Historical Vignette
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ACADEMIC FREEDOM AT UT: THE CRISIS YEARS

Academic freedom, or the right to teach, research, and publish in their fields of scholarship without fear of outside political, economic, or religious pressure is the most highly valued privilege of those who constitute the faculties of American colleges and universities. Tradition has given the privilege widespread legitimacy except in authoritarian societies, but even in democratic governments, academic freedom has often been challenged by those who consider it a license to teach "subversive" or "disloyal" doctrines. The most serious attack on academic freedom in the United States occurred during the early 1950s in what has been called "The McCarthy Era."

As chairman of a U.S. Senate subcommittee, McCarthy investigated and "exposed" a variety of individuals in government, education, the arts, and the military whom he considered Communists or Communist sympathizers, but other congressional committees and numerous private watchdog organizations joined in the effort. These investigations produced major controversies on the campuses of the Universities of California, Wisconsin, Colorado, Cornell University, and the City College of New York, but the University of Tennessee was not immune to the professors (AAUP). One of the professors ran into trouble for assigning a history text which included the statement that "We are all descended from lower animals." Although Tennessee did not pass its anti-evolution law until 1925, public sentiment was already strongly against the teaching of Darwinian evolution before the law was passed. The AAUP undertook an investigation and concluded that UT's system of one-year faculty appointments was "neither just nor compatible with the dignity of the profession"; the timing of the dismissals during the summer, when the discharged professors were away and unable to seek alternative employment, was unfair; and that while the administration's actions may have been legal, they were not equitable or "honorable." The association at its 1924 meeting declared the dismissals unjustified and criticized conditions at UT as "detrimental to the purposes of the institution and to the interest of higher education in general."

In 1932 another dismissal—this time of Alfred Mueller, an associate professor of education—produced a second AAUP investigation and a renewed charge that tenure at UT was not in keeping with "good academic custom and usage." The AAUP now placed UT on its censure list.

Tenure were factors in the organization's actions. Neither of these earlier incidents reflected a national trend of hostility to institutions of higher education. The McCarthy Era of the 1950s was different both in its virulence and the extent of the attacks on faculty, administrators, and the universities themselves.

Knoxville was no haven of "radical" politics and never experienced the intensity of inquisitorial activity from legislative committees, demagogic politicians, or private anti-Communist organizations that characterized other academic centers. Nevertheless, the decade of the 1950s witnessed several forcible efforts to uncover "radicalism" on the UT campus. After all, it was not difficult for anti-Communists to find targets when "subversion," "disloyalty," and Communism were defined as vaguely as these terms often were. A 1954 Army pamphlet entitled How to Spot a Communist warned that Communists could be identified by their predisposition to discuss civil rights, social and religious discrimination, or the immigration laws. A naval intelligence officer advised that Communists were most likely to be found among "intelligent people" and an opinion poll disclosed that the general public believed Communists to be people who talked about political matters "too much," who "read too much," and had "an affinity for causes."

While Senator Joseph McCarthy did not begin his public campaign against subversives until February 9, 1950, when he claimed to have a list of 205 Communists in the State Department, President Harry Truman's 1947 executive order instituting a loyalty-security program for all federal employees had already produced what the New York Times in 1951 called "a subtle, creeping paralysis of freedom of thought and speech" on university campuses. A mild manifestation of this phenomenon occurred in Knoxville in late 1948, when the Rev. R. O. Elfer of the Central Methodist Church denounced Mary Elizabeth Barnicle, a lecturer in English, for allegedly distributing campaign literature for Henry Wallace among her students. (Wallace, Franklin D. Roosevelt's third term vice president, ran for president in 1948 under the Progressive Party label.) Elfer also charged that Barnicle was being investigated by the FBI as a Communist. What action the University took is unknown, but Barnicle resigned on August 31, 1950.

Late in that same year, while the Korean War was in progress, an assistant professor of philosophy, Howard Lee Parsons, became the object of a curious accusation by a local patriotic group because of a question he had placed on a logic examination. The question asked students to use their knowledge of formal logical processes to "prove" that "the South Korean Republic was like the Franco Spanish Regime" and that the North Koreans were "peace-loving and non-aggressive." UT Vice President Fred Smith explained that the question was only one of six, all of which drew upon contemporary newspaper quotations and which challenged the students to apply the principles of logic they had learned in their course to particular situations. The "small flurry" created by the incident appears not to have aroused much excitement either way. While Parsons was defended vigorously by Professor Willis Moore, who was in charge of the philosophy program, the rest of the faculty remained silent. Parsons was generally known to be a political liberal and an opponent of racial segregation.

