THE DAY THAT CHANGED AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION, FOREVER

The day was June 22, 1922, and Commencement Day at Harvard. As President Lawrence Lowell approached the podium, he probably had little idea that, on that day, he would initiate a movement that would drastically change the nations colleges and universities. Lowell noted in his speech that Harvard had a "Jewish problem". The "problem" was that 22% of the students were Jewish, with expectations that the number would double in the foreseeable future. The situation resulted from the fact that Harvard, like most universities in the world, admitted students on the basis of their performance on an admission examination. The system worked fine for years as applicants from the aristocratic private academies of New England filled the freshman class. But things changed with the arrival of Russian Jewish immigrants. These parents instilled in their children a love of learning and exhorted them to academic achievement. The children responded by excelling at every step of the educational ladder. For example, in 1920, thirty percent of the population of New York City was Jewish, but they represented fifty percent of the high school population. And they creamed the college entrance examinations. At the time, forty percent of the Columbia student body was Jewish.

But Lowell made an error of judgment. While the developing situation was viewed with alarm by the eastern educational establishment, and flagrant, widespread anti-Semitism was being used to stem the tide, Lowell made the mistake of publicly admitting to the practice. All hell broke loose. The New York Times featured a front-page story; the Massachusetts legislature proposed a legislative inquiry; a bill was introduced to remove all reference to Harvard from the state constitution; the governor established a committee to investigate discrimination in the university and the Boston City Council (being Irish and knowing about discrimination) condemned the Harvard administration.

President Lowell did what all university presidents do when under fire - form a committee. (I actually found a copy of the report in the Cornell Library.) The first sentence of the report came out strongly against any form of discrimination or quotas. Not too many sentences later, the report recommended that the admission of students by examination, which resulted in the Jewish success in the first place, be deemphasized.
And what criteria did the committee propose to replace admission by examination? They decided that geographical diversity would add something to the student body. The problem was the students from the west and the south had a difficult time with the entrance examination, so a recommendation was made that students who ranked in the top seventh of their class would be exempt from the examination. This move made for a much larger pool of applicants from which to pick and choose. Decisions would then be based on the individual's 'character' and 'leadership' with letters of recommendation to help with these evaluations. In other words, the nature of the student body was now determined by the institution rather than, as previously, academic merit. Similar procedures were rapidly adopted by other institutions and the number of Jewish students dropped precipitously—at Columbia, from forty percent to twenty-two. It is interesting that our present system for admitting freshmen arose, in 1923, from the Harvard committee which devised ways to limit the number of Jews.

Our system is unusual—if a student at a European university were to be told that athletic ability, character and leadership were factors in the selection process, the result would be a blank stare. I believe that our system is different because most of our institutions are private rather than public. As such, they are financially dependent on alumni, who have a voice in institutional policies. The alumni remember "how it was" and resist change. One topic that got alumni worked up in the late 1960s was the possibility of the admission of women at all-male schools, with Princeton being the most bitter. The Old Tigers believed that the presence of "girls" would destroy the institution. A group ACTION was formed to save the university. A poll of alumni showed the fifty-seven percent wanted the status quo, with the old guard heavily opposed to women and the young alumni relaxed. The undergrads were all for it. ACTION tried to take over the alumni organization, with Donald Rumsfeld '66 being one of those leading the charge. They failed.

ELITISM

A concept that may be a bit difficult to precisely identify, but you know it when you see it. The public school systems of New York, Chicago and Philadelphia, the three largest urban areas in the country at the time, had a combined total of 13 students in the entering class at Yale in 1950. St. Paul's Episcopal Academy, a boarding school in New Hampshire, was represented in the same class by 24 students from a graduating class of 64.

THE WONDERS OF NATURE

And what do you think that this bazaar looking animal might be? If you saw the most recent National Geographic, you would know that it is a speckled emperor moth from South Africa. The picture shows the moth's left and right wings. Note the glints in the "eyeballs." That might be enough to scare the daylight out of a predator.

THE WONDERS OF MAN

This is an aerial view of Santa Monica, California, taken in 1945. As in the picture above, it is not what it seems to be—it is the Douglas Aircraft Factory, camouflaged to prevent detection. It is a fake city built on four hundred poles with millions of square feet of chicken wire, flimsy houses and fake trees. There is even a working smokestack which is real.