Nathan Marsh Pusey

April 4, 1907 – November 14, 2001

In his habits of character and his presidential style, Nathan Pusey '28, Ph.D '37, LL.D '72, was a figure of transition. The last of a breed in some respects, he did more than perhaps any other man to usher the American research university into the modern age. The last Harvard president to have graduated from the College, he was the first to come from west of New York State. A deeply religious man and a staunch friend of Memorial Church, he was the last Harvard president to read the lesson at services every Sunday. And he was the prototype of today's college presidents, who must feel equally at ease in the world of academe and that of large-scale fundraising.

Still, transitions can be exciting times, requiring a good measure of faith and the courage of one's ideals. Nathan Pusey had both to spare. "This was," he said, "the best time to be a president, almost, in modern history."

Anne and Nathan Pusey at Commencement last June

A classics scholar with a particular passion for Athenian law, he was only 46 when the Harvard Corporation tapped him to succeed James Bryant Conant as the University's twenty-fourth president, in June 1953. He came to Harvard from Lawrence College, where he had been president for nine very constructive years.

A fellow historian and Midwesterner, Franklin L. Ford, Ph.D. '50, who served as dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences under Pusey, thought his friend's experiences in Wisconsin were formative: "At Lawrence he discovered that the person in charge had to be alert to an institution's every need, because the place was depending on him. When he got here, he felt the same way."

Visiting the Yard's laboratories and libraries, offices, and athletic facilities during that first summer, Pusey was appalled by the degree of overcrowding and decrepitude in evidence. He concluded that, without a massive infusion of dollars, Harvard risked failing to meet the opportunities and challenges of a postwar period marked by expansion in nearly every aspect of American society.

His solution was The Program for Harvard College, the most ambitious and successful fundraising effort in the history of higher education to that point. The campaign raised about $100 million from 28,000 donors. As John T. Bethell writes in *Harvard Observed*, "For all of private education, it redefined the art of the possible."

In all, during Pusey's phenomenally progressive tenure as president, Harvard's endowment and budget quadrupled. The construction of more than 30 buildings—including Mather House, the Science Center, the Countway Library of Medicine, Holyoke Center, Gund Hall, the Loeb Drama Center, and the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts—almost doubled its floor space. The population of teachers and administrators grew from 3,000 to 8,500. The student body was transformed as well, with the inception in the 1960s of a "need-blind" admissions policy, which energized the Yard with young people from all sorts of backgrounds. And Pusey bravely started negotiations aimed at a merger between Harvard and Radcliffe, breaking the ice in 1970 with an "experiment" in coresidential living (decried by many alumni at the time). In all these initiatives he was aided by a remarkable cadre of deans, for he worked hard at his appointments and was exceptionally good at finding the right person for a job.

Pusey's dynamism in ensuring a proper physical environment for learning and research was matched by his passion for defending Harvard's intellectual climate against any who dared to threaten civil discourse and academic freedom. He was an early and outspoken adversary of Senator Joseph McCarthy; when McCarthy pressed for dismissal of four faculty members he accused of being Communist sympathizers, Pusey declared:

> Americanism does not mean enforced and circumscribed belief.... Our job is to educate free, independent, and vigorous minds capable of analyzing events, of exercising judgment, of distinguishing facts from propaganda, and truth from half-truths and lies.....

His adamance, which made him a liberal hero in the 1950s, cast him in a less popular light a decade later, in April 1969, when he called in the Cambridge police and state troopers to evict and arrest students who had taken over University Hall to protest the University's perceived role in the military-industrial complex. By his impassive dealings with the protesters, whose behavior he felt was an affront to the civil discourse integral to the culture of a university, Pusey made himself a natural target for criticism. He announced his retirement the following year, but he claimed to have no regrets over his handling of the protest, maintaining that his choice had been a simple one.

In the three decades following his departure from Harvard, Pusey remained true to his ideals. He served for four years as head of the Andrew F. Mellon Foundation, in New York, wrote a book about American higher education, and chaired the Fund for Theological Education.

Visitors to Harvard Yard will find his name emblazoned in the Nathan Marsh and Anne Woodward Pusey Room in Memorial Church and the Nathan Marsh Pusey Library—fitting tributes to a man who feared a "world without spirit" above all else, and who cherished the University as "one of the noblest creations of the mind of man." ~DEBORAH SMULLYAN

A memorial service will take place April 12 in the Memorial Church.

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