THE FUTURE OF THE COLLEGE PRESIDENT

Union Worthies: Eliphalet Nott

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WORTHIES

Worthy, A: A distinguished or eminent person, especially a man of courage or of noble character... having a marked personality.

Oxford English Dictionary

AS AN OUTGROWTH of its Sesquicentennial celebration, UNION COLLEGE has inaugurated this series of historical pamphlets dealing with the lives and accomplishments of distinguished or eminent persons who have been intimately connected with the institution during its first one hundred and fifty years. Each number will consist of brief biographical or critical essays by competent scholars and a short bibliography of books and articles by and about its subject. The present issue commemorates the 150th anniversary of the inauguration of Eliphalet Nott as President.

CARTER DAVIDSON
THE ONLY FORMAL collegiate instruction President Eliphalet Nott ever had (if indeed it can be called “formal” at all) was at Brown University under President Maxcy. He was in residence less than a year; during that time he passed all the baccalaureate examinations but was not awarded a degree in course. With a singular academic nicety of discrimination, in the same year in which the Fellows declined to give him an earned degree, they conferred upon him the honorary master of arts degree. Thus they did no violence to the letter of the law; yet they obeyed its spirit!

A second tie between Brown and Union was furnished by Jonathan Maxcy, who conferred the degree upon Nott. After performing the duties of president of Brown during the decade from 1792 to 1802, Maxcy came to Union as president for two years before moving south. Thus he was the immediate predecessor of Nott.

Personally I feel another connection with Union. By marriage I became a relative to “Uncle Marshall”; he had begun college at Wesleyan and, therefore, had some fellow feeling with me. He left Wesleyan because, though he had no rubbers, he was censured for not attending church when a mixture of snow and rain had produced six inches of what he called “sposh.” Rebelling at such harsh discipline he transferred to Union. He often regaled me with the wise and imaginative manner in which President Nott dealt with chicken stealing, absence from divine service, and other student adventures. Despite the long passage of years, there-
fore, I have shaken the hand of a man who shook the hand of Dr. Nott.

There is, of course, a deeper and more significant tie between our institutions. Of all the presidents of Brown the most controversial, and the greatest, was Francis Wayland, a graduate of Union and an intense admirer of Nott. There is a conjunction of words in that remark which is worthy of emphasis. Recently “controversial” has become a term of reproach. But both Wayland and Nott were great men; certainly both, as innovators, were controversial. It is not necessary to assert that every controversial figure is a great man; would that one could! But at least the two qualities are not inconsistent with each other.

Francis Wayland received his bachelor of arts degree from Union in 1813. Not long after, he spent four years on this campus as a tutor. In 1826 he returned as professor of mathematics and natural philosophy, but served only a few months before being elected to the presidency of Brown University. In that first year his alma mater conferred an honorary doctor of divinity degree upon him. Wayland reciprocated by presenting his former president with a doctor of laws degree in 1828.

At the celebration of President Nott’s fiftieth anniversary a century ago, Wayland was chosen from among the college presidents to speak. In the account of the proceedings there is a note of farewell. Even President Nott seemed to regard the occasion as a sort of valedictory. As it turned out, that youth of eighty still had twelve years more to serve in office—a period longer by far than the average term of the modern college president. This should be an adequate warning to those who think they can prophesy about the future, and especially to those who venture to discuss “the future of the college presidency.”

Reflections upon the past, however, should correct our present perspective and refresh our sense of humor regarding the great educational experiments upon which we spend large sums of money. A current test, for example, seeks to determine whether young people, if they have unusual capacity and energy, can successfully enter college with less than the customary required time in preparatory schools. All the men of whom we have spoken
today did that 150 and 200 years ago. In fact, it was a common practice up until fifty years ago, and even later. We also know of some recent great experiments in shortening the college course. None is quite as drastic as the shortening of President Nott's at Brown or even of President Wayland's at Union. That also was common practice up to forty years ago. Thus we tend to move in cycles, if not in circles. Instead of building upon the past and breaking new ground, there is a tendency in education to re-experiment with things with which experience is actually longest.

