Can American Universities be Depoliticized

Henry David Aiken

Brandeis University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/phil_ex

Part of the Ethics and Political Philosophy Commons

Repository Citation
Available at: https://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/phil_ex/vol1/iss1/13

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @Brockport. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophic Exchange by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @Brockport. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@brockport.edu.
CAN AMERICAN UNIVERSITIES BE DEPOLITICIZED?

by

Henry David Aiken

In his inaugural address a year ago last autumn, Morris Abram, the second president of my own university, Brandeis, called for a general "depoliticizing" of our universities and colleges. Many others, both inside the universities and out, are making similar appeals. The hope, it seems, is for a return to a golden age of higher education when professors professed, and administrators, delighted to leave well enough alone, spent their time passing the hat, balancing budgets, acting as substitute parents, and performing such ceremonial acts as presiding at faculty meetings and commencement exercises. Of course such a golden age is long gone. It hasn’t existed at private colleges for generations; at public colleges and universities, many of which evolved out of the old land-grant colleges, it never existed. In fact, another university president (or rather ex-president), James Perkins of Cornell, has argued approvingly that American institutions of higher learning generally have combined in a unique way the three "missions" of teaching, research, and service. By "service", however, Perkins seems originally to have had in mind primarily service to the state and to the national society over which the state presides. In times past, such services have often grudgingly been performed; indeed, faculties and students alike have frequently debated whether they do not compromise the integrity of the American scholar. And even when members of the university have accepted the principle that the college should also include a service station, they have rarely agreed among themselves as to the proper nature or extent of the services to be rendered. But such disagreements, like the services themselves, are inescapably political.

For example, long before the Vietnam war made the ROTC such a bone of contention on our campuses, many academicians, old as well as young, insisted that this conspicuous tie between the academy and the military be severed. Occasionally, moreover, they prevailed, thereby saving their colleges energies for better ways of showing patriotism. Another example may be mentioned which is more interesting and important. As some of you may recall, it was during the First World War, at Columbia, and during the Second, at Harvard, that programs which now go by the name of General Education were respectively initiated at those distinguished universities where recently there has been so much turmoil. At the outset, the purpose of such programs was undisguisedly political: their function, quite simply, was to awaken the minds of hitherto indifferent or misguided students to the transcendental virtues of our American...
CAN AMERICAN UNIVERSITIES BE DEPOLITICIZED?

system and to the wickedness of all systems that oppose it. To be sure, this great awakening should be accomplished in a suitably genteel and roundabout way, by searching out the fountainheads of freedom in the works of such ancient masters as Plato (the greatest of all exponents of all aristocratic ideal who reserved the higher forms of learning for the guardians of his ideal Republic) and Aristotle (the first pragmatist who preferred a mixed polity in which nonetheless some men, being slaves by nature, cannot be allowed to participate since they are unable to grasp the meaning of political obligation). From the beginning, of course, General Education was widely opposed. Some opposed it on the grounds that so obviously politicized an educational venture demeans the university, whose modes of political indoctrination should be less conspicuous; others (in their own way perhaps anticipating educationists such as President Abram) opposed it on the ground that any form of politicking on the campus should be excluded since it diverts institutions of higher learning from their proper business, which is advancement and dissemination of learning. Were they consistent, such purists, who do not pause to examine the varieties of human learning, would have to go much further. In America, however, where even purists are pragmatists, few have questioned the prerogatives of established departments of political science and sociology, in which much time and energy are spent in ideological and hence political controversy.

Several lessons may be drawn from this example: one is that politicized activity on the part of the members of the so-called academic community is generally acceptable if it is sufficiently concealed, indirect, learned, and firmly established; it is below the salt only when it becomes open and direct, formally unlearned and boldly innovative. But another and happier lesson may be learned from the example of General Education. For it was through the efforts of highly politicized academic patriots that a great educational movement was launched whose function has been to revive the spirit of what used to be called liberal education in an age of rampant specialism, professionalism, and scientism. The failures of the movement, alas, are all too plain. But in nearly all cases they are owing to the fact that its exponents have been too timid and too concessive, too limited in their demands for educational reform, too conventional in their conception of the forms of education that are necessary for free men in a really free society.

