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THE BEST

An Interview with Ralph Ketcham

BY CAROL NORTH SCHMUCKLER

This fall, the Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) paid Ralph Ketcham the ultimate compliment. They named him Professor of the Year, best among his peers in all of America.

We thought it would be interesting to go to this teacher, chosen by CASE from among 400 nominees, to discover what kind of man earns such an accolade. We found Ketcham willing to share his thoughts frankly, on topics that ranged from the state of American education to the future of our democratic system.

I. Ralph Ketcham on Teaching in the Eighties

SUM: *What makes a good teacher?*

Ketcham: Questions are one of the most important aspects of teaching—their content and timing.

A question must take a class from where it is at the moment to a place a little deeper. I can't think of any way to explain how that works. It's just part of the dynamic of the session.

The ultimate responsibility belongs to the teacher. You can't say you couldn't do anything with this class because they were hopeless. There's always some way to connect with a class.

SUM: *What techniques do you use?*

Ketcham: A great part of effective teaching is the ability to listen. You must ask yourself all the time, "Where are the students?," and then

decide how to go from there to where you want them to be. I think that if you don't ask yourself that question, you won't get very far; you're lost to begin with.

SUM: *How do you prepare for a class?*

Ketcham: I try to organize every session around only one important thing. If you have too many notions in mind, the chances are you'll sort of fumble around. But if you pick out one thing that's important enough to keep coming back to, it will probably make more sense to the students. Maybe they won't remember very much, but if you can give them one thing well enough, maybe that's all you can expect.

By the way, that's another important thing: your expectations shouldn't be too high. I don't mean at all that you should give up in advance, but you must recognize that you aren't going to create a miracle for every person in class every day. You just do the best you can.

SUM: *What are the students' responsibilities?*

Ketcham: Seriousness about their studies and about developing their minds. Students are very different in the degree with which they accept that responsibility. When I have a student who is serious about being in class and learning something, then I know I can be helpful. Without that, it's hard.

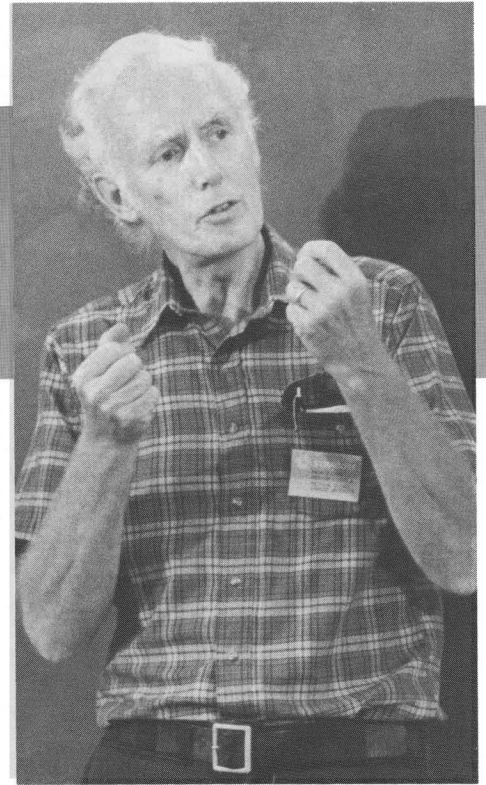
Of course, I'm also responsible for evoking that seriousness. Those students who begin with indifference and hostility can be tickled a little bit—you can give them a nudge here or there—to stimulate a little interest. It would be nice if everybody came with intense interest, but they don't.

SUM: *How is teaching in the eighties different from teaching in the sixties or seventies?*

Ketcham: If you go even further back, to the 1950s, two interesting things have happened. First, it's now possible to have a much less formal and more equal relationship with students. The teacher being

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distinguished from the students both in dress and in title created a distance between the two I wasn't keen about. I enjoy the increased informality.

But another, less positive difference is that students today are less likely to possess a basic body of knowledge. The educational changes of the last 20 years have emphasized specialization and choice of electives. In some ways that was good, but it also means you cannot take for granted that students have a basic time line in their heads of the development of Western civilization. I have to provide background more often.

