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The Fisher Documents: Clash of Ideological Warriors

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8	MR. SEFRIT: Those subversive organizations have the smartest
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12	propaganda. I will make that statement under oath in court.

The Fisher Documents: Clash of Ideological Warriors

Fisher and Sefrit in a 1935 behind-the-scenes showdown

STORY BY RON C. JUDD ('85)

The most intriguing find in recently discovered documents about the firing of Charles H. Fisher from Western Washington College of Education, now Western Washington University, is the only known copy of a typed transcript of a remarkable, closed-door Board of Trustees meeting on May 22, 1935.

That evening, Bellingham Herald manager and editor Frank Sefrit and a half-dozen other accusers met Fisher and the three-member college Board of Trustees face to face to [lay out accusations against the popular president.](#) (pdf)

These proceedings, until now only known to participants, took on the air of a trial, and were documented word-for-word by a court stenographer hired by Sefrit. The resulting typed transcript, lost to history for 75 years, reads like a screenplay for a tense courtroom drama. Essentially on trial, alongside Fisher, were what we now consider to be core tenets of liberal-arts education.

Sefrit, with a sharp tongue that matched his newspaper-editorial voice, assumed the role of grand inquisitor. For nearly five hours, he hammered away at Fisher's alleged transgressions. Many of these were picayune, involving perceived slights Fisher had inflicted upon community members, failure to properly display the American flag on campus, and other alleged transgressions.

Other charges cut to the heart of the matter:

Of 26 speakers invited to campus in the preceding three years, 22 were members of well-known "subversive," "atheist," "pacifistic" or "free-love" organizations, while only one speaker could be construed a "patriotic character." ([See a PDF of Western's list of campus speakers from 1932 to 1939](#))

The student body president ran a "Social Sciences" club that had invited to a meeting a member of the League of Industrial Democracy, a "Red" organization bent on controlling colleges.

Fisher had dismissed faculty in a Depression-era budget purge because of familial conservative political leanings, not merit.

"Un-American" books in the campus library were written by an all-star lineup of alleged Reds, including works by peace activist Kirby Page; education reformers George S. Counts and John Dewey; Russian writer Maxim Gorky, muckraking journalists Upton Sinclair and Lincoln Steffens and his wife, British activist Ella Winter, and many others. ([See a PDF of the list from Sefrit's collection of documents now at the Center for Pacific](#)

[Learn more about the Charles Fisher case:](#)

Read "[The 'Get-Fisher' Squad](#),"

See Ron Judd's presentation, "[The Liberal Arts on Trial: The Inside Story and Legacy of the 1939 'Red Scare' Firing of College President Charles H. Fisher.](#)"



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Northwest Studies)

Fisher and his faculty had conducted a quiet, insidious campaign to strip impressionable young students of personal religious beliefs.

The over-arching complaint, however, was that Fisher, himself, was a commie dupe, doing the bidding of Marxists such as Columbia University's George S. Counts, a leading educator at what Sefrit termed "... the Reddest, most un-American educational institution" in America.

Sefrit told trustees: "I came to the conclusion that Dr. Fisher was 'taken in' a number of years ago when George S. Counts of Columbia University came out here, and went to other institutions throughout the country, and one by one he picked off the professors and presidents of these institutions and filled them full of this Russian virus."

At other times, Sefrit referred to alleged evidence of even more-nefarious activity by Fisher and college faculty, hinting with little subtlety that disclosure would be ruinous to the institution. "I think if it were revealed in a public way, there would be two or three murders in this town within a week," he proclaimed.

Fisher responded with surprising calm, and disputed few of Sefrit's claims about campus activity. His responses reveal the tremendous chasm between his vision of the appropriate societal role of public higher education, and that of his opponents. What some townspeople considered sedition was, in his mind, simply a well-rounded curriculum during a period of Depression-era strife.

Students in the Social Sciences Club, he said, had acted on their own and been threatened with expulsion if they aligned with the nationwide radical student group. Faculty excused in layoffs were chosen because they were the least-capable, not because a spouse belonged to the Daughters of the American Revolution.

