

## ***The Fall of the American University***

NOT SO LONG AGO Erik von Kuenhelt-Leddihn entertained a luncheon gathering of The Remnant with a description of the peregrinations of a bad idea. The notion that students have a right to use university premises as a privileged sanctuary from which to carry on a revolutionary war against society and/or the State first took hold in Latin America. Then, after ruining Latin American education, it skipped to Japan. The next stop was Berkeley in California (in 1964, a year before Lyndon Johnson decided to put drafted troops into Vietnam), from which it moved erratically eastward to the grisly climax of Columbia, the deaths at Kent State, and the disruption of Harvard. The European universities were not immune, but the crises

in France and West Germany had a shorter duration.

Adam Ulam, a Polish-born Professor of Government at Harvard University, lived through the tumultuous period in Cambridge, Massachusetts, with a constantly growing wonder that the American public high school and private preparatory school could have produced such a totally lack-logic generation of students. They couldn't distinguish between a strike and a boycott. They confused academic life with politics and labor relations. They thought they had a mission to prescribe foreign, military, and economic policy before they had learned something about history and government, not after. Instead of asking for French teachers who could teach French, or mathematicians

who knew something about imparting the principles of the calculus, they wanted a faculty that could satisfy their religious, ideological, and political yearnings. In short, they were in the market for anything but learning and the acquisition of skills that might enable them to lead productive or at least unalienated lives.

### **First Things First**

Professor Ulam has put his ruminations on the college scene of the Nineteen Sixties into a wise and searching book, *The Fall of the American University* (Library Press, \$7.95, trade distribution by Nash Publishing Company), that is part history and part essay. He starts out with the commonsensical idea that universities should be institutions of learning. Traditionally the university has existed to impart knowledge and skills for a fee. The university may turn out people with ideas about solving social problems, or running governments, or fighting (or abstaining) from wars, but it is not set up to do any of these things directly. Professor Ulam is a first-things-first man, with a gift for aphoristic expression. He doesn't see why classrooms should be used as pulpits, or why professors of English literature should be psychiatrists, or why students should assault deans when they

are really mad at Congress for supporting the draft or letting the President fight an undeclared war. He wants the lines of logic to run clear. Above all, he asks for precision in the use of language.

There was the business of the student "strike" at Harvard, for example. A boycott of classes is not a strike. How do you "strike" against something you have paid for? In normal life, if you don't like what you are getting, you ask for money back and take your patronage elsewhere. Harvard's answer to the student "strike" should have been to close down the university. If your patrons don't like your service, they have the right to complain or to go to a store across the street. But the university is under no compulsion to stop teaching Spanish, or the history of the Middle Ages, merely because its President can't at the same time satisfy the students that the Black Panthers are getting justice, or that the White House really knows what it is buying when it asks for a position paper on neo-colonialism in the Third World.

### **Who Is to Blame?**

Adam Ulam does not make the mistake of blaming the young for everything. Our whole society became rather disoriented in the Sixties. The professors who went

to Washington in the days of Camelot could not have it both ways. They were great when "cost effectiveness" worked. But when, as whiz kid advisers to White House and Pentagon, they supported the strange idea that dedicated Asian Marxist guerrillas would give in to "graduated pressure" in a tropical jungle terrain, they ran the risk of exposing themselves to the students back home in Cambridge as stupid running dogs of a brainless military-industrial complex. When college authorities failed to protect the civil liberties of visiting speakers or business recruiters, radical students drew the correct conclusion that they could get away with anything short of murder.

As Professor Ulam puts it, "in the mid-Sixties it was suddenly discovered that there was one place which miraculously fitted the requisite of every man's ill humor. The university was elitist; it de-based learning by letting in utterly unqualified people. It permitted, nay encouraged, promiscuity and the use of drugs; it repressed the young. It advised the Pentagon and big business how to meddle in the affairs of other nations; it bred anti-patriotic feelings and anarchism. It epitomized white supremacy; it stimulated black radicalism and separatism. It was a repository of useless pedantry;

it was full of busybodies who, under the pretense of objective study of society, sought power and were eager to submit their fellow citizens to some half-baked schemes of their fabrication." And, so Professor Ulam sums it up, "by 1969 one had to admit that there was an element of truth in *all* those charges!"

In a permissive age the university administrations and faculties let students claim rights and indulgences that were not possessed by ordinary citizens. Students were beyond the reach of ordinary police power. A growing army of university officials came into being to administer a constantly diminishing body of rules. Professors were at once permissive and patronizing. And so, of course, they lost all respect.


### ***The Age of "Relevance"***

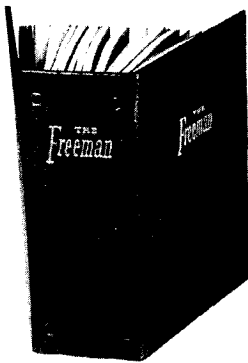
The worst of it was that professors did not defend their own disciplines. They allowed fashionable ideas about "relevance" to undermine their belief in the usefulness of their various subjects. Instead of insisting that the cure for "alienation" is to lure the student into becoming engrossed in a language, a literature, an ancient civilization, or a science, professors allowed students to define "relevance" in terms of current events. There was a great pro-

fusion of courses that confused things that students should worry about with things they should study. As for some of the subjects that go under the name of sociology, Professor Ulam asks why should young men and women be required as part of their expensive higher education to sit through lectures on what they already know and hear incessantly from newspapers, magazines, TV, and their own rap sessions?

In the brave new world of the modern university, students hold forth on ecology and abortion but learn little biology. They can discuss Red China's role in the UN

but fail to master a single foreign language. They know all about injustice but scorn history as irrelevant. Everything dissolves into fashionable platitude, and the young arrive at adulthood in "a state of mental fatigue, aimless agitation and anger, incapable of that discriminating approach to public affairs which democracy calls for in its citizens."

So far has the American university "fallen." Professor Ulam wonders whether the "counter-revolution of common sense" will ever restore it to its proper purposes of "promoting learning and advancing knowledge." 



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# JANUARY 1973

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