

The Peacemaking General

Few people have done more for
democracy than the Civil War
Officer, Henry Martyn Robert.

by TOM MAHONEY



General Robert in 1869. This was the year in which he printed the first small leaflet of the now famous Rules of Order.

FIFTY YEARS AGO, street gangs terrorized the lower East Side of New York City. Arguments were settled with fists. Big boys bullied little ones. The weak shut up. A few idealists ventured into the slums to teach democracy to the sons of immigrants who had come to America looking for it.

In 1914, one of these missionaries persuaded William Edwin Hall, a successful young lawyer, to visit one of the first Boys' Clubs. A fight was brewing. One side wanted to table the proposal of the other side, but the proposers wouldn't give up. The 12-year-old chairman asked the grownups: "Can you debate a motion to table?"

Hall, a graduate of the Harvard Law School, didn't know, but an 11-year-old in a tattered red sweater triumphantly produced a worn copy of *Robert's Rules of Order*. He showed where it says you can't debate a motion to table. Peace returned.

Hall was so impressed that he devoted the rest of his career to promoting Boys' Clubs. In the 38 years he served the movement as national president, he diverted millions of boys from gangs to clubs.

"Get a gang to run on Robert's Rules," Hall said, "and you have a club. They introduce something new and precious, personal dignity."

Robert's Rules force club members to practice democracy. They are based on a few golden principles:

- Abide by the will of the majority.
- Listen to the minority.
- Consider one thing at a time.
- Give everybody a chance to talk.
- Keep the discussion impersonal.

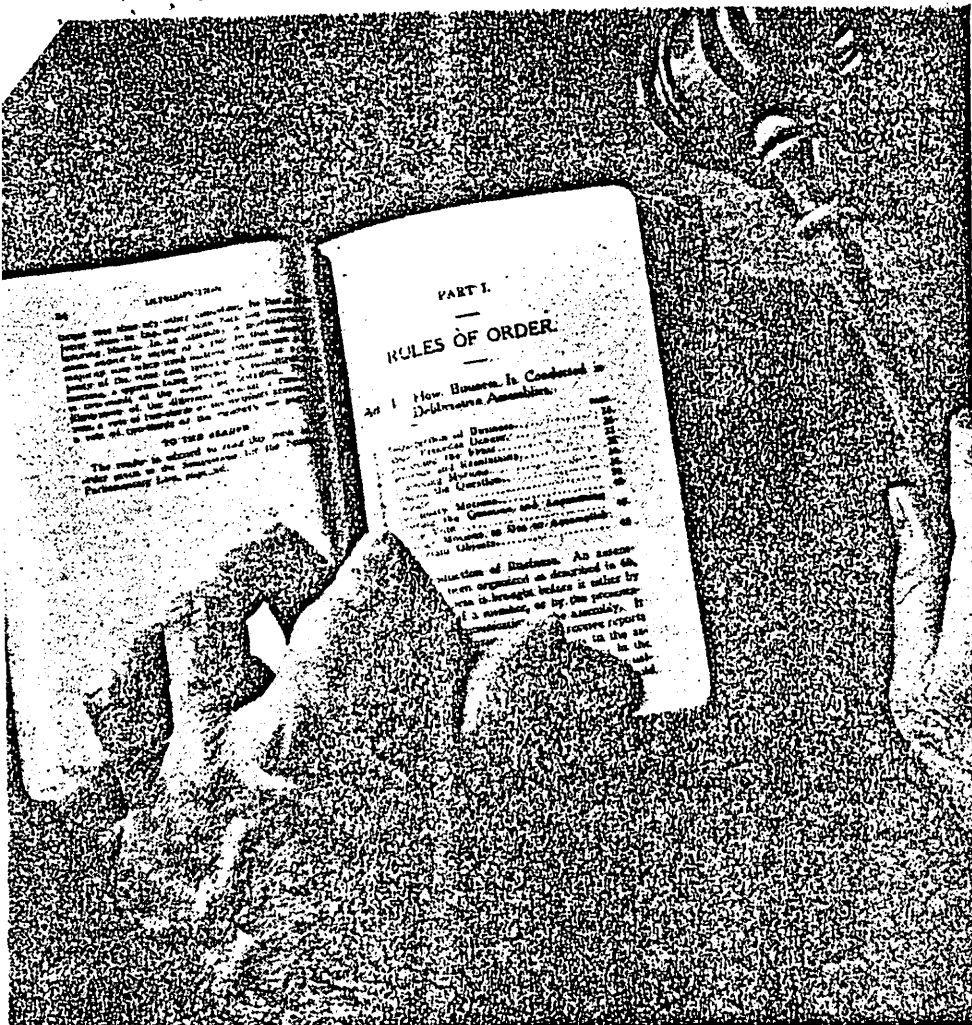
These principles have long been the basis of good manners. Robert's Rules apply them to every conceivable tangle of human wills. To do this gracefully takes the logic of an engineer, the conscience of a minister's son, the discipline of an