Here it should be emphasized that purists who oppose such existing politically-oriented educational programs as the ROTC or General Education are politicized by the very act of opposing them. In fact, the only way a scholar can avoid the trap of politics is by shutting the door to his study, pulling down the shades, and sticking, despite hell and high water,
to his own neutral researches and to courses of instruction related exclusively to them. President Abram's presidential address, whether he realized it or not, was a political act, in the same way that the actions of committed anarchists, who yearn to dispense altogether with politics, employ political means to achieve their post-political ends. The state, as we have learned, never does its own withering away. But of course the depoliticizers (if "depoliticize" is a word then so is "depoliticizer"), like the anarchists, cannot succeed. History, human nature, not to mention existing versions of the American dream, all conspire against them.

In one direction, the Pentagon and the great scientific-technological establishments that are themselves so closely intertwined with government, will continue to find their way into the universities and colleges, in part because they have an insatiable need for the products of the "knowledge factory." In the opposite direction, even the most servile university, in bringing together exceptionally lively and imaginative individuals, also brings into existence what I call a "shadow university" where free men find ways of instructing and advising one another about the social and political conditions of a more fully human life. In Russia, in Spain, in Czechoslovakia, and in the United States, the university has always served in spite of itself as a breeding ground for the education of political dissenters, reformers, and revolutionists. The only way to disperse such dissidents, and so to prevent them from enlightening one another, would be to disband the universities. But this is precisely what the state and its functionaries, academic and otherwise, cannot afford to do. Hence, since politics, like nature, abhors a vacuum, the educationally absorbing question is not whether the universities and colleges can be depoliticized, but rather what forms of political activity they may properly encourage or tolerate. And it is to this question that we must presently address ourselves.

Still, granted that efforts to depoliticize the academy are, to put the point least offensively, quixotic, it is an instructive exercise in the philosophy of higher education to perform the imaginative experiment of considering what the educational as well as human results would be, were our colleges actually to succeed in eliminating every form of political activity from the academy.

In the first place, liberal education would disappear. For liberal education is intended by definition for free men, and free men, by definition, are political beings, concerned not with their own self-government only, but with the liberation of all their kind from every form of human bondage, including those forms of bondage by which men in societies enslave one another. Clearly, liberal education is committed from the outset of the study of institutions, including the state, and this not
merely as they have been and are, but as they ought or ought not to be. In
a word, to depoliticize the university would require the exclusion of all
normative social and political studies. But it would also entail the aban-
donment of ethics, since as Aristotle long ago pointed out, ethics and
politics are ultimately inseparable. And since ethics, broadly conceived,
is the heartland of philosophy, it would have to exclude philosophy too,
or at least those parts of it that are not purely analytical. Neither Aris-
totle nor Plato – nor, above all, Socrates – could get a job in the de-
politicized academy.

Indeed as we ponder the matter we are driven to the conclusion that
a depoliticized academy could not tolerate any educational program nor
any sort of sustained speculation and criticism aimed at the radical
reformation of human personality. “Know thyself,” said the oracle. But
what would be the point of trying to know oneself, with the help of en-
lightened teachers, unless one were determined to change one’s life?
And how could one think of undertaking such a task if one were not pre-
pared to entertain the possibility or necessity of actions which, if they
succeeded, might revolutionize all our social institutions, including of
course the colleges and the state themselves?

I am bound to say also that a fully depoliticized academy could not
permit any form of religious study which aimed at something more than
the external examination of historical religions, their creeds and rituals,
and churchly paraphernalia. For active religious reflection, as Paul Til-
lich used to say, has to do with matters of ultimate concern to us as
human beings, with what is worthy of our profoundest loyalty and love.
But the awakened religious consciousness, as all great religious leaders,
from the Prophets and Jesus to Gandhi and Pope John XXIII, have dem-
onstrated both in their teachings and in their lives, is always a threat
to the established order, including the political order. Indeed, great reli-
gious geniuses, like great philosophers, and artists – by their very exis-
tence – endanger the established orders, and the dominations and obses-
sions of their governing elites.

