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Confronting a "Climate of Raucous and Carnival Invasion": The AAUW Takes On the Johns Committee

by Karen Graves

“**W**hat happens to the pursuit of truth and the advancement of learning in such an atmosphere as the heresy hunters and thought controllers have created in parts of the South can only be conjectured,”¹ historian C. Vann Woodward wondered in his essay on “The Unreported Crisis in the Southern Colleges,” published in 1962—the same year that members of the Florida Legislative Investigation Committee (FLIC) descended on the University of South Florida (USF). The Committee had come to Tampa to investigate reports of communism, homosexuality, obscenity in course materials, and professors’ alleged attacks on students’ religious beliefs. This emboldened advance carried the Committee into territory far removed from its legislative mandate, and exposed it to new criticisms. Thus far the Committee’s actions against civil rights activists, and then gay and lesbian educators—however egregious—had fallen within the boundaries of the dominant ideology in the region, in fact, the nation. Indeed, the Committee’s very existence came about as part of

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1. C. Vann Woodward, “The Unreported Crisis in the Southern Colleges,” *Harper’s Magazine* 225 (October 1962): 89.

the State's effort to preserve segregation in the wake of the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. When the NAACP entangled, and finally defeated the Committee in the court system, it sustained its legislative life by taking on the so-called problem of homosexuality in the school system. In the 1950s and 1960s homosexuality was an issue that no court, indeed no public voice, would yet defend. When State Senator Charley Johns and his Committee launched its USF investigation in 1962, it had been frustrated by the NAACP maneuvers but still remained relatively unchecked.²

The Florida Legislature established FLIC during a special session devoted to the issue of school segregation in the summer of 1956. In the midst of heated discussion between moderate and conservative segregationists senators Charley Johns, Dewey Johnson, and John Rawls introduced Senate Bill 38 to establish a special legislative investigation committee. Couched in vague and non-committal language, the bill established a committee that would target civil rights activists. Supporters of the bill modeled their efforts on those of Cold War conservatives, who had usurped legislative investigative power on the national stage to suppress any

2. The history of the Johns Committee is complex, intersecting with the histories of higher education, gay and lesbian education, and the American civil rights movement. See, for instance, Allyson A. Beutke and Scott Litvack, *Behind Closed Doors: The Dark Legacy of the Johns Committee*, Documentary Institute in the College of Journalism and Communications, University of Florida, 2000; Stacy Lorraine Braukman, "Anticommunism and the Politics of Sex and Race in Florida, 1954-1965," Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1999; Braukman, "Nothing Else Matters But Sex': Cold War Narratives of Deviance and the Search for Lesbian Teachers in Florida, 1959-1963," *Feminist Studies* 27 (3) (Fall 2001): 553-575; John Loughery, "Hunting Gays in Gainesville," *The Harvard Gay and Lesbian Review* 18 (Winter 1996): 17-19; Judith G. Poucher, "One Woman's Courage: Ruth Perry and the Johns Committee," in Jack E. Davis and Kari Frederickson, eds., *Making Waves: Female Activists in Twentieth-Century Florida* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003), pp. 229-249; Robert W. Saunders, *Bridging the Gap: Continuing the Florida NAACP Legacy of Harry T. Moore, 1952-1966* (Tampa: University of Tampa Press, 2000); James A. Schnur, "Closet Crusaders: The Johns Committee and Homophobia, 1956-1965," in John Howard, ed., *Carryin' On In the Lesbian and Gay South* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), pp. 132-163; Schnur, "Cold Warriors in the Hot Sunshine: USF and the Johns Committee," *The Sunland Tribune* 18 (November 1992): 9-15; James T. Sears, *Lonely Hunters: An Oral History of Lesbian and Gay Southern Life* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997); Bonnie Stark, "McCarthyism in Florida: Charley Johns and the Florida Legislative Investigation Committee," Master's thesis, University of South Florida, 1985.

activity they deemed "un-American." Johns' previous attempts to establish an investigative committee in Florida had failed, but in the face of the desegregation order the Senate (34-1) and the House (72-15) passed SB 38 by wide margins. Governor LeRoy Collins allowed the bill to become law without his signature, giving life to the Johns Committee as the investigative body was soon known. The Committee had the authority to hold public hearings and subpoena witnesses, although its mandate lasted only until the next legislative session. Over the next nine years, successive legislatures re-enacted the enabling legislation, and, although new acts expanded the range of operations and budgets of the committee, the FLIC routinely exceeded its authority. By 1958 the NAACP had stymied Committee efforts by tying up the investigations in court challenges. As a result, FLIC turned its attention to exposing and rooting out individuals it assumed to be gay or lesbian, particularly targeting professors, teachers, and students in Florida's universities and K-12 schools. The Johns Committee hired investigators who kept citizens, professors, teachers, and students under surveillance, pulled teachers and students from classes for hours of questioning without access to counsel, and violated other civil rights protections. Scores of teachers and professors lost their jobs and educational credentials, and students were expelled. When FLIC opened its investigation into activities at USF in 1962, the public already had some idea of what to expect.