army officer and the courtesy of a southern gentleman. The Robert of the rules was all these and more. When he died in 1923 Robert had become the final authority for settling all parliamentary disputes.

Henry Martyn Robert, the name that has settled a million fights, belonged to a physically frail but gregarious and determined U.S. Army Engineer officer. He was born May 2, 1837, at Robertville, S.C., a place founded by his Huguenot ancestors. His father was a Baptist minister who moved around the country. When Henry was 16, he was appointed to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point from Ohio. In 1857, he was graduated fourth in his class and assigned to the Corps of Engineers. In 1859 his health was permanently damaged by tropical fever contracted in Panama on his way to fortify San Juan Islands in Puget Sound, Washington Territory.

In 1860 peacemaking failed. Although a southerner by birth and temperament, with a dozen relatives in the Confederate Army (an uncle, Brig. Gen. Alexander Robert Lawton, became quartermaster general), Lieutenant Robert remained loyal to the Union. As he built defenses for Washington, D.C. and Philadelphia, history was posing questions about the rights of assemblies versus members, majorities versus minorities. In 1863 an embarrassing experience challenged him to find a better way for men of good will to handle differences of conviction.

Robert was fortifying New Bedford, Mass. against attack from Confederate raiders preying on the whaling fleet. A well-mannered, devout young Baptist, he was asked to run a stormy church meeting. Although he had no experience as a presiding officer, the 26-year-old West Pointer felt that the



Almost two million copies of the book have helped to keep order in countless meetings.

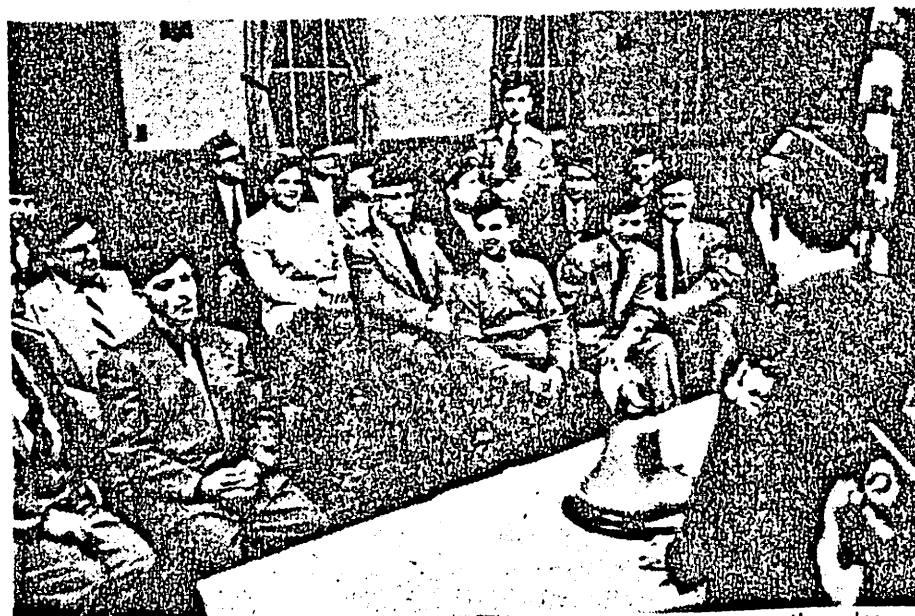
honor of his uniform required him to accept. He faced a nightmare. One man kept shouting "out of order, out of order." Neither Robert nor any one else knew whether he was right.

When it was over, he turned to books for help. Exhaustive search turned up only two, "Jefferson's Manual of Parliamentary Practice," a digest of the rules of Congress compiled by Thomas Jefferson when, as Vice President, he presided over the Senate, and "Cushing's Manual of Parliamentary Practice," a similar 1844 work by Luther Cushing, a judge who taught at Harvard. But both were meant for continuing government bodies of paid members.

