scientific competence and, if I may say so, in their political naiveté, made some selections which were unfortunate. Thereupon, in the next appropriation bill, restrictions were laid upon the expenditure of funds; these so seriously impair fundamental policy that fellowships for work in non-secret studies are being discontinued, and the National Research Council is withdrawing from the administration of the remaining fellowships after next year. The reason is that the National Academy, established by Congress for the specific purpose of advising the govern-
ment, regards the restrictions as "unwise from the standpoint of the advance of science in the United States."

That episode offers a conspicuous illustration of the way in which, under the American tradition, Congress can and habitually does control administrative policy in a manner which is inconceivable under the British system. When, therefore, the British Grants Committee is cited to prove that government can make grants without interference in academic matters, the answer has to be that there is no parallelism to justify the reference.

It is instructive, in this connection, that in one instance where Congress wrote relatively few specific instructions into a bill and seemed willing, initially at least, to give somewhat more discretion than usual to a non-political, expert body to administer the National Science Foundation, the President vetoed the bill. He refused approval on the ground that it would "vest the determination of vital national policies, the expenditure of large public funds, and the administration of important government functions in a group of individuals who would be essentially private citizens . . . whom the President could not effectively hold responsible." In the nearest approach Congress has made to empowering a body roughly (and only roughly) analogous to the British Grants Committee, the bill was thereby made unacceptable to the Executive. Clearly the British precedent is inapplicable to the subsidy of American universities.

In the third place, the inferences drawn from the British Grants Committee are based upon a situation which no longer exists, even in Britain. That Committee was established in 1919, over thirty years ago. When it formulated the classical policies on the basis of which favorable inferences are drawn, Treasury grants were for a marginal part
of university budgets. Originally one-sixth or less, even as late as the period immediately before the war grants amounted to only about one-third of the budgets. Since the war, however, the grants have risen above fifty per cent and in a year or two will exceed sixty per cent. Because grants are not the same percentage of the budget in each university, in some instances the subsidy may amount to as much as seventy or eighty per cent.

In its last report the Grants Committee candidly recognized a change in its relationship with the universities: "The implications of the present financial position are far-reaching and of profound importance. Before the war the amount of money at our disposal for distribution to the universities was relatively modest. . . . It was also recognized that the cost of capital projects would have to be defrayed almost entirely from private sources. The function of our grant, in other words, was not so much that of stimulating active policies of expansion and development as that of encouraging and facilitating such limited improvements as the universities could see their way to undertake within a relatively stable financial framework. Progress was always taking place, but its pace was dictated for the most part by factors other than the Government grant."

"Events . . . have transformed the situation. . . . The question cannot . . . be avoided whether the greatly increased dependence of the universities on Government grants may carry with it a threat to their continued existence as free institutions. The system . . . between the two wars was free of any form of State interference and control. . . . It is generally accepted that, in administering the much larger funds . . ., it is appropriate for us to exercise a somewhat greater measure of influence over university policy
than hitherto. . . . When Exchequer money is involved on the scale now reached, the duty of ensuring that it is expended in the way best calculated to promote the public welfare is plainly imperative.

Even the universities have now officially accepted "the view that the Government has not only the right, but the duty to satisfy itself that every field of study which in the national interest ought to be cultivated in Great Britain is in fact being cultivated in the university system and that the resources which are placed at the disposal of the universities are being used with full regard both to efficiency and to economy."

Moreover, while the Committee still makes lump sum grants to be expended at the universities' discretion, there are also specially earmarked grants and the Committee frankly declares: "Undoubtedly the earmarking of grants entails some impairment of the universities' freedom of action." Furthermore, there are now grants for capital expenditures and the Committee admits that "direct influence upon university policy is exercised by our . . . grants for capital purposes. These have always been made in response to applications from the universities in respect of specific projects, so that no new question of principle arises here. The vastly increased scale, however, on which capital assistance is now available, places the matter in a new perspective and it must be remembered that large capital developments for teaching purposes have a direct influence on recurrent expenditures."

Even under a socialist government there are not unlimited funds. Therefore, the Grants Committee has to exercise some discretion as to where to put its resources. If it decides, for example, to make a capital grant to one
institution for a cyclotron and declines such a grant to another institution, that is not merely a fiscal decision. To some extent, at least, it determines the nature of the work in physics in both institutions, the kind of faculty each shall have, the courses and research open to the students; it determines internal policies by indirection, but no less effectively.

So great are the changes that the Committee sees "a new and intricate relationship between the State and the universities," which involves "a certain measure of central planning." The Committee faces a new problem in seeking to devise "appropriate means of reconciling the operation of planning with the maintenance of the essential academic freedoms."

To sum it up, even if the British precedents had ever been relevant, that relevance has disappeared, for the Grants Committee is faced with unsolved problems; and it is these new problems which Federal subsidy would bring to the American universities.

We should decide whether the trend toward Federal support of American universities is to accelerate or is to halt. Before we are drawn into the dependent situation of the British universities, under much less favorable circumstances, we ought to look with great candor at the factors which produce Federal aid.

In facing the issue some phases of British experience are revealing. Subsidies were made to British universities because senescent capitalism gave them inadequate philanthropic support. The initial grants were not a socialistic experiment any more than the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, established by Herbert Hoover, was socialistic.
Each was an expedient to deal with a practical situation, not a reflection of ideological dogma.

British socialism — and the nationalization which follows in its train — did not come with a single, decisive change of the popular mind; it seeped into a vacuum created by capitalist failures. There is no need, in this connection, to discuss the socialist idea. Whether it will succeed or fail is presently in the realm of speculation. Many are convinced it will fail, others are equally convinced it will not; each can give short-run evidence in support of his view. But the decisive evidence is not to be found in the way in which socialism operates for a year, or two, or three, or four, but over a period longer than we have available for judgment.