Woodward's essay indicates that the Johns Committee investigation of USF did not occur in a vacuum. Across the United States, faculty dismissals and harassments and student reprisals had reached a new high. The American Association of University Professors (AAUP), a national faculty organization, reported that cases involving academic freedom increased from 37 in 1961 to 55 in 1962. Woodward attributed much of the activity to the reactionary, anti-civil rights politics of groups such as the White Citizen Councils, the John Birch Society, and the Ku Klux Klan. Noting that assaults on academic freedom and due process were by no means limited to the South, Woodward outlined 16 recent cases in southern schools, adding that extremists' attacks on historically black colleges and universities were particularly intense.³ Woodward's analysis led him to believe that aroused public opinion was the critical element for ending the attack on academic

3. Woodward, "The Unreported Crisis," 82; 84; 89.

freedom. In addition to the positive effects of public outrage in exposing the attacks, the organizational support of the AAUP and court rulings had provided some assistance in limiting the damage, and protecting academic freedom. Historian James Schnur documented all these elements in his analysis of the USF investigation.⁴ Less is known of the work of the American Association of University Women (AAUW), an organization that helped turn the tide of public opinion against the Johns Committee. The Tampa Branch of AAUW engaged in a sustained effort to protect academic freedom by working with women locally and across the state. While other organizations avoided direct confrontation with the Committee, Tampa's AAUW fought openly and directly.

It is no surprise that the efforts of the Tampa women have been ignored. As Raymond Arsenault and Gary Mormino note in their foreword to *Making Waves: Female Activists in Twentieth-Century Florida*, women's historians have thus far paid little attention to Florida, and the standard histories of the state make few references to women. Certainly this is true in educational history; with the exception of some references to Mary McLeod Bethune—short, informational pieces; attention in collections on African American women in the civil rights movement; a 1964 biography—one is hard pressed to cite scholarship on Florida women's contributions to education.⁵ This is not for lack of material, as the contributors to *Making Waves* make clear. Many of these essays, on politics, work, environmentalism, and civil rights, address broad educational concerns. But Lynne Rieff's chapter on home demonstration work is the only one that focuses directly on schooling issues of the sort usually taken up by educational historians. Study of the Tampa AAUW adds another dimension to the important scholarship now emerging in Florida women's history.

4. Ibid., 89; Schnur, "Cold Warriors in the Hot Sunshine."

5. Raymond Arsenault and Gary Mormino, "Foreword," in *Making Waves*, vii-viii. See, for instance, Kendra Hamilton, "From Humble Beginnings," and "Keepers of the Dream," *Black Issues in Higher Education* 21, no. 20 (November 18, 2004): 12-13; Rackham Holt, *Mary McLeod Bethune; A Biography* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964); Dolores C. Leffall and Janet L. Sims, "Mary McLeod Bethune—The Educator; Also Including a Selected Annotated Bibliography;" B. Joyce Ross, "Mary McLeod Bethune and the National Youth Administration: A Case Study of Power Relationships in the Black Cabinet of Franklin D. Roosevelt;" and, Elaine M. Smith, "Mary McLeod Bethune and the National Youth Administration," in *Black Women in United States History*, Darlene Clark Hine, ed. (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, 1990).

The American Association of University Women dates to 1921 when the Association of Collegiate Alumnae, founded in 1881, and the Southern Association of College Women, founded in 1903, combined their efforts. These organizations, formed in the early decades of women's collegiate education, concentrated on equity for women in higher education. After the merger the AAUW operated on a number of fronts, serving simultaneously as a professional organization, research institute, public policy lobby, service group, and social club. Susan Levine, author of *Degrees of Equality: The American Association of University Women and the Challenge of Twentieth-Century Feminism*, argues that the AAUW advanced the cause of feminism and become a significant force for social change. The organization monitored the status of women as students and professors in colleges and universities, tracking information on admission, graduation requirements, facilities, job hires and advancement, salaries, representation in administration and on boards of trustees, and other measures of equality in higher education. Scholars, noting periodic shifts of emphasis in the history of the AAUW, agree that local branches often shouldered a good deal of the work of the national organization. Coming out of the 1950s, a decade when political activity within the branches waned, the Tampa AAUW's 1963 battle with the Johns Committee stands out for its courage. The Tampa action can be seen as a bridge in between the AAUW's community service emphasis of the 1950s and the grass roots activism of the 1960s.⁶

In his introduction to *Making Waves*, volume co-editor Jack Davis argues that analysis of women's clubs is critical to developing a fuller understanding of women's activism in twentieth-century Florida. The story of the Tampa AAUW adds weight to Davis' contention that, "As a collective group pursuing common civic goals, women could in fact wield the power to influence public policy."⁷ In addition, an analysis of the Tampa AAUW activities contributes to our understanding of the role Florida women played in fighting oppressive state forces during the Cold War, offering an interesting parallel to Judith Poucher's study of Ruth Perry. Perry emerged as one of

6. Sarah V. Barnes, "American Association of University Women," in *Historical Dictionary of Women's Education in the United States*, Linda Eisenmann, ed. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998), 14-18; Patrice McDermott review of *Degrees of Equality: The American Association of University Women and the Challenge of Twentieth-Century Feminism*, by Susan Levine, *History of Education Quarterly* 36 (3) (Autumn 1996): 380-381.

