Albert L. Kohlmeier

In June, 1953, Professor Albert L. Kohlmeier retired from the faculty of Indiana University after more than forty years as a member of the Department of History. He had served as the department's head from 1926 to 1948.

The Indiana University Department of History honored Professor Kohlmeier at a dinner, on June 1, 1953, at which President Herman B Wells praised Kohlmeier's skill as a teacher, excellence as a scholar, and competence as an administrator, and voiced the hope that, notwithstanding retirement from routine duties, Kohlmeier would continue to be a very active influence in University affairs. President Emeritus William Lowe Bryan expressed gratitude for Dr. Kohlmeier's many years of devotion and service to the University. Professor Prescott W. Townsend of the Department of History and Vice-President and Dean of the Faculties Herman T. Briscoe also paid tributes to Professor Kohlmeier, which the *Indiana Magazine of History* takes pleasure in here publishing. We are pleased to publish, in addition, two speeches of Dr. Kohlmeier's, the first given on Founders' Day, May 6, 1953, and the second, a complement to the first, made at the dinner in his honor.

"Albert L. Kohlmeier: Colleague"

Prescott W. Townsend

My first association with Indiana University led me to identify this institution with one man. That man was Albert L. Kohlmeier. In him and through him I quickly came to appreciate the tradition of the University and the department in which I have had the privilege of membership. In the history department I found a tradition of long standing, which encouraged the individual to exercise the greatest possible freedom consistent with responsibility to the group. Out of this tradition there has grown a notable *esprit de corps*, a spirit of loyalty and service, none too common in those days or in these. Professor Kohlmeier was then and has continued to be the embodiment of this tradition and this spirit; under his skillful guidance it flourished and grew. In less competent hands it might have withered and died.

Mr. Kohlmeier regards neither uniformity nor conformity as virtues in and of themselves. As a department administrator he steadfastly insisted upon the worth of the individual student and of the individual teacher. He encouraged each member of the history staff to develop his own capacities as a teacher and as a scholar, each in his own fashion, firmly convinced that thereby lay the greatest good to both individual and institution. If a teacher fell under criticism on some particular count, he would at once point out this teacher's excellent qualities and outstanding successes in ways which the critic had overlooked, but which Mr. Kohlmeier considered important. "If he is not teaching these particular facts, or if not by the method you prefer," he would say, "he is teaching something else, or by another method." In his mind the one absolute requirement was that the teacher *teach*, and that his teaching be honest, effective, and scholarly. There was no place on the staff for the indifferent and the incompetent. The first and paramount duty of the faculty was to teach.

In his view the ideal university department is composed of individuals, each with his own special qualifications. That passion for rule, regulation, and regimentation, so often dear to the hearts of those of more limited experience or lesser stature, had no charm for him. This is by no means to say that Mr. Kohlmeier would do without law—no one with his extraordinary grasp of history could harbor a notion so naive—but that the individual should have the utmost freedom within the frame of law. Insofar as possible he preferred to rely upon the individual teacher's sense of responsibility. Conformity to a set pattern or to a rigid system was a vice. It was not a virtue.

Mr. Kohlmeier is a man of infinite patience and tact. In his relations with colleagues and with students, these qualities have stood him in good stead. This I know from considerable personal experience. It may well come as a surprise to many in our university community to learn that they are not the first to urge revision and promote reform. There were other reformers before them. All could freely present their ideas to him, and any thoughtful suggestion or honest criticism received careful consideration. When the speaker had finished, Mr. Kohlmeier, with a searching, well-directed question, would then draw attention to some vital aspect of the problem which

the eager advocate had overlooked. It rarely failed to touch the heart of the problem.

Of course there were always those who had not eyes to see, nor ears to hear, those who failed to appreciate his insight. For such, Professor Kohlmeier had an effective method: Allow the person to continue along his own path, until he had learned for himself by the hard way that which he might have learned more easily, had he been willing to listen. In the end there was no recrimination, no sharp "I told you so," at most the suggestion of a smile or a sly twinkle. This too I know from personal experience.

Above all else I have found Mr. Kohlmeier to be a man of balance. Keen observation of life combines with profound study of history to teach him the line between the petty and the significant, the ephemeral and the eternal, the impractical and the practical. Born of wide experience and a sense of fitness and balance, his wisdom was never more evident than when weighing and testing a new procedure or a proposed change in policy. What are the implications? Where will it lead over the years? These would be his questions. Change for the sake of change has not appealed to him—a quality all too frequently misunderstood by those who mistake all change for progress. Measures which he considered unsound he steadfastly opposed; but if convinced that the proposal had merit, he would lend effective aid. To solve a vexing problem his skill in compromise was often brought to bear; to sacrifice some immediate short-term advantage for the ultimate long-term goal, he regarded as gain; but to sacrifice a principle for an immediate advantage was no gain. This is the path of great wisdom.