SUM: *What goals do students bring to their studies now?*

Ketcham: In the last 10 years there's been much more tendency for students to want specialized professional training, such as management. In a way that's good because it gives them both direction and motivation. But it limits their development as whole human beings. They have less sense that they should prepare themselves to understand and take part in culture, American society, and politics.

Even social science majors are affected. Our courses now tend to be more specialized and more focused on quantitative data. This gives students highly specialized skills but neglects their integrative understanding. As someone said, there are lots of experts on everything in particular, but no experts on the situation as a whole.

SUM: *What qualities here at Syracuse support good teaching?*

Ketcham: The Maxwell School is a wonderfully chaotic place. I've been entirely free to pursue my interests and to try things I felt would be worthwhile.

I am a member of four separate teaching areas at Syracuse—public affairs, American studies, political science, and history. But I think of them as connected together. They all overlap so it's not as though I had four different jobs.

Teaching this way gives me access to good students in many departments, students who bring different perspectives and concerns to class. I know it confuses everybody who looks at the organizational chart, but it's been ideal for me. Of course, it also allows me to play one boss off against the other so I can avoid doing things I don't want to do. But every once in a while it works the other way and I get caught by everybody!

I suppose it is rather rare to be attached to so many different departments, and it's all possible only because the Maxwell School is wonderfully open and flexible.

SUM: *Give us an example of the type of curriculum that arises in that environment.*

Ketcham: For the last 15 years I've taught a two-semester undergraduate sequence called "Foundations of American Political Thought." During the first semester we study the period of America's founding and the Constitution, right through Lincoln, and

the second semester picks up with the impact of Darwinism to the present. I also teach a graduate course with similar subject matter.

SUM: *What is the goal of the course?*

Ketcham: I want students to understand the basic ideas that have been expressed about fundamental questions of political inquiry. What is the nature of man? What is the nature of justice? What is the purpose of government? I want them to understand what Americans had in mind for answers to those questions at the time of the American Revolution and the drafting of the Constitution.

Understanding those answers prepares them for developing more sophisticated answers of their own and deciding whether they agree with the answers given in our nation's fundamental documents.

I suppose what I'm basically doing is asking students to think profoundly and critically about the basis of our political system.

SUM: *You're also involved in a very popular team-taught course.*

Ketcham: Yes. It's called "Issues of American Democracy," and the subject matter changes from year to year. We've covered such subjects as the corporate state, leadership, religion and politics, and America's place in the world. This coming spring we'll do one on the role of the professional in American society.

SUM: *Are all the teachers from the Maxwell School?*

Ketcham: Not at all. We'll have faculty members from Newhouse, management, nursing, and several other colleges. All of them are interested in the professional, who also must be a responsible member of society.

Some of the questions we'll cover are medical and legal ethics, the ethics of health care, and generally the

whole question of business ethics. Then there's the issue of what responsibility a journalist has beyond merely getting the story. These are questions that are the same in all professions, and faculty members want their students to discuss these issues with other professionals.

SUM: *What do you see as the most serious shortcoming in higher education today?*

Ketcham: My answer to that is reflected in a change we made in the undergraduate arts and sciences curriculum some years ago by instituting what we call the Liberal Arts Core. The old way of approaching liberal arts was incoherent; it was a little of this and a little of that. There was no sense of adding up to anything because the requirements themselves had no pattern.

The Liberal Arts Core, on the other hand, organized requirements into clusters and coherent sequences. That was desperately needed, although it's just a beginning. Our educational system must pay more attention to giving students a basic understanding of Western civilization—the kind of culture they live in.

II. Ralph Ketcham on the Presidency

SUM: *What do you think of the strong party identification modern presidents have?*

Ketcham: It's a flaw that both Democrats and Republicans share. It always makes me wonder what the American people must think of the president when they see him being blatantly, openly partisan.

Let me give you two examples.

Portrait of a Scholar

Picture a tall, slightly ruffled professor with a fair complexion, pedaling his bicycle through small village streets in the heart of the People's Republic of China. This is Ralph Ketcham on a recent lecture appointment to Shandong University. Avoiding all pomp and privilege in his usual fashion, he refused the official car offered by his host for the sake of meeting the people by traveling as they do.