Starting from scratch, Robert began to think out what would work best for brief meetings of voluntary groups. After the war he taught military engineering at West Point, spent four years in San Francisco as chief engineer of the Pacific military district, and worked in Arizona and Southern California mapping trails, including those which developed into present Highways 66 and 80. Wherever he went, he attended meetings. Rules varied widely. Differences were especially troublesome in California, where

every kind of community organization had to be founded by settlers from different parts of the East. Robert kept the rules which worked best, discarding variations.

The rules Robert refined make it pos-



Running an orderly meeting is no problem for the officer who knows the rules.

sible for people to join together for a common purpose even if they don't know each other. They are the essence of what George Romney, Republican Governor of Michigan calls "voluntary cooperation." Romney regards it as the secret strength of America.

Recognizing these values, youth organizations and many high schools now teach Robert's Rules to build character. Seven-year-old Blue Birds practice against the day they will "fly up" to Campfire Girl meetings run on Robert's by repeating together the Blue Bird wish "to remember to keep my temper most of the time." Young officers of Future Farmers of America and 4-H Clubs are trained in Robert's Rules, sometimes by grownup officers of civic clubs. Both organizations encourage officers to demonstrate by putting on model meetings for their members, and by entering contests at which judges rate competing teams on the correctness and elegance with which each executes a prescribed parliamentary maneuver. Boys in Junior Achievement, Inc. have to organize and run the Board of Directors meetings of their miniature corporations on Robert's Rules.

Character building aside, familiarity with parliamentary technique is now as essential to modern life as driving a car. Millions who didn't learn it when they were in school, fill in at adult education courses. There are movies, educational television programs, correspondence courses, and taped lessons. Elaborate materials were developed a few years ago by corporations undertaking to teach their executives how to participate in politics. To be sure of order at their meetings, the policemen's association of Washington, D.C. took lessons in Rob-

(Continued on page 34)

ert's Rules in the lineup room.

We've been called a nation of joiners. It's true. According to a 1960 survey made by Dr. Marguerite Rittenhouse, "meetings" are the leading destination of both men and women on a night out. We now support so many clubs, lodges, boards, associations, societies, foundations, leagues, institutes, sororities, fraternities, brotherhoods, circles, unions and committees that it's hard for anyone to escape an organized meeting.

All this joining has made "Robert's Rules of Order" a unique publishing phenomenon. It has sold 1,925,000 copies since the first pocket manual appeared 87 years ago for the use of "all classes of societies, conventions, councils, associations, and assemblies." Since most of these organizations are run by Robert's, and they increase every year, the book sells faster the older it gets. Somebody will buy the 2,000,000th copy in 1963.

Legislatures and many organizations have their own rules, but they are wise to specify Robert's for points on which their own rules are silent. On the last day he presided over the United States Senate, former Vice President Nixon suggested from the chair that Robert's Rules would apply even to that procedure-proud body if his attempt to change the rules for a civil rights fight should leave it in doubt about how to proceed. President Kennedy, incidentally, brought along a copy when he moved from the Senate to the White House.

Social scientists have criticized Robert's Rules for stifling friendly, spontaneous exchange of opinion with formal, stereotyped procedure and making every

topic into a battle. Hundreds of simpler books on meetings have been written. Most big membership groups and unions have chatty little booklets for the guidance of their amateur officers. The Rules themselves have been illustrated, acted out, digested, and reduced to charts, diagrams, tables, and even slide rule form for ready reference in the heat of debate. But no one has devised a substitute. Many officers dare not preside without the "little old rules" and travel with well-worn copies of the small-sized book in their pockets or handbags. When there is a dispute, nothing else will do.

No best-seller was ever so modestly launched. In 1869, Robert paid the San Francisco printer who published his survey of Arizona, to produce an eight-page leaflet on parliamentary procedure to give away to people asking him for advice. It was so well received that he felt something more was needed, but he didn't get to it until he was transferred to Milwaukee to build lighthouses on the Great Lakes. When the bitter winter of 1873-4 shut down construction, he found time to write a longer work. He sent outlines to New York publishers. "Cushing and parliamentary law are synonymous," one replied. "Moreover, what does an army officer know about parliamentary law?" All rejected it.

Undaunted, Robert continued to work on his manuscript. He read it to his wife. At her suggestion, he illustrated the bare rules and added a section explaining how a society is organized and conducted. When he heard of the fight of a member of a religious society against ejection, he added a section on the legal rights of an

assembly to protect itself.

