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The Stormy 1960s at the University of South Florida

I appreciate very much the opportunity to be here this evening. Coming back to this institution, where I spent five early and very formative years of my professional life, is a rare privilege; I want to thank Professor Gary Mormeno for inviting me, and all of you for coming tonight to hear what I have to say.

Five years ago, at the invitation of Professor Raymond Arsenault, I spoke at the St. Petersburg campus on my recollection of the assault on academic freedom and civil liberties at USF in 1962-63. A few of you may have heard me on that occasion. If so, you are now more or less stuck here while I present that same basic speech, with a few modifications and shifts of emphasis. I keep in mind for such occasions as this a remark attributed to the French philosopher Andre Gide: Everything worth saying has already been said--but since no one was listening, it is necessary to repeat it. And so, with apologies for necessary repetition, I proceed.

For the next half-hour or so, I'm going to draw upon my recollection and on the public record to talk about a very dramatic sequence of events that took place here at the University of South Florida in Tampa and elsewhere in this state more than 30 years ago, in the early 1960s. A few of you will have your own memories of those events. Many of you may know little if anything about them. Even though I was very directly involved in this story, and though I have written a good bit about the South before and during the civil rights movement, I found as I prepared for this evening that an almost

dreamlike air of unreality envelopes the time and place and the characters in this particular drama, as if it were ancient history, or even mythology. But let me assure you, the story is true, and it happened here not so long ago.

I had come to the university in 1960 as a 25-year-old public relations officer, as director of what was then called the Office of Information Services. The first class of students to enter USF enrolled that fall. When I left five years later, the number of students must have been up somewhere near 20,000--and as for me, I felt a bit like a war veteran, a battle-scarred survivor of an intense and emotional conflict. I felt older, and I think wiser, stronger, and even grateful for the unique experience of that singular time--but relieved, all the same, that it was behind me and not ahead of me.

Before I left, I gathered up all of the clippings, notes, letters, and records I possessed that had to do with the conflict that occurred during those years and gave them to the librarian of the university for preservation and safekeeping. Along with that material, I handed over a 300-page narrative, my own account, gleaned from all the available sources. I had written the document because I felt it was historically important for there to be at least one eyewitness account from the scene. In recent years, a very enterprising young graduate student named Jim Schnur has dug into all this material--and more--and has produced some fascinating and very valuable interpretations of it. My archival deposits were somewhat helpful to him. Tonight, I would like to review for you some of the highlights of that material.

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Let us begin not quite at the beginning but a little later, in the spring of 1962, when five individuals dissatisfied with the direction in which the

University of South Florida seemed to be moving began an uncoordinated but overlapping assault on the institution. The five were:

- * Thomas J. B. Wenner, a lecturer in The American Idea, one of the core courses for undergraduates in the USF College of Basic Studies;
- * Jane Tarr Smith of Tampa, mother of a first-year student at USF;
- * George Wickstrom, editor of a weekly newspaper in Zephyrhills, in Pasco County, northeast of the campus;
- * Sumter L. Lowry, a retired military officer, ultra-conservative politically, and formerly a candidate for governor of Florida; and
- * Charlie Johns, a state senator from Starke, a former governor, and chairman of the Florida Legislative Investigating Committee, an unaudited and uncontrolled body with subpoena power and a mission to purge from public employment individuals who in the committee's wisdom were deemed to be "undesirable."

Professor Wenner had begun his employment at USF the previous fall, and quickly gained notice as an outspoken political liberal. But then, in a sudden and rather amazing metamorphosis, he joined forces with the right-wing anti-communist movement that was then in full flower in Florida.

Mrs. Smith expressed alarm at what she said was an atheistic and pro-communist bias in the faculty and in books at USF, and she organized a group of citizens that included Tampa Mayor Julian Lane as their spokesman.

Mr. Wickstrom, the editor, frequently published anti-communist exhortations in his paper, and focused his wrath on the university as a breeding ground of radicalism and anti-American behavior.

General Lowry was perhaps the Tampa Bay area's best-known and most outspoken anti-communist and right-wing extremist, and he was from the beginning alarmed by what he saw as left-wing radicalism at USF.

Senator Johns, whose committee had been controversial since its creation in 1956, was ever on the lookout for communism and immorality in public life.

Wenner and Wickstrom first united in opposition to a proposed visiting speaker in a USF class who was said to have been associated with groups labeled subversive by the U. S. attorney general. They were soon joined by Mrs. Smith, who, with the encouragement of General Lowry, called on Senator Johns to conduct an undercover investigation of the school. Exactly how these five critics got together in the first place, or how closely they worked in attacking the university, has never been clear. In any case, by early April of 1962, they all knew what the president of USF, John S. Allen, and his faculty and administrators, did not learn for another six weeks: that the Johns Committee had set up shop in a resort motel on Dale Mabry Highway and was taking secret testimony from students and others who were making a wide assortment of charges against members of the university community. Others outside the university also knew the undercover investigation was in progress; among them was Baya Harrison of St. Petersburg, chairman of the State Board of Control, governing body of all Florida's state universities.