What then would be left to the higher learning were all significant
political thought and activity excluded from the university? We are driven,
I think, to the conclusion that if our academies were systematically
depoliticized, many traditional and humanly important parts of the human-
ities and the so-called social sciences, even in their present-day con-
fused and emasculated forms, would have to be dropped from the curricu-
ulum. Moreover, many researches now conducted under the more austere
auspices of natural science departments would have to be abandoned,
since their results, devoid of theoretical interest, have value only for
governments committed to the deadly business of power politics. To be
more concrete (and I shall continue to play our little game as even-handedly as possible), one cannot imagine that cathedrals of pure scholarship would tolerate such political activists as Professor Marcuse or (at the other extreme) Professor Sidney Hook; no doubt Chomsky would have to go, but so too would Professors Schlesinger and Galbraith, to say nothing of such eminent newcomers to the academic scene as Professors Humphrey and Johnson. But these are not all. For thousands of indentured technological scientists, along with their multitudes of graduate assistants, would also have to find new jobs in the great industrial laboratories where there is no quibbling about the aims of higher education.

What about the student activists, who are currently such burrs in the saddles of our academic administrators? Surely there would be no place for them, even if they stopped carrying arms and rifling the files of deans of the faculty. For they would still be politicized. So it would be necessary to proscribe such student organizations as the SDS and (were the authorities consistent) the Young Republican Clubs. And if the reply were made, which is not without merit, that one can get an education of sorts by engaging in such extra-curricular political activities, the reply, in this instance, would fail, for a political education is still a part of the political life of men in societies.

Nor have I forgotten here the distinction between forms of political education that are topical and directly activistic and those concerned more abstractly with the critique and formation of general ideological principles which serve their political ends more indirectly. And to those who concede that the higher learning should have a place for studies of the latter sort (and I fully agree with them) the reply must be that they are forgetting the game we are playing. I cannot see how an academy, depoliticized in any depth, could tolerate a William James, a John Dewey, or a Bertrand Russell, any more than it could tolerate a Marcuse. For, again, all forms of political reasoning, whether abstractly ideological like Plato's Republic and Rousseau's Social Contract, or concrete and topical, like the Declaration of Independence, The Emancipation Proclamation, or the Communist Manifesto, have a practical intention: that is to say, they are aimed, whether for the longer or shorter run, at the modification of active political-social attitudes. In fact, they defeat their own purposes if, when the time is ripe, they fail to move us to action designed to reform or, if necessary, revolutionize the existing order.

In sum, a thoroughly depoliticized academy, were it ever actualized, would not be an institute for all the forms of advanced study necessary to the progressive enlightenment of mature human beings, but instead would be learned mandarins lost finally both to the world and to themselves. No doubt an affluent society like our own, which presumably can
afford anything that takes its fancy, could afford such an institution, and for a time at least it might even be willing to tolerate it, just as it now tolerates religious retreats and sanctuaries. What is more doubtful is that the internal purity of the academy could be maintained. How could it make certain that a few whole men — whether students or professors — might not get into it by mistake? And how could it guarantee that such impure spirits, like our own campus rebels, would not in the end become so alienated from it that, despairing of further argument with their uncomprehending superiors, they would not be disposed at last, like all other alienists, to take matters into their own hands? Surely it is not hard to imagine in these troubled times that beginning with teach-ins and sit-ins, they might be tempted to seize the administration building by main force and hold the president and his deans incommunicado until their "non-negotiable" demands for a more liberal conception of higher education were met.

