

THURSDAY FORUM

10 years after, his questions apply

By Walter H. Capps

When he was introduced, it was noted that he was once the youngest person to have been appointed dean of the Law School at Yale, and the youngest-ever president of the University of Chicago. It was added that he was chairman of the board of directors of the Encyclopedia Britannica. In addition, he was identified as a primary intellectual sponsor of the St. Johns Colleges as well as the Aspen Institute, and the founder of the "Great Books of the Western World" tradition. And then, when it came time to describe what he had become involved in subsequently, reference was made to the fact that he was also founder and president of the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, in Santa Barbara.

Beyond these institutional mentorships, he was also acknowledged as having offered some of the most insightful interpretations of the basic and ongoing needs and challenges of a democratic society. The topics he addressed, the philosophical convictions to which he was devoted, and the social needs and political issues that captured his attention read, in outline, like an updated version of the substance of Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*. He had urged that the vitality of a democracy depends upon the rigor of its discourse. How he would have loved this year's bicentennial appraisal of the meaning of the Constitution. But he would have approached it as a discussion that needs to occur next year too, and the

On this 10th anniversary of his death, we who are indebted to him wish to pay tribute anew to Robert Maynard Hutchins.



one after that, and each year thereafter.

On the subject of education, he got there early, and remained far ahead of everyone. *The Learning Society*, his last book, published in 1968, may still be the most recent philosophical treatise on education written by an American college or university president. In it, with remarkable anticipatory insight, he addressed many questions that have subsequently become fundamental: How can the nation build an educational system to anticipate and meet the monumental challenges of the 21st century? What combinations of private and governmental sponsorship will be required? How can the United States train its citizens for resilient participation in the international community? What are the basic texts when education is conducted within a global framework? How are values taught

and consciences nurtured in a world increasingly characterized by scientific advance and a compulsion for technological expertise? How shall the resources of education be tapped — while the most respected traditions of scholarship are strengthened — to meet the requirements of justice, liberty and equality for all peoples of the earth? Can human wisdom attain sufficient depth rapidly enough to be able to establish protections against the threat of a nuclear holocaust? These were the questions that prompted him to conceive of a "learning society," in which education is lifelong, and is not restricted to formal schooling.

He respected law, he cherished tradition and he was keenly sensitive to the authority of whatever is genuinely new, spontaneous and innovative. He pleaded for the most substantial theory possible, convinced that nothing less would stimulate constructive action. And when he assembled participants around his dialogue table, he sought knowledgeable persons from all walks and stations of life, compelled by what Studs Terkel has called "the wisdom of ordinary Americans."

Mortimer Adler, his longtime friend and colleague, once praised him to the skies, observing that this "measured judgment" would one day be elevated to an even higher assessment. Adler cited the keenness of his abilities as mentor, the integrity of his moral conscience, and "the beauty and grace of his person."

He himself did not trust such adulation, being prone by temperament to focus instead on what he saw as an unfulfilled potential that marked portions of his career while haunting the institutions he had set in motion.

Both assessments are accurate, for the work that he set out to accomplish remains unfinished. And on this 10th anniversary of his death, we who are indebted to him, who remember him vividly and continue to be encouraged by his extraordinary example, wish to pay tribute anew to Robert Maynard Hutchins.

Walter H. Capps is professor of religious studies at UCSB, and a former fellow and director of the Hutchins Center.