Although he was supporting a wife and three children on a salary of \$1400 a year, Major Robert had sheets for 4,000 books printed at his own expense. In February, 1876, he paid S. C. Griggs & Co., a Chicago textbook publisher, to bind 1,000 books and send them for comment to the leading parliamentarians in every state. If these liked the book, Griggs would go ahead and publish it and the next edition would profit by their criticism. Robert had the type broken up so that he would be forced to revise the book after the first 4,000 copies were sold. Since almost everyone who was known to need it had received a free copy, the next edition did not seem imminent.

But a new edition was needed in five months! Ten thousand copies were sold in the first year and that many or more have been sold every year since. Sales now run around 60,000 a year. To this day, Scott Foresman & Company, which bought the Griggs firm, sends each new speaker of a state legislature a copy with his name stamped in gold on the cover. There is a black leather binding for clergymen, and an edition in Braille. While many copies have been sold overseas, the book has never been translated since an early German-language edition was translated for German-Americans. Other democratic countries have their own special ways, and so much hangs on each word that translation is a big responsibility.

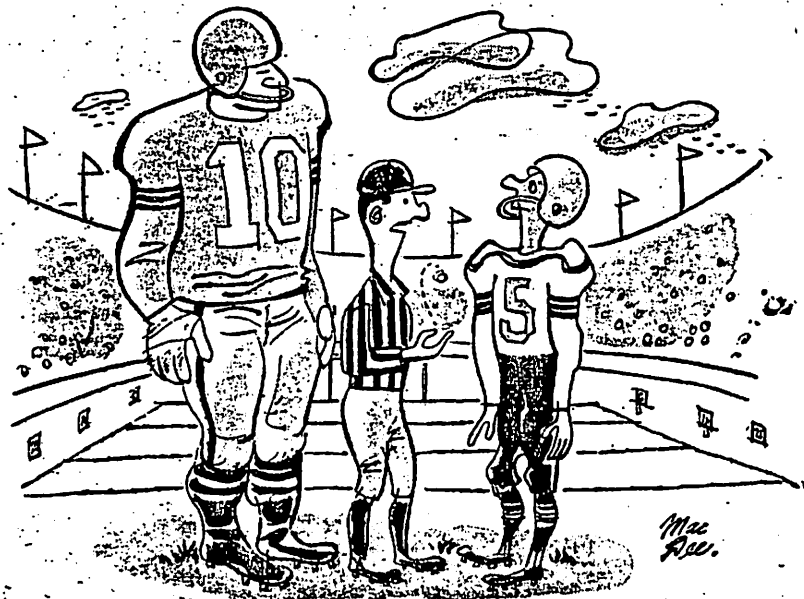
During his long life, Robert conscientiously answered a steady stream of letters, sometimes 30 a week. Rules of a women's club, for example, required the president to appoint committees promptly. She did so and then resigned. "The committees serve," answered Robert.

"Can a candidate serve as a teller in an organization's election?" asked somebody. "Yes," ruled the General, "otherwise he might be made a teller to prevent his being a candidate."

Another question involved a motion to place in a park some swan boats. While the motion was pending, an amendment proposed to add "equipped with roller skates." An amendment to the amendment struck out "roller" and inserted "ice." Robert approved. No amendment should be ruled out he said, as long as it bears on "the immediately pending question."

A member resigned, and was present when his resignation was accepted, but later wanted to rescind it. "No," said Robert.

In settling thousands of disputes like these, Robert clarified and refined the principles behind the Rules. Later editions profited. The various revisions,



"Heads or tails, or does it really matter?"

It have expanded the original 100 pages to 326, give it copyright protection until 1971. A few years before Robert died, his son, Henry Jr., a civilian professor of mathematics and economics at the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, was named trustee of the famous volume. When the son died in 1937, his widow, Sarah Corbin Robert, an active clubwoman, succeeded to the role.

But no single individual can advise all the many groups that now need interpretations of the Rules. A whole new profession has been created to cope with them. There are now Registered Parliamentarians, like there are Registered Nurses. Four hundred R.P.s have passed the examinations of the National Association of Parliamentarians, Inc., with headquarters in Miami, Fla. The National Institute of Parliamentarians is newer and smaller.