7. Jack E. Davis, "Introduction," in *Making Waves*, 7.

the courageous Miami NAACP members whose resistance to Johns Committee intimidation became legendary. Perry and the women of the AAUW appear to have cut their strategic blueprints from the same cloth. Poucher's essay indicates to Davis that "Perry's assertiveness in the press and before the Johns Committee was more representative of a new age of activism that adopted methods of direct-action protest and the language of freedom and empowerment."⁸ Such methods also distinguished the AAUW's response to the Johns Committee's assault on the university from the approach taken by the AAUP. It is important, too, to contrast the activism of the AAUW with that of women in other groups who supported the Johns Committee. As Davis observes, women made history both as "anticommunist crusaders and as defenders of civil liberties," and the unique, nine-year run of the Johns Committee has much to tell us in this regard.⁹

The Johns Committee began its secret investigation of the University of South Florida in April 1962, interrogating witnesses at the Hawaiian Village, a motel on Dale Mabry Avenue in Tampa. The inquiries became public knowledge after Thomas Wenner, a disaffected instructor who had a hand in bringing the Committee to the University, spoke with the press. Margaret Fisher, Director of Student Personnel at USF during the investigation, recalls that the Johns Committee was well known among faculty and administrative staff, many of whom had come to the new university in 1960 from other Florida institutions. "The people I worked with most closely tended to groan, 'Well, here comes one more witch hunt.'" Once university officials became aware that the Johns Committee had begun an investigation of USF, the AAUP advised President John Allen to "invite" the committee to campus. "Those who had been through similar trials elsewhere had learned that the best way to cope with ideological attacks is to strip the cloak of darkness away from the sponsors and their proceedings."¹⁰ Fisher likened the university approach to the impending investigation to the efforts that educators make to inform accrediting agen-

8. Ibid., 14. See Judith Poucher, "One Woman's Courage: Ruth Perry and the Johns Committee" in *Making Waves*, 229-249; idem, "Raising Her Voice: Ruth Perry, Activist and Journalist for the Miami NAACP," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, Volume 84, No. 4 (Spring 2006): 517-540.

9. Davis., 13.

10. Margaret Fisher interview by author, 18 August 2004; Notes from interview with Fisher, 1 July 2005, pp. 2, 6.

cies of the mission and purpose of an institution. That is, if Johns and his committee didn't understand the importance of academic freedom, professional ethics, and due process, USF witnesses would have to teach them.

Forced to conduct its investigation in the light of day, the Johns Committee lost some of its force of intimidation. President Allen and the USF members of the AAUP made their cooperation with the committee contingent on a set of parameters: witnesses could only be questioned on matters of legitimate public interest; interrogations were to be held on the USF campus and tape recorded using university equipment; witnesses could receive a written copy of their testimony and have legal counsel; and, information would not be released to the public without the consensual agreement of faculty and the university. President Allen informed USF students and faculty of these conditions in a public forum on 21 May, stressing "If you feel you are being unfairly questioned in any way, you may refuse to answer, and I would appreciate it if you would inform me of any such unfair questioning."¹¹

The Johns Committee held formal hearings on the USF campus from 23 May to 7 June 1962. The weekend before the hearings began students protested with signs around campus and advertised a "short course in book burning."¹² A number of students volunteered to testify before the Committee, many reading prepared statements in defense of their university and the principles of academic freedom. One student, the son of a professor, began his testimony by questioning the Johns Committee's claim that it was on campus to clarify issues that had been stirred up by local citizens. He reminded the Committee that its mandate only allowed for investigations of people suspected of advocating the violent overthrow of the government, and alleged homosexuals. This exchange led the committee's spokesman to ask, "... have you come here to interrogate us, or to give us information?"¹³

When Fisher was called to testify before the committee she put off the meeting for one hour and phoned Ed Cutler, a local attor-

11. Steve Raymond, "Politics Denied In USF Probe," *Tampa Tribune*, 22 May 1962; Stark, "McCarthyism in Florida," 136-138.

12. Fred Smith, "Politics Denied In USF Row," *Tampa Tribune*, 20 May 1962.

13. Testimony-Tampa 6/1/62, pp. 1428-1433, file 14, box 5, Florida Legislative Investigation Committee S1486, Florida State Archives, Tallahassee.



USF President John Allen enters the Florida Senate to address members of both chambers in defense of the university. Accompanying Allen are Rep. Woodie Liles, Sen. Tom Whitaker, and Legislative Aide Andy Garcia. *Courtesy of the State Archives of Florida.*

ney who had consulted with the AAUP and USF officials, for advice. She specifically wanted to ask about professional rules of confidentiality. Cutler suggested that Fisher put those questions before the committee members, educate them about professional procedures, and refuse to discuss particular details concerning individuals in counsel. For everything else, he advised her to “Use your natural talent, obfuscate.” As Fisher remembered her preparation for the interrogation she added, “I’d thought that Ed Cutler’s scenario for the Johns Committee was highly plausible. I thought I could snow ‘em.”¹⁴

Two of the most heated controversies that emerged during the USF investigation involved professors whose work fell

14. Fisher interview with author, 18 August 2004.

beyond the pale of Pork Chopper ideology.¹⁵ In June President Allen rescinded his nomination to hire Professor D.F. Fleming, a scholar of considerable accomplishment whose work included an analysis entitled *The Cold War and Its Origins*. Fleming asked the AAUP to investigate the case, and, upon completion of its inquiry, the organization censored USF for its actions. In August the university hired Dr. Sheldon Grebstein as Assistant Professor of English. The fall term had barely begun when Charley Johns obtained a copy of one of the articles Grebstein had assigned, "The Know-Nothing Bohemians," by Norman Podhoretz. The article, which contained some mild profanity, was actually a critique of beat literature but this did not stop Johns from contacting the Board of Control of Higher Education in Florida (BOC) and demanding that it pressure President Allen to fire Grebstein. Allen suspended the English professor and ignited a statewide revolt. Florida AAUP chapters, the AAUW, the Florida Library Association, and alumni groups from the University of Florida (UF) and Florida State University (FSU) condemned the action. President Gordon Blackwell joined with the FSU faculty senate in protest, and prominent faculty there warned they would leave the state unless academic freedom was protected. The fear that had dominated Florida campuses during the homophobic witchhunts gave way to a sense of anger; academic freedom was an issue that intellectuals were not afraid to support.¹⁶

The USF investigation and the recent controversies underscored the necessity for a set of guidelines to assist professors called before the Johns Committee. In November 1962 the Florida AAUP organized a committee to study faculty members' legal rights regarding legislative investigations. In July 1963 the resulting Committee on Academic Privileges and Legal Rights released a two-page publication that included six recommendations to faculty regarding individual rights and protections afforded by law.

