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John G. Kemeny and Dartmouth College: A Life, A College President and the Times of the 1960s, 70s and 80s

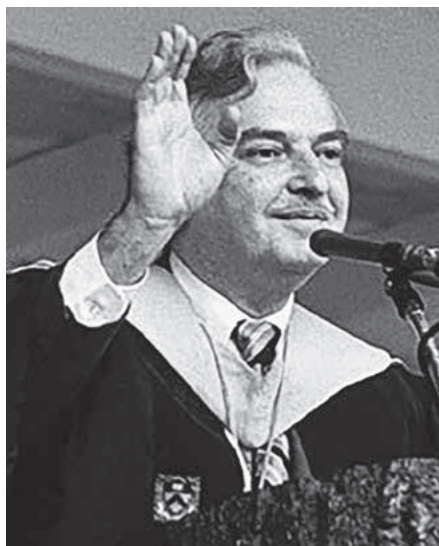
Stephen Nelson

John Kemeny was inaugurated president of Dartmouth College on March 1, 1970. He took the helm in tumultuous times that had begun in the mid-1960s. The tenures of many college presidents came to quick ends in the face of political and social whirlwinds that swept them out of office: protests over the Vietnam War and civil rights, issues of social equity, and massive changes in American culture.

There was mounting outrage about America's foreign and domestic troubles. The economy was strained, and an emerging ideological maelstrom sowed seeds of battle in the 1970s that are sustained in contemporary culture today. The major issues Kemeny faced paralleled those nationally facing other colleges and their presidents. These issues — free speech; freedom of the press; ideological political, cultural and social pressure points; an economic downturn that starkly contrasted with the boom of the 1950s and 1960s; questioning the value of the liberal arts; and student conduct and discipline — continue today throughout higher education. Kemeny's Dartmouth presidency successfully addressed the difficult issues of those tumultuous times of the late 1960s and 70s. And in doing it all, he resolutely held fast to a signature commitment to the pursuit of knowledge, learning, human understanding, equity, and justice. John Kemeny's footprint made him a forceful figure in the academy and in the public square.

John Kemeny's story is captivating. He emigrated to the United States

from Hungary at age fourteen in 1940, brought by parents fleeing the looming Nazi assault on their native land. He had to learn English, and then graduated at the top of his elite New York City high school class at age sixteen. He went to Princeton University, where as an undergraduate he served two years in the military working on the atom bomb project at Los Alamos, being introduced to the finest scientific minds of the time.



John G. Kemeny.
(Photo Credit: Dartmouth College)

After his undergraduate career, double majoring in mathematics and philosophy, he remained at Princeton completing a Ph.D. in math. With Einstein as his advisor, many were convinced Kemeny's genius was equal to that of his teacher. After two years teaching philosophy at Princeton, at age 27 he was recruited by Dartmouth and began his career there in 1953 as professor of mathematics. During sixteen years prior to the Dartmouth presidency, Kemeny rebuilt the math department injecting new blood with energetic and resourceful young faculty; he recruited and personally visited high schools to bring to Dartmouth the finest young math students; cut his teeth in teaching and in faculty leadership through service on key committees involved with policy-making and program initiatives; founded college computing; created the groundbreaking computer language BASIC; and invented the first shared computer network, the Dartmouth Time Sharing System (DTSS) in the early 1960s.

In an unfinished autobiography, Kemeny characterized his days as the "Curious Turns" of "An Interesting Life." As president and even before as a professor, he exhibited the virtues and gravitas desired in any leader in any time: intellectual heft; the capacity to ponder, consider, and achieve the best conceivable actions; compassion, understanding and empathy; unflinching belief in the rising generation of college students; and courage in the face of challenging public issues, contentious and warring factions at seeming loggerheads in unbendable points of view.

Kemeny made enduring impacts inside and outside the gates into affairs of the public square. With so many accomplishments, what is his distinctive footprint? The highlights are many but a select few underscore his prominence as professor and college president.



*Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire.
(Photo Credit: Peter K. Lloyd/Alamy Stock Photo)*

As a young math professor, Kemeny spun exposure to computers from his Los Alamos days into founding college computing. This was in itself an enormous accomplishment. The less known story is how he and his partner, Tom Kurtz, did all the work that led to BASIC and the Dartmouth Time Sharing System, as well as the twists, turns, and inventiveness of their revolutionary thinking and creation. Kemeny was a teacher, a professor in all that he did. From the outset of his work with computers he involved students who wrote the programs, helped to solve problems and figure out bugs, and joined as absolute collaborators with Kemeny and Kurtz.

Highlighting the intimate involvement of students in this groundbreaking work, when the first test was conducted with DTSS on campus at 3:00 a.m. on May 1, 1962, Kemeny was at one computer terminal and a student on another elsewhere on campus, both going into the mainframe and running two different problems using different programs simultaneously for the first time. This was an “ah ha” moment on

order with Bell’s first telephone call, and Kemeny shared that moment with a Dartmouth undergraduate student, one of many before and after as partners with their professors.

Kemeny always held students in the highest regard. As president, he treated them in and out of the classroom with respect and dignity, even when their protests and points of views differed with his and his trustees. Kemeny’s modus operandi as a teacher carried into his leadership as president. Key administrative leaders as well as trustees and alumni, not to mention faculty colleagues, consistently applauded his ability to teach them. They remark repeatedly how Kemeny was able to explain things fully and clearly and to engage senior cabinet seminar-like discussions. This leadership was always

president, Kemeny was a prominent public supporter of coeducation. He co-chaired the faculty committee that in the late 1960s recommended that Dartmouth go co-ed. Fellow members of the committee knew that Kemeny was their most eloquent spokesperson. He made a crucial presentation supporting coeducation to the Alumni Council in December 1969. On that seminal weekend, when his only meeting with the trustee presidential search committee took place, he made clear to them his unalterable position that Dartmouth must admit women. The fate of his candidacy hung in the balance as he and his wife Jean thought his stand had likely sunk his prospects for the job.

As it turned out, Kemeny’s position on the admission of women did not block

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exerted with the goal of reaching the best, wisest and most informed decisions, and carried out with the patience to listen in everything he did.

Dartmouth’s journey from an all-male college for its first two hundred years to the advent of coeducation is a most improbable tale. Long before becoming

his path to the presidency. However, despite appointing him president, the trustees made no commitment about a future decision on coeducation. That drama played out in the first year and a half of Kemeny’s tenure. His deft hand was crucial in convincing the trustees and the Dartmouth community that

coeducation was essential to maintain and expand the college's stature. Had Kemeny's powers of persuasion not held sway his presidency would never have reached its two-year anniversary.

The tumult of the 1960s caused in large measure by protest about the Vietnam War and civil rights unrest continued to shape life in the 1970s. Kemeny had been in office days shy of two months when the enormity of the Kent State shootings became a leadership test of unprecedented proportion for him and all college presidents. The times were a crucible that put his character on full display. The Vietnam War, underway for a half-decade or more, was fast becoming an increasingly contentious reality. Protests over the war, increasing racial tensions and demonstrations, all against a backdrop of antagonisms spawned by social and economic inequities, roiled and gathered steam. Kemeny and his presidency had a front row seat, thrown into this maelstrom.

To grasp the winds of change and differing positions within the Dartmouth community, Kemeny conducted a daylong series of meetings on May 4th. In the middle of these dramatic discussions, news broke about the killing of four students at Kent State. Going into those sessions, Kemeny knew he "had to take a stand that evening." In the series of meetings, "There was all kinds of advice, some of it very reasonable. But there was absolutely no consensus."¹ The meetings concluded around 8:00 in the evening. Leonard Rieser, his Provost, was the last man in the room. Kemeny asked him what he should do. All Rieser could do was to say Kemeny would figure it out and that he would have his support.

At the start of his presidency, Kemeny established a routine of speaking live on the airwaves of the campus radio station and responding to questions by student broadcasters on the first Monday of the month at 9:00 p.m. This day being a

first Monday, Kemeny knew that it was a crucial moment to air his thoughts and indicate to the campus community what Dartmouth would do. Leaving his office just up the street from the station, Kemeny had an interlude of less than an hour to figure out what to say, what actions to take.