In one respect, however, there will be a break in the cycle, for never again will a president remain in office for sixty-two years. Even in former days, Nott's term was unique. The mere fact that terms of office are now so relatively short will prevent any one man from leaving so deep an impression upon an institution in the future. Indeed, even a long administration could not produce a like dominance of a single individual, for colleges and universities have become truly corporate bodies. Large institutions are so complex in their structure, so diverse in their programs, and so dependent upon many people with varying talents, that no individual can duplicate Nott's record, not alone in extensity but in intensity.

Even the era of Daniel Coit Gilman, Charles William Eliot, David Starr Jordan, and William Rainey Harper is gone. They brought the university idea from Germany. They not only transplanted it, but transformed it and made it into something characteristically American. Their task is complete, and there is no prospect of another like rapid or revolutionary transformation.

Long past is the day when the president was almost always a preacher, when most professors occupied benches instead of chairs and instructed from textbooks, so that the president could substitute for any professor who was ill. Probably it will take some time for a cycle to work out so that the office of college president is held with a like juncture of piety and the promotion of a lottery, though New Jersey may be opening the way in current legislation, at least for the lottery without the piety. No one ever again can carry a college in his vest pocket or inside his head. None today could have such freedom in the use of college funds, or could have
so much self-assurance as to his rectitude in the free application of college funds to personal or quasi-personal uses. The passing years may have seen a decline in the piety of college administrators, but certainly they have witnessed an improvement in the ethics of their fiscal relations and responsibilities.

Historically the powers of college presidents have varied from something approaching dominance almost to insignificance. One seldom sees either extreme, but in an age whose watchword is security there may be a drift toward "safe" appointments. Trustees not infrequently elect a man with whom it will be comfortable to live—one, in a word, who will not be "controversial." He may propose no innovations, press for no reform, stir up no agitation, balance the budget, let instruction rock along in a smooth groove, and maintain amiable public relations. That occasionally happens after a vigorous and experiment-minded administration.

Thus the role of the college president is somewhat similar to the role of the British monarch—he reigns but he does not rule. His influence is conditioned by his own abilities and temperament, but perhaps to a larger extent by the climate of opinion in which he moves, by the temper of the trustees, the faculty, the students, and the alumni. It will surprise many that historically environmental factors have often proved more controlling than the personality, the aptitude, and the experience of the president. Frequently a vigorous and resourceful man finds his administration eventuating in frustration.

Two of Brown's ablest leaders, Wayland and Andrews, so ended their labors for the University. The famous reforms of Wayland were repealed by the Fellows and Trustees within two years. Andrews's views on a passionately argued economic question precipitated his departure. Today, as in earlier times, frustration and irrelevance blight many an administrative career. It may happen hereafter, as long as college presidents and college governing boards are human beings.

Generally speaking, the college presidency is an office without definition. In my own institution, all the Charter says is that "the instruction and immediate government of the College shall forever be and rest in the President and Fellows, or Fellowship."
HENRY M. WRISTON: *The Future of the College President*

tells how the president is to be elected and how he can be dismissed, and that he shall sign diplomas. Of the substance of his labors there is no further definition, nor of what his relationship to the Board of Fellows should be. There are no by-laws defining his powers, and no statutes delineating them. The ceremonial part of his responsibility is well described, and the substantive tasks left to imagination and to experience.

What is true of Brown is true in many another institution. Furthermore there is no common denominator among institutions. In one great university the president regards himself as the head of a holding corporation; he expects the deans to act as presidents—or operating officers—of subsidiary corporations. In some instances the president is primarily a fund-raising officer; one famous university president told me that his principal function was public relations. I have served under a president who knew nothing about the curriculum, nothing about admissions, who certainly was not a scholar, and who could not tell a scholar if he met one on the broad high road. Yet he was a successful president because all those functions were competently discharged by other people around him. The institution needed a promoter, and he fulfilled that role par excellence. Also he chose good trustees. Perhaps they were too good; they dismissed him!

The well-worn French aphorism, *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*, is but an echo of the words of the ancient preacher, "The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done, is that which shall be done; and there is no new thing under the sun." The modern college president is sometimes accused of putting his whole energy into raising money, building buildings, and taking care of the materialistic part of the college and the promotional aspects of his task. To a certain extent the charge is true. But Wayland said, "With all my admiration for Dr. Nott, I think I am not unaware of his errors. As the president of a college, he devoted himself to its material prosperity. Had he sought more to improve its means of instruction and to teach its teachers, so that these means might be well employed, I think his success would have been greater."