The point is that, before the people could be induced to accept socialism, capitalism had to have manifested grave defections from its own philosophy. It atrophied as a result of monopoly practices in pricing arrangements and in market allocations (which permitted neglect of cost-reduction); it substituted collusion for competition; there were widespread nepotism and managerial inertia; undermaintenance of plants, neglect of home investment, and the slighting of research (even hostility to it) resulted in retardation of technological improvement.

As the socialists are said to pay the least able, the least willing, and the least industrious equally with those who are energetic, skillful, and thrifty, so by short-circuiting competition capitalism was guilty of the same essential fault — keeping marginal producers in business and relieving them of the necessity to exert themselves. All this was the more disastrous because it coincided with the rise of competition from Germany, Japan, and other countries, the decline of
colonialism, and the cost of a world war. These circum-
stances should have stimulated British capitalism to intense
effort, vigorous innovation, aggressive management, and
lively marketing. In default of those qualities British trade
lost ground even in peace time.

Certainly the British industrialist who connived at or
consented to the impairment of competition and to the
decaying vitality which ensued did not wish for socialism;
he just did not have will enough to make his own wishes
come true. He will complain that government regulations,
excessive taxation, and other such influences drove him to
the practices to which I have adverted. That is only partly
accurate. Regulations and controls arose from abuses, and
usually political correctives result in over-correction. Once
the bureaucracy starts to grow it takes determined efforts
to restrain it, but if the competitive spirit dies, the power to
restrain bureaucracy is crippled.

Furthermore, protection of the least competent man-
agement, which negated the competitive thesis underlying
free enterprise, sold the worker short and drove him to look
for "welfare" from government, not from production —
its only real source. Thus in two ways at least, both fore-
seeable and preventable, capitalism smoothed the way for
socialism in Britain. When enfeebled capitalism no longer
met its social responsibility to support free institutions of
learning, government took over.

There were other factors, of course. The statement need
not be complete for this is not an article on economics. The
point is that in America there is only one way to keep the
government from dominating the independent universities
and colleges; and that is to keep them vigorous, competitive,
and solvent.
Support has to come from somewhere; if it does not come from private sources, it will come from public sources. There is no danger whatever that the privately endowed universities will be taken over unless absence of resources creates such a vacuum that it draws in public money. Not many people are really happy about the situation of the medical schools, but perennial deficits existed which they thought they could not cure by economy without the self-defeating method of impairing instruction. The deficits were not met by gifts; a last minute cooperative effort for corporate gifts recalls an almost forgotten phrase — "too little and too late." The consequence is Federal subsidy.

If private capital has only the wish to keep government out and not the will to keep it out, the financial status of the institutions will deteriorate to such a point that money must be accepted from any source available to meet commitments to their faculties, the expectations of the young, and the demands of society. The medical schools have already reached a condition where they are ready for desperate expedients. Other phases of higher education are not far behind. If philanthropy withers, government will step in.

It is a matter for deep concern that already in one way or another — through government payment of fees, contracts for research, or other less obvious forms of payment — some independent, private institutions are (directly or indirectly) drawing half or more of their revenues from Federal sources. By appointments and other commitments they are becoming dependent upon that support and, as a result, the government is getting a vested interest in their programs, procedures, and even their methods of accounting. Institutions such as Brown, which have not followed this policy, experience an adverse leverage against adequate
personnel, adequate salaries, and adequate research equipment.

The trend to Federal subsidy grows in part out of political ambitions and social utopianism. It is due very much more to the failure of people interested in free enterprise to give universities and colleges the resources essential to survival as exponents of independent education. The government cannot take over institutions which are not made ready to be taken over by those who have moral and official responsibility for their preservation. Gifts for higher education during the last two years fail to reflect the payment of the largest dividends in American history. The cold fact is that at present American educational institutions generally, and Brown specifically, are not receiving fresh capital at a rate commensurate with the necessities for independent survival.

If the welfare state of the British fails, it will be to some extent because of the mistaken belief that wishes and will power are the same thing. Men have always wished for a condition where poverty and other unpleasant things would be abolished, for the false utopia denounced by Kipling, “where all men insist on their merits and no one desists from his sins.” In the same way, if the American university falls into the hands of the government, it will be because those who believe in the freedom and independence of learning wish for them instead of exerting will power to maintain them. It is as clear as anything can be that the task cannot be done by wishing. It will require the greatest possible sacrifices.

The sacrifices are of two kinds. The first is financial. Independent education is essential to the independence of both business and the church — and independence can be
achieved only by gifts. Independent universities cannot enlarge their income adequately by increasing tuition, which is already high. Brown has advanced its rates ahead of the pace of others, rather than behind. Further increases would simply price it out of an intellectual market and into a social market, which would mean saving something not worth saving.

The second sacrifice involves readiness to take the hazards that go with freedom. Universities cannot preach a conservative doctrine any more than they should preach a radical doctrine. If teaching is either conservative or radical, doctrine is set above the search for truth. The universities' task is to evoke intellectual power, not to freeze an established pattern. They must stimulate students to seek to achieve ideal ends. This is dangerous business, for the use of minds is always dangerous.

The essence of capitalism is willingness to take risks: when risk-taking is evaded, capitalism falters and socialism supervenes. The essence of a free educational institution is, in like manner, the willingness to take intellectual risks: else the process is sterile and can be moulded by the government into propaganda.

Unless we are ready to make both these efforts, financial and intellectual, American universities might as well climb up on Uncle Sam's knee as quickly and meekly as possible.