Parliamentarians get all kinds of problems. "At school," a little girl wrote Katherine E. Bowers, head of Parliamentary Consultants, a Washington firm, "the members of the eighth grade organized a civic club. We chose a president whom our teacher recommended. But, sorry to say, we made a mistake. Our president is stubborn. I would like to know your opinion on: 1. How to conduct a meeting. 2. Should there be a vote if someone suggests something? 3. Does he (the stubborn president) have authority over the class? Would you please let me know what you think?" The child's questions were excellent, but answers to them could surely have taxed the keenest parliamentarian.

The camera crew which shot Mrs. Bowers' television film, "How To Make Your Influence Felt" put it to her more succinctly. "How can we get rid of our bum union president?" Trouble with organization officers is a common problem. One club had to call in a parliamentarian to save them from commitments made by a recording secretary who rewrote the minutes to suit herself after having them approved. Also, salvation from a good amateur parliamentarian can be difficult. A union which tried to get around an expert on Robert's Rules by dropping them in favor of "common sense and majority rule" found that the Robert's expert was the only member who could tell them how to change the rules legally.

Lawyers don't learn parliamentary procedure in law school. Unless they get into politics, they can be as ignorant of it as Edwin Hall was at his first Boys' Club meeting.

In opening its membership to Negroes in 1956, the Bar Association of the District of Columbia goofed with a voice vote instead of the count required, to be sure two-thirds favored the change in rules.

"Leaders of reform movements seem

prone to become overzealous," a Federal court chided the lawyers in declaring the move illegal under the Bar Association's own rules. "They assume that the ends justify the means. That theory can never be sustained in a court of law." The red-faced Washington lawyers hastened to put their reform on the right side of the law.

Some years ago, company lawyers couldn't extricate the then chairman of AT&T from a motion to limit debate at a stockholders' meeting. Clubwomen from every part of that huge auditorium shouted advice, until one of them marked the appropriate section in a copy of Robert's she happened to have in her pocketbook and passed it up to him.

Women are supposed to be innocent of foul play and even the issue in debate. "While none of us can recall what it was we were voting on," a cartoonist makes a plump clubwoman say, "I'm very pleased to announce that the majority of us were for it." Men fall in with this view because of the notorious disorder of discussions in the home. George Price, the cartoonist, once drew an embattled family of seven demanding "a copy of Robert's Rules of Order" from a bookstore clerk.

The fact is that women are usually better parliamentarians than their husbands. They attend more meetings and get more practice. From Mrs. Robert herself on down, the most active professionals are women. Before she was head of the Women's Army Corps, Oveta Culp Hobby was parliamentarian for the Texas State Legislature. The National Association of Parliamentarians was founded and is run by women. L. C. Michelin of Republic Steel Corporation finds the situation "somewhat unfortunate because many of the very important meetings in the country are staffed and chaired by men."

Wilma Soss, the unquenchable president of the Federation of Women Shareholders in American Business, has outmaneuvered chairmen of great corporations at stockholder meetings. She once stood unrecognized, shouting "point of order" at the president of the New York Central Railroad Company until she had to close her eyes from fatigue. Next meeting, she brought a lady wrestler in case the management tried rough stuff. Many corporate secretaries believe that special rules should be written for stockholders meetings. Mrs. Soss and Lewis Gilbert, a more decorous but equally persistent crusader for "stockholder democracy," disagree. "If a \$200,000 chairman cannot master running an annual meeting under Robert's Rules of Order," she says, "what he needs is a cut in salary, not a new set of rules."

Like "stockholder democracy," "union democracy" is based on rules of order. James G. Cross, president of the Inter-

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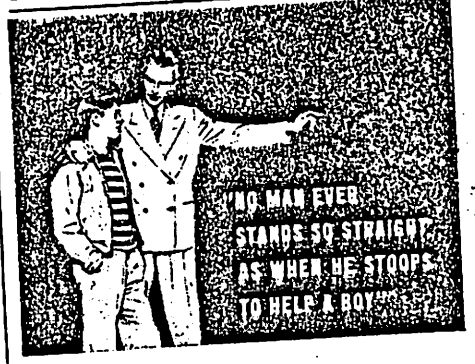
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national Bakery and Confectionery Workers Union, abolished Robert's Rules at the 1956 convention so that he could seize control. "Parliamentary procedure was made for Senators, not for bakers," he told the delegates. Since 1959, union members shut out by a dictatorial leadership can sue under a provision of the Landrum-Griffin Labor-Management Reporting and Disclosure Act forcing unions to operate under reasonable rules such as Robert's. Labor Department officials think that the rank and file speak up more than they used to do, often to reject the best contract their leaders have been able to negotiate. Company presidents who have to contend with publicity-seeking minority stockholders can agree that democracy is not always constructive.

