

The Fellows were ranged around the conference table, pondering the limits of liberty and law. A secretary came in and put a note in front of the Chairman. He looked at it and said, "President Kennedy has been assassinated in Dallas." The conference – and the conferees – fell apart. All except the Chairman. He tapped his water glass with a pencil and said, "Can the discussion go on?"

He was a notoriously precise man: If he'd meant "may," he'd have said "may." What he said was "can."

*Can the discussion go on?* This was Bob Hutchins's question the whole of his long life. This was why he fought for liberal education in the universal elitism of democracy. This is why he fought for unity in the modern shambles of the university. This is why he fought for academic freedom. This was why he opposed his country's entrance into World War II. This was why he established the Fund for the Republic to try to save the First Amendment. This was why he established the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions to ponder the basic issues of society. It was all of a piece.

It was thought, mistakenly, that he tried to revolutionize education. He didn't try to revolutionize it; he tried to revive it. Rabanus Germanicus in the Ninth Century: "Dialectic is the *disciplina disciplinarum* . . . through it we argue and discover what is consequent and inconsequent, what is contrary to the nature of things, what is true, what is probable, and what is intrinsically false in disputations." Or J. S. Mill one thousand years later: "He who knows only his own side of the case knows little of that. His reasons may have been good, and no one may have been able to refute them. But if he is equally

From *The Progressive*, July 1977.

unable to refute the reasons on the opposite side . . . he has no ground for preferring either opinion."

He was a lover of inquiry, inquiry unfettered by the fear that it might corrupt the young or overturn the state or scandalize the neighbors. This Ninth-Century–Nineteenth-Century Man was that Ancient Man of Athens who said (just before his countrymen killed him), "The unexamined life is not worth living."

*Can the discussion go on?* "The American people must decide whether they will longer tolerate the search for truth." – This in the pre-McCarthy days of the Dies Committee – "If they will not, we can blow out the light and shoot it out in the dark."

It might take a hundred years or a thousand to make the world safe for rationality – "all the more reason to get started this afternoon." It might never come to be – but "it isn't necessary to hope in order to undertake, nor to succeed in order to persevere."

Most of what he did at the University of Chicago went down the drain. ("I was the plug in the bathtub.") Liberal education everywhere declined and the production of uneducated specialists flourished. The dismemberment of the modern university proceeded. Academic freedom became the freedom to moonlight for the CIA and fight for higher wages and lower hours. The blue-collar McCarthy from Wisconsin gave way to the white-collar McCarthy from San Clemente. The civilization of the dialogue didn't radiate from the Center in Santa Barbara.

He thought he had been a failure. He didn't know that it is better to fail trying to do what he was trying to do than to succeed at anything else.

But that was the only thing he didn't know. He knew the difference between right and wrong – no cheerful thing to know. He knew that life (including his own) is demoralizing. But I never knew him to duck – except once, when I was ducking too. One day I told him he ought to take a year off. "And do

what?" "Think." "If I ever started to think, I'd have to think about why I'm not a socialist, a pacifist, and a Christian. I'd rather not."

Clark Kerr called him the last of the giants. He was certainly one of the great men of the age, and just as certainly as good a man as a great man can be. He was a paragon of clarity. He was exquisitely witty in our sense of sassy and in the Greek sense of apt. He was a marvelous (and most unlikely) combination of bravery and bravado.

I shan't miss him. I have all of his life and some of his letters at my disposal. Here are some of his letters to me (in full): "I am a great admirer of your work. Are you doing any?" "Dear (in the sense of expensive) Sir: Stop bothering me." "Have you written any good books lately?" "How about getting me some of those pipe cleaners. Think how I saved you from Hearst."

In a lucky life like mine there are one or two people you don't miss when they're gone; living or dead they're looking over your shoulder. Anyway, I'm an optimist, and I abide serene in the starry confidence that we or our latest descendants shall see his likes again.