Suppose they did. In such an event, we may well imagine, a depoliticized college president or board of trustees would be exceedingly reluctant to make use of the strong arm of the state. For in so doing they would of course be responding in kind — that is to say, politically — to the actions of the rebels. Still, one must suppose that in the end they would feel obliged, necessarily in uneasy conscience, to call in the police in order to protect the integrity and the freedom of the academy. But what sort of freedom would this be? Not, surely, the freedom to discuss in a critical spirit the nature and limits of science, whithersoever the argument might lead. For anyone who starts asking limiting questions about the proper aims and functions of scientific inquiries may well find that such limits are extremely unclear or else that they are in need of radical revision in an age like our own in which governments, with the indispensable help of scientists, can destroy mankind. No matter how paradoxically, it is doubtful whether a depoliticized academy could tolerate active and open debates about the aims of the higher learning as a whole, since these would almost certainly result in disagreements whose implications are inescapably political. Indeed, the whole problem of academic freedom would become so stylized, so touchy, that discussions of it would be permitted only in cases of specific violations, and then only by safe men who have accepted in advance the ground rules established by academic authorities who understand the limitations of a depoliticized academy.

Suppose, however, that some overly-conscientious professor raised questions about the wisdom or the good faith of his superiors? Would he not also have to be put down in one way or another, thus further compromising the purity of the guardians of the depoliticized academy? What
HENRY DAVID AIKEN

then? Here plainly the road becomes exceedingly slippery. But compro-
mise, as usual, leads to compromise. And one may as well be hung for a
sheep as for a lamb. In the real world, as Plato himself foretold, in-
telligent purists must also be realists, and even the depoliticized acad-
emy needs guardians who are willing and able to sustain it. Physicists
and mathematicians, as well as poets, must eat and their studies and
laboratories must be decently provided for. Hence donors must be solici
ted, foundations appealed to, legislatures and governors of states pla-
cated and cajoled, congressmen begged, and presidents of state exhorted.
Thus in practice even the purest institutions of advanced study and
higher learning require their front men, who know how to wheedle funds
from those who possess or control them. lobbyists, public relations men,
and sober-sided presidents like Mr. Pusey, who know how to talk to con-
gressional committees that might otherwise not be able to understand the
non-political aspirations of the academies. But this is not all. For acad-
emicians, no matter how chaste their intentions, are invariably misunder-
stood by the hoi polloi that live in the slums that surround the precincts
of the academy, and in many cases are owned — in trust of course — by
the academies for purposes of future expansion and for the housing of
their own less affluent members. Let us face it. The hoi polloi do not
understand, nor care to understand, the purposes of the academy; what
they see are oppressive landlords, indifferent and condescending pro-
fessors, students who raise hell on Saturday night. So the academy must
either maintain its own praetorian guards, which invariably prove in-
adquate to the demands made upon them, or else be willing to call upon
the armed services of the city or the state in order to protect its privacy
and its property against intruders who mean harm to the members of its
community. Extraterritorial rights are not honored save at a price. And
the price, as we may as well recognize, is a price whose name is poli-
tics.

Is this picture overdrawn? Then merely by an inch. Does it also ring
a bell? I believe it must. Can the deep inconsistencies which it involves
be overcome? Short of utopia, I am sure they cannot. The conclusion is
inescapable: The managers of our academic establishments, like their
allies in our legislatures and state houses, in the congress, and the
White House, who tell us that the proper business of the universities and
colleges is not with politics but only with the advancement of neutral
learning, are either disingenuous and hence guilty of bad faith or else so
self-deceived that they are incompetent and deserve to be removed from
office.

These, I realize, are harsh terms; nor do I use them lightly. Let me
explain. Such men act in bad faith, or else are self-deceived to the point
of madness when they invoke the image of the academy as a haven and
respository of pure learning, itself completely at variance with the actual practices of their own institutions, and then condemn, or else - as the English put it - send down obstreperous student activists who give them the lie direct and the countercheck quarrelsome. They act in bad faith, or are self-deluded, when they accept government or foundation money, which commonly has political strings attached, yet pretend that they are free, and are outraged when dissident students and faculty members point this out to them and then, in their own turn, take steps, not always genteel, to see that those strings are cut. They are disingenuous when they represent themselves as agents of law and order, yet never raise deep questions about the justice of that law or order, nor acknowledge that there can be no law or order without government and hence politics.