This sense of balance, this feeling for the "golden mean," was invaluable in problems of administration. He readily distinguished the pedant from the scholar. Estimates of scholarship based upon numbers, be they number of titles, number of pages, number of references, he has never confused with appraisals of quality. Far better than most who consider themselves experts in the field, he recognizes the differences between the pedagogue and the educator, between the mechanics and the art of teaching. Throughout his career he well demonstrated that success in teaching depends in the last analysis on the teacher's knowledge and on his personal enthusiasm for his subject.

The oft-repeated dichotomy between teaching and research Mr. Kohlmeier knows to be false. He can take the measure of the man who, filled with pride (or shall we say conceit?) in the quantity rather than in the quality of his work, seeks to put a less prolific colleague in his place with the condescending remark: "He is *only* a teacher." This remark we have all heard, and from those who ought to know better. Too often it emanates from one whose success in the classroom is somewhat less than phenomenal. Few understand better than he the value of true scholarship and the essence of fine teaching. He well knows that the superior university teacher excels in both. Of this truth he is himself the superb example, a profound scholar and an inspiring teacher.

Professor Kohlmeier, on behalf of your colleagues in the history department, I take great pleasure in expressing our appreciation for a leadership considerate, conservative, progressive, and efficient; considerate in your relations with students and staff, conservative in holding fast to the lasting values of education, progressive in your concern for substantial growth, and efficient in carrying out a policy adapted to those objectives. Members of your department are fortunate indeed to have served under your administration. For a quarter of a century and more the history department of Indiana University has looked for guidance and direction to an outstanding administrator, a man of integrity, and a scholar.

"Albert L. Kohlmeier"

Herman T. Briscoe

I recently came across a copy of the yearbook of my class—the 1917 *Arbutus*. In this were pictured the full professors, associate professors, and assistant professors then on the faculty at Indiana University. There were fifty-six of these men and women. I was an undergraduate at that time and to me all of these persons were wonderful and great. After many years, during which I have come to know the University much better, and have known many hundreds of persons who have been and are associated with it, I still think this faculty of 1917 was a great one. Dr. Kohlmeier belonged to

that era as well as to this. He knew our strength and also our weaknesses in 1917, and during the years since then he has helped us remember our strengths so that we might increase them. He has also reminded us of our weaknesses and has helped us improve wherever they existed. One of Dr. Kohlmeier's great contributions has been this tie which he has provided with the University's past and with our heritage as an institution of higher education.

I once sat in a class taught by Dr. Kohlmeier. He was not the regular instructor, but on a few occasions he taught the class when the regular instructor was absent. Those occasions were the only bright spots for me in an otherwise uninspiring course. When he spoke of historical events I could well believe that he was speaking as an eyewitness who had viewed these events. In later years, I have heard him speak many times about Washington, Lincoln, Jefferson, and Franklin, and when he did so it seemed to me that he spoke as a contemporary, or indeed, as a boon companion, of these men.

What are Dr. Kohlmeier's contributions? This is both an easy and a difficult question to answer. It is difficult if we attempt to name his contributions one by one. It is easy if we summarize them by the statement: "His contributions are what they are because he is what he is." His contributions have been left in the hearts and minds of thousands of students and many colleagues with whom he has worked. We cannot compare his contributions with those of others because he stands alone. There has been and never will be but one Albert Kohlmeier. His contributions are those of a great teacher, a brilliant historian, and a scholar.

If I were a youngster interested in becoming a teacher, I could hope for nothing better in my training than to be allowed to sit in his classes and there to observe his methods as a teacher.

If I were a university president seeking a teacher of history, I would be proud and fortunate to have him on my faculty.

If I wanted to begin all over again my student days, I would want to have him as my teacher of history.

For all these qualities we admire and respect him.

If I wished to spend an evening about the fireside, I could wish for no more enjoyable companion.

If I were to travel through farms and gardens and woods and fields, his company would make my journey happy and complete.

If I wished to learn about people—little people, unimportant people—I could wish for nothing more than to have him tell me about them from his big heart that is full of understanding, sympathy, and tolerance for them.

If I thought the whole world were wrong and everyone about me were mad, I should go to him to renew my faith.

For all these qualities we love him.

Because of all these qualities, and because he is what he is, he has contributed more than most of us to the institution that he has served, and for all of these qualities we admire, and respect, and honor him tonight. He will always be remembered as one of the University's great.

Now, to be a little less formal, I should like to say to you, Albert and Lucy, we hope the years ahead may be many and golden. This is not farewell. It is thank you for all you have been and for all that you have done for us, for those who went before and for those who will come after. God bless you both.