So certain was Tom Wenner that USF was about to be blown apart that he went to the St. Petersburg *Times* and exposed the probe, apparently because he wanted to take a lion's share of the credit for it. This was "a campus of evil," he told the newspaper, and Dr. Allen and a dozen or so of his top administrators and faculty were going to be thrown out. "We've been

working hard every night on this," he went on, "and I'm committed to assist in this cleanup"--which, he added, "will be one of the most thorough house-cleanings in American educational history." Lots of people talk a nice anti-communism, said Mr. Wenner, but nobody was doing anything until he and his compatriots took charge. It would all come out, he crowed, when the Johns Committee began a public hearing in Tampa about ten days hence.

Senator Johns, General Lowry and the others who had been relying on Wenner as their agent provocateur on campus were caught off guard by his statements. So was Governor Farris Bryant, who also apparently knew of the undercover investigation; Bryant summarily announced Wenner's dismissal from the USF faculty, effective immediately, and didn't even both to discuss it first with President Allen, who in a separate action had suspended Wenner. To complicate matters further, Allen had learned independently that the Johns Committee staff, headed by attorney Mark Hawes and investigator R. J. Strickland, was conducting a secret investigation of the university--this on the eve of the *Times*'s publication of Wenner's charges. Dr. Allen promptly picked up the phone and called the flabbergasted Hawes, inviting him and his staff to come out to the campus and make their inquiries in the open.

Suddenly, what was to have been a surprise attack on an alleged den of subversion and immorality was prematurely exposed, and the critics, not the institution, were thrown on the defensive. Tom Wenner had become a liability, and his fellow critics were hard put to explain him away; he, in fact, turned on some of them, and called the *Times* to complain that they had "gone soft." Speaking of attorney Hawes, Wenner said: "I want to smoke him out. Why should he object to a little mud?"

Seizing the initiative, President Allen on May 21, the following Monday, called an open meeting of the university community to say what he had learned about the investigation and what assurances he had asked for and been given about due process. He concluded with this statement:

"It is unfortunate that the narrow prejudices of a few unthinking people should precipitate this trial so early in the history of the university. Let me assure you, however, that the burden of proof of any wrongdoing by any member of this institution lies not on any one of us but on those who have raised the issue. You are innocent until proven guilty in my eyes, and I trust all who have the best interests of the university and the state at heart will feel likewise. I appreciate your cooperation and your faithful service to this institution. With your continued help, this unfortunate incident could ironically become an important solidifying factor in the development and maturity of the University of South Florida."

The committee began taking testimony on the campus that week, and continued for about two weeks, concluding with a six-hour interrogation of President Allen. Senator Johns, in a parting shot, said the press was biased against him. The charge that USF was "a campus of evil" could not be sustained by the evidence, he said, but there were some "serious and substantive matters that require and demand corrective action," and these would be turned over to the Board of Control.

Thus ended round one of what would prove to be a long fight, and USF clearly won the round. But almost immediately, the bell sounded for the next confrontation. A political science professor named D. F. Fleming, who had just retired from Vanderbilt University, had been invited to teach part-time on the USF faculty in the fall of 1962. All of the preliminary arrangements for

what should have been a pro forma appointment had been made, except for the inclusion of Fleming's name on a list of new faculty to be routinely approved by the Board of Control. In June, a few days before this final formality was to take place, President Allen received a copy of a letter in which the chancellor of Vanderbilt, while not calling Fleming a communist, implied that he bore watching. He was the author of a controversial work of scholarship on the Cold War. More to the point, Chancellor Harvie Branscomb described Fleming as "an individual who has gone sour over the years, and has lost his perspective and his balance of judgment," and he had been forced to retire from Vanderbilt against his wishes.

John Allen followed up on this letter and conferred with his deans, no doubt feeling the hot eyes of his critics bearing down on him. Finally, with most of his advisers in opposition, he decided that since Fleming had not yet technically been hired, the best course of action would be not to submit his name to the Board of Control for approval. (In truth, Fleming's name was already on a line item in the state budget, and it was necessary to put through a termination order to remove him.)

The president was under continued heavy pressure from the board to answer more questions and charges raised behind closed doors by the Johns Committee after their public inquiry was over, and it was clear to him that Senator Johns and others wanted him fired. Furthermore, Allen could detect little if any support for his challenge to the committee from the Board of Control, the governor and state cabinet, the legislature, or even from his fellow presidents in the university system. Only the newspapers, particularly the *St. Petersburg Times* and the *Tampa Tribune*, had given him strong public support. And so, he reasoned, it would be better to avoid another

disruptive fight with his outside critics; he would take his lumps internally and try to get on with the job of building the university.

The internal lumps were hard. The faculty in general and the campus chapter of the American Association of University Professors in particular registered strong protests over what they saw as the dismissal without cause, for purely political reasons, of one of their own. It made matters both better and worse when Mark Hawes, in a July letter to the Board of Control, said D. F. Fleming, whom the Johns Committee had bluntly accused of being a communist, had been confused by the investigators with one D. J. Fleming, another educator "to whom these affiliations are rightfully attributable." In other words: Oops, sorry about that!