They are particularly disingenuous, let me add, when they argue, as McGeorge Bundy and others do, that university administrations and governing boards possess merely formal power and that the actual power and authority in the academy resides in the faculty, when they know that our faculties are chock full of careerists who have no interest in its governance so long as they themselves are left alone to do their work according to their own flickering lights. As they very well know, faculties are nearly always self-divided and usually incapable of independent and decisive action to rectify either educational wrongs or administrative malpractices. They also know how clever and determined administrators, with their own informal ties to government, industry and business, can and do manipulate their faculties to secure their own frequently political ends. Finally, these apologists for faculty authority cannot fail to know, especially in this time of troubles, that formal power can always be reconverted into actual power by university presidents and by the governing boards at whose pleasure all presidents enjoy their tenure.

They speak and act in bad faith when they pretend to be votaries of reasonableness, yet reserve for themselves the peremptory authority to determine for students and faculty members alike the standards and limits of reasonableness, and times and places where their critics may foregather to present their reasons for opposing existing academic practices and policies. Above all, they are either appallingly naive or again are guilty of bad faith when they angrily condemn those dissidents who, disillusioned by arguments that get them nowhere, resort to force, yet in the clutch react - and over-react - in kind.

But here I myself may have been a bit disingenuous. For I concede that gentlemen like the presidents of universities such as Columbia and Harvard do not react in kind to students who unceremoniously eject aca-
DEANIC deans from their offices, occupy administrative buildings, rifle files, and sip presidential sherry in order to quiet their nerves. For as they well know, the force employed by the students is informal, personal, and usually intramural and poorly organized, whereas the force upon which they themselves rely is extramural, highly skilled, well armed, and sublimely confident in the assurance of its constituted authority. Of course such administrators know full well that when the chips are down, as they have so often been of late, this majesterial power is always incomparably greater than that of their youthful opponents, with their obscenities, sticks and stones, pop bottles, their occasional pistols (for we must be fair), most of them unused, and their bare hands and unshielded bodies.

These last comments may be misleading. Let me then emphasize that it is no part of my own argument to condone acts of gross violence, whether on the part of the university authorities and the governments that offer their moral and military support, or on the part of misguided students — black as well as white — that jeopardize the very existence of liberal learning (and mind you, I emphasize the word “liberal”). Cowardly arsonists who come in the night to burn books and manuscripts, studies, libraries, are not exponents of freedom, their own included. On the contrary, from the point of view which I defend, the destruction of any constructive and liberating work of the human mind is always appalling. But if a burned book or study is something forever to be grieved over, broken heads or backs are far more lamentable, especially when they are the heads and backs of innocents who are always sacrificed when men in groups resort to violence.

But this is not the place to undertake a general discussion of violence and its legitimate (or illegitimate) issues. It is my conviction that in most situations, thoughtful but sparing use by academic administrators of the legal device of injunction is justified in order to protect scholars and students, as well as the legitimate fruits of their labors, against marauding hoards whose only purpose is to terrorize the academy and to destroy the materials and records necessary to its proper work. This conviction commits me, accordingly, to the view that the university as a corporate body is entitled to perform legal and political acts in its own defense. By the same token, however, I am obliged to consider whether the university, as such, may also be entitled to take other political positions when its own integrity is threatened.

As it happens, Professor Hook and I found ourselves in at least partial agreement some years ago when a number of distinguished colleagues proposed, at a business meeting of the American Philosophical Association, that the Association, as a corporate body, condemn the government’s policies in Vietnam. And I, for my part contended that a
purely professional organization, concerned exclusively with its own professional business and ends, was not entitled to take political stands not closely germane to that business and those ends. This, so I argued, in no way denied the right of members of our association, speaking not only as private persons but also, if they wished, as individual members of the group, to condemn the Vietnam War (which I myself have always heartily opposed). And I agreed to sign any sensible memorandum or petition deploiring the war, not only in my own person but also as a member of the association. (I should add in passing that the American Philosophical Association, if one could judge by its annual programs, seems to me to have long since given up any common concern with the pursuit of wisdom and has become as narrowly specialized and professionalized as, say, the American Association of Morticians.)

