

The Liberal Arts:

a relic of the past or a hope for the future?

By DR. ROBERT K. CARR
President of Oberlin College



Dr. Robert K. Carr, president of Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio, returned to the University of Oklahoma last spring as the Phi Beta Kappa speaker. Dr. Carr had been a member of the O.U. government faculty from 1931-37. He was also on the Dartmouth College faculty before going to Oberlin as president. A nationally-known political scientist, Dr. Carr has served the federal government as an expert on civil rights and is the author of numerous books and articles. The following article is a Sooner Magazine adaptation of his address to O.U.'s 1961 Phi Beta Kappas.

THE technical know-how or professional competence which our college graduates will bring to their specific assignments in life does not particularly worry me. If we have learned anything in our era, it is how to train people for the wide range of jobs that keep the wheels turning in our complex civilization. Rather it is their general outlook, their view of the world and man, that seem to me to be important as we look ahead to the contributions they can make to society.

The graduates of the University of Oklahoma are identified with a great institution, which among other things means that it has many technical and professional schools. But these are mostly at the graduate level. Unless things have changed more than I realize since my years at the University, the kind of education which O.U. graduates have received is essentially the one I have known throughout my academic career—a liberal arts education. Admittedly this is a label. It is a shorthand phrase, one we tend to use too easily, often imprecisely, and at times even a bit pretentiously. Many people have tried to de-

fine a liberal arts education, never wholly successfully.

Fortunately, there is an easier approach. For more important than a liberal arts education is the end product of such an education, the liberal arts graduate himself. What kind of a person is he? Ideally, what kind of a person should he be? Here we are on a bit firmer ground. For example, the man who has been exposed to a liberal arts education and with whom the exposure has taken possesses among other things two exceedingly important qualities. The first of these is perspective, a quality that enables one to bring a balanced approach to life and its problems, a quality gained out of past thought and experience. The second is open-mindedness, a quality that enables man to choose his way ahead calmly and dispassionately as he faces issues posed by the present and future. Not everyone possesses these two qualities. Unfortunately, not even all graduates of liberal arts colleges possess them.

Two experiences this spring on the Oberlin campus have brought home to me how elusive these qualities are, or, to put
continued

education is concerned with ... as we

it differently, how hard it is to understand the spirit and meaning of a liberal arts education and then, having achieved understanding, to accept or approve this tradition.

The two experiences involved expressions of opinion at opposite ends of the political spectrum. The first occurred during a visit to the Oberlin campus of a group of so-called students from the Soviet Union. I say "so-called" because most of the members of the group proved to be nearer thirty years of age than twenty and any resemblance between them and typical American undergraduates was mighty slender.

Because Oberlin was the only liberal arts college the Russians visited, they pressed us hard for an explanation of the concept of the liberal arts. In spite of our best efforts to explain to them the meaning of a liberal

arts college, they just did not seem able to grasp the central idea. For them education had to offer something practical or useful. Most of them were engineers or journalists or lawyers or bureaucrats, and they just could not understand the general type of education that is offered at Oberlin. In the end the best they could do was to think of our educational system as somehow similar to the 19th century tradition of classical education with its emphasis upon the study of philosophy, history, ancient languages and the like. Having gone that far, they immediately put the question, "But why would anyone want that kind of an education in this day and age?" It was beyond their ability to understand that education could properly be concerned with helping the individual develop certain qualities of mind, such as perspective and open-mindedness,