This leads to two remarks. First, the range of activity which
may properly be called the function of a president has become so vast that no one man can discharge all the duties which could reasonably be assigned to the office. He must, therefore, elect to put his energies on such parts as appeal to him in such a way as to evoke his interest and increase his effectiveness; he must delegate to others tasks which they can perform better and more effectively. Second, if he remains long in office, he should from time to time change the zone of his activities in order to restore freshness to the task, to challenge his powers, to keep himself alert, and above all to keep from being bored by the essential routines.

Moreover, Wayland's discussion of Nott's error in emphasis was a counsel of perfection. Today it is often deemed as almost a trespass upon academic freedom if a president cares or dares to make a suggestion about teaching. It is nonetheless one of his fundamental duties. Of all the necessities for alertness none is greater than to prevent a man achieving tenure who is less than original, imaginative, and energetic in his thought. It is a responsibility which requires more courage than any other presidential task. In an age literally obsessed with security, where the great American Association of University Professors has put the major part of its energies upon tenure and security, rather than upon competence and loyalty to the ideals of the profession, it is difficult indeed for presidents to act. Far greater errors have resulted from timidity, indecision, and inaction than from the patently tyrannous misbehavior of a few heads of institutions.

It was once somewhat of a joke in the profession that the surest way for a teacher to escape criticism or loss of appointment was by being a radical. Presidents were afraid to touch such men, whatever their shortcomings in the classroom or in research, lest the administration be accused of trying to control opinion. Since the activities of the distinguished Senator from Erewhon, however, it is getting dangerous to criticize a professor who is on the far right flank; if he is for the Bricker amendment he becomes sacrosanct! This tends to narrow very greatly the realm of maneuver; you can deal with impunity only with those who are in the middle of the road. And they present few problems!

Of course, taken literally, this would make nonsense of the
HENRY M. WRISTON: The Future of the College President

office. The presidency is a hazardous business and must be so approached and dealt with. Anyone who wants to move with impunity should seek some other field of endeavor. If he wants security, there is no opportunity for leadership. If he cannot absorb criticism, he should do something else. No president is ever worth any more than his resignation. If he is afraid to surrender his office, the office is worthless.

But there are hazards in every business, hazards to life and limb in mining, in electricity, and in ten thousand other occupations. There is no reason to feel that a college president is in any more difficult position than any other man who has to deal with many publics—the trustees, the faculty, the students, the alumni, and the people at large.

These comments are a further reminder that his office partakes of a political character. It involves the problem of evoking cooperation from people who have no taste for cooperation, who are, almost by the nature of their tasks, individualists—in research, in teaching methods, and in other ways. There is just as much difference between an educational politician and an educational statesman as there was between Senator Vandenberg uninstructed in international affairs and Vandenberg after he saw the light.

Any intellectual life for a college president is strictly extracurricular. There is no provision for it in the statutes or in the number of his appointments, or in the range of his duties. If, therefore, he has an intellectual interest, it is to be regarded as an individual idiosyncrasy, and as having no necessary relationship to what he does as an officer.

It is nonetheless desirable that he should at some time have been a scholar. It may seem absurd even to mention any such qualification in the light of the fact that he will never again have an opportunity to act like a scholar, to think like a scholar, to write like a scholar, or to speak like a scholar. Being a president is a full time occupation which includes many a dinner and many an evening speech; even leisure is not available for scholarship.

Still it is advantageous to have a scholar, for, unless a man has subjected himself to the disciplines of scholarship, unless he has felt the creative urge of a scholar, unless he has schooled himself...
in the patience necessary to assemble the evidence, he cannot understand the requirements of scholarship. He will never know why a teaching load can be arduous no matter how few hours are spent in the classroom or how small the number of students taught. Without that first-hand experience he will never fully understand the professor who works year in and year out on a book, withholding it from publication in order to add one footnote.

The rhythm of life, the standards of performance, the objectives and ideals of the true scholar are different from those of other men. Unless a president has himself experienced the life of the scholar, he can never be patient enough or understanding enough to make a college really great.

But if he ought to have been a scholar, he must nevertheless consciously lay aside some of his scholarly habits. The scholar is justified in postponing decision until the last available piece of evidence has been examined. On the other hand, the administrator who does that will never accomplish even a portion of the things that must be done. On many points he must learn to take the evidence that can be readily assembled and make quick judgments, reserving his time, his energy, and his thought for the basic decisions which are of larger import than the day-to-day management of affairs.