"Now picture a distinguished figure, decked out in full academic regalia, receiving an honorary degree from his alma mater. That, too, is Ralph Ketcham, being recognized by colleagues and students as the epitome of the ideal professor: for the grace and clarity of his thought, his intellectual generosity, and his ability to lead and inspire others."

With these words Chancellor Melvin A. Eggers nominated Ralph Ketcham national Professor of the Year. They accurately describe a man who is a world-renowned scholar and teacher, a sought-after lecturer, an author of influential

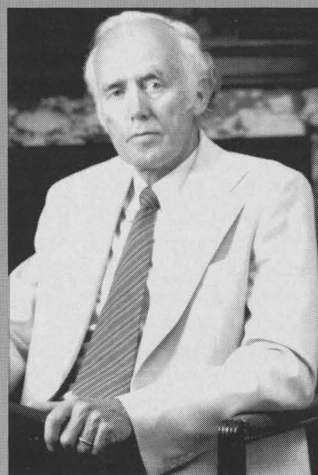
works on early national history, and a creator of innovative curricula.

Ketcham's award, administered by the Council for Advancement and Support of Education, comes as no surprise to those who know him. He is a man knowledgeable in many areas of the social sciences and fascinating in every one of them. In fact, unlike any other SU faculty member, he holds appointments in no fewer than *four* programs in the Maxwell School: American studies, history, political science, and public affairs.

Says Chancellor Eggers, "Ketcham is a major force in all of these academic units. Moreover, in each he is both a scholar of world-class reputation and an extraordinarily gifted undergraduate teacher. Quite simply, Ralph Ketcham can do absolutely everything a college professor is supposed to do, and do it all at the highest level of excellence."

That may be the reason Ketcham received the Chancellor's Citation for Outstanding Academic Achievement in 1979, the first year it was established.

Ketcham's passion and elo-



quence for his subjects have also made him a hotly pursued guest lecturer. In 1976 he was an American Bicentennial speaker on the U.S. State Department's European tour. He was a Fulbright lecturer in Japan and India. He has lectured or taught in Austria, Britain, Ireland, Mexico, the People's Republic of China, Sweden, and West Germany. He spent last spring as a Fulbright professor at the University of Leiden, Holland.

Ketcham is also deeply involved

in creating coursework relevant to the problems of the modern age. Recently he helped the New York State Department of Education develop a curriculum for a high school course on participation in government.

In his most recent book, *Individualism and Public Life: An American Dilemma*, Ketcham traces individualism from its origins to its role in contemporary society. He is also the author of *Presidents Above Power: The First American Presidency, 1789-1829*; *From Colony to Country: The Revolution in American Thought, 1750-1820*; *James Madison, A Biography* (a 1972 National Book Award nominee); and *Benjamin Franklin*. He is editor of *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin* and *The Papers of James Madison*.

Ketcham received his bachelor's degree from Allegheny College in 1949 (and honorary doctorate in 1985), his master's degree from Colgate University in 1952, and his Ph.D. from Syracuse University in 1956. He's been an important SU fixture ever since.

—C.N.S.

When Jimmy Carter was president, he invited Democratic fund-raisers to lunch at the White House, and everyone clearly understood that this was a way of thanking them for having contributed to the party in the past and encouraging them to do so in the future.

As they were leaving, someone asked one of Carter's aides if it wasn't a violation of federal law to be practically soliciting funds for partisan purposes in the White House, since some of the people were federal employees. And the aide replied that it was all right because nobody actually asked for money on government property.

Well, that's a shady evasion, and it so clearly politicizes the White House that it can't help making people disrespectful.

Another illustration: I received a letter a few years ago that had at the top "1600 Pennsylvania Avenue." Well, that's the address of the White House and everybody knows it. The letter was a request for funds for the

Republican party and at the bottom it said that although there was no bias or prejudice in this, if I gave a certain amount they'd give me a special telephone number I could call to get the ear of the president. It didn't say the president would answer, but somehow or another I would have access to the president's ear. It was signed by Ronald Reagan.

Now, what am I to think about that? Here I am being solicited for funds by the president, and the obvious implication is that if I contribute, I'll have some particular access.