Senator Joseph McCarthy cross-examines a witness during the Senate hearings in the early 1950s.

Please go to the next page.
Dr. Fred Holly, head of the Economics Department, was questioned about statements in the Morgan text that referred to income taxes, the inequalities of wealth distribution, the national debt, and socialized medicine. Holly responded that while he did not agree with everything in the text there was no reason for not using it. Students should learn to read textbooks critically . . . .

They conceded that Parsons held views on “sensitive” social and political matters that were controversial, but they insisted that a democratic society should expect “honestly held differences of opinion.” Failure to promote Parsons would be interpreted as “an infringement on intellectual and academic freedom of a peculiarly insidious type.”

The appeal to Dean Lexenuel Hugel of the College of Liberal Arts fell on deaf ears. Parsons resigned on August 31, 1957. He moved to Coe College in Iowa, where he became head of the Department of Philosophy and Religion, and then to the University of Bridgeport as chairman of the Philosophy Department. He retired in 1989 after an active career in teaching and scholarly publication.

In the fall of 1952, another incident occurred on the Knoxville campus which indicated the pervasiveness of national suspicion and fear at American universities. A number of students organized a Film Society and convinced the administration to show classic and foreign films to student audiences in Perris Hall Auditorium. Unfortunately, the society’s first choices proved to be highly controversial, although neither the students nor their faculty advisers—Samuel Baron, an instructor in English, and Richard Brothers, an art instructor—expected them to be so. The films were four Charlie Chaplin comedy shorts—The Cure, The Floorwalker, The Fireman, and The Pawnshop—and Alexander Nevsky, a Russian epic set in the thirteenth century, directed by the well-known Sergei Eisenstein with music by the equally well-known Sergei Prokopiev.

The attack was launched by the Knoxville Journal, which, in a front-page story on October 5, criticized the University for showing “a Soviet-produced film glorifying Russia” and Chaplin films only months after the movie star had been barred from the U.S. because of “grave moral charges” against him. The Chaplin charges were ten years old in 1952. The fifty-four-year-old comedian had been sued in 1943 by a young woman, Joan Barry, who claimed he was the father of her child. Chaplin denied this charge. A year later, the comedian was indicted for violating the Mann Act, which made it a federal crime to transport a woman across state lines for purposes of prostitution. Barry had allegedly received money from Chaplin for interstate travel. Chaplin was acquitted after a trial in April. The paternity suit initiated by Barry led to a mistrial; a second suit held Chaplin to be the father even though bloody tests showed he was not.

In September 1952, Chaplin was in London for the premiere of his film Limelight. Even though the Journal writer had never seen the film.

The day after the Legion published the article, Chaplin announced that the films would not be shown. “I am sorry the matter has come up,” Brehm said in a letter to the local post commander, Charles Segal. The Film Society’s faculty advisers indicated that a Buster Keaton comedy and a Peter Lorre mystery would be substituted for the offending films. Neither faculty adviser commented on the validity of the Legion’s charges.

Student response was muted. An editorial in the student newspaper, the Orange and White, blasted the ban on the films as “nonsensical” and called the Legion’s and the Journal’s charges “half-baked.” What connection, the paper asked, was there between Chaplin’s private life and the films he made years ago? “Is this the meaning of academic freedom?” A student columnist was more critical of the ban. He ridiculed the charge that Alexander Nevy was an “anti-American” and a “Communist propagandist.” The student columnist was more critical of the ban. He ridiculed the charge that Alexander Nevy was an “anti-American” and a “Communist propagandist.”

The columnist ended with an appeal: “[Let’s have an end to witch-hunting in Knoxville, shall we?]” Unfortunately, the student plea went unheard. Less than six months later, the campus was enmeshed in another controversy, and Sam Baron, the history instructor who had been a Film Society faculty adviser, was squarely in the middle of it. As legislators in many states fell under the spell of Joe McCarthy’s campaign of fear, they sought to root out subversive influences appearing in textbooks.

