

Abraham Flexner, Pioneer in Educational Reform

About fifty years ago, a relatively unknown visitor named Abraham Flexner presented himself in the paneled offices of Henry Pritchett, then president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. He had come for an interview at Pritchett's request. If someone had warned Flexner that the interview was to be the beginning of the end for old-style medical education, he would have been astounded and baffled.

Although not nationally known, the visitor was not without reputation. He had founded and presided over one of the most distinguished preparatory schools in the South and was the author of a book entitled *The American College*. He was the brother of Simon Flexner, the brilliant director of the Rockefeller Medical Institute.

Pritchett lost no time in coming to the point. He proposed that Abraham Flexner undertake a survey of American medical schools. Flexner, whose own training was in the classics, was astounded. He suggested that Pritchett must have him confused with his brother Simon. Pritchett shook his head. He wanted someone from outside the medical profession; he had read Abraham Flexner's book on the American college and knew that he had found the man he wanted. Flexner finally agreed to undertake the task.

Simon Flexner once described the first medical school he attended in 1887 as "a school in which the lecture was everything. Within the brief compass of four winter months, the whole medical lore was unfolded in discourses following one another in bewildering sequence . . . ; and lest the wisdom imparted should exceed the student's power of retention, the lectures were repeated precisely during the second year at the end of which graduation with the degree of Doctor of Medicine was all but automatic."

The medical proprietary school had multiplied rapidly in the second half of the 19th century, and only a fraction

of the profit of these schools went to further medical education. English medical journals at the close of the 19th century referred repeatedly to the low quality of the American medical degree. The distinguished British surgeon Sir William Macewan of Glasgow had so little faith in American medicine that when he was offered an appointment by Johns Hopkins University he stipulated that he be allowed to bring his whole staff of nurses. Johns Hopkins withdrew the offer.

Pritchett's selection of Flexner to do the study was an unconventional and inspired choice. Flexner was entirely without the obvious qualification of a medical background. All that he had was a razor-edged mind, fierce integrity, limitless courage, and the capacity to express himself clearly and vividly. And that proved to be enough.

After a period of careful study and preparation, Flexner visited over 150 medical schools throughout the United States and Canada. His report was published in 1910 as Bulletin No. 4 of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.



Abraham Flexner (1866–1959)

What did he find? He found that the entrance requirements were enforced in only ten of the medical schools in this country. He found that 140 of the schools had libraries that were inadequate or had none at all. He found that in 139 of the schools laboratory courses for the first and second years were deplorably equipped and poorly conducted. In one medical school, in Salem, Washington, Flexner asked the dean if the school possessed a laboratory. "Surely," was the reply, "I have it upstairs; I will bring it down to you." And the helpful dean "went up and brought down a small sphygmograph."

There had been an overproduction of uneducated and ill-trained medical practitioners by commercial schools, many of which were promoted by blatant advertising. In many cases, universities allied themselves with medical schools "without making themselves responsible for the standards of the professional schools or for their support." Many medical schools provided no hospital facilities whatever. Students came to the schools shockingly unprepared.

Flexner urged wholesale reduction of commercial medical schools and a drastic upgrading of standards. The report did not deal in generalities. It named names. Words such as "disgraceful" and "shameful" were freely applied. The city of Chicago with its 14 medical schools was described as "the plague spot of the country."

As everyone knows, the study led to a revolution in American medical education.

In 1913 Abraham Flexner joined the General Education Board, and for 15 years played an extraordinary role in helping to finance the revolution which he himself had touched off. He distributed some \$50 million of Mr. Rockefeller's money, and in the course of doing so he raised an estimated \$600 million from other sources for medical education.

Referring to Flexner's extraordinary skill in extracting money from wealthy citizens for good causes, George Eastman once said in jest that he was "the worst highwayman that ever flitted into and out of Rochester." He spoke feelingly. Flexner had succeeded in getting him to put up \$5 million for the University of Rochester Medical School.

When Flexner "retired" in 1928 it might have been assumed that all the great chapters in a full life had been written. But one of the most important was yet to come. In 1930, Louis Bamberger and his sister, Mrs. Felix Fuld,

contributed \$5 million to establish the Institute for Advanced Study, and Abraham Flexner was chosen as the first director. It was not a surprising choice. The plan for the institute was Flexner's and grew out of ideas developed in his book *Universities—American, English and German*.