Campus speakers were selected by a faculty committee and, in most cases, spoke at other universities across the country. Leftist books in the library, just as those written by conservatives, were key to any well-rounded education. Any failings of students to attend local churches could be attributed to their opened minds, not atheist indoctrination, Fisher explained.

Fisher confirmed that a large number of his faculty were trained at Columbia -- as would likely be the case with any teacher's college in America at the time, given Columbia's primacy in the field. He said he would hire even more if he could get them. George Counts, he said, had never visited the campus, and most of the Columbia graduates employed had never had him as an instructor.

At the heart of the Sefrit group's complaints, Fisher surmised, was baseless fear of the unfamiliar -- and an alarming distrust in the intelligence of faculty and students.

"You see, we take all this Constitution, American government and patriotism for granted," Fisher said. "These young people have had this taught them 12 years in public schools. We can't do much with them after that ... even though we wanted to make radicals of them, I don't think we could. Their fundamental ideas are fixed; they can't be changed."

Sefrit: "You do change them."

Fisher: "We don't try to change them."

Sefrit on several occasions asked Fisher how any sensible person could review the list of campus speakers, library books and "seditious" student activity and conclude that students and faculty were not being indoctrinated. Fisher replied sternly: "You don't give these men and women credit for ordinary intelligence. The implication seems to be that we are not good Americans. I think we are."

Near the end of the hearing, the embattled president, an imposing, bespectacled man never known to shirk from argument, became defiant. "I would love to go with you into court with an attorney on all these matters, and see how far you would get," he told Sefrit. "I would love to do it; so would this faculty, and have this thing out once and for all. I think I could whip you in court on every question."

The defense ultimately won the day for Fisher, who was exonerated of all charges by the trustees. Sefrit's group never produced evidence that Fisher was a communist, or even un-American, they said. They later issued a public expression of confidence in their president.

But it was not to last. The Sefrit group never stopped lobbying conservative Democratic Gov. Clarence Martin, who at the time the Fisher affair erupted, was early in his second term, governing under a fragile political coalition that included many conservatives. The same trustees who had exonerated Fisher showed him the door on October 11, 1938,

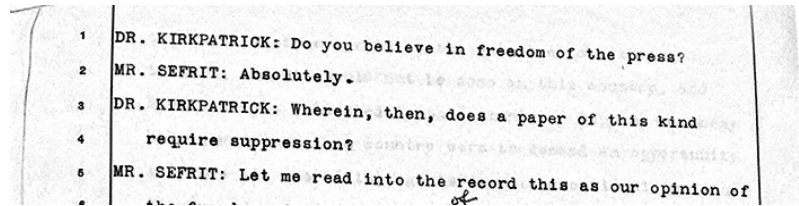
asking him to leave by the end of summer session in the 1938-39 academic year.

Documents in the Fisher case: Pages from the 1935 Fisher hearing

Following are excerpted pages of the original typed transcript of the May, 1935 Charles H. Fisher hearing, conducted before the Board of Trustees in Old Main. Handwriting on the pages presumably are notes jotted by Frank Sefrit, in preparation for making his case, in succeeding years, to Gov. Clarence Martin to appoint a new Board of Trustees willing to fire Fisher. Trustees later responded to this hearing by issuing a lengthy exoneration of Fisher, concluding that the virulent “strife-breeding” in Bellingham - a result of a political fissure between conservatives and liberals - was something that no educational institution, nor its president, could have successfully negotiated without ruffling feathers. The documents now reside at Western’s Center for Pacific Northwest Studies.

“... agents and preachers of un-American doctrines...”

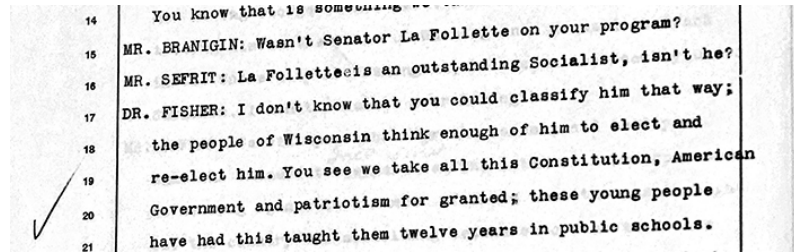
Frank Sefrit, discussing what he found to be troubling articles in the campus newspaper, then known as The Viking, is asked by trustee Kirkpatrick whether he supports the First Amendment and freedom of expression. Sefrit, a newspaperman who insisted that the Board of Trustees hearing be closed to the press, opines that free speech protections do not apply when the nation is at risk from those who would “subvert government.”



