

# Business Men in Control of American Colleges

## Member of Princeton's Teaching Force Criticises Condition Which He Regards as a Baneful Autocracy in Higher Education

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**T**HE present war has been drifting continually closer to the issue of democracy, and to the United States has now fallen the task of mooring the conflict definitely at the anchorage of this form of political organization. By a declaration of war for the democratization of Germany, however, we have morally declared war on the faults of our democracy at home. Our defiance of Germany is a challenge to ourselves.

There are few faults at home more glaring and more difficult of change than those in the government of the American college. It is, in fact, one of the most striking anomalies of our national life that in those very institutions which educate for self-government our future men and women of affairs there is entrenched an autocracy which does violence to every national political ideal.

The American college has a legal status not unlike a municipal corporation. It is a "body politic" which owes its corporate existence to a charter granted by the State. It is, after all, not unlike a city also in its political and social aspects: a group of people living together in one community and subject to laws, rules, and regulations designed to further a common aim. But unlike a city—and here is the bedrock of the autocracy—the college corporation is not the citizens themselves. It is a board of absentee governors called Trustees or Regents. New York City is in law the citizenship thereof and the officers of government responsible to them. Princeton University, however, is legally not the Faculty and students, the community citizenship, but a group of twenty-nine men in no way responsible to them, and none of whom lives or functions at the university.

These twenty-nine men at Princeton, and other small groups like them in every college and university community, are in law rulers whose power is absolute.

They have the legal authority to employ and dismiss whomsoever they wish in the service of their institution—the President, the professors, administrative officers, janitors, and day laborers. And no one of these, it is well to note, has any more constitutional security of tenure than another. They can discharge a janitor who complains that his wages are low, or an instructor who makes the fact known to his classes. When George Wharton Pepper, Trustee of the University of Pennsylvania, was asked by a reporter of *The Philadelphia North American* for an explanation of the board's failure to reappoint Scott Nearing, he is reported to have said, quite frankly: "If I was dissatisfied with my secretary for anything he had done, some people might be in favor of my calling him in here and to sit down and talk it over. Others might think it wiser to dismiss him without assigning any cause. But in any case I would be within my rights in terminating his employment." This is a correct statement of the law—whether Mr. Pepper actually said it or not.

Trustees can, in law, control the finances, the purchase of supplies, the erection and care of buildings, even their architectural design, and may forbid those whom they dislike to use the rooms therein. Previous to the address of President Wilson asking Congress for war power President Hibben of Princeton, as agent of the Trustees, refused to grant permission to an undergraduate organization to hold meetings on the campus in the interest of our continued armed neutrality. In explanation of his act, he said that such meetings would be inconsistent with the war policy to which the university was committed. There had been no such commitment by the will of either Faculty or students. In justifying this action of the authorities Professor Henry Jones Ford of the Politics Department wrote to *The Daily Princetonian*, with an implication unconsciously

candid: "Freedom of speech implies simply the right to speak upon one's own premises at one's own charge, and to extend that claim upon the property of others is evidence of the topsy-turvy character of pacifist logic." That the college is the property of the Trustees to do with as they see fit is a proposition that cannot be denied in law, however it may be in wisdom.

The governing boards also have complete authority in educational matters. They may veto any change in the curriculum suggested by any Faculty, or they may abolish the privilege of suggesting it. They may provide that every student spend two years in the study of one or more languages usually known as "dead," that no student shall be taught of the development of trade unionism, or that Buddhist students must attend the Christian Church on Sunday mornings. The recent resolution of the Columbia Trustees authorizing an investigation into the teachings of members of the Faculty suspected of undermining the faith of their students in our political institutions was passed with full legal sanction if without much sense of humor.

And, finally, they may exercise the power of deciding all cases of violations of the college community laws without a hearing, and from their decision there can be no appeal.

Not only can these boards exercise every power mentioned without any legal responsibility whatever to those over whom they exert such immense control, but, in private institutions, they escape responsibility to the sovereign State itself. College charters are "contracts" between the State and the Trustees by ruling of the Supreme Court in the Dartmouth College case. As such they are protected by the Federal Constitution from "impairment" by any act of the State Government that has not the sanction of the Trustees. Such an unmistakable expression of the sovereign will of the State of New Jersey, for instance, as an act of Legislature ratified on a referendum by every voter in the Commonwealth could not compel Princeton University to offer a course in agriculture for the farmers of the State, nor prevent it from teaching its students that in the Republican Party lies the only hope of national prosperity.

