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"Willful Men"

The Cosmos Club of Washington has been much in the news lately. The first incident to attract national attention was the nomination of President Kennedy for membership and the discovery by an astonished public that he would have to wait his turn for election just like anyone else. Democracy in action! But the publicity of the last two weeks stems from an incident quite different in kind, one that reveals grave flaws in the mode of government of the club.

Unlike many private clubs, the Cosmos Club has no constitutional religious or racial qualifications for membership. Neither wealth nor position in "society" is taken into account for election. On the contrary, the prime requirements are that the candidate shall have done "meritorious original work" in science or the arts, or is "well known to be cultivated" in some field of the arts or sciences, or is "recognized as distinguished in a learned profession or in a public service." More than half of the members are scientists; the rest are lawyers, editors, writers, university presidents, painters, reporters and columnists, government officials, and so on. Admissions are passed on by a 12-man committee, and two adverse votes disqualify a candidate.

In view of the elevated intellectual and cultural aspirations of the club and of the fact that Negro guests are freely admitted, members and nonmembers alike were astonished and dismayed when the admissions committee turned down an apparently well qualified Negro, Carl T. Rowan, for membership. Although it is true that about one-third of all those proposed are rejected, the great majority of the members are reported to believe that racial prejudice was the ruling factor in this case. Mr. Rowan occupies a high position in government (he is Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs and was nominated for membership by his predecessor in that office), is a well-known reporter, and is the author of three books. The reaction to his rejection was immediate: some dozen members, among them John K. Galbraith, who was one of Mr. Kennedy's sponsors for membership, Jerome Wiesner, the President's science adviser, and Howard K. Smith, radio and television news commentator, resigned in protest. Others, no less opposed to the action of the admissions committee, hastily organized to attempt to make sure that no similar action would be taken in the future. An overwhelming majority of the members voted in favor of a declaration that "the exclusion of any person from membership on account of religion, color, race, or national origin is incompatible with the principles of the Cosmos Club." An informal committee polled the ten candidates for the five vacancies on the admissions committee for their opinions: the five who were elected were the five who unequivocally pledged that race would not influence their votes.

By these two actions the Cosmos Club took the first steps toward restoring its lustre as an intellectual institution. But if it is to retain its national status as a place for scientists to meet, it will have to devise a mode of election to membership that will not permit the wishes of the majority to be thwarted by what Woodrow Wilson, a distinguished former member, might have called "a little group of willful men, representing no opinion but their own."—G.DuS.