[Click here](#) to see a PDF of this part of the transcript.

“We don’t try to change them”

The hearing includes an interesting exchange between Sefrit, Fisher, and trustee Verne Branigin about an appearance on campus of Sen. Robert La Follette Jr, his status as a socialist, and what his appearance on campus implied for students. Fisher’s response gets to the core of his argument that notions of patriotism and “Americanism” are imbued in them before they get to college.



[Click here](#) to see a PDF of this part of the transcript.

“He is entitled to his views the same as we are.”

A major point of contention in the charges against Fisher were campus talks given by “radicals,” particularly one appearance in Bellingham -- not on campus -- of leftist speaker Kirby Page. Fisher’s response at the end of page 65 is telling: He suggests Sefrit’s fear of a Communist takeover in the U.S. is a result of paranoia.

22 DR. FISHER: He is entitled to his views same as we are. If he
23 wants to be a pacifist isn't he entitled to be one? As a
24 Christian minister he bases it on Christianity; wasn't
25 Jesus a pacifist? Why are you people so alarmed about Com-
26 munism? It hasn't a chance in this country.

[Click here](#) to see a PDF of this part of the transcript.

"You would ruin practically every school in the land."

Following up on that subject, Fisher and Sefrit spar over the likely impact of Sefrit's crusade if it were extended nationwide.

15 MR. SEFRIT: One of the most radical schools in this country is
16 the Columbia University that you are so proud of; Vassar
17 College, Smith College, University of Chicago and Wisconsin
18 University.
19 DR. FISHER: You are going to close up some of the best schools
20 in the United States. What about Harvard?

[Click here](#) to see a PDF of this part of the transcript.

"The implication seems to be we are not good Americans."

Fisher ultimately concludes his argument by surmising that Sefrit and his associates simply fail to give people credit for ordinary intelligence to reject fringe ideas on their own - often a core point of dispute in fights over academic freedom.

7 DR. FISHER: We have a pretty high standard of speakers.
8 MR. SEFRIT: Those subversive organizations have the smartest
9 men behind them that you could find.
10 DR. FISHER: There has not been one speaker spoken in our
11 Assembly that has come with the idea of putting over some
12 propaganda. I will make that statement under oath in court.

[Click here](#) to see a PDF of this part of the transcript.

"You don't understand this community." "I understand it better than you do."

Further, Fisher argues to Sefrit, the Bellingham community in general was in full support of opening minds by exposing them to broad viewpoints.

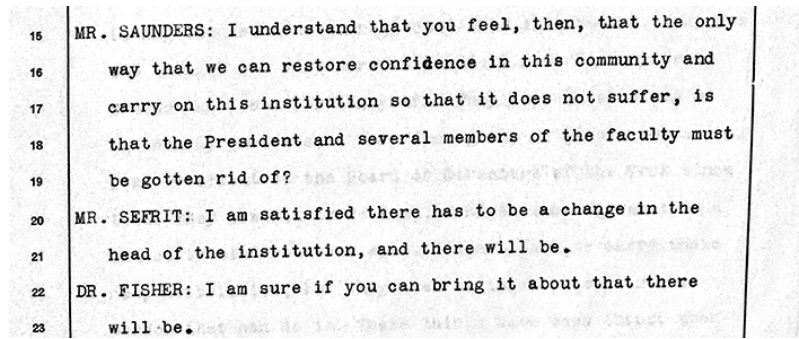
13 DR. FISHER: We have all the students that the present faculty
14 can take care of. The enrollment has gone up 20% this year
15 and we have promise of a good summer school.
16 MR. SEFRIT: Don't you want the friendship of the people of
17 this community?
18 DR. FISHER: We have had. You only speak for a very small group.
19 MR. SEFRIT: That is where you don't understand this community.
20 DR. FISHER: I understand it better than you do. I don't believe
21 you are in touch with the community.