But it is worth the price. No one was more willing to pay that price than Robert. "In your case," he wrote a woman in 1915, "the only thing I can suggest is persuasion. I believe that with one exception I was president of more Government Boards and Commissions than any other graduate of the Military Academy. And yet I never failed to get a unanimous report of every board. Sometimes it seemed hopeless to others, but I never gave up trying till I succeeded. You cannot force people to agree with you. But when persons are approached in a conciliatory spirit, with an evident desire for the general good, and willingness to yield personal preferences where it can be done with no injury to others, I have found people responsive."

Robert was a friendly but strict boss, and an efficient presiding officer who sat leaning forward on the edge of his chair listening intently to every word. "When he found members of a Board of Engineers apparently unable to agree," an officer who served under him recalls, "he took the position that, as they were all earnest, honest, educated and equipped with loyal minds, the points of difference were due to different understandings of the premises. He would have these explained and if they were not agreed upon, they would stay on this point until they agreed as to what the premises were, what problem was to be solved, what entered into it, and what the value of each of these matters was. Having agreed on these points, a unanimous conclusion followed."

Harmony was Robert's ideal. If he disagreed with a subordinate's report, he would discuss it with him informally and try to avoid having to disapprove it. "If it is possible to avoid it," he said in a letter, "I never defeat an opponent publicly. That hurts his pride and makes him an enemy."

Robert was president of the Board of Engineers who planned the great seawall at Galveston after the 1900 tidal

wave. It has protected the city ever since. He was promoted to brigadier general and made Chief of Engineers shortly before retirement in 1901. While he continued to lend his engineering talents to projects at Galveston, the Mexican port of Frontera and elsewhere, he spent most of his remaining years at Owego, N. Y., his second wife's hometown. He enthralled youngsters with stories of his adventures in the West, drew up a system of forms for Baptist conventions, made many speeches and gave many fees to charity.

Robert's lifetime of experience as a peacemaker shines through later editions of the "Rules"; "Parliamentary Practice," a short, elementary book on the forming of organizations issued in 1921; "Parliamentary Law," a 500-page treatise published in 1923; and thousands of personal communications.

"It is not allowable to arraign the motives of a member," he advises meetings, "but the nature or consequences of a measure may be condemned in strong terms. It is not the man, but the measure, that is the subject of debate."

"The presiding officer of a large assembly should never be chosen for any reason except his ability to preside."

Robert's advice to presiding officers will be pertinent as long as human beings assemble: "The chairman should never forget that to control others it is necessary to control himself."

"No rules will take the place of tact and common sense on the part of the chairman."

"Know all about parliamentary law, but do not try to show off your knowledge. Never be technical, or more strict than is absolutely necessary for the good of the meeting."

"One of the most prolific causes of confusion in deliberative assemblies is the neglect of the chair to keep the assembly well informed as to what is pending business."

He died at 86, the oldest General and the oldest alumnus of West Point. When Toastmasters International met in Washington in 1954, a delegation of members laid a wreath on his grave.

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall see God," Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount. A deeply religious man, Robert refused pay for many private acts of peacemaking.

"A man who knows anything is in debt to those who are less fortunate," he once explained. "He can only pay the debt by imparting the knowledge."

General Robert more than paid his debt. In a tribute to him, Luther Evans, when Librarian of Congress, said: "General Robert made it possible for our democracy to express itself in terms of decision, action and result. His work is infused in, and inseparable from, our society."

THE END

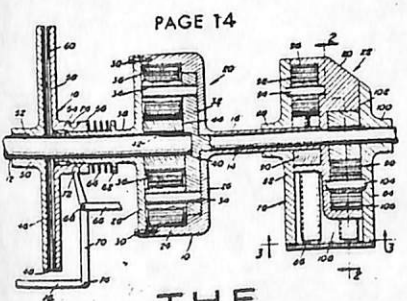
INDIGNION

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A THREAT TO AMERICAN INDUSTRY

That Could Cripple Our National Security

By WILLIAM R. KINTNER



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THE INVENTOR GETS A BREAK

THE PEACEMAKING GENERAL



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The Story of Henry Martyn Rebert and his Rules



THIS MONTH'S ISSUE
*"Should Congress
Curb the Filibuster?"*