IN MEMORIAM

SIDNEY EDWARD MEZES

Sidney Edward Mezes was born September 23, 1863, at Belmont, California, the son of
Sidney N. Mezes, who came to California from Spain, and his wife, Juliet Johnson, of Kentucky.
He studied engineering at the University of California, receiving the degree of Bachelor of Science
in 1884. Prolonged and repeated visits to Europe both as boy and man broadened his interests and
gave him fluency in French and German. For several years he combined the practice of
engineering with the management of his father's large landed estate, but the work proved
uncongenial. Becoming interested in philosophy, he went to Harvard University and graduated
with the class of 1890. He continued his work in the Graduate School there with such men as
James, Royce, and Palmer, and received the degrees of A.M. in 1891 and Ph.D. in 1893. In later
years the honorary degree of LL.D. came to him four times--from Southwestern University in
1911, from the University of California in 1913, from New York University and from the
University of Cincinnati in 1915.

Dr. Mezes' first teaching was done at Bryn Mawr College. Thence in 1894 he came to the
University of Texas as Adjunct Professor of Philosophy and here he remained twenty years. In
1897 lie was made Associate Professor of Philosophy, in 1906 Professor. Appointed Dean of the
College of Arts in 1902, he served in this capacity with such distinguished success that six years
later in 1908 the Board of Regents elected him President without his knowledge and when he was
in Europe, this at the very meeting when the resignation of President Houston was presented. A
cablegram urging his acceptance was at once sent, signed by every member of the faculty who
could be reached. For six years he was President of the University of Texas. Then in 1914 he
went to the Presidency of the College of the City of New York and held this position till failing
health forced his retirement in 1927. In 1913 he declined to be National Commissioner of
Education, but in 1917 accepted the Directorship of the Inquiry inaugurated by President Wilson
during the Great War as preparation for the peace settlement and he was present in Paris during the
Peace Conference an Director of the International Section of the American Commission to Negotiate Peace and member of the Central Territorial Commission of the Conference. In 1929 he was elected President Emeritus of the University of Texas. This honor he declared to be more precious to him than any he could receive on earth, but he was not destined to see the University again. Besides sundry articles on philosophical and educational subjects in reviews, he contributed to two books: "The Conception of God," a symposium published by the University of California in 1897, and "What Really Happened in Paris," a popular book of 1921, and he published alone in 1901 a substantial work with the title "Ethics, Descriptive and Explanatory." In 1896 he was married to Annie O. Hunter of Austin and there followed a married life of singular happiness for thirty-five years. There were no children. On resigning the Presidency of the College of the City of New York, in 1927 he sought health in Europe, in Arizona and in California, but to little purpose. He died in Pasadena, California, September 10, 1931, and was by his request buried there with the simplest of rites.

Such are the main facts of Dr. Mezes' life. An estimate of his work outside of Texas we do not attempt. We write of him as we knew him during the twenty years of his connection with the University of Texas, as Professor, as Dean, as President, as man.

For several years after he came to the University, Dr. Mezes was the only teacher in his department and his province extended over the entire fields of philosophy, logic, and psychology. Indeed, not till he became Dean did he have more than a single assistant. His work was therefore more general in scope than we demand of men today. He was at home in it all and his students felt that they were studying with a master. He was clear in exposition, searching in analysis, stimulating in his questions. No propagandist was he; rather he tried to encourage opposition to his own views. Independence in thinking was the first goal he set for his students. Clearness came next. And as a proof of independent and clear thinking must come also clearness and definiteness of expression, Brevity, too, was imperative. One of us recalls his saying that if a certain paper had
only not been so long, it would have deserved an A. But he was more than a teacher. He was also a friend -- sympathetic, helpful, genial, whom his students loved because he loved them.

To the Dean’s office Dr. Mezes carried the same sympathetic attitude that he showed as a teacher. He believed in standards, but he did not lose the human touch. Administrative problems interested him greatly and his contributions to their solution were usually recognized as sound and far-seeing, but he would not let himself become a slave to, machinery. Faculty and students alike found in him a just judge and an understanding counselor.

As President, Dr. Mezes showed a rare combination of breadth of mind and courage. He was convinced that the University to fulfill its purpose must broaden its scope. He believed in the old subjects, but he saw that new times had opened new fields of endeavor and he believed that it was the business of the University to lead along the new lines as well as the old. By enlisting more interests the University would become more firmly fixed in popular approval, legislative appropriations would be larger, and the old subjects would move forward with the new. In this conviction he inaugurated departments of Institutional History in 1909, General Literature and Architecture in 1910, Business Training and Domestic Economy in 1911, Semitics in 1912, Journalism and Music in 1913. In 1909 he organized the Department of Extension and the Bureau of Economic Geology, and in 1913 the Bureau of Municipal Research. In 1910 the Graduate School emerged from the College of Arts as a separate entity. Not all the work he added has been continued, but the general result was as he foresaw. The total enrollment rose from 2,462 in 1907-1908, to 3,501 in 1913-1914; the legislative appropriation from $155,500 to $658,300. -

Dr. Mezes’ administration was marked also by notable building activity, but unhappily only two buildings were of a permanent character--the second Heating Plant, completed in 1910, and the Library, occupied in 1911. The rest were the merest shacks, necessary to house the new work he had started, but cheap and ugly for want of money to make them better. It was his hope that State pride would replace them promptly with permanent structures. He was not to see the fruition
of this hope, but of the Library he was justly proud: though outgrown in size, it is still the most beautiful building on our campus.

In his handling of University problems, Dr. Mezes showed an unusual power of detachment. Approachable to both students and faculty he was ready, even meager to see all sides of every question. Hasty decisions were distasteful to him. His conclusions were reached only after the fullest consideration and they commanded always respect and usually also approval as just and wise. His judgments of men were always kindly, his actions generous. Yet when need arose, he could strike both swiftly and effectively. When the interests of the University were at stake he never thought of his own profit. More than once he refused an increase of salary and to unite the University and the Agricultural and Mechanical College he offered in all sincerity to give the Presidency to the head of the other institution.

Dr. Mezes was not a man to be spoiled by power. Through all his administration he remained to the faculty a colleague still, who understood their problems and was really sorry if he could not carry out their wishes. Students he continued to treat as the gentleman he was himself, seeking by confidence to develop their sense of manhood and responsibility. To the alumni his latch-string always hung out for he enjoyed talking over old times and listening to counsel that came with the perspective of years. To the public he never ceased to be a democrat, for he believed in the people and loved to work for their welfare. How could such a man fail to inspire affection and confidence? What wonder that his resignation brought a feeling of dismay and personal loss to staff and student body and alumni and every friend of the University?

Of Dr. Mezes as a man it is hard for us who knew him well to speak with moderation. If we should try to set down our real feeling, we might seem to indulge in hyperbole. Let it suffice to say that the keenness of his mind, the charm of his personality, the strength of his character, the kindliness of his heart combined to create an admiration and a friendship so strong that his death seventeen years after most of us saw him last gave us a sense of poignant grief.
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