1. The authorizing statute of the legislative committee

15. "Pork Choppers" refers to the group of politicians in Florida from the northern, rural counties who maintained majority control in the Senate and, thus, control of Florida politics for most of the twentieth century, even though they represented a minority of the state population. Charley Johns was a key member of the group.

16. Schnur, "Cold Warriors," 12-13.

enabled individuals, if approached, to refrain from answering any questions posed by an agent of the committee.

2. One was entitled under law to decline an invitation to appear before the committee.
3. Legal counsel should be obtained before one responded to a subpoena to appear before the committee. Full judicial procedures provided a method of challenging the validity of the subpoena.
4. Those who appeared before the committee could decline to answer questions. Only under lawful procedure could the committee compel answers to questions.
5. Faculty members were encouraged to contact the AAUP Committee on Academic Privileges and Legal Rights immediately at first contact with the investigative committee.
6. Faculty members should cooperate with the investigative committee only when all conditions of investigation were in full accord with due process of law.¹⁷

By the time the AAUP published its recommendations for faculty the Johns Committee's questioning of university personnel had come to an end but, in response to issues stirred up by the committee, the BOC reasserted its authority. In a September 1962 report the Board noted that most of the "problems" the Johns Committee noted at USF were already under scrutiny. Further, it underscored the point that "the Board of Control is the proper body to receive, investigate, and take action upon any and all complaints directed toward or against the institutions under its authority."¹⁸ A special committee recommended that the BOC take aggressive action to disseminate its policy on homosexuality and Communist teaching, and see that institutions follow the policy by taking immediate action whenever cases arose. It also suggested that the BOC adopt new policies to require universities to develop plans regarding approval of teaching materials and pedagogy as it related to religious beliefs.¹⁹

17. "AAUP News Digest," 29 July 1963, pp. 1-2, file 3, box 2, Egerton Papers, Special Collections, University of South Florida, Tampa.

18. "Report of the Special Committee of the Board of Control," 14 September 1962, p. 5, file 2, box 1, Florida Legislative Investigation Committee S1486.

19. *Ibid.*, 1-5.

Alarminglly, although the Johns Committee apparently had ended its investigation of universities (it *was* running out of universities to investigate), the BOC, a permanent State entity had absorbed its agenda. Professors united in protest against the State's extended attack on academic freedom. The FSU physics faculty captured the intensity of the affront leveled against Florida's institutions of higher learning in a statement prepared in November 1962:

We condemn the interference of the Legislative Investigating Committee in the academic affairs of the Universities. We are shocked by the submission by the Board of Control to the attacks of the Committee.... The responsibility for defense of our freedom finally devolves upon us, the faculty. We declare that we will not collaborate in the destruction of our University.²⁰

By the end of the year the BOC and faculty at the state's public universities had agreed upon a compromise "Statement of Policy on Academic Freedom and Responsibilities." Much of the original BOC rhetoric was toned down, especially in regard to curricular and pedagogical concerns that were, in the end, left to the discretion of the individual professor. But the BOC retained the admonition that universities consider "general character" and "moral conduct" in hiring faculty and admitting students. And, in particular, the BOC enjoined university administrators to "continue to guard against activities subversive to the American democratic processes and against immoral behavior, such as sex deviation."²¹

Even as the faculty and the AAUP struggled to protect their academic freedom, another organization, the AAUW mobilized a powerful counterforce against the Johns Committee—they investigated the state investigators! Recalling the efforts of Tampa AAUW President Betty Hohnadel, Tampa AAUW Chair of Higher Education Helen Paul, USF counselor Dr. Lucille Foutz, Daytona

20. "A statement addressed to our colleagues at the Florida State University by seventeen members of the faculty of the Department of Physics assembled on 1 November 1962," p. 2, file 16, box 2, Florida Legislative Investigation Committee S1486.

21. "Statement of Policy on Academic Freedom and Responsibilities," 7 December 1962, p. 3, file 2, box 1, Florida Legislative Investigation Committee S1486.

Beach journalist Mabel Chesley, State Representative Beth Johnson, and others, Margaret Fisher concluded: "It was the women who really moved in on the Johns Committee."²² There is reason to suspect that Fisher, herself, was a motivating factor in the AAUW's decision to act. According to the Tampa Branch AAUW minutes, the group accepted Fisher into local membership at its 5 June 1962 meeting, less than a week after her testimony before the Johns Committee. At the same meeting the branch initiated a study on mass propaganda. In addition, Fisher became the USF delegate to the national AAUW Council of Deans.²³

Margaret Fisher came to Tampa in 1960 as Director of Student Activities and was a member of the charter faculty of USF. During her tenure she served the university as Dean of Women, Assistant to the Vice-President of Student Affairs, and Professor of Interdisciplinary Social and Behavioral Sciences. Following graduation from the University of Texas in 1939, Fisher began an eleven-year stint with the YWCA that included administrative positions in San Francisco, Texas, and at the University of Oklahoma. After completing doctoral studies at Columbia University in philosophical foundations of education, Fisher combined administrative work with teaching at the University of Buffalo and Mills College. She then took a position as Assistant to the President, and later, Coordinator of Student Personal Services at Hampton Institute. Fisher came to USF directly from a position in the U.S. Office of Education.

