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THE PROFESSORS AND THE POLITICIANS¹

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A lot of the misunderstanding between the professors and the defenders of the republic arises out of sheer ignorance of what a professor is and what he does.

In the secondary school system it may be adequate, for the needs of the country, to teach our future scientists the multiplication table, the value of π to two decimal places, and to distinguish between *stationary* and *stationery*. The college teacher conceives of his job as something quite different.

If a college education stands for anything, it means that the graduate has been taught to do his own thinking and to reject canned or predigested ideas. Our freshmen may not know who the president before Roosevelt was, but they arrive with hand-me-down prejudgments on everything under the sun, including politics, economics, segregation, the sanctity of marriage, and commissioned officers of the armed forces. The first task of the college teacher is to jolt them out of this.

Now, there is no detectable benefit in mutual applause. The student's assumption that Socialists are little if any better than Communists may be right; on the other hand, it may be wrong. In order to find out whether it is right or wrong, a convenient way of getting discussion going is to set up the proposition that Socialism is a very fine thing and it would be wonderful if the country had elected Norman Thomas president, and challenge the class to knock it down. Regardless of whether he himself votes Democratic or Republican, the teacher knows some nice things that can be said about Socialist theory. He knows that when the smoke of battle has blown away the Republicans will still be Republicans, the Democrats will still be Democrats, and the Communists will still be Communists; but he also knows that when-

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ever in the years to come they hear the term "Socialist," every student will remember that from the discussion emerged certain fundamental distinctions between Socialism and Communism.

Habits are built by repetition. If the teacher and his colleagues pull the rug often enough, they establish reflexes, so that when the student hears a controversial topic coming up he will (a) instantly identify it as controversial, (b) look for the gimmick, and (c) get into the argument as fast as he can. Four years of this makes college graduates.

There are plenty of materials for discussion, but the more feelings they hurt the longer the discussions will be remembered, and if you sit in a contemporary classroom long enough—it doesn't matter which one; these are matters which leap across departmental lines—you will hear suspiciously friendly things said about Fascism, Communism, capitalism, and atheism, sharp criticism of the legend of the Creation, and savage commentary on the workings of our courts of justice, all in order that the student's faith may rest on solid ground and not on muck.

The bloodiest row I ever witnessed was when a teacher of English called Social Security a fraud, a swindle, and a national shame, and for once found himself without a supporter in the class. They backed him right up to the wall and it was only the 10:55 bell that stilled the tumult and saved him from a knockout.

Teaching thrives on free discussion, and on this principle the colleges are turning out graduates who, among other things, can see right through politicians. It is precisely this fact, that they deliver to the community a hard core of men and women who have been permanently immunized to demagoguery, which enrages certain of the elected representatives of the people. And it is the fact that, by the nature of the case, the teachers can at one time or another be found on almost any side of almost any subject, that leads these same representatives to conclude that teachers are vulnerable and can safely and profitably be attacked.

There is no reason for the teachers to change their mode of life and there is no reason to think the politicians will, so that the conflict will have to be resolved, as usual, by public opinion. With each succeeding June the proportion of college graduates in the electorate is rising.