

Fall 2015

The 'Get Fisher' Squad

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Recommended Citation

Judd, Ron C., "The 'Get Fisher' Squad" (2015). *Journalism*. 6.
https://cedar.wvu.edu/journalism_facpubs/6

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WINDOW

THE MAGAZINE OF WESTERN WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

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STORIES



The 'Get Fisher' Squad

Western's fourth president was a lover of big ideas. That made him a target.

STORY BY RON C. JUDD ('85)

The irony was lost on most. When Western Washington University recently opened its new City Center in the Bellingham Herald building, not a single eyebrow was raised. But the symbolic merging of the local newspaper and the Bellingham hilltop campus surely produced seismic activity in local cemeteries, where bodies of old political battles lay buried.

Eight decades ago, the powerful men leading the two institutions now sharing space on State Street were bitter enemies, locked in an ideological death struggle that would lead to the career-ending ouster of Charles H. Fisher, Western's fourth president. The controversial firing was instigated by a group of arch-conservative townspeople led by Frank I. Sefrit, longtime manager and editor of The Herald, who essentially ran the newspaper and the Republican Party from the same office.

Fisher first came under attack in 1935 for "communist, atheistic and free-love" activities on campus, only to be fully exonerated by Western's Board of Trustees. But persistent lobbying by the same group persuaded Gov. Clarence Martin, a conservative Democrat, to order his dismissal three years later. The controversial move stands today as one of the most puzzling - and perhaps misunderstood - events in Western's history. But thanks to new evidence and a fresh review of the case, clarity is emerging.

Red Square

As a 1985 graduate of Western (Journalism and History), a longtime journalist at The Seattle Times, and an adjunct lecturer at Western, the Fisher case seemed a natural choice when, in 2013, I began searching for a thesis project to complete a master's degree in history. Surprised to find that no previous historian had undertaken a thesis-length survey of

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

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- [The 'Get Fisher' Squad](#)
- [This Brain is Fighting Back](#)
- [The Fisher Documents: Clash of Ideological Warriors](#)
- [Message from the President](#)
- [A Wave of Change](#)
- [The Big One](#)
- [Unsinkable](#)
- [In Over My Head](#)
- [The Power of Scholarships](#)
- [Work begins on Carver overhaul](#)
- [Tiny collaborations: Alum honored for research in 'quorum sensing'](#)
- [Theatre's Rich Brown is the state's Professor of the Year](#)
- [Western moves into new digs in the heart of Downtown Bellingham](#)
- [The search is on for Western's next president](#)
- [Alumni Conversations](#)
- [Trees of History](#)
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- [Fröderberg led Western through tragedy](#)
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the Fisher case, I waded into a sea of local archival material - some of it left for posterity in 1939 by a scorned and heartbroken President Fisher himself.

First impression: The passing of decades had eroded the corners of the Fisher story to the point that facts of the case, let alone lessons to be learned from it, had faded into obscurity. Fisher had entered a sort of myth-based historical purgatory in which his innocence of these charges of "un-Americanism," incredibly, seemed in doubt.

Part of this is simple bad luck and unintended associations: Fisher Fountain, the only campus feature named for the once-nationally recognized leader of Western, lies dead center in Red Square, the nickname given to the university's red brick-lined central plaza, for obvious reasons. (Hello, guilt by association.)

These mistaken impressions even appear in a brief profile of Fisher on Western's own website, which concludes that "... Fisher was accused of expressing his liberal leanings and nontraditional religious ideas at the college." (Fisher, a seminary graduate, was a devout Protestant his entire life.)

Clearly, the Fisher story needed to be re-examined, and retold. While the paper trail from the period is rich, the case became infinitely more interesting thanks to a single box of musty files that only recently became public: Sefrit's own Charles Fisher files, which had languished at The Herald for decades before making their way to Western Libraries' Center for Pacific Northwest Studies.

World views clash behind closed doors

To any researcher of the Fisher case, these files are a historical gold mine: The collection, essentially the private working files of Frank Sefrit's get-Fisher squad, provides an unprecedented glimpse into the shadowy conspiracy to smear and dethrone Western's popular, charismatic leader.

Among the contents are various right-wing organizations' pamphlets, mission statements and bulletins; news clips about national alleged communist conspiracies and leftist activity; correspondence to and from Sefrit from other Red-baiters; "evidence" of "Red"-tinged college library books and "traitorous" leanings of campus speakers; and a set of what appear to be notes from several gatherings, written in Sefrit's own hand.

Even more significant is an 80-page, typed transcript of a May 22, 1935, hearing before Western's Board of Trustees, in which Fisher was effectively put on trial by the Sefrit group behind closed doors.

This transcript, likely the only copy in existence and lost to history for 80 years, reads in places like a screenplay. Throughout the remarkable, nearly five-hour proceeding in Old Main, Fisher and Sefrit exchange rhetorical volleys that reveal the clashing world views of two uncommonly articulate ideological titans - one arguing for what would become the country's progressive future, another staunchly defending its conservative past.

With this serendipitous find in hand, I spent months further rounding out the Fisher story by examining countless pages of other local historical collections not usually associated with the Fisher case, most in the diverse archives of Western's Heritage Resources. The historical "takeaways" from the resulting new view of the Fisher case are extensive and someday might fill a book.

But several key points stand out:

1. To restate what should be obvious, Fisher was not a communist. He was not an atheist. The rural Pennsylvania native, grandson of deeply religious Prussian immigrants, was a former assistant pastor, a New Deal Democrat, a lover of ideas and debate, a nationally respected educator, a first baseman, a devoted husband and father, a patriot, and a worshipper of Orcas Island sunsets. Big ideas were his passion; Western was where they flourished.

