Free Speech: National Perspective

By RICHARD BEST

The problem of controversial speakers on campuses has plagued university presidents for years. A question impossible to avoid, it has been handled by some with obsequience to local pressure groups and by others with a forthright defense of academic freedom.

An example of the latter case was acknowledged in 1961 by the American Association of University Professors when the group gave its Alexander Meiklejohn Award to President Arthur S. Flemming of the University of Oregon for upholding the right of students to select campus speakers.

(The Meiklejohn Award is presented each year to an American college or university administrator or trustee, or to a board of trustees as a group, in recognition of an outstanding contribution to academic freedom.)

Flemming, Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare under President Eisenhower, was also lauded for less controversial efforts in the same area when he was president of Ohio Wesleyan University. There he urged the local AAUP to draw up its own statement on academic freedom and responsibility, and then saw to its adoption by the administration, the alumni association, and the Board of Trustees.

At Ohio Wesleyan there was no “cause celebre” because as one professor recalled, “he was the kind of administrator who, by constantly sustaining the principles of academic freedom, prevents such untoward events from taking place.”

Nevertheless, once at Oregon, Flemming was confronted with protests of a student group’s invitation to a former secretary of the U.S. Communist Party to speak on campus. He stated at the time that, “A university by its very nature cannot pay lip service to the concept of freedom of expression and then deny persons with whom it is in sharp disagreement the opportunity of giving expression to their views.”

By HUGH RICE KELLY

“It’s a simple issue—either you are able to hear people or you are not,” Robert Van Waes, a staff associate of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), told the Thresher this week.

“To say that some can and that some can’t be heard is invidious by definition, defeats the whole educational process and defies the notion that the academic community should be free to search for the truth and go where the search takes it.”

An employee of the Washington office of the AAUP whose work includes staff service to the Committee on Faculty Responsibility for the Academic Freedom of Students (Committee S), Van Waes was on campus following a conference held at Baylor University last weekend. While he consented to discuss the general question of student freedoms, Van Waes declined to comment on the particular situation at Rice.

“At good schools,” he said, “the question of the students’ right to invite whom they please has been answered long ago. There is a correlation between the quality of an institution and the degree of freedom it allows,” he added.

As an association, the AAUP has “emphatically endorsed the student’s right to hear.” Its most recent involvement in this area was the draft report of Committee S (Thresher, October 22) which has yet to be considered by the AAUP’s delegate convention.

Van Waes reported that reaction to the committee’s statement has been generally favorable, although few chapters have yet given it formal consideration.

Some criticism of the wording has been voiced and some changes in the composition have been made as a result, but no changes have been made in the section on speakers.

[The section on speakers provides that “any person who is presented by a recognized student organization should be allowed to speak”]

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