Fisher's educational trajectory and scholarship provide evidence of an uncommon intelligence and perceptiveness that have made her insights into the Johns Committee's assault on higher education quite valuable. She authored *Leadership and Intelligence* (1954), based on her work at Columbia on Karl Mannheim's theory of the intellectual elite; co-authored *College Education as Personal Development* (1960) with Jeanne L. Noble; and wrote *The Vision of a Contemporary University* (1982) with Russell M. Cooper. In the latter work Cooper and Fisher explained the "All University Approach" that distinguished USF's mission. The USF community consciously strove to put the learning-teaching process at the

22. Fisher interview with author, 18 August 2004.

23. Interview notes, 1 July 2005, p. 3; AAUW Minutes, 5 June 1962, AAUW Tampa Records, Special Collections, University of South Florida, Tampa. AAUW designates local organizations as "branches" rather than chapters.

center of university life in an interwoven, holistic fashion that integrated general, interdisciplinary study with specialization, teaching with service, the university with its larger community, and life with work. When the innovative university in Tampa attracted the detrimental attention of the Johns Committee, then, it was an especially painful blow to the institution and it provoked a strong defense. In a 1985 interview, Fisher noted that the AAUW, "in particular, came out with fire in their eyes."²⁴

The Tampa AAUW Higher Education committee began a series of meetings upon the release of the Johns Committee report on the USF investigation in fall 1962. The following February local president Hohnadel reported that the state AAUW had formed a committee to investigate the standing of academic freedom at the universities in Florida; Lucille Foutz, who had come to USF from Gainesville, served on that committee. The local AAUW record also documented a series of joint meetings between the Higher Education and Legislative committees.²⁵ Records indicate that the trajectory of the AAUW's tactical action against the Johns Committee began with the Tampa branch, centralized at the state level, and then spread throughout the state via the 29 branches of the organization.

In November 1962 Carol Scott wrote USF President John Allen on behalf of the Florida AAUW, inquiring as to how the organization could best support the university. She explained, "Through our branches about the state we reach women who would be glad to help our universities gain freedom from meddling by legislative committees."²⁶ Allen put Scott in contact with John Egerton, Director of the USF News Bureau, who was doing all he could to marshal an organized attack against the Johns Committee. In January 1963 Scott reported to Egerton that she had submitted an

24. Margaret B. Fisher, interview by Nancy Hewitt, Tampa, USF Silver Anniversary Oral History Project, 7 August 1985, p. 8. University of South Florida, Florida Studies Center, Oral History Program, http://www.lib.usf.edu/cgi-bin/Ebind2h3.pl/U14_011. See also, Margaret Fisher, *Leadership and Intelligence* (New York: Teachers College, 1954); Margaret B. Fisher and Jeanne L. Noble, *College Education as Personal Development* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1960); and, Russell M. Cooper and Margaret B. Fisher, *The Vision of a Contemporary University: A Case Study of Expansion and Development in American Higher Education, 1950-1975* (Tampa: University Presses of Florida, 1982).

25. AAUW Minutes, 4 October 1962; 7 February 1963, AAUW Tampa Records.

26. Carol Scott to John Allen, 18 November 1962, file 16, box 2, Egerton Papers.

article to the AAUW bulletin, alerting members statewide to the current crisis regarding academic freedom and the importance of retaining professors of the highest caliber in Florida institutions of higher learning. She encouraged each of the local branches to take up a study of the issue and lobby state legislators—individually and collectively—through the branches. Scott went on to inform Egerton that the AAUW State Board had passed a motion calling for a committee to investigate the extent to which the Johns Committee had violated principles of academic freedom; that the committee keep Governor Farris Bryant and all 29 AAUW branches in Florida apprised of its findings, and prepare a report for the May 1963 AAUW convention.²⁷ On 7 February 1963 Mrs. R. George Swift, Chair of the AAUW Higher Education Committee, wrote to Egerton requesting copies of Mabel Chesley's *Daytona Beach* series on the Johns Committee. She indicated that the editorials would "provide a point of beginning for a state-wide study of Johns Committee activities," and noted that the AAUW intended to distribute copies to all Florida branches.²⁸ On 24 April the Academic Freedom Committee of the Florida AAUW formally asked the Florida legislature to abolish the Johns Committee because of its attack on academic freedom. After the Florida Division of the AAUW voted to petition the Florida legislature to abolish the Johns Committee on 4 May 1963, Tampa President Hohnadel sent a copy of the motion to Representative Terrell Sessums, adding, "Do you realize what the Johns [Committee] has done to Tampa—educationally, and economically? It will be a long time before the damage has been erased."²⁹

The women of the AAUW pulled no punches in their "Study of Aspects of Academic Freedom and of Legislative Investigation of Florida Universities." The four-and-one-half page "Report and Resolution" is a powerful, well-written document. At the outset authors of the resolution established the legitimacy of their investigation: AAUW policy required that members represent universities that "in no case sacrifice the moral function and individual

27. Carol Scott to John Egerton, 13 January 1963, file 12, box 2, Egerton Papers.

28. Mrs. Swift to John Egerton, 7 February 1963, file 12, box 2, Egerton Papers.

29. Betty Hohnadel to Terrell Sessums, file 1, box 25, Terrell Sessums Papers, Special Collections, University of South Florida, Tampa; AAUW Minutes, 4 April 1963, AAUW Tampa Records; Academic Freedom Committee AAUW to Florida Legislature, 24 April 1963, file 15, box 2, Egerton Papers.

