

James A. Perkins

October 11, 1911 — August 19, 1998

James Alfred Perkins served as the seventh President of Cornell University from 1963-69. At the time of his death, he was Chairman Emeritus of the International Council for Educational Developments, which he had founded in 1970. Perkins devoted most of his life to the improvement of higher education in the United States and abroad. As Cornell President Hunter Rawlings stated: “Jim Perkins represented the highest ideals of liberal education, and he left a permanent legacy not only on the Cornell campus but also in the foundation of our nation’s dynamic postwar education and research institutions.”

Born in Philadelphia, Perkins was the son of Harry Norman Perkins, a banker, and Emily Cramp (Taylor) Perkins. Although his parents were not Quakers, he attended the Germantown Friends School, founded by the Monthly Meeting of Friends in Philadelphia in 1845, a school whose goal was “to give a thorough education by providing moral, intellectual, and physical training that will fit boys and girls to become useful men and women...Christian influences, positive in character, are fostered as the highest value in school life.” In his senior year, Perkins was editor-in-chief of the student literary magazine, the *Pastorian*.

Perkins entered Swarthmore College in 1930, at a time when pacifist sentiment was gaining strength on college campuses across the nation. He had attended weekly Friends’ Meetings in high school and so it was rather to be expected that during his undergraduate years he would join the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers). In the spring of his junior year, students at Swarthmore and more than sixty other American colleges solemnly took the “Oxford Pledge,” declaring their opposition to military service and participation in war. Perkins graduated from Swarthmore in 1934 with high honors.

He then entered the Doctoral program in Political Science at Princeton University, where he studied with the prominent scholar, William S. Carpenter. The topic he chose for his dissertation, “Congress Investigates Our Foreign Relations,” reflected Perkins’s ongoing concern with contemporary problems of war and peace. In 1934, the U.S. Senate had created an investigating committee under Gerald Nye of North Dakota to probe the influence of the armaments industry on American foreign policy. In 1936, the Nye Committee issued a report, which asserted that bankers and munitions makers had played an essential role in pushing the United States into the First World War.

In his dissertation, which he completed in 1937, Perkins examined the munitions inquiry as one example of many congressional attempts – beginning with a 1919 Senate investigation into conditions in Mexico – to influence presidential conduct of the nation’s foreign policy or federal policies affecting trade and immigration. Perkins’s conclusion, which he published in the April 1940, *American Political Science Review*, was that congressional investigations “have repeatedly failed to have much influence on the course of our foreign policy.” Much of his effort went to explaining the political and structural reasons for that failure, and to calling for “self-restraint” on the part of Congress so that its future actions might be “in harmony with the requirements of our democracy.”

His Ph.D. degree in hand, Perkins decided to remain at Princeton, first as Instructor in Political Science from 1937-39, and then as Assistant Director of the School of Public and International Affairs from 1939-41. On June 20, 1938, he married his college sweetheart, Jean E. Bredin (Swarthmore ‘36), and the couple eventually had five children: Barbara, Joan, John, David, and Tracy. By 1941, Perkins had already acquired valuable experience in academic administration at Princeton, and the entry of the United States into World War II in December provided him (and thousands of other able young men and women) with an extraordinary opportunity to develop his managerial skills in wartime civilian administration.

Perkins moved to Washington, D.C. in 1941 to take a position with the Office of Price Administration (OPA). Created by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in order to prevent inflation and profiteering, the agency was led by the flamboyant New Deal economist, Leon Henderson. Perkins headed the Pulp and Paper Division which had responsibility for many commodities: wrapping paper, paperboard, boxes, wastepaper, printing and writing paper, industrial paper, converted paper products, pulpwood, and wood pulp (special grades of which were used for rayon and nitrating purposes). Since the war had interrupted shipments of lumber from the Scandinavian countries, prices had begun to rise sharply. So Perkins’s Division endeavored to obtain voluntary agreements from leading producers to hold the line on prices, and, when unable to arrange for such informal compliance, to formulate and implement a schedule of maximum prices. Within about a year, most of the needed regulations were in place, and the work of the Division thereafter consisted chiefly of refining and adjusting existing standards.

In 1943, Perkins left the OPA to become Assistant to the Administrator of the Foreign Economic Administration (FEA). Headed by Leo T. Crowley, the agency had been created in September of that year to bring a measure of consistency to the efforts of the Office of Economic Warfare, the Office of Lend-Lease Administration, and the Office of Foreign Relief and Rehabilitation Operations. The FEA also sought to coordinate the work of these

agencies with that of the State Department. Perkins was now involved in issues such as the provision of Lend-Lease aid to Great Britain, the restoration of private trade in the liberated areas of Europe, and the making of plans for postwar Germany. Perhaps Crowley's most controversial decision, made in May 1945, was to cut off virtually all Lend-Lease aid to the Soviet Union.