The fact is that I am less certain now than I was then of this position. For I now see that even a fairly narrow professional association, dedicated to a small part of the advancement of learning, may find its own work undermined, or even rendered impossible, by policies and actions of the state. However, I shall waive this question here. For the sake of argument, I am prepared to reaffirm the position I took in 1967 regarding the provenance of the American Philosophical Association, viewed simply as a professional society. And I do so because I want to free myself for independent scrutiny of the situation of the university in matters of this sort.

Now most academicians, including not only students and professors but also administrators, generally agree that the university is not and cannot be understood as a mere galaxy of professional associations. To be sure, its task includes the advancement of learning, by research and teaching, in a wide variety of subjects. And this task has its important professional side, which includes the granting of degrees to student-apprentices that will qualify them for more advanced work in particular fields, as well as the creation and maintenance of conditions necessary to the researches of established professional scholars. But the university is much more than an institute for the training of pre-professionals and the support of professional scholars. It is also the great unifying institution of higher learning whose difficult task, above all, includes the education of free men. Because of this, the educational heart of the university is, or should be, its college, not its professional graduate schools.

Thus, unlike the professional society, the university has educational responsibilities which cannot be defined in purely professional terms. As we know, professional societies can sometimes function tolerably well under governments which are repressive and war-like. The university, however, by its nature is threatened by any social or political
policy which diminishes the freedom of ordinary citizens. More positively, because the university bears such a heavy responsibility for the full intellectual, moral, and human development of all its members, professors as well as students, it has a corporate obligation to protest, and in some circumstances even to defy or obstruct, social practices or political policies which undermine or constrict its comprehensive educational purposes.

Given the organizational principles which at present obtain in the American university, I for one am loath to support, without qualification, any and all corporate decisions affecting the relations of the academy to the national society or its government, which the university's existing governing boards and administrative officers may come to. Many such boards and officers lack a clear notion of the extensive freedom necessary to the university. But the faculties and student bodies of the university whose primary concerns are educational, in the wide sense I have here in mind, do seem to me to have the right, after full and open debate, to speak and act against certain social and governmental policies and practices as corporate bodies. Thus, I should argue, the faculties of universities in the South have the right, and perhaps the obligation, to adopt corporate principles and to express corporate attitudes which are at variance with the segregationalist and racist policies of existing state governments. I should also argue, in the same vein, that faculties, perhaps in concert with students, have the right and at times the obligation to condemn, and on occasion to obstruct, policies and practices of the federal government which are inimical to their own educational purposes.

I am not a formalist. Student bodies and faculties, as well as university presidents and boards of trustees, are liable to error and confusion. Indeed, I can imagine circumstances in which wise administrators may be obliged to make decisions at variance with those adopted by their faculties and students. In every institution, in my judgment, no man or group of men is, or should be, sovereign. Yet this does not, I think, affect the point at issue. Universities, and especially their faculties and students, have rights and responsibilities which entitle or indeed require them to make corporate decisions of a political nature when national or state governments adopt policies which undermine the conditions of liberal learning. Of course such decisions should be thoughtfully made, and even when thoughtfully made they may still be mistaken. And it is the duty of minority groups within the university to point out such errors when they occur. Indeed they themselves may be obliged to obstruct or to defy decisions which, in their view, are academically as well as politically unwise. But these qualifications do not impugn the principle: the university, and especially its faculties and students, have the right to
take corporate political action when such action is necessary in order to protect the wide and deep aims of higher education.

In bringing this part of my paper to a close, let me emphasize that every institution, if only in its own defense, is involved in politics. The church-state problem, for example, necessarily involved the churches in corporate political action. The same holds, as Leslie Fiedler has discovered, even of the family. Politics is an inescapable dimension of every form of institutional activity. And those who refuse to involve themselves in it must, if they are responsible, forewear participation in every form of institutional life. To my mind, however, this is platitudinous. The great and ineluctable fact is that no institution, given its ends, is more profoundly involved in problems of politics and government than the university.

Thus, as I have tried to show, the question before us is not whether the university can be depoliticized. Rather is it the question of how and to what ends the university should engage in political activity, and what forms of political activity are proper to it.