SUM: *But don't the parties have an obligation to raise money for their candidates?*

Ketcham: Of course they do. But to me it's demeaning for the president to take part in that effort. Somehow we've got this rather crazy idea that a president only has power if he's a power in his party and he can only get his followers to toe the line because he's the big cheese in the party. Of course, the way the system now works

the president does gain some power through his partisanship. But I think he loses more than he gains, because the public perceives him as something other than the nonpartisan president of all the people.

I think we need the political parties; I'm not against them. They should conduct the campaigns and people should run for the presidency under a party label. But we might encourage the custom that the president leaves partisanship at the White House door and does not join in overt party tasks such as those I've described. I don't think it's proper for the president to campaign for other politicians.

SUM: *How would you change things?*

Ketcham: I would favor a constitutional amendment to limit the president to one six-year term. This way the president wouldn't have to worry about his own reelection. Some people say this would make the president a lame duck, but I disagree. If we knew a president was going to be in office for six years, I don't think we would

"He Spoke as Though It Mattered"

BY JIM NAUGHTON

Twice each semester, usually on a Sunday night, Ralph Ketcham would invite a dozen or so of his students to his family's comfortable flat, where we ate chili, drank Piel's Real Draft beer, and talked about what we had been reading. Julia Ketcham made good chili and her husband had poor taste in beers. I point that out because those facts were essential to the homey atmosphere of those evenings and because those evenings were essential to my understanding of Ralph Ketcham.

It was, of course, not only a meal that Professor Ketcham asked us to share. It was his gentle passion for learning, for thinking broadly, yet rigorously, about the major themes in American intellectual history. Around a small fire in his book-lined living room, we'd discuss the concept of "calling" as expressed by John Winthrop and argue the

merits of Alexander Hamilton's and Thomas Jefferson's divergent visions of the young nation's future. The prelaw majors were always taken aback to discover that Henry David Thoreau had formulated a radical political philosophy. The literature majors were slowly persuaded that Abraham Lincoln was an accomplished stylist. We all learned to put current events into historical perspective.

We spoke with an earnestness that, in retrospect, is somewhat embarrassing—as though some consensus about the role of the individual in the corporate state would emerge. We spoke as though it mattered, and I guess it did. Not, perhaps, in the broad sense—not yet—but in the personal. Professor Ketcham brought his material to life, but more important, he brought it into our lives. Most of my political convictions, and a few of my moral ones, were forged in conjunction with his classes.

With that said, I should point out

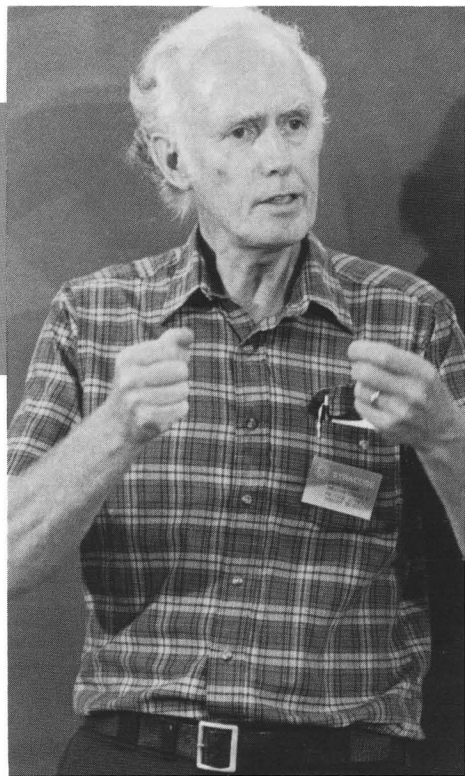
that other students had the same experience with Professor Ketcham, but they forged entirely different convictions. We are lawyers, social workers, historians, and journalists now. He didn't teach us what to think. He taught us how to think and did it so artfully that we felt we'd accomplished it on our own. He might begin his class with a lecture, pause for questions, let the questions dissolve into a general discussion, and then pick up the lecture again as though he'd planned the class to proceed just that way. A feeling that approached collegiality arose. Professor Ketcham invited us to partake in his own constant questioning.