With the end of the war, Perkins returned to academic administration, this time as Vice-President of his alma mater, Swarthmore. He remained in that office from 1945-50, years of rapid expansion in American higher education, largely as a result of the G.I. Bill of Rights, but years also noted for the relative tranquility of campus life. In the summer of 1950, he left Swarthmore to become an Executive Associate at the Carnegie Corporation, a foundation whose purpose was to promote "the advancement and diffusion of knowledge and understanding among the people of the United States." Appointed a Vice President in November 1951, Perkins remained with the Carnegie Corporation until 1963 when he moved to Cornell. In his first year at Carnegie, the Corporation made grants totaling about \$5 million; ten years later, the annual amount had reached nearly \$10 million. While at Carnegie, he helped prepare a widely circulated document, "The Power of the Democratic Idea," under the auspices of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund.

At the same time, Perkins also served as a Vice President of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, then headed by John Gardner (who also was President of the Carnegie Corporation). The Foundation had been established in 1905 as a pension fund for college professors, but its charter authorized it "to do and perform all things necessary to encourage, uphold, and dignify the profession of the teacher and the cause of higher education." The Foundation sponsored surveys and initiated policy reviews, and during Perkins's tenure, it paid particular attention to the emerging federal presence in higher education, and the implications of that presence for the autonomy of universities and the preservation of academic freedom.

In 1951, Perkins took a leave from his duties at Carnegie to serve as Deputy Chairman of the Research and Development Board of the Department of Defense. He summarized some of the Board's findings and recommendations in a paper published in the *Public Administration Review* in the spring of 1953. Criticizing various organizational shortcomings, Perkins suggested that the Joint Chiefs of staff be relieved of certain administrative tasks so that they could concentrate on military planning. He also recommended that policy planners in the State Department and National Security Council be kept better informed about new concepts of military strategy and economic planning. In April 1960, testifying before a Senate subcommittee, Perkins said that organizational shortcomings

were largely to blame for the failure of the National Security Council to provide the President clearly-defined policy alternatives.

In 1963, following the retirement of Deane W. Malott, the Cornell Board of Trustees elected Perkins President of the University. Commenting on his selection, trustees and faculty members not only mentioned the positions he had held in government, academia, and the world of private foundations, but also noted his service as the Chairman of President John F. Kennedy's Advisory Panel on a "National Academy of Foreign Affairs," and as a member of General Advisory Committee of the United States Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, the United States Committee for UNESCO, the Herter Committee on Foreign Affairs Personnel, and the Board of Trustees of the Rand Corporation. Clinton Rossiter, the John L. Senior Professor of American Institutions, said he had seen Perkins at various conferences, "and I have always been impressed by his learning, common sense and high standards."

Perkins was inaugurated on October 4, 1963, not long after Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech at the March on Washington, and not long before President John F. Kennedy's assassination. John Gardner, in his introductory remarks, praised Perkins as "an extraordinarily kind, warm, decent and charitable human being," sounded a note of caution – which, in the event, proved prophetic – when he said that, "like every other social institution, universities are subject to disintegrative forces, are the scene of power politics, and are susceptible to the decay that so often sets in at precisely the hour of triumph."

Perkins's inaugural address, however, emphasized only the exciting opportunities facing Cornell. Calling for a "sweeping reexamination" and "redefinition of our mission," he proposed that Cornell embrace its role "in the hard world of affairs." Forecasting the future of American universities, he declared:

"Having meshed their gears with society, they must now develop the institutional policies and the administrative muscle required to be a driving rather than merely a spinning gear. The university has a direct stake in the shape and substance of the society in which it will do its work. If free universities require free societies, universities cannot shirk their obvious responsibilities."

Perkins elaborated on some of these ideas in November 1965 when he delivered the Stafford Little Lectures at Princeton University, later published as, *The University in Transition*, a book which sparked considerable controversy. The university, Perkins said, was "increasingly vital in the application of knowledge to the problems of modern society."

In his six years in Day Hall, Perkins brought about far-reaching changes in virtually all areas of Cornell life. The very look of the campus changed with the planning and construction of the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, the Space Sciences Building, the Robert R. Wilson Synchrotron Laboratory, the Noyes Student Center, the underground Campus Store, and Uris, Clark, Emerson, and Bradfield Halls. There were innovative modifications in departmental structure, too, such as the formation of the Division of Biological Sciences (which combined departments from the endowed side of the University with departments from the New York State statutory side), and the Department of Computer Science (which belonged jointly to the Engineering College and the College of Arts and Sciences). Perkins's administration also witnessed the creation of the Plasma Physics Laboratory, the Water Resources Institute, and the Cornell Institute for Social and Economic Research.

Changes in the academic life of the university and the role of the professoriat were equally significant. In his first year in office, President Perkins persuaded the trustees to provide an across-the-board salary increase that dramatically improved the faculty's standard of living. He initiated the Andrew D. White Professors-at-Large Program that brought eminent scholars to campus for two-week visits; he saw to the creation of 23 endowed professorial chairs for distinguished faculty members; and he established the Society for the Humanities. During Perkins's presidency, the university moved to a more structured use of internal ad hoc committees in cases involving tenure and promotion. A system of five-year terms for department chairs became the rule rather than the exception.