To this question my answers must be brief. I shall proceed from those problems which are more topical and hence debatable to those that are more enduring.

To begin with, the university must be free to call in question and, on occasion, oppose any form of service to the nation-state designed primarily to enhance the state’s military power. Here I have in mind not only such forms of military instruction as are conducted by the ROTC, but, far more important, research projects supported by federal grants-in-aid whose basic purpose is to increase our national capacity for nuclear warfare. Beyond this, the university is entirely within its rights if it refuses to countenance forms of research designed to explore means of degrading or maiming human beings or of destroying natural resources upon which they are dependent for life. For the university, as an institution of higher learning dedicated to the religious, moral, and political enlightenment, defeats its own ends and undermines the conditions of its own existence when it, or the members of its faculties, engage in such activities as a matter of course. Moreover, the forms of enlightenment fostered by the university, are by their very nature public. Hence the university is entitled to deny, and in my judgment should deny, the use of its facilities to academicians involved in the work of such secret governmental services as the CIA and the FBI. And of course the same applies to similar services to industry or other social institutions or societies. In a word, academicians cannot also be secret agents. Finally, the university must be free to criticize, or on occasion actively oppose, both particular public policies and private practices which create an
ambience inimical to its own broad educational purposes. And it must make available the use of its facilities to members of the academic community who are concerned to criticize and to oppose such policies and practices.

At the level of ideology, I should deny no member of the academy the right, in the proper circumstances and under proper auspices, to defend any form of thought, religious, ethical, or political, no matter how heterodox, so long as he does so in a manner which is appropriate to it. It is sometimes argued that the only forms of inquiry which are proper to the university as the primary institution of higher learning are those that aim at scientific truth. In another way, it is argued that the only studies which a university should support, or tolerate, are those which are ‘neutral’ or ‘value free.’ As I have already suggested, such a principle is educationally pernicious, since, among other things, it precludes the possibility of philosophical investigations whose task is to provide critiques of all forms of putative knowledge. Without begging basic philosophical questions, it simply cannot be assumed that the scientific method is the one and only method of achieving human understanding. A philosopher, not to mention a theologian, a moralist, a literary critic, or an artist, must be free not merely to consider what forms of study are proper to his activity, but also to employ the methods and procedures which upon reflection he deems appropriate. If he is mistaken, then it is the business of his colleagues and students to expose his errors.

What concerns me here, above all, are those pervasive but frequently unformulated philosophies, or ideologies of higher learning, that regard liberal education, which is concerned with the development and enlargement of the whole life of the mind, to be a dispensable or peripheral luxury. On another level, such philosophies are deeply suspicious, or even fearful, of liberal education precisely because it is not and cannot be neutral in the scientific sense. From the latter point of view, liberal education, owing to its active concern not merely with scientific study but also with the appraisal and advocacy of religious, ethical, and political attitudes and institutions, automatically involves the teacher and his students in controversial issues which can and do create an atmosphere of dissention which is inimical to that basic congeniality of mind which a community of scholars seems to require.

In reply I must take the bit in my teeth: liberal education does indeed lead to controversy, and undoubtedly its exponents and participants are given to forms of dissention that frequently go very deep. The liberal mind is inherently non-conformist, and non-conformity usually has a political aspect. In my view, however, controversy, dissention, and non-conformity are indispensable to intellectual and hence educational development. Accordingly, the price in terms of conflict, both within the
CAN AMERICAN UNIVERSITIES BE DEPOLITICIZED?

faculty and the student body, simply has to be paid. And if this reduces the sense of community among the members of the university, we must make the best of it. The business of higher education is not to make those engaged in it comfortable with one another but to advance all the basic forms of human understanding. In short, I do not deplore conflict on the university campus, I applaud it. Nor in saying this do I commit myself to an uncritical or flaccid acquiescence in all the forms of turmoil which now beset our universities. Physical violence on the campus is nearly always to be deplored. And the same holds not only for student "revolutionaries" but also for administrative "reactionaries."