In Tennessee, a legislative inquiry of such a nature was launched early in 1953, at the beginning of Frank Clement’s term as governor. It did not particularly favor the investigation, but he found it impossible to oppose it. As an official of the American Legion, he had been active in pursuing subversives, and he had been an FBI agent during the period when the agency was involved in carrying out the Truman loyalty security program. Senator Sterling Roberts of Roane County chaired the committee, which had received complaints about sociology and history texts. On Feb. 5, 1953, the committee held a one-day hearing on the UT, Knoxville, campus. Two books appeared to interest the committee, An Introduction to Economic History by N.D. Argue and Russia: A History by Sidney Harcourt, although the probes also quizzed the heads of the Sociology, Political Science, and Psychology/Philosophy Departments about their texts. Dr. Fred Holly, head of the Economics Department, was questioned about statements in the Morgan text that referred to income taxes, the inequalities of wealth distribution, the national debt, and socialized medicine. Holly responded that while he did not agree with everything in the text there was no reason for not using it. Students should learn to read textbooks critically . . . .

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enough for a full-year course, and that it had already been replaced by another text. The course was used in Baron's Russian history courses, a three-term survey from the time of Peter the Great to the Present Regime. Under questioning, Baron explained that the text was equally balanced in its treatment of Communism, and that it appeared to satisfy the committee. The day's hearings seemed to be the first of the "Red Scare" on the Knoxville campus. Senator Roberts had intended the text to be limited, and he had managed to keep it so. His committee's final report, presented on a joint session of the legislature, concluded that no evidence of Communist material was uncovered in the text's textbooks. It urged publishers to produce textbooks that present a vigorous, dynamic, and patriotic approach to American democracy and government." As for the new laws in the state's colleges, the committee's report stated that Tennessee's colleges and universities were employing adequate safeguards against "the infiltration of subversive influences." When the report was introduced into the legislature, it was spread on the journals of the house by a joint vote of 10 to 6, but without specific discussion. From the viewpoint of a later historian of Tennessee politics, the investigation had "fizzled like a daffodil firecracker." A student columnist in the student newspaper of the University of Tennessee, in the spring of 1954, declared that the "Barnet Report" was an example of the "sage" for investigating that "as characteristic of America's 'harried society ... from ... the McCarthy ... down to ... state legislatures.' The student warned Americans to look for evidence publicly seeking politicians who would honor the time-honored American principles that "the man has the right to pass down all the other men that they may or may not add." The fireworks, however, were only begun. A local columnist, Judd Acuff, ferociously attacked the report of the joint investigating committee. He accused the investigating committee of "a cover-up. He accused the text book, "unmarked low. Dean L.R. Heeler conceded as much. The anti-Communist hysteria sometimes took curious forms. A newly appointed history instructor was advised in the fall of 1953 to shave off his beard lest it arouse suspicion of his loyalty. Sam Baron left the university at the end of the summer in 1953, but he had already been informed that his contract would not be renewed. The accusations against him during the Chapman investigation the year before and the textbook charge hurt his career as he moved to various universities on one-year contracts before joining the faculty of Grinnell College in Iowa, then the University of California at San Diego, and finally to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, from which he retired in 1969 as an Alumni Distinguished Professor. J. Wesley Hoffman was not affected by Acuff's charges. He retained his position as head of the history department, from which he retired in 1965.

Senator McCarthy's censure by his own colleagues in December 1954 by the overwhelming vote of 67 to 22 ended his influence and produced a beginning to the end of the "Great Fear." But the judgment on any group of fundamentalists and the charge against McCarthey's influence on the committee. An editorial in the "Orange and White in May 1953 noted with sorrow that "we have already had half-hearted experience with a system at U-T of just how much anger and injustice can result from inaccurate accusations." A Time magazine survey had disclosed that "professors are losing confidence in their chosen field," and one dean had reported that "students were reluctant to discuss certain matters." This was not the American way," the UT student editorial writer concluded.

Within the next year, positive action was initiated to strengthen academic freedom within the university. A joint committee of faculty members, including the representative of the AAUP and various colleges on the Knoxville campus drafted a strong statement on faculty rights to freedom of teaching and research on June 30, 1954. President Brehm submitted it to the Board of Trustees, which voted to send it to the Martin and Memphis campuses for faculty and administrative review and comment. Memphis proposed a few changes; Martin had none. In February 1955, Brehm forwarded the revised statement to the trustees urging approval on the ground that it affirmed the faculty's freedom to teach while protecting for disciplining those who "do not conform to the ethics set forth in the policy statement." These ethics included a caution to faculty against expressing views either in or out of the classroom about which they had no professional competence. Brehm elaborated his views a month later in welcoming the national AAUP at its annual meeting, which was held in Galatin and was hosted by the UT chapter. No one wanted to restrict teachers in expressing opinions they were "qualified to discuss with authority," he said, but they must not use the "prestige and dignity" of their position to propound or to express views on matters they were not qualified to discuss. He urged teachers to
exercise "judgment, discretion, and wisdom" in such matters. The proposal evoked an animated discussion among the trustees. One protested that there was too much emphasis on freedom and not enough on responsibility; another feared that the amendment would encourage socializing between UT and Knoxville College faculty. Still another trustee demanded an explicit acknowledgment of UT’s obligations to uphold the U.S. and Tennessee Constitutions. A new statement was ultimately drafted by the board, approved by the faculty committee that had drafted the original proposal, and adopted on November 4, 1955.