Recalling in his unpublished autobiography the on air unwritten and unrehearsed remarks made that evening, Kemeny underscored that "personally I was opposed to the war. I was horrified by the Cambodian action, which would escalate the war, and by the tragedy at Kent State. I expressed sympathy for students who felt that protest was more important at that moment than their education. But I said that this must be an individual decision, and they must not interfere with the rights of those who wished to continue their education. I felt that we needed a period for intensive free discussion of the issues. Therefore, I cancelled classes for the rest of the week, asking that the time be spent in intense but peaceful discussion. And I called a special meeting of the Faculty for the next evening. I was later accused of having preempted the strike. I guess I had."

Beginning with the events of spring 1970, Kemeny created a testimonial of a young president getting his feet into the job. Those days underscored the difficulties of what it would take to bring about stability, to challenge the prevailing thinking of dug-in positions, and to maintain the purposes of the college and the creed of the academy amid social strife and cultural controversies. Even as the events of May 1970 unfolded, Kemeny had to turn attention during the next year and a half to the heated debates marking the college's discussions about coeducation. He succeeded and led a transition that, while not without controversy, went more smoothly than many imagined and feared.

Many challenges filled the decade of Kemeny's tenure to its end in 1981.

The major issues Kemeny faced paralleled those nationally facing other colleges and their presidents. These issues — free speech; freedom of the press; ideological political, cultural and social pressure points; an economic downturn that starkly contrasted with the boom of the 1950s and 1960s; questioning the value of the liberal arts; and student conduct and discipline — continue today throughout higher education.



Everett Raymond Kinstler, *John G. Kemeny (1926-1992), Class of 1981H, 13th President of Dartmouth College (1970-1981)*, 1977, oil on canvas. Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth: Gift of Harle and Kenneth F. Montgomery, Class of 1925; P.978.194.

Decisive wisdom and a steady hand in facing those issues and choices distinguished his presidency. He navigated fiscally stable pathways through strenuous and strained economic downturns; confronted the ideological battles spawned by cascading controversies that led to the coining of the term “political correctness;” and unbendingly ensured the college’s commitments to diversity and equity. It was no longer the 1960s, but the spillover of cultural, political and social crises from that decade complicated the 1970s, along with the upheavals on the campus and in the nation that persisted and were new

to the scene. And added to his duties as Dartmouth’s president, in 1979, President Carter tapped him to serve the nation as Chair of the Commission to investigate the catastrophic nuclear power accident at Three Mile Island.

Kemeny concluded his presidency with striking, prescient counsel in a presidential valedictory at Commencement for the class of 1981. His message that day was prophetic. It reads as something that could have been delivered today, some forty years later in the second decade of the twenty-first century. The closing words of this address capture Kemeny’s thoughts uttered that day:

During the years to come many voices will speak to you — voices that will clamor for your attention to tell you what it is that you should do with your life. Among these voices will be one — a voice heard in many guises throughout history — which is the most dangerous voice you will ever hear. It appeals to the basest instincts in all of us — it appeals to human prejudice. It tries to divide us by setting Whites and against Blacks, by setting Christians against Jews, by setting men against women. And if it succeeds in dividing us from our fellow human beings it will impose its evil will upon a fragmented society.

Do not listen to that voice. Listen instead to the voice that is within yourself — the voice that tells you that mankind can live in peace, that mankind can live in harmony, that mankind can live with respect for the rights and dignity of all human beings. And use your talents — your very, very considerable talents — to make this a better world, a more compassionate world, for all of us.

For, Men and Women of Dartmouth, all mankind is your brother, and you are your brother’s keeper.²

Endnotes

¹ Kemeny Autobiography Draft from computer files shared by Jenny Kemeny. Also available in the Rauner Archives, Dartmouth College. The continuing narrative of these events and the quotations are from the Kemeny Autobiography Draft, pp. 193–195.

² Valedictory Address, June 14, 1981, Speeches and Lectures, MS 988 Papers of John G. Kemeny, 15:24, p. 3.



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