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THREATS TO ACADEMIC FREEDOM AT MONTANA STATE COLLEGE

Ultra-conservatives on two occasions threatened my position at Montana State College, once during the Joe McCarthy witchhunt and again during the John Birch mania.

I came to Montana State College in September 1947, six months after the enunciation of the Truman Doctrine. I was opposed to the assumptions on which it was based, that the Soviet Union was an aggressive, expanding nation, determined to conquer the world. I felt that the U.S.S.R., our war-time ally, was misunderstood, that she reacted from a sense of insecurity and fear, rather than from a lust for conquest. Consequently, I favored the viewpoint of Henry A Wallace and voted for him in November, 1948, instead of for Tom Dewey or Harry Truman in the presidential elections.

In the fall of 1949 or 1950, I was invited by the Bozeman Rotary Club to give a noon luncheon talk concerning a country with whom our national relations needed improving. Immediately, the Soviet Union came to mind and so I gave a talk entitled, "Facts Forgotten about Russia," in which I reviewed the war-time devastation of the U.S.S.R., the loss of life, the nation's need for peace, and its fears of another invasion. Members of the club in the discussion after the presentation were critical, but President R.R. Renne told me that he thought it a good speech, saying things that needed to be said.

May 1951, Joe McCarthy was riding high. I was teaching the History of Russia course at the time and wished at the close of the course to present two views of the contemporary Soviet Union. George F. Kennan had published
his famous Mr. "X" article in the July 1947 issue of Foreign Affairs, and assigned the students to read that. Since I could not find a statement of the opposing point of view, I decided to use my "Facts Forgotten about Russia" essay. Here I made a mistake. Since I had placed copies of the Kennan article on reserve in the library, I should have placed copies of my composition along with it. Instead, I mimeographed it and distributed copies to the class, including a student who took it to an influential ultra-conservative in Butte.

President Renne was in the Philippines at the time. Pat Gaines was serving as acting president. The individual in Butte, as I remember it, submitted a copy to the FBI, which it sent to President Gaines. He in turn sent it to Dean Frank B. Cotner, Dean of the Division of Science. Cotner panicked. He called me into his office and gave me to understand that he thought that "Facts Forgotten About Russia" with its reference to "the war-lords of Washington" was Soviet propaganda, evidence that I was in communication with Joseph Stalin! It was a tense moment. I decided then and there that I needed support among the citizenry of Montana. When Carl F. Kraenzel invited me in the summer of 1951 to accompany him to a [Montana?] Farmers Union picnic in Hill County, I accepted and made contact with the MFU leadership.

Years passed. President Eisenhower served his two terms. The Soviets launched Sputnik, the Cold War, intensified by the Truman Doctrine, continued, as did the threat of a nuclear holocaust. In the midst of these international tensions in the early 1960's the John Birch Society emerged, with one or two chapters in Bozeman.
During the fall of 1961, we had a group of live, young intellectuals on campus, organized into a club called, “The Organization for the Advancement of Cultural Understanding”: They organized that fall a lecture series entitled, ”Dangers of Atomic War”, or something like that. The lectures were given in the Student Union, each one was taped and broadcast the following week by radio station, KBMN: Several scientists talked from both Montana State University in Missoula and MSC in Bozeman. The group asked me to give the concluding lecture on ”Alternatives to Atomic War.” I had given two talks that autumn on the United Nations, one to the Rotary Club and another, at the College of Great Falls, and I chose to talk on cooperation through the United Nations as an alternative to atomic conflict.

The student lounge of the SUB was packed that December evening. I talked, relying more than usual upon my manuscript, for the young men had informed me that they had invited arch-conservatives, Harvey Griffin and Malcolm Story, to attend. They wanted to educate them. I said that when the chips were down we must cooperate with the Russians “or mutually destroy ourselves.” When I had finished, a lengthy question-and-answer period followed. Both Griffin and Story were present. They were courteous, at least. Mr. Griffin participated in the discussion.

When, however, the following Monday, KBMN broadcast my speech, Malcolm Story asked for equal time. When the radio station or somebody informed me that the station people had agreed to broadcast Story's reply on Wednesday evening, I knew the fat was in the fire. I immediately contacted
my lawyer, H. B. Landoe and asked him to listen to Story's rebuttal. I also made arrangements for it to be taped.

In that broadcast, Story insinuated that I was a Communist, that I should be fired and that if the university administration didn't do it, a vigilante committee would. That evening President Renne asked for police protection for both Malcolm Story and myself. I was fortunate throughout the crisis to have the unyielding support of President Renne, who himself was under attack for harboring Communists on the college staff. I was fortunate in another way in this crisis in that I had a friend in Mrs. Heinz Spielman, who was periodically writing a column for the Bozeman Chronicle. Her husband was a professor in the agricultural economics department; he was a refugee from Austria, a victim of Nazi persecution. He had been through this sort of witch hunting before. By publishing a portion of my speech in her column, Mrs. Spielman was able to inform the community of the exact nature of my remarks.

Story followed up his attack with a request to the State Board of Education that I be fired. Colleagues on campus wanted me to sue him for slander, but Landoe advised against that action. He said that slander cases in Montana were hard to win; moreover, he said, a lawsuit would give Story the attention that he was seeking. On President Renne's recommendation, I talked to Hal Bolinger, chairman of the college's local advisory board. He was supportive, saying only that he thought I should have used the word "negotiate" rather than the word
"cooperate."

That which was fearful about the situation was the presence of ultra-conservative Donald Nutter as governor and chairman of the State Board of Education. It was well-known that he sympathized with the John Birchers, [and] that he refused to proclaim United Nations Day in Montana. When in mid-January Story's request came before the state Board, Nutter was reported to have said, "Yes, I know of some forty pink professors in the university system that should be fired." I was relieved, for in numbers there was strength. A week later the governor was killed in an airplane crash and Governor Tim Babcock did not pursue the matter.

These were not the only threats to academic freedom in my time. In May of 1858. [Should read 1958: This is the sole typo in this document.] President Renne, badgered by the extremists, refused to allow Eleanor Roosevelt to speak on the campus. Harvey Griffin and the ultra-conservatives said that she was a Communist. I was in charge of arrangements; [And] instead of her speaking on campus, she spoke in the auditorium of the Willson school, and I introduced her as "the First Lady of the World."

When President Renne returned from an assignment in Ethiopia in 1960, he refused to allow Leslie Fiedler of Montana. State University in Missoula to speak on the campus. The ultra-conservatives said Fiedler was a homosexual and a bad influence on students. A few years earlier we had had a gay black pacifist on campus for an international conference arranged by Professor Nick Helburn. He was Bayard Rustin, later active in the civil-rights movement.
Renne had come under attack for allowing him on campus and did not want to submit himself to the same criticism again. Local 1005 of the American Federation of Teachers, of which I was a member, was his (Fiedler) sponsor.

Instead of speaking on campus, Fiedler spoke to a full house at the Helburn's

AFT attacked Renne, the campus supported Renne, and the incident lead to the demise of the organization at MSU.

Robert G. Dunbar

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