

THE FREEDOM AND RESPONSIBILITY OF THE UNIVERSITY

A Statement

by

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to the

Joint Legislative Committee on Higher Education
of the State of New York

February 29, 1968

The Freedom and Responsibility of the University

Mr. Chairman, and other distinguished members of this Committee:

I am honored by your invitation to appear today. I welcome this opportunity to discuss with you a matter of central importance to higher learning in general and to the State University of New York in particular, namely, the concept together with the present status of academic freedom.

I.

The emergence of the State University of New York as one of the great institutions of higher learning in this country has now become a strong probability rather than a vague possibility. From here to California, and indeed in many foreign lands, the people of New York State are being regarded with ever-increasing admiration for their massive twenty-year effort toward building a university system second to none. There is no longer any question that the State University is and will continue to be a priceless asset to the fortunes and the future of the Empire State.

I come before you today for the single purpose of expressing my concern that the vital strength which the State University of New York has gathered in recent years may be unwittingly or even purposefully sapped by external incursions upon its academic freedom and institutional autonomy. If such a gradual but steady draining away were to occur in this State as it already threatens in some others, I think you should know that the people

of New York State will be destined to have a University of mediocrity or less, rather than one of greatness.

I know you agree with me that a democratic society devoid of free universities, public or private, is unthinkable. After all, how do we regard some other countries where universities are clearly politically controlled and made the instruments of temporal and politically expedient purposes? In our modern world it is the free university, as no other institution, which becomes the one reliable balance wheel of the social order, the only preserver and interpreter of all that has happened and is still to come.

II.

Thoughtful people everywhere have become disturbed of late over the possibility that this balance wheel--our universities--may increasingly be subject to pressures which have nothing to do with the essence of an education but have much to do with the momentary surges of the public passion. A recent event in the State University of New York is an illustration of this point.

Several weeks ago, a number of students from the Stony Brook campus of the State University were arrested in a dramatic police raid and charged with the possession and distribution of drugs. As I hope you know, the University has taken every step to cooperate with the public

authorities not only at Stony Brook but at all other campuses as well. The University is as intent as any other social agency to respect the law and help enforce it within the limits of its authority and capability.

The notion persists in some quarters, however, that the University in its care to preserve the principles of academic freedom is at the same time harboring and protecting fugitives from the law and that it permits a quality of human conduct which would elsewhere be regarded as unacceptable.

The first fact of the matter is that any act in violation of law has nothing whatever to do with academic freedom and the University provides no such protection. The second is that no double standard of conduct can be applied to a university and to the larger society.

We should remind ourselves that immoral behavior, the breakdown of traditional values, the advent of the hippies, the development of social and political dissent--these are not the product of our universities but of our time. Society easily enough condones the actions of a teen-ager at his home whether they have to do with alcohol, sex, or anything else, but as soon as he enters the university the full burden of criticism for permissiveness falls upon the administrator.

In very large measure the things for which many universities are criticized are criticisms of ourselves as members of our culture. They are human follies and they are universal; they have nothing to do with higher learning or the search for truth. Universities cannot become the whipping boys for all that is wrong with society, for if this happens consistently and for very long, they will be stripped of their true reason for existence and their power to perform their true purposes.

III.

The university is thus far more than an arm of the state. This institution not only serves the existing order--it also, through research and discussion, examines and questions the status quo, commenting freely on its shortcomings and exploring alternatives for action. Such examination and questioning often encourage change, and it is at precisely this point that university values most often collide with the traditional or conventional patterns of thought. Accordingly, it is this function of university life that requires the greatest freedom. For if the university is to speak honestly and without intimidation, it must remain politically unencumbered.

While the university--as a forum for the free exchange of ideas--must remain free, I do not suggest that the institution is not accountable to the public, nor do I argue that people within the university are beyond

criticism. The university must answer for its stewardship. If its mission is inadequately fulfilled, an explanation should be demanded. If those within the university speak irresponsibly, they should be challenged. If they behave unlawfully, they must accept the consequences of their acts. Just as society remains healthy through constant self-examination and evaluation, so does a university, and the State University of New York welcomes reasoned criticism from any source.

Let me emphasize that a fundamental difference exists between criticism and domination. Society is always free to criticize the public university; it is not free to impose upon the university its own remedies which may violate the very structure and spirit of the enterprise itself. Unless the university is capable of preserving its traditional birthright of academic freedom in an untrammelled way, its mission is immediately compromised and subverted.

IV.

The major issue upon which our discussion focuses today, therefore, is the relationship between a university and the people who create it. Historically, this relationship has varied from nation to nation and from period to period. On occasion universities have served as appendages of ecclesiastical bodies, as extensions of government, or as platforms for

political revolt. In America, however, a somewhat different conception of the university has taken hold. Building upon our European heritage, we have conceived of the university as both servant and critic of society. We have developed an institution which involves itself intimately in the practical problems of the people and yet, in a sense, remains detached, apart.