Sadly, Fisher's bold, successful gambit to make Washington State College of Education a national leader in the emerging field of teacher training by minimizing traditional pedagogy in favor of a broad, liberal arts education has been largely overshadowed by his ignominious exit. But every faculty member, administrator and student who sets foot on campus today unwittingly carries forward his legacy of intellectual inquiry.

See transcripts from the meeting, Sefrit's charges against Fisher, the trustees' response and other [documents in the Fisher case.](#)

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.](#)"



2. The Sefrit-led group was larger, its campaign more meticulously planned, than originally believed. When the group levied its charges at the 1935 Trustees meeting, a letter listing 10 official charges was signed by Sefrit and five other local men - one a pastor, others associated with the American Legion. One of the five was Solomon Blanton Luther, a downtown landholder and self-professed Grand Dragon of the local Ku Klux Klan.

But Sefrit's recently unearthed notes add another seven names, including former Chamber of Commerce Secretary P.E. Healy, and an even more intriguing person - Frances Payne Larrabee, business and civic leader, philanthropist, and wife of Fairhaven co-founder Charles Xavier Larrabee. Mrs. Larrabee, who ran her husband's extensive businesses for decades after his death in 1914, led various community women's groups and was a leading philanthropist in her day, responsible for the building of the YWCA in Bellingham. She also founded the local chapter of "Pro-America," a rising conservative U.S. women's group of the day, which actively engaged in research on Fisher's alleged campus transgressions. The full extent of her involvement in the Fisher case is unknown.

3. Motivations in the anti-Fisher group were varied. Fisher, never known to suffer fools, had created a handful of enemies, but none with the political clout, or cunning, of Sefrit. Fisher told friends the rift with the acerbic newspaperman emerged in 1934 when a Sefrit friend and fellow conservative, Pelagius Williams, was laid off in a Depression-related faculty cutback. Sefrit sought Williams' reinstatement, but was rebuffed by Fisher.

Other potential motives of Sefrit are open to interpretation. As one of many local conservative power brokers cut off at the knees by sweeping Democratic majorities in elections of the New Deal era, Sefrit did seem to believe the nation was under threat from leftist radicalism. He also clearly bristled at Fisher's status as one of few men in Bellingham brave - or foolish - enough to openly defy him. Sefrit, Fisher would write in 1939, "... has exercised control in the community for thirty years, and has earned a reputation ... of getting any man he cannot control."

4. The ultra-conservative, "super-patriot" leanings of the Sefrit group would not have seemed jarringly out of place in the mid-1930s, when a virulent counter-reaction to leftist political agitation still simmered in the Northwest. Militantly conservative passions ignited by crushing the Seattle General Strike in 1919 were further enflamed by New Deal economic reforms in the 1930s. The left wing of the state Democratic Party was occupied by practicing communists; Gov. Martin's power base included conservatives from both parties.

5. Significantly, Sefrit's attack on Fisher unfolded simultaneously with a strikingly similar campaign by famed newspaper publisher William Randolph Hearst, who attempted to create a national Red Scare by attaching "communist" labels to professors and university administrators across America in 1935. Hearst's favorite target was educational reformer George S. Counts, of Columbia University ("the Reddest, most un-American educational institution" in America, Sefrit warned trustees), where nearly half of Fisher's Western faculty had been trained.

Hearst did not own The Herald. And while no evidence of direct collaboration between Hearst and Bellingham agitators has emerged, Sefrit, who reputedly embraced the nickname "Little Hearst," clearly was aware of the legendary publisher's fanciful Red-baiting campaigns. He adopted some of the same "evidence" cited by Hearst operatives elsewhere to smear textbook authors and guest speakers at Western.

6. Fisher's ouster unfolded remarkably close to Sefrit's original scheme: His plan was to dispatch committee members to collect "evidence" against Fisher to be presented at the 1935 hearing before the three-member Board of Trustees. This was essentially a charade, as Sefrit's notes indicate he fully expected the board to exonerate the popular president. Sefrit then would deliver his dossier - along with the hearing transcript, to document the Board's intransigence - to the governor, who would fire the board and appoint new trustees to fire Fisher.

Sefrit's only miscalculation was over-estimating the fortitude of the trustees, who in 1938 ultimately caved to the governor's demands - for the good of the college, they said, tacitly endorsing the governor's skimpy explanation that, after 16 years, Fisher had simply worn out his welcome.

'An embarrassment to all concerned'

Fisher held a number of other administrative posts in his later years. One, a position with the Washington Pension Union, drew him into yet another Red Scare quagmire in Seattle in 1948 - likely contributing to lasting confusion about his political leanings. He died in 1964 without ever having taken his eye off the state of affairs below Sehome Hill.

Western moved on, with Fisher's faculty carrying forth the liberal arts legacy he had set in motion. But the Board of Trustees never bothered to even acknowledge Fisher's departure, let alone explain it.

No mention of the incident survives in official minutes of Trustees' meetings from 1938, when Fisher was forced out. This scrubbing of the historical record by trustees was intentional: Trustee Verne Branigin, a Mount Vernon attorney, explained to a Seattle newspaper reporter that the incident was "an embarrassment to all concerned."

More than 75 years later, those words still hang over Fisher's legacy - and the university's official history - like a cloud, a sad epitaph for a man whose full devotion to the cause of opening minds was snuffed too soon by winds of extremism.

Ron C. Judd is a reporter and columnist for the Seattle Times, a three-time nominee for the Pulitzer Prize and an adjunct faculty member in Western's Journalism Department.