[Click here](#) to see a PDF of this part of the transcript.

"There has to be a change in the head of the institution, and there will be."

As the hearing nears an end, Sefrit repeats earlier suggestions to the Board of Trustees that his presented "evidence" against Fisher is merely the tip of a larger iceberg, the full extent of which would destroy the

institution. Sefrit never produced evidence of such scandal; no shred of evidence of it was maintained in the private files recently made public at the Center for Pacific Northwest Studies. Sefrit hinted in a separate private communication that, as a newspaperman, he once helped prevent public disclosure of an indiscretion between a student and a faculty member, which is what he may be obliquely referring to on transcript page 76.

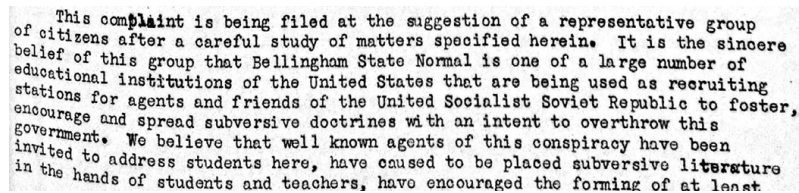


[Click here](#) to see a PDF of this part of the transcript.

Documents in the Fisher case: The Committee on Normal Protest's charges against Fisher and the Board of Trustees' response

"... recruiting stations for agents and friends of the United Socialist Soviet Republic..."

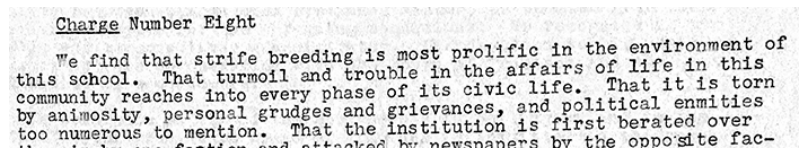
Sefrit's original listing of charges against Fisher, in a formal letter to college trustees.



[Click here](#) to see a PDF of the rest of the document.

"We cannot be severely critical of a personality capable of standing on his own two feet in this community"

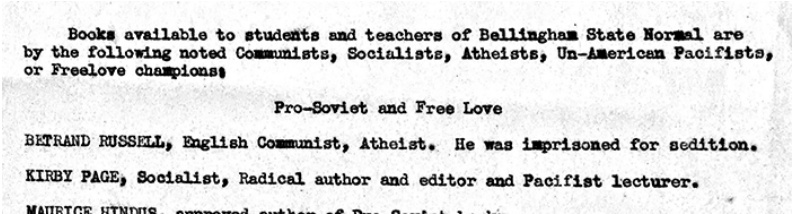
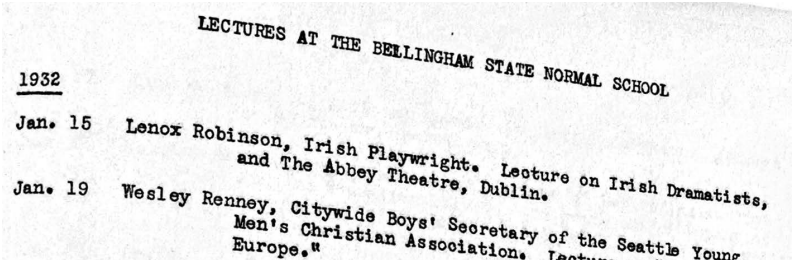
Excerpts from the Board of Trustees' written response to the Sefrit group's charges, issued weeks after the hearing. The board's response to Charge Number 8, about the ongoing political climate in Bellingham, is particularly noteworthy.



[Click here](#) to see a PDF of the rest of the document.

Documents in the Fisher case: "Subversive" speakers and authors

Multiple pages of "evidence" of "subversive" speakers and/or authors whose works were influencing Western students appear below. Most of the group's definitions of "Red" public figures were drawn from The Red Network, a popular, scantily-researched directory of Communists self-published by Chicago provocateur Elizabeth Dilling in 1934. The same work was cited by operatives for William Randolph Hearst in other manufactured "Red Scare" activity on campuses across America in 1935.



Click on the images above to see the full documents (PDF).