

# Letters . . . to the Editor

## Computerized Man

Editor:

I was much impressed by the excerpts from "The Computerized Man" by Justice Douglas in the September issue. I should like to take slight issue with one statement and expand another statement.

As a university professor, I am very much aware of the fact that even such apparently objective "items such as age, years in high school, college degrees" and the like can involve much unsuspected subjectivity — on the receiving end, in the instance of the first two; on the sending end, in the instance of the third. Though the late John F. Kennedy and I were the same age at the time, he was being called too young to run for the presidency and I was being called too old for an assistant professorship. (We both made it — he is now a martyred President, and I am a full professor.) An acquaintance of mine, however, was turned down for candidacy for graduate school (he is still an excellent secondary school teacher) because his record showed that he had spent six years in high school — interpreted as prima facie evidence of his academic ineptitude. Even a sworn statement by his high school principal, since retired — that he attended two years of high school on a half-time basis because he had to support the family of his widowed mother — had no effect on this arbitrary decision. In the matter of "college degrees," it is the lack of such a degree — since his record shows that he attended the University for five years — which presently handicaps a young man of my acquaintance. His performance was spotty: brilliant in his specialty, mediocre to poor in other subjects. But though his "grade point average" was satisfactory for graduation, he lacks the necessary credits in physical education. As a professional ice-skater in high school and college, he viewed the physical education program as "so much Mickey Mouse" and refused to comply.

I should like to second Justice Douglas's comments on putting into computers the results of interviews "between the investigator and the former teacher" and the results of "the questionnaire." Since I have been teaching since 1938, I couldn't even guess at the number — certainly more than two thousand — of times when I have been asked by interviewer or questionnaire to pass judgments on former students. (And I'm not referring to letters of recommendation or questionnaires prompted by the students themselves — those run into the tens of thousands.) On one occasion, I was asked by an investigator from the Office of Naval Intelligence: "Would you recommend E — B — as completely trustworthy in a position of highest security clearance?" It happened that I had taught E. B. as a tenth grade student in high school some ten years earlier. I explained that I hardly felt qualified to make a statement one way or the other. The next question was: "Then am I to put down that you would not recommend him?" How much did the computer record of my ten-minute dissertation upon the way persons change between the ages of sixteen and twenty-six, even though I was maneuvered into giving an answer of yes? More recently, I was asked to fill out a questionnaire on a student whom I had supposedly taught in 1961. I searched my records and the records in the Office of the Registrar, and I could find no evidence that I had ever taught a

student by that name. I returned the questionnaire, checked "No Opportunity To Observe" in all categories, with a covering letter explaining that, to the best of my knowledge, I had not taught that student. Later I received what looked like a form letter stating, in effect, that my failure to cooperate would have to be construed as an unfavorable report on the person in question. I immediately turned that form letter over and sent it back (this was from a private corporation) with a somewhat intemperate denunciation of the firm and its neolithic personnel policies. About five months ago, I got a lighthearted note from the person in question, thanking me for my favorable recommendation, since he had got the job, and explaining that — since he had not been officially adopted by his foster-father — he had changed his name back from Hart to Allen, in accordance with his birth certificate, in order to apply for a job with the security-conscious firm for which he was working.

For these and many other reasons, I view a National Computer Center for People with alternating amusement and alarm. But, as time goes on, alarm takes precedence over amusement — especially since the article in This Week Magazine last Sunday, which detailed the way in which electronic eavesdropping devices are freely available to the general public. It is quite possible, for example, that a sophisticated electronic listening device could print out every word which I have typed in this letter. Such a device would not yet be available to the general public, because of cost, but it could be designed if the stakes were high enough (may already be in existence, for that matter) by a government agency, like the F.B.I.

The horrifying fact is that there is no effective law — and no way of writing such an effective law — against the National Computer Center for People nor against the proliferating electronic and non-electronic eavesdropping devices. (Many years ago, as a joke, a pre-medical student friend of mine demonstrated how we could listen in on our next-door neighbors by putting his stethoscope against the wall. We could hear everything said — except when somebody flushed a toilet. At the time, it was hilarious. Now, I'm not so sure.) — Will C. Jumper, Ames, Iowa.