Let me close by making some positive proposals which, if adopted, would greatly reduce the wrong sort of tension which has now become endemic to the contemporary American university. A great part of this tension, which reflects analogous tensions within the wider society, is owing to the obsolete organization of the academy. I do not deplore academic leadership, and certainly such leadership must come, in some part, from the university administration. But this requires that university administrators and, behind them, the governing boards, be educators and not merely arbiters and fund raisers. And they cannot be, or remain, educators unless they also study, teach, and go to school. To this end, I propose a principle of rotation that will close the profound intellectual, moral, and political gaps that presently divide the various academic classes. Administrators must be given, or obliged to take, leave from time to time so that they may renew, in a more concrete and intimate way, their understanding of the work, the attitudes, and the problems of their faculties and students. They must be obliged in a more-than-ceremonial way to participate in the life and work of both faculties and students. Administration, in short, must no longer be treated as a full-time job, and, again, if we all will have to pay a certain price for the change, then so be it. Faculty members must be enabled to participate fully in the governance of the university. Thus, faculty members should be elected to the governing boards in whose hands, as we have learned, to our sorrow, great actual as well as formal power still resides. In some degree the same holds with respect to students. For example, able and enlightened students must not only be permitted but encouraged to participate in the instruction of their classmates and in the formation and revision of departmental curricula. And, in sum, through these and other entirely practicable changes, actions can and must be taken to convert what is now merely an institution into a truer community of self-respecting and mutually understanding scholars.

Beyond this, valuable forms of educational and political activity that are now conducted exclusively within the shadow university should
HENRY DAVID AIKEN

be encouraged to come out of the shadow and to be recognized, not as extracurricular alternatives to football or Saturday night parties, but as relevant educational activities designed for the improvement of the understanding of all members of the university community. Specifically, dissident and radical groups, whose aim is the reconstruction of the whole society, must not merely be tolerated with agrimace, but invited to meet in the light of day with those who disagree with them so that meaningful and continuous dialogues may be established concerning the problems and jobs of works to be done in our confused and faltering social system.

Nor is this all. More enlightened head-start, upward-and outward-bound programs should be established in order to bring into, and so to enrich, the intellectual life of the academic community, many many more gifted but disadvantaged students whose deprivation, real as well as imagined, are owing to poverty, inadequate secondary school education, and racial prejudice. These students must be provided with ample scholarships that may enable them to live and to study on equal terms with their classmates. Further, the colleges and universities must be prepared to invite to the campus, whether on a full or part-time basis, knowledgeable and enlightened laymen who have so much to tell us about the possibilities. educational and otherwise, of reform and reconstruction throughout the national society. And sustained programs of adult education need to be established which are no longer marginal and conducted by disadvantaged professors in need of another honest buck.

But all these, of course, are no more than approach shots. What is necessary, above all, is a massive return to the ideals and practices of liberal education itself, properly updated for contemporary men and women who have something more to do in the world than acquire forms of professional and vocational training that may enable them to move upward in the social and economic hierarchy. These ideals and practices must also be reintroduced into the graduate and professional schools. We need and must have forms of liberal education that are relevant to the lives of human beings in an age of unprecedented social and cultural crisis, in an age in which there are problems of life which human beings have never had to face before: the massive consolidation of power in the hands of elites responsible in practice to no one but themselves, the contests for ideological and political control by great states, all of them, including our own, increasingly repressive and totalistic, and, most important of all, the uncontrolled employment of weapons of destruction that, in an instant, can convert this planet into a scene of lunar desolation where the life and work of civilized human beings is completely blotted out.

This is the great and difficult work that lies before us. In an era in which as never before the academy is the state’s most important insti-
CAN AMERICAN UNIVERSITIES BE DEPOLITICIZED?

tutional auxiliary, we must again make sure that what we call higher education is an education, not for technicians and specialists only, but for autonomous men, enlightened and unafraid. Ours is the responsibility to make certain that the advancement of learning includes the improvement of our understanding of what it means to be a man and a human being. And this task, once again, imposes responsibilities whose meanings are through and through political.