integrity of its faculty and staff to any economic, political, or doctrinal end."³⁰ The resolution included a working definition of academic freedom that encompassed the right of students to a dynamic intellectual climate, the right of teachers to select and present course materials in accordance with the ethics and integrity of their disciplines, the right of administrators to maintain an intellectual environment, and the right of executive boards to "*hold in trust for the public community its right to education untrammelled by political expediency, factional censorship, or doctrinal insistence.*"³¹

The authors of the resolution went on to present the results of their investigation of the Johns Committee, comparing its actions to actual authority granted by the legislature. The AAUW charged that the Johns Committee violated the terms of its charter by suborning witnesses, editing testimony, relying on hearsay evidence, intimidating witnesses, frightening (student) witnesses by the quasi-judicial trappings of the committee, taking secret testimony, acting in the dual capacity of prosecutor and judge, and coercing witnesses. Further, the Johns Committee had judged morals and ethics according to its own definitions, "smeared" individuals with charges of homosexuality, assumed the right to search for communists, reported directly to the public press rather than to the legislature, and "created a circus atmosphere inimical to the peace and dignity of the state...highly inimical to the dignity of the educational process...."³² The AAUW charged the Johns Committee with coercing the BOC and claiming authority over the university, making USF vulnerable to national disgrace that would threaten public faith in the institution as well as its Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) accreditation. The AAUW acted on its findings by calling for the discontinuation of the Johns Committee and asking the legislature for a clear delimitation of the extent to which morality, ethics, and religious beliefs may be controlled by the state; a review of the methods employed by the Johns Committee; an audit of public money expended by the committee; and a consideration of the political and doctrinal motivation for investigative action. Finally, the AAUW underscored the right of the academic community to set its own standards, subject to review of the BOC and SACS.³³

30. AAUW "Report and Resolution," Egerton Papers, Box 2, File 2.

31. Ibid., 1. Emphasis in the original.

32. Ibid., 2-3.

33. Ibid., 4-5.

Margaret Fisher believed that many of the women who challenged the Johns Committee were driven by a well-deserved pride in their new university, itself founded on a shared commitment to liberal arts education based on interdisciplinary principles. They maintained a positive perspective, "trumpeting the fact here that USF was a damn good university that had taken the lead in academic freedom and responsibility."³⁴ Indeed, an analysis of the AAUW's action puts it squarely in line with observations that Florida women "possessed a vision of the meaning of social and legal justice and equality, sensible government and public policy."³⁵ Indeed, Fisher suggested that the Tampa women's activism was not anything out of the ordinary, and observed that the women of the AAUW had always been "highly skilled in practical judgment and in concerted study and action." They engaged in a free, open, responsible, and affirming type of politics.³⁶ Quite simply, the women of the Florida AAUW "did not expect universities to have to put up with the Charley Johns-es."³⁷

The battle over authority in the academy played out in a broader climate of anti-intellectualism, and not all women supported the AAUW position. In Hillsborough and Pinellas counties, the controversy of academic freedom was especially inflammatory. Jane Smith, one of the parents of USF students who had enjoined the Johns Committee to investigate the institution, remained in the eye of the stormy controversy. According to notes that John Egerton took at a citizen's meeting in Plant City in December 1962, Mrs. Smith reminded the audience of Governor Bryant's position that academic freedom was not "a license." According to Egerton's notes Smith denied claims that her group wanted to prescribe thought or action for others but then added, if children were to remain "American and Christian" something must be done. Smith suggested that citizens watch, be discerning, and pray.³⁸ In a 30-page document to preserve the facts of the USF showdown as she remembered them, Smith revealed the underlying concern that fueled her assault on academic freedom: "We

34. Fisher interview with author, 18 August 2004.

35. Davis, *Making Waves*, "Introduction," 1.

36. Fisher interview with author, 18 August 2004.

37. Ibid.

38. Egerton's notes, file 5, box 1, Egerton Papers.



Following the USF investigation the Florida Legislature extended the life of the Johns Committee and awarded it a \$155,000 budget. From left: Jane Smith, FLIC counsel Mark Hawes, and members of the Committee: Rep. William O'Neill and Sen. Charley Johns. *Courtesy of the State Archives of Florida.*

know that as the student goes, so goes the nation; hence, our grave concern over the teachings they receive.”³⁹

On 10 April 1963 the Women’s Republican Club of St. Petersburg adopted a resolution in support of the Johns Committee in anticipation of the upcoming legislative vote on extending the life of the committee. Club members, in fact, urged their legislators to award the committee permanent status. Among other points in their resolution, the women argued that “anguished appeals to ‘academic freedom’...seem chiefly to serve academic self-interest”; that one “hired to form the minds of the young...ought not to bemoan ‘methods’ when the Committee asks him an embarrassing question which he has invited by his own questionable conduct”; and that teachers, “being on the public payroll, deserve ‘academic freedom’ only to the extent that they use it in the public interest as determined by the public.”⁴⁰ Apparently, what these citizens meant was that academic freedom should not be maintained at all, even if they were reluctant to say

39. Mrs. Stockton Smith, June 1962 document, p. 2, file 5, box 1, Egerton Papers.

40. “Resolution: The Women’s Republican Club of St. Petersburg, Florida,” 1 April 1, 1963, file 1, box 25, Terrell Sessums Papers. The Women’s Club adopted a second resolution that day, asking Governor Bryant not to declare a ceremonial United Nations day.

so explicitly. A few days earlier Wayne Thomas, Jr., President of the Plant City Conservative Club, released a document encouraging club members to request copies of the Johns Committee report on its USF investigation. Thomas quoted Charley Johns in the one-page letter.