An institution which enjoys this kind of freedom represents a remarkable social creation for, generally, societies expect conformity from the institutions they create. Indeed, only a free and confident people could comprehend such a notion. It demands courage of the highest sort for any society to create and nourish a vigorous and independent university.

In each generation there have been those who have opposed such an independent institution. They have done so for a variety of reasons, some selfish and some philosophical. And yet, in each generation there also have been those who clearly understand the function of a university. They have arisen to defend it, simply because they believe deeply that a society is served well by its scholars just as it is by those who relate themselves to the more obvious and sometimes more practical human needs.

Over the years the university has developed a kind of internal balance; it has evolved mechanisms for self-management and for self-correction. Society, quite wisely, has granted the university freedom of internal governance, knowing that the university is a social institution whose unique spirit must be preserved.

The legal process by which this power has been delegated is clear enough. The public officials who created the University placed the operating authority in the hands of an appointed body of respected citizens-- the Board of Trustees. In giving nearly all of the University's power to this Board, the Legislature created an agency to act for the people in conducting the affairs of the institution. The Trustees in turn have delegated certain responsibilities to the academic community itself and, out of this climate of trust and shared authority, an effective mechanism of governance has emerged--a mechanism that recognizes both the responsibility and the independence of the University.

It is this tradition of internal governance which must--at all cost-- be preserved. Any attempt, however well intentioned, to ignore Trustee authority or to undermine the University's own patterns of operation, will vitiate the spirit of the institution and, in time, kill the very thing it seeks to preserve. May I illustrate the point: over the years, university faculties have developed procedures by which professors are evaluated and tenure

granted. It would be a shocking invasion of institutional integrity and professional responsibility if any legislature were to prescribe by statute the pattern that must be followed in the process of faculty appointment, review, or dismissal.

Similarly, colleges and universities have developed procedures by which regulations governing student conduct on campus are established and enforced. The rights of students, the interests of the institution, and the expectations of the community are all carefully considered. Any external attempt arbitrarily to impose standards of conduct, or to pre-judge an institution's system of due process for students accused of misconduct, would be a serious violation of institutional integrity.

A third example: traditionally, classrooms--indeed the entire campus--have been areas of free inquiry in which discussion and debate have been openly carried on. In cases of impropriety, the university has, as a rule, moved vigorously toward self-regulation. This is the ideal, and we do not always attain it. As I have said, when we are wrong, society should call us to account.

But, again, it is one thing to criticize the college community, and quite another thing to invade it secretly, or to put it under surveillance without the knowledge of responsible officials.

Of course, special problems of law enforcement and extraordinary circumstances do arise. But if surveillance and eavesdropping, with the inevitable attendant climate of insecurity and suspicion, ever become common practice, then a central requirement for the unimpeded exchange of ideas will have been violated. No institution, no state agency, indeed, no individual can operate freely and without intimidation if he is persistently shadowed or constantly monitored. If we as individuals live with the knowledge that our most casual comments or our most private acts may at some future date become objects of public exhibition, our freedom of speech and ease of action are effectively destroyed.

So it is with the university. No university can long function in a climate of suspicion or intrigue. Trust is essential. Society is free to challenge its university, but it should do so honestly, openly, and with full respect for the integrity of the institution.

One additional point. The issue at stake here is not primarily that of the rights of society, but rather of the restraints which society voluntarily chooses to accept. Clearly, those who have created a university are legally empowered to regulate and even to invade it in any way they choose, subject only to the relevant legal and constitutional limitations. Such invasion has happened elsewhere in the past, and it may

happen again. But the fundamental question is this: do we believe deeply enough in the principle of an intellectually free and self-regulating university that we are willing to exercise the necessary caution which will permit the institution--with its faults--to survive and even to flourish?

The university, in turn, has its own responsibilities: the obligation to conduct its affairs wisely, to listen attentively to all thoughtful criticism, and to correct itself when weaknesses have been identified. These are the obligations of the university, led by the board of trustees, who stand as the bridge between society and the community of learning. But in the last analysis, a university flourishes only in a climate of confidence. A society that no longer trusts its universities can no longer trust itself.

Let me conclude on an urgent yet hopeful note. The State University of New York is very young. It is now only in its twentieth year. It has no vocal, highly organized alumni, few traditions, and the ivy is just taking root. And yet this University is rapidly making the great transition from adolescence to maturity. It has already assumed its special role as a detached yet responsible social servant.

Nationally, even internationally, it is becoming known for its efforts to meet local and regional needs. Enrollment continues to climb. Distinguished scholars join us. Research horizons are expanding. The campuses of the University are interacting and the image of a single

institution is beginning to emerge. In all this, the executive and legislative leaders of this State deserve full measure of credit for their vision, for their statesmanship, and for the support they have provided.

It is obvious that, in physical terms, this University is destined to grow still more, perhaps far beyond our vision or our imagination. But whether it will live as a great university is, for the moment at least, up to us. To be great, the university must be free. Criticized and questioned, yes, but never controlled. This ideal is possible, if we maintain faith in ideas, faith in each other, and faith in our future.