

## Editorial

### *America and Socrates*

Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, in a speech at the University of Colorado on Jan. 22, 1987, made numerous noteworthy remarks, among which:

"If I were to search for a model of that man who best embodied the love of free inquiry and the love of free citizenship, it would be Socrates. He said in the *Apology* that Athens was committing a grave injustice against him by condemning him to death. Defiantly, Socrates vowed never to cease from examining the grounds of the well-lived life. Yet, he always fought his city's battles and was known for his great courage in her defense. He claimed that both his questioning of Athens and his willingness to defend his city stemmed from his love for knowledge. Moreover, in the *Crito*, the sequel to the *Apology*, Socrates refused to leave Athens for another city, even to save his life. Where else could he go, he asked, where he would be as free to philosophize?"

The defense secretary's theme, in that speech, was "The Role of the University in the Defense of a Free Society." He argued that America's academic community will only serve its own interests in academic free inquiry, were that community to mobilize in behalf of America's defense against the growing Soviet threat. In his speech, the secretary concluded with a historical assertion which has not been made in recent years, and which ought to be asserted more often:

"Like her modern descendant, America, Athens was not a perfect society. But, also like America, Athens was a free society—a society that was free to perfect its imperfections. As such, she won the allegiance of the man who was free to know, and knew best how to be free."

This has not been Secretary Weinberger's first public allusion to the close cultural affinity he sees between classical Athenian civilization and modern America. This particular historical perspective makes him one of America's more exceptional and rare civil servants, one might say on a par with a John Quincy Adams. Some months ago, Secretary Weinberger, in another policy-

setting speech, echoing the historian Thucydides, asserted that the modern military-political conflict between the U.S.A. and Russia, is, in principle, a continuation of the clash between the republican principles of classical Athens and the oligarchical principles of Sparta, typified today by Russia.

Now that he has brought forward the question of Socrates—one of the central questions of Western civilization, with whose defense Secretary Weinberger is charged—we feel obliged to make the following remarks: The secretary was right in presenting the academics of the University of Colorado with the paradox which ought properly to plague their lives: To be worthy of the academic title, you must be at least as ruthless in the search of unpopular truth as Socrates was. Once you are such fierce suitor of free inquiry into the truth, you shall be as eager to defend the liberties of America as Socrates was.

In an age which has seen a great deal of academic disparagement of patriotism, and even greater, vacuous criticisms of the United States, Weinberger is right in suggesting that an academic's interest in defending Western liberties is proportional to such an academic's intellectual ability to ruthlessly pursue the cause of truth in free inquiry. The Athenian Socrates is the model for this: His great passion for unpopular truth—and truth is always unpopular—was equaled only by his passion to uphold the laws and liberties of Athens.

Secretary Weinberger is right when he views the U.S.A. as the direct descendant of the imperfect Athens of the fourth century. That republic fell when it decided upon and carried out the execution of Socrates. Athens and its liberties fell when Socrates was executed. The city lost when it killed Socrates, but Socrates, his spirit, lived on and emigrated to America. That Socratic spirit, Mr. Secretary, will always live on. We must rescue, not Socrates from receiving a death sentence, but the republic from passing and executing such sentence. Socrates survives both sentence and execution, but the republic does not live beyond the sentence it passes.