Our Committee is not against Academic freedom except where they teach our children atheism, softness on communism and request that our children read these obscene books that are not decent for you or me to read....⁴¹

Johns went on to describe “the hand writing on the wall as to what is going to happen in this country if the brain washing of our children at our colleges and universities is not stopped.... Khrushchev’s time table is going to become a reality.”⁴² Thomas, for his part, reinforced the familiar themes and echoed Jane Smith’s call for action: “When you consider that our children some day may be exposed to some of the atheistic, immoral, gutter trash, presented under the mantle of ‘education’ and presented by professors who believe in neither God nor a moral code, then *someone* had better take some action.”⁴³

Constituents who wrote Representative Terrell Sessums in April and May 1963 argued for and against the continuation of the Johns Committee. Those who supported the committee agreed that it could be a “powerful influence for good in the schools, especially in providing teachers who are *not* atheists...” They relied on the committee to “protect us from the growing communist peril.” One writer quoted Proverbs 17:13 in the header of the letter: “Whoso rewardeth evil for good, evil shall not depart from his house.” This writer voiced concern that subversive activities would increase since the United States had “emasculated” the sedition laws of the states. Another writer supporting the Johns Committee warned that the United Nations was a “trap for America” and a “Green light for the Communist & her Sattalits [sic].” A more moderate FLIC supporter admitted, “At times perhaps we might question their methods but I *can never doubt* their *motives*.”⁴⁴ Jane

41. Johns, quoted in Wayne Thomas, Jr., “To Members of the Plant City Conservative Club,” 4 April 1963, file 5, box 1, Egerton Papers.

42. Ibid.

43. Ibid. Emphasis in the original.

44. Letters dated 27 April 1963, 3 May 1963, 4 May 1963, n.d., 27 April 1963, file 1, box 25, Terrell Sessums Papers.

Smith sent Representative Sessums a copy of her report on the USF investigation. In a handwritten note that accompanied the report, she took off the gloves where academic freedom was concerned.

Do I want my sons and daughters *indoctrinated* in the belief that there exists no right or wrong, no morality or immorality, no God, that family life has failed, that pre-marital relations are good, that homo-sexuality [sic] is fine? And then told, in the name of academic freedom it's none of your business? If they (AAUP) are to have unlimited freedom, then I say the parents should have unlimited freedom, even if it means seeing the professors—flattened on the floor!⁴⁵

Sessums sent respectful letters of reply to his Hillsborough County constituents, explaining why he was opposed to the continuation of the Johns Committee. He was one of 14 representatives who voted against extension of the committee in 1963. But by that point, lawmakers who opposed the Johns Committee knew that support for their position was building. Certainly, by 1962 the Johns Committee was beginning to overreach itself. Its attacks against the NAACP as well as those against gay and lesbian teachers were rooted in, and clear expressions of, the entrenched racist beliefs and unquestioned homophobia that dominated southern culture. When the Committee attacked academic freedom, however, it aroused the academy and related professional organizations—institutions controlled by the powerful elite.

By the end of May 1963, despite public pressure to end the reign of the Johns Committee and the first significant House debate, it was apparent that the legislature would pass the bill to carry the investigative committee through another biennial term, and Governor Bryant would sign it. Even though the Johns Committee got new life its public image was severely weakened. In a backhanded admission of its tenuous status, the newly constituted Committee acknowledged that it was not engaged in a popularity contest, and that it would not pursue its agenda without criticism. In a memorandum to fellow members of the 1963

45. Jane Smith to Terrell Sessums, file 2, box 25, Terrell Sessums Papers. 46. Morgan, 24 July 1962, file 12, box 2, Egerton Papers; "Informal Report #1," 16 September 1963, pp. 2-4, file 1, box 25, Sessums Papers.

Florida Legislature, the Johns Committee tried to counter what it described as “the often unfair picture of the Committee’s activities” with a pledge that, as an investigative arm of the Legislature, they would cooperate with law enforcement agencies but not become enforcers themselves.⁴⁶

The new, contrite form contradicted earlier arguments supporters of the Johns Committee used to campaign for an extension of the charter during the spring legislative debate. Then Committee members had argued that it was vital to state interests to continue with its investigations because it was better equipped for “catching” homosexuals in schools and colleges than regular law enforcement agencies. In response, Representative Robert E. Knowles charged, “This is not a legislative committee any more, it’s a police committee.”⁴⁷ The combined efforts of the AAUP and the AAUW, in effect, forced the Johns Committee to drop its assault on academic freedom and revert back to the part of its agenda that had sustained it in 1959. In 1963 the Committee began its final biennial term in a defensive posture, ridiculed by some as “the Legislative Police Bureau on Homosexuality.”⁴⁸

From that point on the Johns Committee was routed at nearly every turn: losses in the U.S. and Florida Supreme Courts; a frame-up that backfired; the public outrage that accompanied its 1964 publication of the “purple pamphlet” on “Homosexuality and Citizenship in Florida.” The ultimate demise of the Committee in 1965 was, clearly, the result of many factors, but the women of the Tampa AAUW were significant, able workers in the construction of the watershed that marked the decline of the Committee. Or, as Margaret Fisher put it, “It was the women who really moved in on the Johns Committee.”⁴⁹

The action of the AAUW during the “raucous and carnival invasion” of 1962 was qualitatively different from the efforts of the AAUP at that time.⁵⁰ These differences cannot be explained simply along gender lines, as the strong support that Jane Smith and

46. Morgan, 24 July 1962, file 12, box 2, Egerton Papers; “Informal Report #1,” 16 September 1963, pp. 2-4, file 1, box 25, Sessums Papers.