Founders' Day, May 6, 1953

Albert L. Kohlmeier

It is only a few days ago, it seems to me, since I came for the first time as a student to Indiana University. The University was quite different, however, then than now. The campus was bounded on the east by Faculty Row and on the west by Indiana Avenue, a mud road separated from the campus by a rail fence. Three of the buildings now on the campus were then standing. The University consisted of a college and a small law school. The student body had just passed the thousand mark and the faculty was proportionably small. In the faculty, however, was an unusual number of excellent teachers, as good as any in the most renowned institutions in our country in which I later studied.

I need not describe for you the University of today—its size; its magnificent equipment; its large student body and faculty; the number of autonomous schools besides the college; the increased offerings in studies, some added because the Hoosiers are now concerned with distant peoples and movements of which then we only knew by hearsay—hearsay months if not years old when it reached us. Other added studies and fields of knowledge, now vitally related to our existence, were not even known by hearsay then because no one on earth knew anything about them.

This accelerated development of the University along many lines is not only an illustration but in some respects an epitome of the historical process in which I have been so long interested. When I came here, I, with the majority of people, believed that the act of creation had taken place and been completed a few thousand years ago. Now I, along with the majority of people, believe that the process of creation is continuing in our own day with a frequently increased acceleration and that man—thinking man—is in some respects the most significant instrument in that process.

I repeat to you only a truism when I state that heredity and environment shape and mould and change man from generation to generation. But man—thinking man—also changes his physical, social, and spiritual environment. What is the result? The environment changes man; the changed man reacts upon his environment and changes it; the changed environment, changed by thinking man, in turn reacts on man and further changes him. A chain reaction, if you please. Not long ago some of you were frightened out of your wits for fear that some venturesome nuclear physicist would succeed in splitting the wrong kind of atom and thereby set up a chain reaction that he couldn't stop and that our earth would be consumed in the conflagration and us with it. One of the most important chain reactions is the one between thinking man and his environment that began about a million years ago or so, when man first began to think somewhat as a man, and has been continuing ever since and is proceeding in our own day with breathtaking acceleration. This is the historical process. To express it in a different way, history is the record of man's struggle for freedom. Every time that thinking man wins a victory over his limitations, over the

forces that keep him earth-bound, he enlarges the area of freedom of operation of his mind and enlarges his capacity to advance to a new victory.

Now, the rate of acceleration of the thought of man has not been the same through the ages. It is not as simple as that. There has been a series of changes in the rate as it has changed phases, or mounted from one level to a higher level of acceleration, somewhat comparable to the change of speed of movement of the atoms when ice changes to water and water to steam. That is, thought continues to accelerate until literally it reaches the limit of acceleration on that level or in that phase. Thinkers are stopped short by facing a stone wall that they can't penetrate. This always marks a crisis. Sometimes the leaders of thought of a given culture are able to scale the cliff by changing phase and proceeding on a new plane. Sometimes they fall back and then renew the attack from a new approach. Sometimes they fall back, give up, and accept the fact that the vitality of their peculiar culture is spent. The path of history is strewn with the wreckage of civilizations, some promising, some glorious, that have been arrested because their thinkers failed.

It is obvious that the length of astronomical time required to pass through each succeeding level of acceleration is shorter than the preceding one. The length of time spent by man when his thought acceleration was in terms of his own physiological movement is measured in terms of the hundreds of thousands of years of prehistorical experience. The length of time required to pass through the era when the acceleration of thought was geared to his concepts of his simple mechanical devices is measured in terms of the few thousand years of early history. Thought acceleration at the rate of the steam engine reached its limits in about a century and then leaped to the rate of electromagnetism. Since I came here as a student fifty years ago, time and again thinkers have seemed to find themselves facing a sheer cliff in some particular line of thought but have succeeded in scaling it. Crises resulting from challenges to thought and victories over them have been almost continuous in certain lines, even while the fate of civilization hung in the balance. But thinkers have not been equally successful along all lines. Western civilization again stands today at the threshold of another new heaven and a

new earth that may become a reality to the minds of its thinkers.

When the pioneers crossed the Appalachians and poured into the beautiful Ohio Valley, those who came to this state laid the foundation of a common school system and founded the first state university west of the mountains and one of the first in the world. Some of those men perceived vaguely that the support by all of education among the common people was not only necessary for the fate of democracy but that the support of higher education was essential to the continuance of civilization itself through the historical process. Today when the people of this state, through the General Assembly, go all out in support of the University, and when alumni and friends give their loyalty and affection, it is not because they want young men and women to have a soft seat in the economic world or a glamorous position in the social world; it is because they realize that the University exists to screen and select and develop those thinkers that shall continue to surmount the barriers and make possible the continuance of the historical process with our culture in the vanguard.