The first professor he approached for appointment at the institute mentioned a salary figure which Flexner thought quite inappropriate. It was too low, he insisted, and he named a higher figure. The professor—Albert Einstein—gave in gracefully.

Flexner's early life offers a stirring record of humble beginnings, intense family devotion, and courageous response to economic hardship. His parents had emigrated from Bohemia in 1855, 11 years before Abraham was born. After years of struggle and moderate success, they lost everything in the panic of 1873, and the family was plunged into a period of severe economic deprivation.

Abraham attended Johns Hopkins on funds saved by his older brother, Jacob. In 1890 he founded "Mr. Flexner's School," with five students, to experiment with his idea that children

should be taught with a minimum of restraint, but with undeviating devotion to intellectual standards. Eight years later he married Anne Crawford, who had been his first girl pupil in the school. Anne Flexner later became a very successful playwright. Her best-known play was *Mrs. Wiggs of the Cabbage Patch*.

In 1904 Abraham Flexner made a courageous decision: he decided to close his school in Louisville in order to study in Europe. He was 38 years old. He was a success in his chosen field. After years of straitened circumstances, he was just beginning to enjoy some measure of economic well-being. Yet he put all of it behind him and sought wider horizons.

From there the path led him to Harvard for his M.A., then to Germany, and then to the historic interview in Pritchett's office.

Abraham Flexner was a man of spirit and style. In close personal relations he was deeply affectionate and loyal. In matters of the intellect he was forceful, astringent, scornful of compromise, a warrior in behalf of wisdom and virtue as he conceived them. He had a sparkling wit which was

equally effective in the mischievous teasing of his friends, the needling of those he wished to stir to action, and the harpooning of those who won his scorn. No one ever said of him that he was "comfortable as an old shoe." More appropriate might have been "as invigorating as a cool breeze."

Flexner was an unrelenting critic of the slovenly and the meretricious in American education. He attacked it wherever he saw it, and he saw it in many quarters. He fought a holy war against slackness, triviality, and educational quackery. It is good to know that he lived to see the recent rebirth of a concern for excellence in American education. The authors of *The Pursuit of Excellence*, the Rockefeller report on American education, quoted a characteristic passage from Flexner's autobiography: "We have to defend the country against mediocrity, mediocrity of soul, mediocrity of ideas, mediocrity of action. We must also fight against it in ourselves." No one accepted that call to battle more zestfully than Abraham Flexner himself.

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Science in the News

Soviet Offers New Version of its Quota Plan for Checking on Atom Blasts

In Geneva on 16 February the Soviet Union offered the West a plan for monitoring a nuclear test ban, which, like earlier Soviet proposals, covers all tests and limits on-site inspection to a small predetermined quota. The latest proposal, however, employs criteria based on seismographic responses that broaden considerably the eligibility for inspection of seismic events.

The Soviet proposal is a reply to the plan offered on 11 February by the United States, which the Soviet Union rejected. The United States, with British acquiescence, suggested banning all

tests except underground tests below a certain size.

In the new version of its quota plan, the Soviet Union, for 2 or 3 years, puts aside its own criteria for defining suspicious events and accepts criteria based on standards recently proposed by the United States. The Western standards would permit investigation of a considerably greater number of seismic disturbances, to determine whether they are earthquakes or secret tests, than would the Soviet criteria. During the period of 2 or 3 years, Western and Soviet scientists would consider further the question of setting standards for ordering inspection trips.

The Soviet offer was accompanied by a limitation. Acceptance by the Soviet

Union of Western standards of inspection would depend upon acceptance by the West of a predetermined quota of inspection trips. The size of the quota would depend not on such scientific questions as an estimate of the number of suspicious events to be encountered in the course of a year but on political questions. In past discussions, the Soviet Union has favored keeping such a quota "very small."

France not Joining Talks

On 16 February the French Foreign Ministry announced that France did not intend to join the United States, Britain, and the Soviet Union in the Geneva discussions. Theoretically, the explosion of an atomic bomb in the Sahara on 13 February entitled France to request admittance to the nuclear test suspension talks.

Also on 16 February the French Ministry of the Armed Forces repeated its claim that the above-ground atomic explosion posed no danger to persons in the Sahara or in neighboring African countries. France is expected to explode at least one more nuclear device at the Sahara proving grounds.