IN MEMORIAM – A. D. LANGMUIR*

by

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In 1949, Alex left his position as a professor at Hopkins to become, as he often proudly asserted, the Chief Epidemiologist of the Public Health Service. Indeed, he was that and more. But, in fact, he never ceased being a professor, a teacher. His lectures -- always meticulously well-organized -- were masterpieces of simplicity and of exposition -- intended as much to question as to provide answers. Professional meetings, particularly the American Epidemiological Society, were a special challenge and, for many, the degree of success of the meeting correlated directly with Alex's presence and his involvement. I recall well leaving one such meeting which had devolved into a shouting match -- all precipitated by a few preposterous Langmuirian challenges to orthodox thinking. Afterwards, I asked Alex how he could possibly have offered the outrageous ideas he did and queried as to whether he truly believed what he had said. He responded, with a twinkle in his eye, "Of course not, but it certainly generated a good discussion, didn't it?"

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He wore the badge of a civil servant with honor. I never heard him speak publicly about this but he truly considered this a higher calling -- one which demanded responsiveness to the public and to the press and one which commanded the highest degree of dedication. He had what some would consider an old-fashioned sense of values, of a dedication to impeccable honesty both professionally and personally, of a Calvinistic devotion to his responsibilities. No one worked harder or put in longer hours than he but that was never brandished as a banner nor posited as a virtue for others to emulate. It was simply Alex.

The EIS was his special creation, indeed, a training program now in its 42nd year. It was conceived as an unorthodox crossbreed of academic instruction using Wade Hampton Frost's case history method and practical field experience in the manner he had learned epidemiology as a young epidemiologist in New York State. Nothing was quite so instructive as the hands-on, day-to-day adventure of trying to deal with an epidemic problem -- shoe leather epidemiology. And the classic teaching epidemic of them all was the outbreak of diarrhea following a church supper in Oswego, New York. Even today, the name, "Oswego, New York," to me is all but synonymous with that obscure and fatal church supper which I am sure has been long forgotten by the inhabitants.

Throughout his tenure at CDC, he sought to work through at least one publishable paper with each EIS officer. Those who succeeded in doing so considered

this a defining experience -- involving drafts upon drafts, endless debate and discussion. Alex was a difficult taskmaster and sometimes not the most gentle or diplomatic of persons with whom to deal. For those whose paper was in process and among those who failed to complete the task, Alex bore a variety of labels -- not all complimentary. Curiously for me, throughout my years at CDC, I was never subjected to this process. Papers were approved with little comment and passed on for publication. And then one day, not ten years ago, I sent to him for comment what I then (and now) consider to be the best and most pivotal of the chapters destined for our book on smallpox eradication. I was rather pleased with it as I was sure he would be. It dealt with the principles, the history and development of the concept of eradication. Some four weeks later, his suggestions and comments were delivered. He totally dismembered the entire chapter. He pulled no punches. I confess I was appalled and angry. To me, it was totally unreasonable criticism. My inclination was to dismiss his critique out of hand. Nearly six months elapsed before I was able to dispassionately address that chapter once again. As I was to discover, his insights were remarkable. The chapter, one of the longest in the book, was painfully rewritten, beginning to end. Indeed, now, it is one of the best in the book.

Alex believed firmly that if one truly understood disease patterns and what had happened, one should be able to predict future patterns of disease occurrence. And these convictions produced the well-known Alex the oracle -- always prepared to wager a battle of the finest Scotch whiskey -- to be consumed with the challenger -- as to whether

the next year was to be an epidemic influenza year or whether an epidemic would last 6 weeks or 6 months or whether, when it was done, there would be 100 or 300 cases. The wagers were frequent but, as Alex said, they really helped to sharpen the debate.

Many of us in this room and hundreds, indeed thousands, around the world are working now in a field -- epidemiology and public health -- to which he attracted so many who previously had been uninterested or unknowing. He conveyed always the sense of excitement, of creativity and of the rewarding sense of public service which is intrinsic to every facet of the field. We bear that legacy with pride.