That curiosity is one of his greatest assets as a teacher. He is the primary reason that Syracuse University has an American studies program and the primary reason that it is a good one. He helps design a curriculum that allows students to examine an issue or an era from different points of view. Where there

are gaps in the curriculum, he creates new courses. His most recent success in that field is an upper-level, team-taught public affairs course that was initiated in the fall of 1978. I can't remember a more eagerly awaited academic event. Kids were talking about it in campus bars on Friday nights. The class accommodates almost 250 students each semester, and to my knowledge it still closes out.

In closing I'd like to say that I can't imagine, with any clarity, what my life would be like if I'd never met Ralph Ketcham. I don't mean that he did me any special favors or that ours was a particularly close relationship. I mean that even the act of my imagining has been shaped by him.

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Congress will try to supervise and second-guess what the president is doing, because they feel they've been betrayed. In the long run, that is not a good arrangement. It's much better if Congress feels it can trust the president.

have to assume that he would either be lazy or a lame duck. There is a lot of power in that office and I think it would be conducted more effectively if there weren't such blatant partisanship. It wouldn't take any change in our system, but it would clarify and improve a lot of things.

SUM: *Moving on to more current happenings, what lessons do you think we can learn from the Iran-Contra scandal?*

Ketcham: I think the really horrendous dereliction of office was the failure of the president to obey his oath to execute the laws faithfully. He simply did not accept either the spirit or the letter of the congressional acts that forbid the sale of arms to Iran and that prohibit the sale of arms to the Contras.

It may be true that he did not actually know all the details of what was going on. But it is also quite clear that everybody in the White House assumed they were doing what the president wanted. Reagan allowed the White House staff to make incorrect assumptions about his feelings on the

issue. The president's actions are almost as much of a dereliction as leading his staff to assume something that's contrary to the law.

I don't think there will ever be a "smoking gun." We're never going to find a memo signed by the president saying, "Colonel North, I want you to chuck the Boland Amendment out the door and figure out some way to get the money from Iran to the Contras." That's not going to happen. I think we already have all the general indictment we need.

Ronald Reagan is a man of basic decency. If he were on a college campus in any capacity, he would be liked and admired. But I don't think he's qualified to be president of the United States. I think we've suffered because of that. He's patriotic and earnest, but there are a number of qualities a president should possess that Ronald Reagan just doesn't have.

SUM: *Does the situation indicate an imbalance in our system of government?*

Ketcham: I don't think so. The machinations of Irangate show that it's possible for a president to abuse his powers.

The reaction will inevitably be to heighten conventional suspicions of how the president conducts his office. That's too bad, because it's important for the president to be trusted by Congress and for him to have a great deal of flexibility and leeway. But that can only be freely given to him because he is trusted. That's where the real power of the presidency ought to come from. I'm all for a strong presidency.

SUM: *What do you think the effect will be on Congress?*

Ketcham: I think we're going to have a period where Congress is going to try to supervise and second-guess what the president is doing, because they feel they've been betrayed.

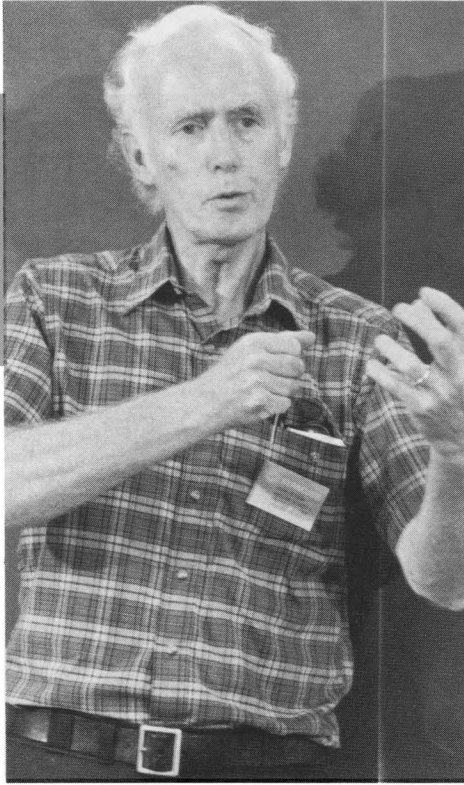
But in the long run that's not a good arrangement. It's much better if Congress feels it can trust the president. Think of World War II, when Roosevelt exercised enormous powers. There was no problem then, because we trusted his judgment and basic honesty. It would have been terrible if Roosevelt had had to check his decisions all the time. The executive power must have flexibility and discretion.

