Letters

HUAC: Academic Challenge

Elinor Langer's brief note (News and Comment, 13 May, p. 898) on renewed efforts within the academic community to assail the House Un-American Activities Committee raises the question: Why is so much effort expended over this question in this quarter?

Raising the ghost of McCarthy is no answer. The equation of HUAC procedures with those of McCarthy will not stand even cursory examination. In fact the HUAC was the first to adopt written rules of procedure, which became a model for the standing rules of the House now governing all committees. Furthermore this committee of nine, by the process of the biennial congressional elections, has had 41 different people sitting on it over the 20 years since it became a standing committee, so it would be silly to ascribe a personality or an ideology to it.

Since HUAC, like the other 19 standing committees of the House, was established by enactment of a public law, the present attack on its constitutionality presumably is directed against its specific legislated purpose:

> . . . The investigation of . . .
> 1) The extent, character and objects of un-American propaganda activities in the United States.
> 2) The diffusion within the United States of subversive and un-American propaganda that is instigated from foreign countries or of a domestic origin and attacks the principle of the form of government as guaranteed by our Constitution, and
> 3) All other questions in relation thereto that would aid Congress in any accessory remedial legislation.

While the word "un-American" is certainly not precisely definable, and undoubtedly has repugnant overtones to a scholarly community with a rooted belief that its beneficial activities are omni-national, still why should there be such strenuous objections to the proposition that Congress may inform itself about acts designed to weaken the stability or alter the form of our government? This is particularly puzzling when this same community rejects as an article of faith that there could be any topic so sacred that its members may not make it the subject of investigation.

Alger Hiss, Harry Dexter White, the Rosenbergs, and Gouzenko, to name a few, have demonstrated beyond doubt that the Communist Party has done and can do real damage on a national scale. Indeed it can do and has done real damage in the world of scholars.

The trial of Andrei Sinyavsky and Yuli Daniel revealed again the Party's implacable resolve to prohibit freedom of thought, expression, and dissent. The Lysenko affair, extending over three decades, demonstrated its unusual tenacity in submerging scientific findings in conflict with orthodox doctrine. In fact, wherever it has the power to do so, the Party seeks out and punishes heresy, an activity which is surely the antithesis of scholarship.

Thus there not only seems to be ample reason why Congress should keep itself informed about the Party and its secret mischievous undertakings, but even reason why the academic community might itself be concerned.

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Who Judges the Teachers?

In his editorial, "Good teaching" (18 March), Warren Weaver says he has little faith in the ability of a student to judge the quality of his teacher. I would counter that the better students in a class are the only ones from whom an administrator can receive an accurate appraisal. They have seen the teacher in action far more than have any of the university personnel, have been with other teachers for comparison, and they know whether their success in the class has been because of the teacher or in spite of him.

Weaver believes that a college teacher can best be judged by his colleagues. Any department with more than two good teachers is singularly blessed (I cite here the results of a statistically insignificant private survey). Since most of a teacher's colleagues are poor teachers themselves, they are particularly unqualified to judge his performance, not to mention the fact that they have probably never seen him teach. To paraphrase Weaver's final remark, a good teacher's colleagues are likely to judge him through the sieve of their own incompetence, prejudices, and jealousy.

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As a graduate student I can hardly agree with Warren Weaver who advocated the evaluation of university teachers by their colleagues. An immediate objection is that the colleagues do not sit in on the courses that the teacher gives. Therefore, they have no basis for "their skillful and intimately informed judgments." Further, the colleagues' judgment is colored by their personal relationship with the teacher. . . . The undergraduates are no better placed to judge the faculty, with their limited background in the subject and their limited experience with university teachers. They can hardly be expected to recognize good teaching or to be aware of the difficulties in teaching a particular subject. The best, though still far from ideal, source of evaluation is the graduate student. He knows enough of the subject to appreciate the difficulties of teaching it, and he has had experience with many teachers. Further, he is likely to have worked with the professor on research and would be able to evaluate the professor's ability both to teach research and to lecture.

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Good teaching is not possible without communication, and this communication must be based on awareness of the students' capabilities and interests. Without this, teaching is at best an ego enhancing exercise conducted before a captive audience. The unfortunate facts are that most teaching is based on a hierarchy of values that places the teacher's needs first; and that teachers in most university departments are more concerned with security, status, and departmental power struggles than they are with the purposes of their chosen profession. Hence, I think

Weaver is overly optimistic in his opinion that "the only useful judgment concerning university teachers comes from their immediate working colleagues."

It is very likely that no teacher is the best possible one for all his students and that no teacher is totally ineffective for all the students he teaches. Between these extremes, however, it should be possible to devise a comprehensive scheme of evaluation that can be accepted ultimately by a reasonable proportion of those interested in developing such a measure. . . . I would give greater weight than Weaver to students' judgments. . . .

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. . . It seems fruitless to discuss sources of evaluating teachers without establishing criteria for judging a good teacher. Having taught at various levels for 22 years, I am convinced that there are four basic criteria for good teachers.

1) Competence in subject field. A good teacher should be proficient not only in the subject matter he teaches, but also in related subjects, regarding teaching not as a routine duty but as a challenge requiring constant revitalization. He must be alert and diligent in searching both old and new knowledge.

2) Clarity of verbal communication. Instructions must be presented in such a way that the majority of students in the class comprehend and respond. Scholars with difficulty in verbal presentation can be great masters for a few graduate students though they may not be good teachers for most undergraduates. A seriously devoted teacher can improve his deficiencies in verbal communication.

3) Dedication to the educating process. The genuinely dedicated teacher recognizes that good teaching inspires results which sometimes don't become apparent for years, even decades, yet he finds such long-range opportunities continually challenging.

4) Love for students. Disinterest in one's pupils is not characteristic of good teachers who realize that their concern for individual students is an essential of teaching and the cultivation of wholesome citizens. Even in large classes, frequent contacts should be arranged to emphasize the personal relationship between teacher and students.

In summary, the first two criteria are objective and can be learned by any devoted teachers; the last two are subjective and must be acquired by self-discipline. Only when a teacher meets these criteria to a marked degree can he then be considered a good teacher. . . .

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The First Computers

Luther Carter, in his article on "Campus computers" (News and Comment, 25 Feb., p. 969), repeats a common error about the early history of computers, in saying that "the first computers were conceived and built at universities."

In the present context, I assume the term "computer" refers to the typical modern computer which differs from those of an older vintage in several ways. Probably the outstanding differences are in the programmed control and in the use of fast binary components.

In point of fact, there were in daily operation several computers with these characteristics some years prior to any completed in a university. The use of binary logic (with the excess-three code, now familiar to computer technology) was introduced in a computer designed by me and built at the Bell Telephone Laboratories in the period 1937–1939. It was demonstrated by remote control from Hanover, New Hampshire, at a meeting of the Mathematical Society in September 1940. . . .

The first operating computer in a university might be said to be the Harvard Mark I, of 1944. This machine was a decimal rather than a binary device and employed IBM mechanical drum accumulators. The first university-originated binary computers would, I think, be the Mark II and the ENIAC, both of about 1946. . . .

I should mention, too, that Konrad Zuse in Germany also made use of binary elements prior to the university-originated computers.

Perhaps, in view of the work of many pioneers like Aiken, Mauchly, Eckert, Williams, Andrews, Booth, and hundreds of others, it is unfair to name any particular computer as "first," but in recognition of the con-