Since, if American higher education is to prosper, the greatest responsibility of the president is to see that the faculty is composed of scholars, he must have sensitive awareness of what he is seeking. He will insist upon men whose capacity to search out and reveal truth is uniquely creative, men who will not repeat their lectures year after year or follow in the same groove of instruction again and again. He will find men who can bring to their classrooms and their conferences with students the insights which come from research and discovery, from creativeness, and from meeting the intellectual competition of contemporaries whose training is at least equal to their own.

The president of the future will not be close to the students. We sometimes think he was in "the old days." From some points of view that is correct. But there was then, is now, and forever
HENRY M. WRISTON: *The Future of the College President*

will be the gap in age and in station which makes the man "in authority" the subject of awe and fear. Occasionally the relationship has a touch of reverence; more often the awe and fear are compensated by mockery, raillery, and nicknames behind his back. This is not so different from the past. Francis Wayland, entering Union in May, 1811 at the age of fifteen, said: "I was struck with irrepressible awe as I came into the presence of the professors. . . . They seemed at an unspeakable distance from me."

In these days, as then, the age gap manifests itself in extraordinary ways. The other day the father of a freshman said to me that he was sure his son did not understand a word I said in chapel speeches. It relieved me at least of one fear: I had been nervous lest I was putting the cookies on too low a shelf. Moreover, I found comfort in reading that Francis Wayland, referring to his study with Dr. Nott, said: "I derived from it but half the advantage it was designed to convey. . . . I was interested; I followed him with avidity; I loved and reverenced him, but I had not learned to generalize, nor was I, from ignorance of the world, able to apply his principles as I should a few years later."

This reminded me of a sardonic comment by a scholar-teacher I knew long ago. When asked his occupation he replied, obviously with a certain Biblical passage in his mind, "A pearl-caster." It was a gesture of fatigue at the effort—his life-long effort—to bridge the age gap. It must be attempted; it can never be fully accomplished.

In one respect the college president of today and of the future will be like President Nott: he must devote a good deal of time and energy to public relations. If the officers of independent institutions are not called upon to lobby as he had to, or to engage in such political machinations as he found essential, they must nevertheless spend vast amounts of energy in convincing the public that youth by the fact of its youth is not degenerate. They must persuade a disillusioned age that the ancient mores from which the critics themselves sought to escape until they reached their anecdotage did not contain the ultimate pattern of sound behavior. They must speak by day and by night, before people, before microphones, before cameras. If possible they should say something, but at least they must speak.
HENRY M. WRISTON: *The Future of the College President*

The last observation upon the future of the president's office is that a college president must always seek to give the impression of candor. I have stated that with great care, for there are times when candor can be frightfully costly. In both institutions I have served, I have had to assemble real estate. If one deals candidly with real estate problems, it is an incredibly costly business; if one does not pursue a somewhat devious path, the road is straight to bankruptcy.

With that sole exception, a president must be not only single-minded, but do everything in reason to persuade people that he is. It is not easy, for the pressures are tremendous. They account for the old definition of the function of a dean: to make the college the kind of place the president insists it already is. I recall an earnest plea by a senior professor that faculty members should stop calling the president a liar. "I do not pretend," said the sage, "that what he says is the truth. But a lie requires a conscious deviation from the truth, and the president has been saying these things so long that his deviations are wholly unconscious." Presidents, in short, tend to see and believe in "the substance of things hoped for."

This issue of candor is no newer than the other problems. It has always been a serious issue, for Wayland said of Nott: "Somehow everyone was afraid that the thing which he seemed to be laboring for, or promoting, was not that which he really had in view." In other words, the reputation for double-dealing which is so common a criticism of modern presidents is not novel and is not likely to disappear.

Sometimes it arises from the very thing which Wayland saw in Nott, for he said that "what seemed to others to be double-dealing and policy was nothing more than a far-seeing sagacity, which enabled him to look much farther than other men, and to prepare for events of which they never conceived, and that this sometimes gave rise to the opinion that he had been laboring to produce, what he only foresaw and provided for." It is a comforting thought; I clasp it to my bosom. I wish I could believe that every president who has been accused of double-dealing had so good an excuse, or at least so eloquent an apologist.