47. Knowles quoted in “Put It in Uniform,” *The Tampa Tribune*, 27 May 1963.

48. “Put It in Uniform,” *The Tampa Tribune*, 27 May 1963.

49. Fisher interview with author, 18 August 2004.

50. “Report and Resolution: Tampa Area AAUW Study of Aspects of Academic Freedom and of Legislative Investigation of Florida Universities,” pp. 4-5, file 2, box 2, Egerton Papers.

the Women's Republican Club of St. Petersburg provided to the Johns Committee attests. Certainly, both the AAUP and the AAUW took important steps on behalf of intellectuals under attack, but a comparison of the two organizations yields some interesting observations.

The AAUP held the defense of academic freedom as its primary objective. It provided legal assistance to individual professors and administrators called to testify before the Committee, a point that should not be underestimated. But the faculty organization soon retrenched to the less combative positions of dissemination of legal advice and rhetorical skirmishes. Five months after the USF hearings the AAUP established a committee to study the rights of professors vis-à-vis investigating committees. Eight months after that the AAUP released its list of legal guidelines for professors. More than a year after the Johns Committee rode out of town the AAUP advised its members that they could refuse to answer questions or appear before the Committee, unless subpoenaed; in the event of a subpoena, they should seek legal counsel. The AAUP adamantly proclaimed that due process of law must be followed; beyond that, the advice seemed to be to cooperate with the Committee. When the Board of Control reasserted its authority and, in effect, wrote the Johns Committee's broad concerns into policy, professors mounted a challenge and won a few concessions.

The response of the AAUP was characteristic of liberal professional organizations. By not protesting too stridently, the organization maintained its place within the network of educational agencies in order to protect individual rights in a time of crisis. It relied on a favored mode of operation—establishing committees to prepare for encounters with Committees—to guard the sanctity of due process of law. Throughout the crisis, the AAUP failed to challenge the Johns Committee directly. To be sure, the AAUP battled for authority in the academy and fought for the principle of academic freedom. Wielding rhetoric and due process of law it provided aid for individuals called to testify in 1962 and did what it could to guard against dangerous erosions in policy after the fact. As Woodward observed more generally, these tactics proved effective, to a certain degree. To have pushed further would have jeopardized the security of the AAUP regarding its place at the higher education table.

The AAUW, on the other hand confronted the Johns Committee directly. The attack on academic freedom at USF



A year after the Johns Committee investigation of USF, Senators discuss the possibility of shifting control of state universities from the state cabinet to a Board of Regents. Senator Beth Johnson is joined here by Senators John E. Mathews and Mack N. Cleveland. Johnson, the first woman to serve in the Florida Senate (1962-67), was a member of the House of Representatives from 1957 to 1962. *Courtesy of the State Archives of Florida.*

served as the catalyst for their attempts to shut down the Committee. They also established committees in the fall of 1962, but whereas the AAUP committees worked on defense, the AAUW hammered out an offensive strategy. The AAUW, as Fisher noted, engaged in *concerted study and action*—analyzing the Johns Committee’s digression from its mandate, detailing its multiple abuses of power, getting the word out through branches across the state, lobbying legislators, petitioning the governor, pressing for an audit of the Committee’s use of funds, and calling for the end of the Committee. At the end of the 1963 campaign, however, the determined effort of the AAUW had fallen short of its target. If the AAUP’s impact had been negligible, it appeared as if the AAUW approach had failed altogether. The Johns Committee was still in business.

It is not entirely clear why the women of the AAUW were more focused on the objective of dismantling the Johns Committee and

less cautious than their colleagues in the AAUP. Obviously, some women belonged to both organizations, but what made the organizational strategies—and objectives—so different? One could argue that the AAUW with its club status had less to lose than the AAUP with its more traditional access to leveraging power in the academy. One could observe, with Margaret Fisher, that the AAUW was calling upon a well-established tradition in women's organizations in selecting their political strategy. Whatever the reasons, the AAUW's confrontation with the Johns Committee provides one more example of twentieth-century Florida women "at the cutting edge of reform." They were, according to Jack Davis, "champions of progress," in a manner and style that differed from male power brokers.⁵¹ And they knew how to carry on in the face of defeat.

When John Egerton wrote Carol Scott to thank her for the AAUW's "extraordinary efforts in seeking to bring the Legislature to a realization of its responsibilities..." he added, "The fact that this effort has failed does not in any sense detract from your hard work or our appreciation of it."⁵² Scott responded that she did not feel as bad about the outcome as Egerton. "If the television report was correct the committee has been returned to its original investigative intent: communism and homosexuality. What we in the Academic Freedom subcommittee were working for was just that—keeping it out of literature classes and out of the investigation of religious beliefs of faculty....Surely, no one was so naïve as to think the committee would be dissolved."⁵³ Perhaps. Perhaps the fight for academic freedom—and that alone—was the only realistic option in 1963. But the fact remains that two years later the Committee *was* dissolved. Among the educational organizations that crossed the path of the Johns Committee, only the women of the AAUW had had the audacity to call for that very thing, naïve or not.

51. Davis, "Introduction," 8.

52. Egerton to Scott, 31 May 1963, file 13, box 2, Egerton Papers.

53. Scott to Egerton, 2 June 1963, file 15, box 2, Egerton Papers.