The "Statement of Principles Governing Freedom, Responsibility, and Tenure" included all the proposed amendments, appointments, probationary periods, the grant of tenure, and terminations of appointments contained in the AAUP’s 1940 statement on those subjects. In the action number fifty-five) The paper demanded an investigation into the propriety of Crane’s appearance on the UT campus. Undaunted by the assault, Crane in his address, titled "The Fate We Face," denounced the "so-called Patriots" who threatened democracy by their contempt for free speech. "Democracy thrives on controversy," Crane warned, "but it dies if they try to shut it up." While the Journal continued to criticize UT for allowing Crane to appear on the campus, there was no administrative response. The only reply was a letter to the Journal from the associate dean of liberal arts, Kenneth Knickerbocker, protesting the effort to smear Crane by his associations with various organizations. The basic test of freedom, Knickerbocker wrote, "is the freedom to be wrong in one’s opinions without being sent to jail." Three years later, another incident was more disturbing to the trustees. It involved Dr. George Soule, an economist who was an appointed visiting professor for the 1961-1962 academic year. The Department of Economics was about to embark on a doctoral program and wanted an economist of stature to strengthen the faculty for this purpose. The department was delighted when Soule accepted the invitation to come to Knoxville.

Holt insisted that while Soule might be called a "liberal" economist, he was not a Communist, a Socialist, or a Fabian Socialist. Holt continued somewhat facetiously that even if Soule were a Socialist, it might not be such a bad thing to have one on the faculty! When asked whether he would ever appoint a known Socialist, Holt responded that there was no constitutional bar to doing so.

Soule, the author of fifteen books, had been recommended by Arthur Burns, president of the American Economic Journal as a Communist sympathizer who had been associated with twenty-seven left-wing movements since 1940. (Three days later, the Journal ran a number fifty-five) The paper demanded an investigation into the propriety of Crane’s appearance on the UT campus. Undaunted by the assault, Crane in his address, titled "The Fate We Face," denounced the "so-called Patriots" who threatened democracy by their contempt for free speech. "Democracy thrives on controversy," Crane warned, "but it dies if they try to shut it up." While the Journal continued to criticize UT for allowing Crane to appear on the campus, there was no administrative response. The only reply was a letter to the Journal from the associate dean of liberal arts, Kenneth Knickerbocker, protesting the effort to smear Crane by his associations with various organizations. The basic test of freedom, Knickerbocker wrote, "is the freedom to be wrong in one’s opinions without being sent to jail." Three years later, another incident was more disturbing to the trustees. It involved Dr. George Soule, an economist who was an appointed visiting professor for the 1961-1962 academic year. The Department of Economics was about to embark on a doctoral program and wanted an economist of stature to strengthen the faculty for this purpose. The department was delighted when Soule accepted the invitation to come to Knoxville.

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loyalty" were in doubt. A special admonition to Holt was to bar UT faculty members from any association with the Highlander Center. Holt would not go as far as one trustee wanted—to prevent faculty members from even speaking at Highlander—but he did agree to cut them from teaching at the school. There the matter rested—but it did not end.

Twice during the next five years, the Highlander Center and UT's connections with it became the focus of further public controversy. In April 1963, the Knoxville Journal, in a series of two articles, charged that an "axis" existed between the Knoxville campus's Presbyterian Student Center and the "Communist leaning" Highlander Center. The Rev. Ewell J. Reagin, head of the center student center, was specifically targeted for attending "a famous Communist training session" at Highlander during the Labor Day weekend of 1957. Again, what agitation, Highlander's critics most was that blacks and whites were both in attendance at these meetings. Reagin, 35, was the son of the minister at Knoxville's First Cumberland Presbyterian Church. He was a graduate of UT, had attended divinity school at Vanderbilt, received a Bachelor of Divinity degree at the University of Chicago, and formerly served as a student pastor of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church in Bowling Green, Kentucky. Reagin responded to the Journal's charges by denouncing them as "false" and "defamatory." Myles Horton, chairman and director of the Highlander Center, denied that the center was a Communist organization. Its primary function, he pointed out, was to educate adults in the South on contemporary social issues, and it had been granted tax exemption by the U.S. Treasury as a public service agency. The Journal added the information that Highlander did not appear on the Attorney General's list of subversive organizations.