That Trustees and Regents do not exercise in practice every one of the powers granted to them by law is proof not of any lack of authority, but merely a lack of desire to do so. They have kept in their hands those powers which they have conceived of most importance, and the rest they have delegated away—with the knowledge that at any moment they can gather them back. They look upon the control of finances, for instance, and of the appointment and dismissal of teachers as powers to be retained. These they have guarded with conspicuous jealousy. Over the educational policy of their colleges they retain a grip less all-embracing, but still a hand upon the throttle. In matters of business management it is the same. Only in the less important fields of educational detail

and student discipline have they allowed their hold to slacken.

Such absolute autocracy at the core of the mind and spirit of our national life is in itself a standing rebuke to our democratic professions of faith. But the personnel of this autocracy raises the rebuke to the level of a sharp indictment.

A recent survey of the occupations of the individual Trustees in seventeen of the leading private and twenty-two State colleges and universities shows beyond a doubt that they are in the hands of a small but very definite and powerful economic class—the successful business men. No less than 56.2 per cent. of the governing bodies of these private colleges and 68.3 per cent. in the State institutions are made up of the commercial class or those intimately connected therewith—bankers, manufacturers, merchants, public utility officers, financiers, publishers, and lawyers. Of the two other great economic groups in society there is little or no representation. The farmers total, but .6 per cent. in private and 4 per cent. in public boards, while no representative of labor has a place on any, public or private. And, finally, no college teacher is a Trustee of the college in which he serves, while only 14 out of 649 are professors in other institutions. Of these 6 are Harvard professors on the Radcliffe board.

We have allowed the education of our youth to fall into the absolute control of a group of men who represent not only a small minority of the total population, but have, at the same time, enormous economic and business stakes in what kind of an education it shall be. What these stakes are in actuality may be inferred from the personnel of one very typical board, that of Yale. One member is both the President of the private water company which supplies the City of New Haven and chief officer of a local trust company, besides being a Director of the gas company and a large insurance corporation; the other members are a lawyer who is a Director of two powerful trust companies, three prominent bankers, also Directors in various public utility companies; a dry goods merchant who is Director of a great railroad system and a national bank, a silk manufacturer and bank Trustee, the editor of a leading newspaper, also Director of *The Associated Press* and an insurance corporation; a hardware manufacturer and bank Director, a newspaper owner, the chief counsel for the Connecticut Trolley Company, and, perhaps to redeem the rest, four ministers of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Were the power of these men and others like them not so absolute, the indictment would be of little weight. Were the Trustees in control only of the business and financial affairs of our colleges, it might even be of some advantage to have them successful business men. It would not be democracy, but it might be efficiency. The inefficiency—even the humor for those sufficiently detached—of the successful business man in the rôle of employer and director of a highly

specialized profession utterly foreign to his own could be matched only were these same business men to turn over the direction and management of their railroads, mines, and factories to professors of philosophy and Greek.

As matters stand, the economic and professional future of the man who does the teaching, in fact, often his whole success in life, depends on the favor and good-will of a well-marked and powerful economic group. The subjects he teaches and the way he presents them are under the same domination. And in private colleges this control is so stamped and sealed by the Supreme Court as to be out of reach of any act of popular will short of an amendment to the Federal Constitution.

Such a situation breeds dangers in a self-governing nation too apparent to need much comment. It is obvious that the first requirement for the success of a representative democracy such as the United States is a high degree of intelligence, not only among the leaders, but also in the average citizen. It is trite to say that education—especially that which prepares for citizenship in a democracy—is worse than a failure if it is vitiated by class interest. No education at all is better for the safety of the Republic than class prejudices entrenched behind the barrier of a trained and partisan mind.

That there is wide and profound dissatisfaction with the present order of things within the college teaching profession no one is unmindful who has "done his bit" for the cause of our higher education. It is only those on the inside who know of the young instructors who fail of reappointment because of the sovereign displeasure of Trustees, of courses refused admittance to the curriculum for a like reason, or the timely hints from above that have forced a teacher into line. Professor James McKeen Cattell, in response to a questionnaire sent to leading college teachers of science in 1911, found that out of 299 replies received no less than 85 per cent. favored a limitation of the present governing autocracy. The public at large has heard the echoes of this unrest in controversies now commonly known as "free speech fights" in most of our representative universities, and in an occasional eruption into newspaper publicity of that at least formidable sounding Association of American University Professors.

It is to be hoped that the war will bring to the United States, as it has to other nations, a searching self-examination into our inner state of democracy. The naive might even imagine that this successful business group which has been the most conspicuous in its advocacy of the armed democratization of Germany would be the first to see themselves as the local Kaisers of our educational world—and abdicate. But, at any rate, the discovery by the public at large of this autocracy at home will do much for the post-bellum reconstruction of our national life.