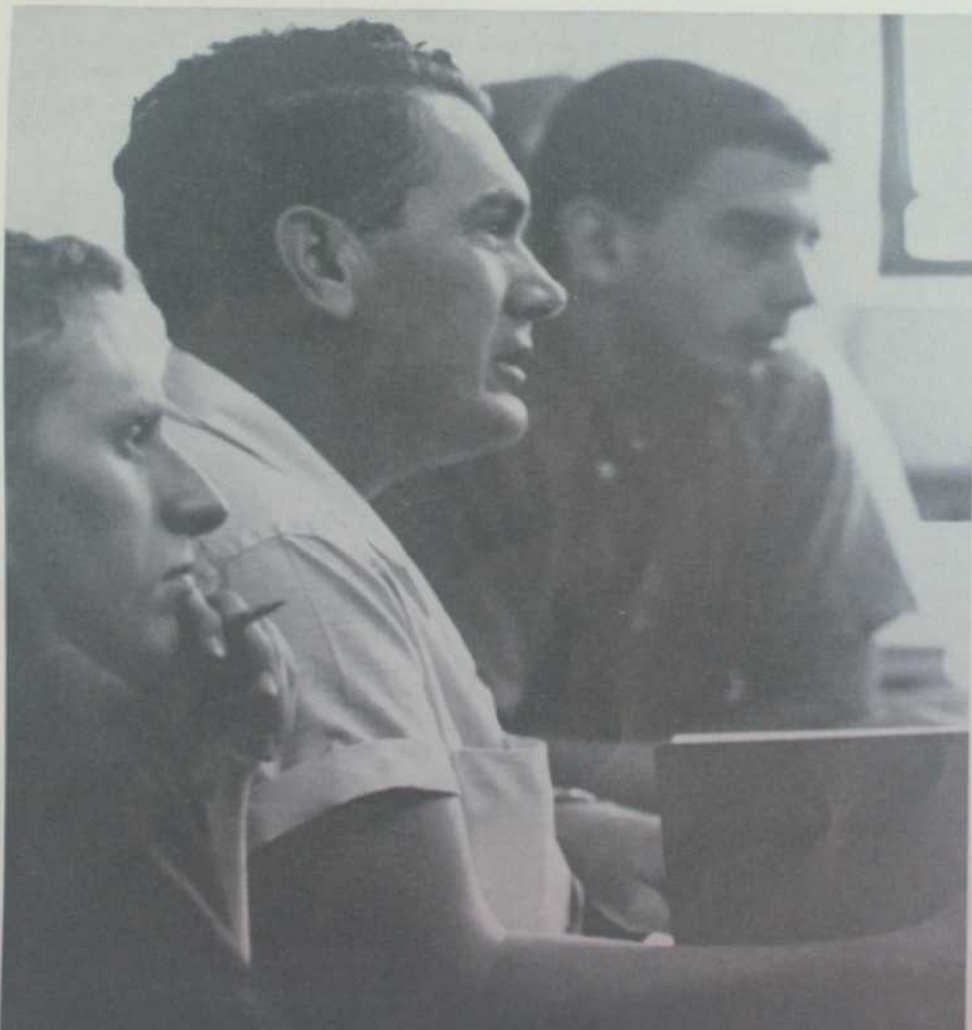
as well as giving him specific professional techniques.

The experience at the other end of the spectrum involved a rash of letters received from people of a conservative bent who seemed to regard Oberlin as a hotbed of radicalism and were disturbed by some of the Cleveland newspaper reports of happenings on our campus. A typical letter criticized me for permitting an extreme left-winger to speak on the Oberlin Campus in favor of abolishing the House Un-American Activities Committee.

In formulating my answer to these conservative critics of Oberlin, I stressed two basic ideas. The first is that a liberal arts campus is a free market place of thought and expression, where open-mindedness is the rule rather than the exception. This was an aspect of our college that the Russian visitors just could not understand. When we talked with them about our view of Oberlin as a free market place of thought and expression, they said, "But does not your country have certain national goals, certain basic beliefs? Why do you permit students to enter into discussions that run counter to these goals and beliefs? Why do you tolerate error on your campus?" It was clear that in the Soviet Union college students must refrain from doubting or debating any ideas that the state has officially labeled sacrosanct. I am afraid that Oberlin's conservative critics at home are much closer to holding this same stultifying view of the learning process than they realize, or would ever like to admit.

The second basic idea that I tried to put into my answers to these conservative critics was that students on a liberal arts campus are viewed as possessing enough maturity, independence, and common sense to resist indoctrination in foolish and unsound ideas, to be trusted to make up their own minds about anything. Such a campus is a place, in other words, where people are beginning to gain perspective. This does not mean that undergraduate students of a liberal arts college will not occasionally

"The student trained in the liberal arts has one foot in the past and one foot in the future."



Qualities of mind the professional techniques

make errors or be wrong in their thinking or in their beliefs. Indeed, an important part of the system is the right to be wrong. After all, one way of discovering truth is by testing it against error. To be wrong about something can often be a very useful experience, when one is thereby enabled to move on to the right answer.

Behind these two basic ideas are certain further assumptions. The first concerns the nature of "truth." Man is not likely at this stage of his development to encounter many final truths in his ways of coming to grips with his problems in the social area—politics and economics, for example. At least that which passes for social truth has, up to now, been subject to continuous re-examination and refinement.

This brings us to a second assumption. Change is an inescapable characteristic of our age, as seen most clearly, of course, in the area of scientific knowledge and achievement.

The third assumption is that a democratic society such as ours must attempt to adjust to such changes as those produced by science. In the twelfth and latest volume in his monumental *Study of History*, Arnold Toynbee writes "I do not know of any human society in which drastic social reform has not been overdue at every stage of its history." A further aspect of this third assumption is that our society must try to adjust to change in an evolutionary manner, thus escaping the disorderly, unpredictable, uncontrollable, and often devastating consequences of revolutionary changes.

Another way of putting this essential point is that the good citizen in a free society—and the student trained in the liberal arts has that role if he has any—must have one foot in the past and one foot in the future. He must have a large measure of respect for what is, as the end of all human progress to date. But he must also recognize that the future is necessarily going to be different from the present. In other words, a man must learn to live, work, and think within the established tradition, but he must also learn to test and challenge that tradition constantly.