The undergraduate experience, too, was transformed during the six years of Perkins presidency. Under Professor W. Rea Keast, who was appointed Vice President for Academic Affairs, committees were established to evaluate many areas of undergraduate education. A committee headed by Professors Alfred Kahn and Raymond Bowers issued a far-reaching report regarding curricular changes. Another group, led by Professor Alain Seznec, explored the possibility of establishing residential colleges, and, indeed, the International Living Center was established, as was Risley House for students interested in the performing arts. The College Scholar program was created in order to free some of the ablest students from the ordinary requirements of a departmental major, and the faculty decided to switch from a numerical to an alphabetical system of grading. A six-year Ph.D. program was instituted, which, while it did not prove successful, nevertheless demonstrated Perkins's imagination and ability to obtain funding for his ideas. During his presidency, also, Perkins saw to the completion of two capital fund-raising campaigns that raised more than \$100 million for Cornell and the Medical College in New York City.

No change was more significant, however, than the adoption of a new minority admissions policy. A believer in the cause of racial justice and the university's role in achieving it, Perkins set up a new procedure to recruit African American students. In 1963, when he assumed the presidency, there were fewer than ten African-American undergraduates at Cornell. Perkins created a Committee on Special Education Projects that fostered non-traditional admission criteria, emphasizing not only grades and scores on standardized tests but also an applicant's motivation and leadership skills. By 1969, because of these efforts, African American undergraduates numbered nearly 250.

Yet while Perkins, like others of his generation, supported integration, nonviolence, and gradualism, the motivating ideals of the early civil rights movement, many African American students who had entered Cornell were devotees of Black Power, with its emphasis on nationalism, self-defense, and non-negotiable demands. Under the circumstances, conflict was unavoidable, and it reached crisis proportions in the years 1968 and 1969. African American students demanded that the university create a separate Black Studies program, and demanded, too, that Black students who had violated campus rules as part of a political protest be exempted from appearing before the judicial system. Perkins attempted to steer a middle course, agreeing to create and fund a largely autonomous Africana Studies Center, but not interfering in the ordinary workings of the judicial system. "I operate on the assumption that the Cornell community will function reasonably if I and my colleagues deal reasonably with these demands," he said in December 1968.

Tragically, by the following spring that assumption was proven unworkable. At six o'clock in the morning on Saturday, April 19, 1969, a number of students in the Afro-American Society (AAS) took over Willard Straight Hall, armed themselves when they feared an assault from hostile whites, and plunged the campus into crisis. National media attention focused on the most sensational events of the following week: Black students leaving the Straight brandishing rifles and shotguns, AAS leaders making speeches over the radio threatening the lives of professors, thousands of students occupying Barton Hall and demanding the faculty nullify the judicial system's reprimand of the Black activists, and, finally, the faculty's decision to reverse itself and to rescind the penalties.

The actions of the administration in persuading the AAS to leave the Straight and in persuading the faculty to rescind the penalties succeeded in averting what Perkins feared most: a violent confrontation between students and the police. However, Perkins paid a heavy price, indeed, for he appeared to his critics as weak, vacillating, and indecisive. Many faculty members, particularly in the Law School, publicly expressed a lack of confidence in his commitment to academic freedom and his ability to maintain law and order. Many alumni, troubled by the

adverse national publicity surrounding the events of April, concluded that Perkins had been unwilling to stand up for basic principles but rather had caved in to the demands of radical students. On May 31, 1969, he offered his resignation and the Board of Trustees decided to accept it immediately rather than have him remain, in effect, as a “lame-duck” president.

In the years that followed, he avoided commenting on the tumultuous events that had led him to leave Cornell. Nevertheless, in a speech to the Tower Club shortly before his resignation he defended his actions. His foremost goal, he said, was to prevent violence. Responding to the argument that he should have called in the civil authorities to end the Straight takeover, he explained: “We calculated that the odds were in the direction of loss of life on the Cornell campus if the Black students were not evacuated from Willard Straight promptly.” Perkins’s aversion to the prospect of violence may have reflected his Quaker background; it certainly reflected his conviction that, in the end, the greatest danger to the university community and the consensus on which it necessarily had to rest was the use of armed force on campus. “If we in higher education cannot find useful avenues toward racial cooperation,” he said, “then I honestly do not know how society at large will be able to deal successfully with this problem.”

On leaving Ithaca, Perkins returned to Princeton, New Jersey, to establish the International Council for Educational Development (ICED) which, over the years, proved highly successful. In 1970, he suffered a profound loss when his wife, Jean, died after a long illness. He would eventually be remarried to the former Ruth B. Aall. In 1990, he retired from the ICED and was named Chairman Emeritus. In 1992, Cornell established the James A. Perkins Professorship in Environmental Studies. In 1995, Cornell trustee Thomas W. Jones, (who had been one of the most militant leaders of the AAS in the 1960s) established the James A. Perkins Prize for Interracial Understanding and Harmony, awarded annually.

President Perkins once declared it his hope that universities could muster the “compassion,” “patience,” and “courage” to perform the important work which society needed. To his closest acquaintances during his Cornell years, those qualities indeed, best described James A. Perkins.

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