

1977

March 28,

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

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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

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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 Bozenan. 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

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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

1958. [ 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

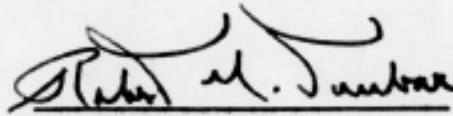
Nick Helburn. He was Bayard Rustin, later active in the civil-rights movement.

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

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Robert G. Dunbar", written over a horizontal line.