

2000

Book Review of Communists on Campus: Race, Politics, and the Public University in Sixties North Carolina

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Repository Citation

Van Alstyne, William W., "Book Review of Communists on Campus: Race, Politics, and the Public University in Sixties North Carolina" (2000). *Popular Media*. 19.
https://scholarship.law.wm.edu/popular_media/19

**Communists on Campus:
Race, Politics, and the
Public University in Sixties
North Carolina**

William J. Billingsley. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1999, 308 pp., \$29.95

WILLIAM W. VAN ALSTYNE

IN 1963 THE NORTH CAROLINA General Assembly wound up its legislative term by adopting a statute requiring all state tax-supported colleges and universities to bar certain persons from appearing on their campuses “for speaking purposes.” Persons henceforth to be barred included any “known member of the Communist Party”; anyone “known to advocate the overthrow of the Constitution of the United States or the State of North Carolina”; and anyone who, at any time, had “pleaded the Fifth Amendment” in declining to answer “any question with respect to Communist or subversive activities,” when asked by a “duly constituted legislative committee . . . or executive or administrative board of the United States or any state.”

Viewed from the distance of nearly four decades, a new book organized around the 1963 North Carolina “speaker ban” law might be expected at best merely to find a small niche within a much larger library of works providing the dismal narrative of anti-communist excesses of its era. The late forties, nearly all of the fifties, and too much of the sixties were that era. It was the era of the Smith Act, the Subversive Activities Control Act, multiple prosecutions and the purging of professors from universities and public school systems, the House Un-American Activities Committee hearings, the Army-McCarthy hearings, the Tenney Committee in California,

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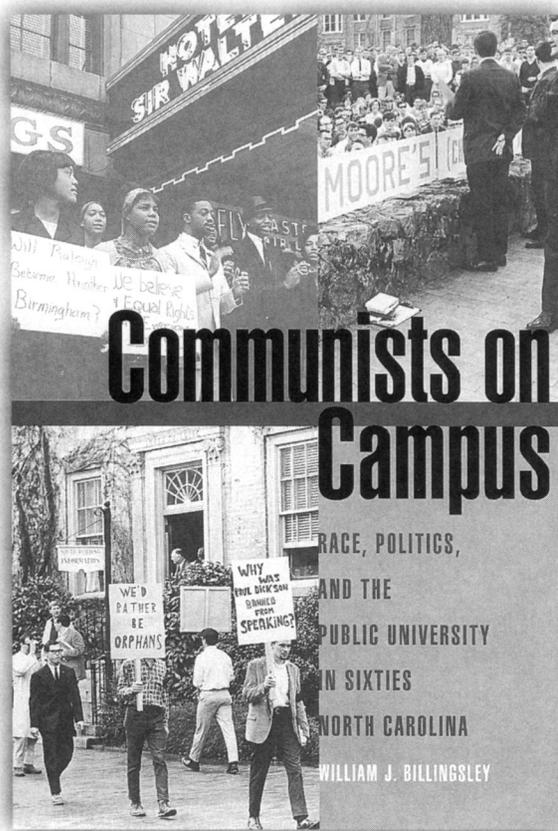
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and the Feinberg Law in New York. It was also a time when the Supreme Court decided *Dennis, Scates, Yates, Barenblatt, Wilkinson, Braden, Keyishian, Kent v. Dulles*, and *Aptheker v. United States*, case names connecting a best-forgotten past, cases now obscure, like headstones flecked with lichen, protruding in a winter wind of an old cemetery, the burial ground of malign laws and of rather sorry times.

So much is in fact quite true of William Billingsley's new book. It is organized around that 1963 act (and incidentally does provide by far the best balanced and most comprehensive account of its enactment and aftermath in the politics of the state). And it *does* warrant shelf space within the larger library of works that overall provide the (generally) dismal historical narrative of anticommunist (really, anti-free-speech) excesses of the era.

But the Billingsley book is better than being equal merely to these two particular tasks. The author elaborates a useful, accurate, and quite finely told story, tracing connections to major political figures, and connections also to the ongoing civil rights movements (as Billingsley correctly notes, crucial student sit-ins in February 1960 at Woolworth's sandwich counter in Greensboro, North Carolina, were the work of four North Carolina A&T State University students). He also looks at the reactions on campuses and the effects on the universities themselves as well as the roles of various university figures (few heroic, several quite pusillanimous), who left it to the students at Chapel Hill to protest, then to sue the university in federal court. And he has situated this exploration very well in the larger context of the times.

This book, to be sure, however, is not a general review of that larger era.



It is rather better, actually, in one respect, just because it is a meticulous review of a particular example and not another loosely thrown together pastiche of generalizations. Here, by having devoted himself to this particular story as he did, that is, to research it fully and unfold it in full detail, whether intended or not (though I imagine he did intend it), Billingsley has managed to write a reasonably slim yet highly informed book that is at once also a serviceable synecdoche for that larger collection of books, of a time when things went seriously amiss in this country for academic freedom as well as for our larger freedom of speech. I quite commend it to those who take an interest in academe.

But one word more. What was the fate of the famous—or infamous—North Carolina speaker ban act? What happened when the students sued? As movie reviewers are rightly chided for giving away the ending of a good film, you'll get no help here. Just read the book to find out.