FOREWORD

by Victor Navasky

In the tradition of the Brits, whom W. H. “Ping” Ferry appreciated more than most Americans, let me at the outset declare my interest. Ferry was a friend of mine. The DJB Foundation, over which he presided with his wife, Carol Bernstein Ferry, made a grant or two to projects I recommended. In fact, were it not for Ferry, I might never have become editor of *The Nation*, a job that changed my life; and as James Ward, in whose debt we are for so artfully putting Ping between hard covers, mentions on page 192, because I had once written a profile of him (for the *Atlantic Monthly*), Ping regarded me as his Boswell and expected me to write his biography. Otherwise, what follows is an objective, unbiased account of why this relatively anonymous man’s life is a story worth telling.

In my piece for the *Atlantic* I had quoted the words of John Stuart Mill: “The mere example of nonconformity is itself a service. Precisely because the tyranny of opinion is such as to make eccentricity a reproach, it is desirable, in order to break through that tyranny, that people should be eccentric.”

But here I want to argue that Ping’s example is important for reasons beyond eccentricity, even though his charm and ability to be heard above the din came first and foremost from the fact that he was an original. Let me begin at the beginning, or rather what for me was the beginning.

I had first seen Ping in action at a Washington-based Conference on the American Character convened by the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, which he had helped birth. He stood out not only because of his pink shirt and yellow polka dot bow tie but because of the theme of his impromptu remarks—how Americans as a tribe were suckers for happy endings and how our leaders exploited this obsession. “There isn’t any happy ending to any of the present situations,” he said, “because most of the endings will call for vast changes in the status quo and Americans simply don’t want to change the status quo.”

Ping wanted to change the status quo.

Not long thereafter I saw an item in the *New York Times* about one W. H. Ferry, vice president of the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, having resigned from the Democratic Party in protest against whatever it was.

This struck me as an interesting thing to do less because of the issue that prompted his protest (frankly, I can't remember what it was) than the form his protest took. I had never heard of a citizen taking the trouble to resign from one of the two major parties before, and I was intrigued.

And then I read a column by John Crosby, who covered politics-as-culture for the old *Herald Tribune*. He wrote about how Mr. Ferry had attacked America's last and most sacred cow, J. Edgar Hoover, the director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. I will quote rather than summarize Ferry because one of the keys to his ability to make enemies and influence people was his gift of barb:

Mr. Hoover warns against Soviet espionage in the U.S. This is an old line of the FBI chief, and its success, year after year, is a tribute to the trance into which his sermons throw Americans, not excepting Congressmen. Mr. Hoover is, after all, our official spy-swatter. In these persistent reports about espionage and sabotage, is he delicately telling us that he isn't up to the job, that Red spies are running loose despite his best efforts?

That's when I got the idea that there was a piece to be done on this happy heretic, The Man Who Attacked J. Edgar Hoover. I quickly discovered that there was more to Ping Ferry than PR man—he liked to describe himself as “a PR man who had lucked into the best job in the world.” He had persuaded Henry Ford II to set up the Fund for the Republic, whose studies of communism might serve as an antidote to the political hysteria that traveled under the banner of McCarthyism. He then helped persuade Robert Hutchins, who had come to national attention when he banned football from the University of Chicago, to head up the Fund (and Hutchins in turn invited Ferry along for the ride). When the Fund transformed itself into the Santa Barbara-based Center with a daily dialogue at its core, Ferry had protested that he didn't belong, he was no intellectual. Hutchins, I now learn from Ward's researches, dubbed him one in the course of an elevator ride. Which is not to say that Ferry was not a supremely gifted PR practitioner. Until I met him I had naively supposed that to be in PR was to be a press agent, whose talent is measured in column inches—getting the client's name in the papers. As Ping patiently explained to me, at the top (and the blue ribbon PR firm for which he toiled before he joined the Fund/Center represented CBS and Campbell Soup, among other corporate behemoths), your job was not to get your client mentioned in the columns but rather to keep the client's name out of the papers. Corporate PR, he explained, schmoozes things over:

The aim of most corporate public relations is invisibility, giving the corporation so much protective coloration it will be hard to pick out from the surrounding scenery, a

contemporary search for the “there’s nobody here but us chickens” effect. It operates on the principle of quietism. A vast oil company tries to represent itself as essentially like the corner drug store only bigger. Corporate PR has gone a few thousand light years beyond where it should go.

A second misconception I had, on which Ping quickly straightened me out, was that the skillful PR man would achieve his goal by manipulating the press through the strategic release of selected information. Ping’s method was quite the opposite. As far as I could see, his practice was to overwhelm his target with a flood of unselected information. At least that’s what Ping did to me when he invited me into his voluminous files including his seemingly endless correspondence with the low and the mighty to which he granted me unfettered access. Eventually I was to enter the unselect ranks of his correspondees, but at the time I merely envied them.