Students rushed to Reagin's defense. The magazine's charges "scandalous." Another lauded Reagin's concern for social justice. The Wesley Methodist Center on the campus of the University added three hundred signatures to a public statement protesting the "false and malicious" statements and its McCarthyistic tactics of attempting to discredit the "grief by associating" it and affirming its complete confidence in Reagin's integrity and loyalty. The petition was published as a paid advertisement in the Knoxville News-Sentinel. When it reappeared in the Orange and White, the petition carried over four hundred names. An editorial in the Orange and White expressed similar sentiments and particularly criticized the Journal for attacking the Presbyterian Student Center for the alleged association of its director with the Highlander Center. This constituted a "form of trial by newspaper" that was undemocratic.

The directors of the Presbyterian Student Center took official action to support Reagin. After a five-and-a-half hour session, the Board of Directors pronounced its confidence in "the integrity, Christian dedication, and loyalty" of the Reverend Reagin. Rejecting the Journal's charges, the board denounced the "dangerous habit of arousing suspicion through the reckless use of subversive charges with whom one disagrees." Other statements of support came from the Knoxville Roundtable of the National Conference of Christians and Jews and the United Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. UT's academic vice president, Herman Spivey, expressed his personal view that the "journal had not offered any evidence to support a charge of guilt against Reagin. Officially, Spivey dissociated the University from the controversy by stating that UT had no control over the religious centers that provided services to students.

The climax of the controversy was not favorable to Reagin or the Presbyterian Center. The adverse publicity generated by the journal's charges led the Appalachian Synod of the Presbyterian Church, U.S. (South), which had provided 60 percent of the students and faculty support, to vote at its October 24 meeting to discontinue that subvention. In taking this action, the synod announced that it was not in the business any manner that the director of the center has been disloyal to our country." On the other hand, it conceded that its decision was the result of "unresolved differences over pending emphasis, methods, and administration of the center as presently constituted."

The Presbyterian Student Center survived the controversy, but the adversarial class continues to serve students today. The Mid-South Synod of the United Presbyterian Church (N. A.) which had provided 40 percent of the Center's support, made up the lost costs created by the southern church's withdrawal. Ewell Reagin remained in Knoxville for another two years before leaving, under pressure, to pursue graduate studies in Chicago. By then, Highlander and UT were again in the news. This time it was Dr. LeRoy P. Graf, newly named head of the History Department, who was accused of lack of critic with the "community's anti-Communist crusade. A story in the paper on March 30, 1965, carried a banner headline proclaiming that Graf had assisted in a Highlander workshop. Why this was news on that date was somewhat mystifying, as the story disclosed that Graf's appearance had been in June 1964. Once again, the paper linked the Highlander Center through a variety of other groups to one that was labeled a "Communist front" by the House Un-American Activities Committee. Graf's role in the workshop was not described.

In fact, Graf explained, all he had done was deliver a lecture on the Populist Movement in U.S. history, a period when black and white farmers united to protest low agricultural prices and high railroad rates. Graf had no connection with the Highlander Center but spoke as a favor to Myles Horton, Highlander's director, who happened to be Graf's neighbor on Little Switzerland Road off Chapman Highway.

Apart from a few letters in the paper, one supporting Graf and one criticizing him, the affair quickly faded from public view. While the incident did not affect Graf's career—he served as History Department head for fifteen years and coeditor of The Papers of Andrew Johnson for twenty, was named a Distinguished Service Professor, and commanded widespread respect in the University community, the Knoxville area, and the world of historical scholarship—it was not easily forgotten. Years later Graf reflected that in 1965 the journal's charge was "the equivalent of tagging someone, if not innocent, as someone connected to nefarious activities. It was bad publicity."

By 1970 the repressive atmosphere of the previous two decades on university campuses began to wane. Faculty members who had been stigmatized as Communist sympathizers were rehabilitated, and some even received monetary retribution. But the controversies of the 1950s and 1960s left their scars, even if not often visible. College students became the "silent generation"; their instructors played it safe and were more outspoken on political matters. The University of Tennessee reflected the national mood. If what some historians have called the "American Inquisition" was not pursued at UT with the same vehemence as on other campuses, it was not because the Knoxville community was more tolerant of unorthodox viewpoints; it was simply that there were fewer targets here for the attacks of fervent anti-Communists.