

# THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY TODAY

*Bernard Murchland*

There are presently 6.7 million students in some 2200 American institutions of higher learning. Their numbers have doubled in the past ten years and will double again in the next ten.

This statistic alone indicates that the university is no longer a shady retreat where scholars and students leisurely engage in the search for truth. The university has become a major power in our societal life. It shares with society in general a frenzied dynamism, the pursuit of immediate objectives, a labyrinthian structure and the lust for prestige. One couldn't imagine a university without, for example, a well-staffed public relations office. The American university today is in almost all senses of the word a *new* university.

Jacques Barzun gives us a reasonably clear picture of it in his *The American University* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers). A good part of the book is devoted to clarifying the tangled relationships between the various segments of the university structure and is somewhat technical (although highly informative) in nature. Just how, for instance, does a department go about filling a vacancy? What precisely are a dean's duties? How are wealthy donors handled? Where are the real power centers?

Barzun's overall impression seems to be that the university is a madhouse and its professionals a bitchy lot. This is an understandable attitude in an educator who still cherishes traditional values and tends toward the oracular. Moreover, there are certain senses in which it is justifiable. Barzun's basic complaint is that universities are not engaged in educating; rather they are in the business of certifying the labor force of the nation. Modern society, he notes, has created a mandarin system. In order to attain any goal one must qualify. My only question here is this: when has man not to qualify for his position in society and is it not desirable that he do so? Surely the good professor isn't urging incompetency upon us.

In the final section of his book Barzun offers some proposals for the future. His overarching philosophy

is that the universities must recover a sense of wholeness and oneness. A "multi university" is a contradiction in terms. The "independent" university is a myth. Thus if reforms are to be achieved universities must act in concert. No one institution has the power (or would want to risk its reputation) to effect a substantial change. One reform Barzun deems most urgent is decreased emphasis on scholarly productivity. It is altogether wrong, he says, to ask of a scholar, as one might of a farm animal or a factory worker, "Has he produced?" We are perishing from publishing, Barzun adds, and must keep the artificial and premature from seeing the light of print. It is absurd "to require research under threats of livelihood and with rewards in that livelihood, the practice being that when the academic peons have turned out *something*, it becomes possible to give them rank, grants, leaves and a friendly goodmorning." Scholarship and publication are not identical and there are other ways of assessing a teacher's worth, the best perhaps being the opinion of men of proven judgment who work closely with him.

A related reform concerns the Ph.D. program. The ghastly spectacle of the beleaguered doctoral candidate is portrayed in grim detail. The whole ordeal of obtaining a doctorate is termed "wasteful and ineffectual, costly and time-consuming." Barzun humorously suggests that the problem be solved by granting every citizen a Ph.D. at birth. Barring this radical move, he proposes some interim measures. The degree might, for example, be awarded after the orals on condition that the candidate has shown "technique" in his written work — M.A. thesis, term papers, or whatever. In this way young men and women coming out of the graduate schools would be free to do more effective teaching. Later on, they might present work which if approved would win them a second Ph.D. — one that would be awarded in recognition of original research.

Barzun does not seem to see that his proposed solution is no solution at all. For clearly the second degree would become the status symbol and the rush would be on to get as many of them as possible on the faculty. Furthermore, I would be reluctant to throw out the knowledge and training that is for better or worse associated with the dissertation. I have known many graduate students who don't really learn much about their field until they get involved in research for the dissertation. Given the fact that we live in a specialized age, Barzun's suggestion could only lead to a downgrading of the Ph.D. degree. In my opinion we need more knowledge today, not less.

When he speaks of the students Barzun is gen-

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## THE IRRELEVANCE OF ANTI-COMMITMENT

*"... at this extraordinary moment of history, we just happen to be the world's strongest economy, its most durable democracy, its greatest military power, and its most creative fount of scientific discovery and technological triumph. Withdrawal and anti-commitment cannot be our 'thing.' Our problem is not to decide whether we will be involved, but how." So argued NATO Ambassador Harlan Cleveland in an address at the 1968 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association in September. A portion of his speech, which appears in the Winter issue of The Atlantic Quarterly, is reprinted below.*

So the mood is anti-commitment. Somebody else will have to be the granary of freedom, the arsenal of democracy, the nemesis of aggressors, the ally for progress, the builder of world order. We have problems at home; our first obligation is to succor the poor and keep the peace right here in America.

To an American politics-watcher living abroad, what is puzzling about this mood is not its undoubted righteousness but its dubious relevance. Righteous we have always been, as much when we thought we were saving the world as in that earlier time when we thought we were saving ourselves from entanglement in it. A strong case can be made that others are not pulling their weight in peacekeeping and international cooperation: the rich Europeans have drawn in on themselves, the poor in other continents are still depending too much on outsiders to do their nation-building for them. But looked at from abroad, our own performance is no longer so impressive. With the single exception of Vietnam, we are spending proportionately less on U.S. foreign policy than in any year since 1939, the date of our last Neutrality Act. And this year's Congressional and public debate reveals that influential Americans, unable to withdraw from Vietnam, are determined to withdraw from the rest of our foreign policy instead. . . .

My thesis [is] that a mood of anti-commitment is pleasantly righteous but practically irrelevant. . . .

Let us define our terms rather informally: The words "American commitment abroad" are loosely used to cover everything from treaty obligations to feelings of moral obligation; they are applied to the war in Vietnam, which we are doing quite a lot about, and to hunger in Biafra, which nobody has succeeded

erally sympathetic to their plight. He realizes that many of them don't actually want to go to college at all but are pressured to do so. He also realizes that after they get there, large numbers of them are victimized by the impersonality of the system. But one must go deeper and question the advisability of herding students into college immediately after high school. As the humorist Russell Baker has put it, this keeps youth imprisoned in kidhood far too long.

Two of the reasons why students fail to catch fire, why they lack what Socrates called the indispensable craving to know, is first of all because college is too much like high school. They are subjected to a similar routine of classes, note taking and memorization and have long since become bored with it. Secondly, most students lack the life-experience (not necessarily the same thing as maturity) to properly appreciate the kind of thing they are likely to be taught in the humanities and behavioral disciplines. The great themes of our liberal tradition — love, suffering, passion, critical inquiry and so forth — fall upon unhearing ears because our young people have been locked out of such experiences. I think this is the principal reason why teachers, as the charge goes, don't teach, why they flee to the graduate schools and the asylum of research. It becomes incredibly dispiriting to face a sea of indifference year after year. Paul Goodman and others have suggested that after high school, students be released for more maturing forms of activity before going to college. I think this is a creative suggestion and ought to be explored at length.

One of Barzun's final proposals is worth pondering. The university, he says is not a democracy. The one man, one vote principle will not work there. The university "has members appointed for various tasks, not citizens voting for their governors. . . . Moreover, it is in practice extremely difficult to get from student bodies either a significant vote, or a council or committee that is representative." This is a good point. Education is exceedingly difficult work. There is no way of effectively sugaring the pill. Easy slogans like "education should be exciting" or "education is life" are not only misleading but false.

Professor Barzun is perhaps too inclined to turn the clock back and seek his solutions in the past. It is my experience that there is no effective way of solving a present problem by returning to a prior state of affairs. On the other hand, education perhaps ought to be more rooted in its history than any of our cultural enterprises, including religion. Though not often heeded, the voices of Plato, Rousseau and Newman are still highly relevant.