It was not only that he was on a first-name basis with such as Tom (Merton, the Trappist monk), Walter (Lippmann), and James (Storow, *The Nation’s* publisher, whom he later helped persuade to grant an option to the group that eventually installed me as editor), but it seemed as if every letter or certainly every letter-to-the-editor was calculated to put the editor of a political satire magazine (which I happened to be at the time) to shame. Thus he wrote the editor of the local Santa Barbara paper proposing that executions be televised in high schools: “Surely the capital punishers must regard television, with its immediacy and technical virtuosity, as a model means for getting across its fearsome lesson.”

It was Ferry, Ward reminds us, who came up with the idea for a pact committing the president of the United States and the premier of the Soviet Union to the personal slaughter of fifty children (who would be exchanged annually) before giving the order to fire the first thermonuclear weapon. (“It is a way of buying time for negotiations,” he would explain, “by calling on the abhorrence and deep compunctions of the individual man against murder by his own hand.”)

At the time I thought Ferry was merely an ingenious gadfly, an ad hoc provocateur, a hypocrisy-exposer with a happy gift for disguising social criticism as satire. Vide his proposal to abolish the New York Stock Exchange because “the destiny of nations should not rest on an institution whose ultimate irrationality is everywhere acknowledged.” According to Ferry’s theory it performed only two functions: (1) It satisfied man’s urge to speculate; and (2) it was a means of arranging for credit. Converting the major investment houses into high class gambling parlors, said Ferry, could take care of the former, and “yankee ingenuity” the latter.

But over time I came to understand that Ping was more than a satirist even

as he was more than an eccentric. He was among other things a unilateralist. He saw Star Wars as beyond Jonathan Swift's wildest imagination. He saw the arms race between the United States and the USSR as insane. He had no illusions about either the United States or the USSR, but he had a bead on the Cold War and he invented his own program for dealing with it. I am not a philosopher and I have no idea what Ping thought of Immanuel Kant, or indeed whether he even read him. But he led his life on the Kantian principle of the categorical imperative, which I take to be: Act as if the maxim from which you act were to become a universal law. Thus the peace movement for Ping was more than a matter of moral protest. Along with E. P. Thompson, the great English social historian and founder of European Nuclear Disarmament, whose work he supported (with money, friendship, introductions, connections, clippings, fellowships which he arranged behind the scenes, etc.), he rejected the theology of deterrence theory and the vocabulary of Mutual Assured Destruction. In Ping's argot there was no room for "perhaps" or "if-they-will-we-will." He was in the business of writing and proposing his own historical agenda, creating a new kind of peace consciousness, one willing to take the risks of peace, a rejection of worst-case thinking.

His politics were confusing to Cold War mainstreamers because he was not a communist, a procommunist, or an anticommunist. He believed in starting from the world where it is or was. But in the tradition of I. F. Stone, A. J. Muste, E. P. Thompson, and our mutual good friend Archie Singham, who brought the message of the nonaligned to the overaligned, he was in the business of holding open alternative space, space that rejected Cold War assumptions, formulations, and vocabulary. Never having been a communist or even, so far as I know, a Marxist, he had none of the bitterness toward communism harbored by so many former reds. And given the Feel Free motto he invented for the Fund but which Ward rightly tells us was also his own, this free-wheeler was incapable of being attracted to totalitarian societies in the first place.

Keeping open alternative space was also a key to many of the grants he and Carol dispensed. Whether to Sandy Close and her alternative Pacific News Service, or Bob Borosage, who presided over the relatively radical Institute for Policy Studies, the Ferrys placed their bets on outsiders, folks who occupied new and often unfamiliar territory. I never talked to him in a systematic way about his theory of philanthropy, although he once told me that too much money is poison. I think he had an almost Aristotelian sense of it. You give it away to help restore balance in the world: balance between the rich and the poor, between the races, between the past (Native Americans) and the future (the technology that was part of the triple revolution he prophesied).

He believed that foundations—or at least those with which he was associ-

ated—should spend themselves out. And in his and Carol’s case they did it without forms, pretensions, or illusion. Once, an executive from one of the Rockefeller-sized foundations pondering a DJB grant to an esoteric Native American project, asked him how he and Carol managed to find so many innovative, radical, unknown-to-the-general-foundation-community projects to fund, and more important how did they check them out? Ping explained DJB’s procedure, which was to say that they had no procedures, no forms, no bureaucracy (which tends to be in the self-perpetuation business). Only a vast network of friends (who tipped them off to possible candidates), and letters from strangers. “Aren’t you afraid you’ll be taken?” asked the shocked executive. “Oh,” Ping replied, “we fully expect that the normal percentage of our grantees will take the money and run. Our batting average is probably only slightly better than Ford, Rockefeller, and Carnegie.”

W. H. Ping Ferry’s ultimate importance to me, then, given his iconoclastic philanthropy, his clarity of purpose and prose, his politics of peace (or is it merely sanity?), his antibureaucratic common sense, is the impossible example he set for the rest of us.

FERRYTALE

The Career of W. H. "Ping" Ferry