I believe that the liberal arts approach

to life senses and expresses this need to balance past, present, and future, even though in the process it must come to grips with more than a little of paradox. Thus, at its best, the liberal arts approach encourages the individual to engage in much study of the past, to use the *historical* method as he endeavors to understand society's eternal issues and problems. It also encourages him to be highly contemporary or *analytical* in attacking problems, to use what we have come to call the scientific method in gathering and evaluating data about these problems. Finally, it encourages him to be concerned about the future, to use the *creative* approach in developing new ideas and new methods in carrying forward the attack upon traditional problems.

Our liberal arts graduates must preserve in their outlooks such opposite or paradoxical qualities as faith and skepticism, contentment and curiosity, steadfastness and flexibility. If they can do this, they will be as well prepared as I know how to advise them to accept and defend what is good and worthwhile in the social order and, at the same time, to reject what is outworn or unsound; to be conservative in protecting time-tested institutions and, at the same time, to be liberal in searching for better ways of doing difficult things.

This will not always be easy. We live in an age in which there are great extremes of thought and action, the extremes of what it has become fashionable to call "the left" and "the right." I suspect that most of us are now pretty well educated about the dangers of the left. Back in the 1930's the individual may have had some excuse for being intrigued by aspects of the Communist dialectic. But within the last quarter of a century, a great deal of history has been taking place, and very little of it has put Communism in a more favorable light for the American. Through their actions the Communists have taught us to understand the errors that are inherent in their doctrines. The result is that the intellectual appeal of Communism to the educated American, particularly to the college student, is non-existent. I happen to believe that this appeal was always exaggerated, that what-



"We have learned . . . how to train people for the range of jobs that keep the wheels turning."

ever the dangers Communism offered to the world, or to Americans in particular, the corruption of our people through the voluntary acceptance of Communist doctrine was not among them.

I am afraid, on the other hand, that mounting evidence continues to suggest that we are less sophisticated when it comes to resisting the corrupting influence of the ideas that find expression on the extreme right. In a sense, this is a bit surprising, for one might suppose that the history of the last quarter of a century would also have taught us to appreciate the error that is inherent in reactionary doctrine. One might have supposed that the events of the McCarthy era would have done this much for us. One might suppose further that our need during this present period of cold war to compete with the Communists in economic, military, and intellectual terms in literally every part of the world suggest the

continued

. . . and the Russians asked, "Why do you tolerate error on your campus?"

utter folly of such favorite schemes of the extreme right as abolition of the federal income tax as a source of revenue for our national government, or the complete rejection of such means of maintaining the physical strength and morale of our people as is provided through the social security system, through unemployment insurance, through public works, through better educational opportunities and improved medical care. Or the folly inherent in schemes to transfer the center of political power and responsibility from the national govern-

ment to the state governments. Or the discontinuation of military assistance to our allies and economic aid to underdeveloped countries.

But these highly emotional and utterly impractical proposals which are constantly emerging from the extreme right seem still to find much favor with many of our people. How else explain the letters from critics on the right that make up such a large part of a college president's mail these days? How else explain the recent action of the Daughters of the American Revolution in

adopting by a vote of 2,082 to 1 a resolution urging Congress not to support the Peace Corps program? How else explain the formation of seemingly endless organizations to promote incredibly reactionary programs by secret authoritarian means, of which the John Birch Society is but the latest example? I am persuaded that there is no surer way to destroy the American way of life than to allow the outlook of the John Birch Society to win approval with any large number of our people. That its proposals represent the proper way to meet and surmount the Communist challenge in our age is to my way of thinking absolutely incredible. Unfortunately, there seems no sure way of guaranteeing that otherwise sensible American people will not listen to the siren songs of the John Birch societies and find them appealing.

I have no magic formula to offer. I can do no better than to fall back on my absolute conviction that a liberal arts education, by giving the individual perspective and open-mindedness, offers him the best protection against being led astray by foolish ideas and against that hardening of the arteries of the mind that makes a person fear and distrust the very idea of change and progress.

Lest there be any misunderstanding at this point, let me make it clear that it is no more true that change is always desirable than it is that all good things lie in the past. Inability to make use of perspective or to maintain an open mind is no more attractive in liberals than it is in conservatives.

There is a strong presumption that those who have experienced the liberal arts approach to education are wise enough to have learned the most important lesson of all, namely, that the only learning that is truly worthwhile in the long run is that which comes through the never-ending process of self-education. They have every reason to face life courageously, enthusiastically, and optimistically. But they must face it with every expectation that the road ahead will be a difficult one and that our country will continue to have an inexhaustible need for new ideas, new social arrangements, and new ways of doing things; in short, that if our way of life is to survive, it must grow and change in the future as it always has in the past.



"Students on a liberal arts campus . . . possess enough maturity, independence and common sense to resist indoctrination in foolish and unsound ideas . . . to make up their minds about anything."