SUM: *Does our method of selecting presidents still give us the best possible leaders?*

Ketcham: While I could find various illustrations of how the system doesn't work very well, over the whole course of American history, the quality of our leaders in the past 40 years is not any worse than during any other 40-year span.

What is distressing, particularly in the last 10 years, is the way in which our campaigns seems to require qualities of candidates that are quite different than the qualities needed to govern. Mr. Reagan is the most extreme example. He has all the qualities that media campaigning requires, but those are not the same qualities that are needed to govern.

But on balance, I don't think any constitutional change is needed. There



When we talk about the shortcomings of public life, the basic difficulty is the absence of any widespread, deep-felt sense of public responsibility on the part of our citizens. The only way to correct that is through education.

is no ultimate solution to the problem of an indifferent selection of leaders except, as Jefferson put it, the improvement of the discretion of the people. And that's a long-term project.

III. Ralph Ketcham on Individualism and Citizenship

SUM: Your new book is titled *Individualism and Public Life: An American Dilemma*. What's the dilemma?

Ketcham: In the last 25 or 30 years, public life has become increasingly disordered. I think this has come about because the individualist tradition that was formerly so useful has created a lot of problems, given the nature of today's world. We need to find a public philosophy—a way of conducting our public business—that pays more attention to the fact that we are human beings living with other human beings. We must solve our problems in relation to others.

Our political problems, especially, must be confronted—not by everybody

starting from their own perspectives, but by understanding the larger public perspective.

SUM: Was there a greater sense of public life a century ago, or have times changed to make our lives more interlinked now?

Ketcham: We certainly do live in a more interdependent world today, but despite that the emphasis on individual rights and the needs of special interest groups has been slowly growing. During the 19th century, the balance was generally good and the individualist tradition served us fairly well. But that was because the 19th century was exceptional. Our day is more like the days of the founding fathers, at least in terms of an interdependent world.

You know, American isolationism is a product of a 125-year period between the end of the Napoleonic Wars and the beginning of World War II. Before that, the public life of the United States was linked daily to world problems. Only after 1940 do you once again find American well-being as intimately, insolubly connected with the problems of the rest of the world. So that 125 years of isolationism in our history was an exceptional period. I think it's a mistake to regard the morals, habits, and attitudes of that time as the fundamental ones for our polity and our society.

SUM: How do you think we should conduct our public life?

Ketcham: I'm suggesting that although the individualist tradition of the Western world has been very

useful and made many contributions over the past 500 years, at the moment it's out of balance, especially in the United States. We've gone beyond the point of maximum usefulness and now need to counteract it—to balance it—with another perspective.

SUM: What do you suggest?

Ketcham: In my book I talk about working out the problems created by an excess of individualism. I look at why individualism has been so strong in our history and then counterpoint it with the philosophies of the Far East, the Confucian-based philosophies. Of course we can't be like the people of the Far East, but perhaps we can learn something useful by knowing another way of thinking about public life.

Finally I try to apply this perspective and see how it could work in certain areas of democratic life: our idea of how to be responsible citizens, our idea of leadership, and our idea of the ways to make decisions. I feel all the basic aspects of life in a democratic society could be thought about differently if we understand both another perspective and the needs of today.

SUM: How do you bring about this kind of change?

Ketcham: Through education. I'm one of a number of educators who developed a course for high school seniors on participation in government. Working with me were Joe Julian, SU vice president for alumni relations, and Donald Meiklejohn, professor emeritus of social science and philosophy. We designed a

Citizenship Education at SU

Ralph Ketcham is not alone in his quest to inculcate a deep sense of public responsibility among his students.

Syracuse University as a whole has a long tradition of promoting citizenship through education, with the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs being the cornerstone of that effort.

While incorporating the theme of civic duty throughout its disciplines, the Maxwell School offers both an introductory course in citizenship and an advanced, "team-taught" seminar supervised by Ketcham.