Response, June 1, 1953

Albert L. Kohlmeier

To some of you last Founders' Day, I indicated my interest in the historical process—the accelerating chain reaction between thinking man on the one hand and his physical, social, and spiritual environment on the other. One aspect of this process, which I did not then even mention, has peculiar relevance to this occasion. It is this: Any new and worthwhile thought can be transmitted by the thinker to a contemporary or to someone of a later generation only if the thinker, before passing from the stage of action, succeeds in adequately embodying his thought or incarnating it in some physical structure or symbol—such as the spoken word, the written characters upon paper or parchment or graven stone, the notations of the score of a musical masterpiece, the beautiful painting upon canvas, the labor-saving machine, the political or social institution in which men constitute the human cog wheels of the machine or organization. It is interesting

how the spirit works through and perpetuates itself by making use of the material. If the thinker fails to accomplish this, fails to clothe his thought in physical form, no matter how profound or important his thought, no matter how beautiful or sublime his emotion, they will be as fleeting and transient as the colors of the dawn before the rising sun. But if he succeeds in clothing his thinking in appropriate physical form, this physical symbol will have the capacity in varying degree of withstanding the ravages and wreckage of time and drift down into the future as the carrier of the thought and emotion of the past. Some man in the future may then be able to penetrate the symbol and wrest from it its inner meaning, and the thought of the original author will vibrate and live again in a revised form in the mind of the man of the later generation. It will, of course, not be exactly the same thought. Only in the case of the scientifically isolated and artificially controlled fact can the thinker transmit his thought exactly to either a contemporary or to someone of a future generation. It makes possible the nice balance between continuity and change so essential. It makes possible the conservation of all that is most important in the thinking in the past and the replacement of the less important, with the new, and possibly better. Possibly the authors of great religious creeds, of political constitutions, and of legal codes, in some cases hoped that they could bind future generations to think after them exactly as they thought. But they succeeded in preserving only the best. Future generations will read into these historical documents not completely new but slightly new meanings. The symbols had to serve as the old bottles into which the new wine was to be poured.

The historical process in which man is the central figure then shares one of its outstanding characteristics with all living forms in their evolution and development. The vegetation of the fields completes its function by depositing its fruit and promise of the future upon and into the earth in order that after the winter of death there may be the new flowering of a new and somewhat different generation in the spring. Death is as essential to the historical process as is birth. The writer of the fourth Gospel pointed out that the word, the truth, absolute truth, was here from the beginning. Prophets had discovered much of this truth, including those

human values that make up the core of Christianity and of other noble religions. But, said the writer of the Gospel, "The Word had to become flesh." The truth had to be embodied in physical form—the idea of Christianity had to become concrete. The ideals of justice and love and mercy had to be translated into actual concrete acts of kindness, and brotherhood and mercy, by a Man. But that could not be the end of the process. This way of life might not be forever restricted to one person and place but must be released through death that His spirit could live again in men of future generations and might be adopted and applied in new ways, under changed and changing conditions.

Finally, I wish to add that the continuance of the process is not inevitable. It can fail through the failure of man. Man can fail to do the things that will make the process continue to function. Some of my students and colleagues have sometimes asked me, "Do you think that with all our libraries, laboratories, and machines it would be possible for civilization to pass through another period like the Dark Ages?" And my answer has been: The writings of Plato and Aristotle and the statues of Phydias were still existent during the Dark Ages. The writings of Plato and Aristotle were used to stop up rat holes or at best used by the monks who copied them to preserve their knowledge of Latin. The monks knew the meaning of most of the words but not of the sentences. A statue by Phydias during the Dark Ages served as a doorstep to the hovel of a Greek farmer, but the symbol did not reveal its beauty and meaning to him. If tomorrow no one could really penetrate the meaning of the books in our libraries or understand the symbols in the scientific formulas or master our complicated machines, all these things would be just so much junk. Besides the discovery of the truth and its embodiment in physical symbols, the historical process is greatly aided if an understanding of the truth can be transmitted by the living contact of mind with mind, from mother to her babe, from teacher to pupil, from professor to student, from him who knows and in addition can illumine the mind of those who have the capacity to carry the torch. I believe this. It has for me been the compelling conviction of my life.

You have been much too kind. I do not deserve so much. I have faced death. Rather, death has looked me steadily in

the eye. Then when I felt the books must be closed and the accounts cast up and all the past came to mind in an instant, I confessed that I had accomplished so little when I had had so much. Sometimes in the small hours of the night I have wished that I hadn't chosen to be a professor and given so much of my time and myself away. Instead I wished that I had played the game and been somebody. It would have been so easy. But tonight I don't feel that way. With so many of my former students and friends about me, my faith in the historical process is strong.