The seminar, for which Ketcham recruits an average of 15 faculty members per semester from all areas of the University, changes

theme yearly to cover various aspects of civic impact on society. Topics have included religion and American politics, the corporation in American culture, and the implication of professions and the professionalization process on American citizenship.

An offspring of the Maxwell School's commitment to civic education is its Center for the Study of Citizenship. Founded in 1984, the Center is concerned with helping citizens to become better informed and more active in civic affairs.

The focus of this endeavor is the center's graduate education program, The Social Foundations of Public Policy, whose faculty includes members of SU's Maxwell School, School of Education, Col-

lege of Law and the Upstate Medical Center. The program has a core curriculum of three courses: "Constitutional Law", "Foundations of American Political Thought", and "Social Foundations of American Public Policies in the Twentieth Century", available to graduate students through any degree-granting department at SU.

"The program provides a really nice interdisciplinary introduction to what it means to talk about public issues in the United States," explains Manfred Stanley, director of the Center.

Providing similar training for undergraduate students is the goal of the all-University Honors Program's new pilot program in citizenship education, sponsored by the Exxon/Kettering Public

Leadership Education Project.

Beginning this spring, Syracuse, using a \$3,000 grant from the Exxon and Kettering foundations, will launch a course matching 10 honors students, who have completed a primer seminar in citizenship, with 10 civic leaders from the local community.

"The program at Syracuse is designed as a seminar, with students and members of the community acting in an apprentice/mentor relationship," says Mary Stanley, public affairs lecturer and member of the Exxon/Kettering Steering Committee. "The students will observe the professionals in their everyday activities and, the professionals, in turn, will initiate the students into public life and the community." —R.G.L.

220-page teacher's guide outlining readings, projects, and Supreme Court cases for the course, and I also helped train the teachers. The curriculum has already been tested locally at Liverpool and Henninger high schools and at high schools in New York City. Beginning in 1988, all seniors in New York state will be required to take a course in participation in government.

SUM: *What's your approach?*

Ketcham: Citizenship education in the broadest sense. When we talk about the shortcomings of public life, I think the basic difficulty is the absence of any widespread, deep-felt sense of public responsibility on the part of our citizens. And in the long run, the only way to correct that is through education. I know we can't do it in one course, but that course can allow us to focus on what seems to be our basic need.

SUM: *Which is?*

Ketcham: It's something I learned 30 years ago when I was a young instructor right here at Syracuse University. I learned it from Joe Tussman [associate professor of philosophy and citizenship, 1956-61]. He influenced me a great deal and was my mentor.

Tussman developed the idea that we must think of citizens as office holders--the office of the citizen. In other words, citizens are office holders because in a self-governing society, when they're acting as a citizens—that is, voting—they're actually governors. They're the people ultimately doing the governing.

Being the governors—the officials—requires certain basic attitudes. Certainly one of the most important is that officials must think of the public interest rather than self interest. If they act in their own self interest, we don't approve of them—we know better.

SUM: *That sounds as though you're getting back to the problem of individualism again.*

Ketcham: Exactly. Quite often, we're taught that what we should do as citizens is get in there and be self-advocates, arguing in favor of our neighborhoods or our businesses or whatever other special interests we have.

Now it's part of human nature to want to support our own particular interests. But we must also recognize the difference between doing that and approaching public problems with an

understanding of the public need. A citizen has just as much obligation to do that as does any other public official.

SUM: *How do you get them to do that?*

Ketcham: Through citizen training, which is basically inculcating a new attitude in young people. The heart of responsible citizenship is learning to ask the right question.

All through history we've judged our leaders, and the difference between a good and a bad leader is whether we've felt the leader acted in the interest of the nation as a whole. George Washington? Queen Elizabeth? They were judged good because they acted for their countries. But Richard III was considered a bad king because he killed his nephews and feathered his own nest rather than concerning himself with the good of his country.

In a small way, individual citizens must hold to that same standard. Not that we're all going to make it—we're all going to have our own particular selfish interests. But if we make a real effort in our intentions—if we consciously try—in the long run the result will be a different quality of citizenship.