The AAUP called on its national academic freedom committee to look into the case, and USF subsequently was blacklisted by the organization. President Allen suffered the criticism in silence. Certain in his own mind that the Board of Control would have fired him had he pressed for the Fleming appointment--and would have replaced him with a puppet leader too timid to challenge the Johns Committee or anyone else--he chose to lose the battle but stay in place for the rest of the war.

In August, while Allen and most other members of the university administration were on vacation, Charlie Johns broke his promise to the Board of Control by giving the Tampa *Tribune* a 53-page summation of the committee's 2,468 pages of USF testimony. In return, the *Tribune*'s managing editor, Virgil M. Newton, agreed to print the summation word for word in the next day's paper. The document was a deeply biased and reckless attack on the institution for a wide range of false and unsupported

iniquities: softness to the communist threat, rampant homosexuality, anti-religious indoctrination of students, the purveying of obscene literature.

Dean Russell M. Cooper, speaking for the university, refuted each and every charge. Baya Harrison, the Board of Control chairman, screamed in outrage when told on the phone that Senator Johns had taken the document directly to the press, but publicly expressed only vague concern about "the unfortunate publicity." Governor Bryant and the state cabinet were silent--except to grant the committee's emergency request for a supplementary appropriation, almost doubling its \$75,000 budget. President Allen returned from vacation to find the campus and much of the state in an uproar again, and things didn't improve when the Board of Control finally responded in mid-September with a four-page statement of weak equivocation, a little sop intended to placate both the university and its critics.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, the University of South Florida came to the fall of 1962 and the beginning of its third year. In a time of extraordinary turmoil and reaction in American higher education at large--conflict over racism, radicalism, communism, the war in Vietnam--this fledgling university was almost unique in the depth and breadth of its travails. It had had enough controversy in one year to last a lifetime--and there was more, much more, to come.

A new member of the faculty that fall was an assistant professor of English named Sheldon N. Grebstein. Highly regarded at the University of Kentucky as an outstanding scholar and teacher, the 34-year-old Dr. Grebstein had come to South Florida knowing practically nothing about the recent unpleasantness here. In class one early October day, he distributed a critical essay on the Beat generation of poets--Jack Kerouac and friends--that in the

course of attacking and dismantling the Beat mystique, quoted some coarse and offensive lines of verse in order to expose them as empty and purposeless expletives meant only to shock.

Within a few days, the mimeographed essay was on President Allen's desk, sent there by an irate parent whose daughter had brought it home and shown it to her. Here was proof, thought the anti-USF crusaders, that trash is being peddled out there, rammed down the throats of our children. By mid-October, Senator Johns had seen to it that copies of the essay were in the hands of the legislature and the Board of Control, and all the dirty language was underlined to aid them in getting the point. Allen was called on the carpet by the board, and they made it clear to him that they wanted this new agitator, Professor Grebstein, summarily dismissed. He stalled for time, talked to the professor and his deans, and then announced that in accordance with standard policy, Grebstein would be suspended for violating a new board policy regarding the selection of teaching materials. He would have a hearing before a faculty board.

The English faculty at USF exploded in outrage, with many of its members demanding Allen's ouster--the very thing the Johns Committee and perhaps the Board of Control wanted. Others also came to both Grebstein's and the university's defense--including, for the first time, faculties of other colleges and universities in the state and a citizens support group in Tampa. The newspapers, particularly those in St. Petersburg and Tampa, showed more maturity and understanding of the situation than the academicians, focusing their ire on the Johns Committee and its assault on free inquiry. John Allen, once again in the eye of the hurricane, was keeping his own

counsel. And Sheldon Grebstein was the calmest of all, serenely waiting for a committee of his peers to exonerate him.

A nine-member faculty review committee* spent three weeks in exhaustive study of the entire episode before issuing a 75-page report that was a ringing endorsement of the professor's behavior, his judgment, his teaching methods and materials, and his basic right to do what he did. This was followed by a summit conference on academic freedom in Gainesville, where faculty representatives of all the state universities met in a four-hour, closed-door session with the presidents and the Board of Control. When it was over, President Allen reinstated Grebstein and called the *Tribune* and *Times* in the Bay area to ask that they print the faculty review committee's report in its entirety. Then Allen went into another meeting with the board, this time alone, and when he emerged three hours later, he had attached a note of censure for bad judgment to Grebstein's reinstatement and had cancelled plans to send the report to the newspapers.

No one except those who were present knew what went on at that tense confrontation of President Allen with the Board of Control. That the president had committed himself to full reinstatement without prejudice is clear; that the board, almost to a man, wanted Grebstein fired is equally clear. In that room, Dr. Allen faced seven men who not only held Grebstein's fate but his own in their hands. Perhaps he volunteered the compromise; perhaps it was forced upon him. Whatever the case, Allen wore the official smile that hid his true feelings. He knew full well that no one would be satisfied with the

Thomas F. Stovall, chair; David Battenfeld, Jesse Binford, Harrison Covington, Robert Fuson, Robert Goldstein, Hans Juergensen, Don Wakefield, Peter Wright

decision: not the board, or the Johns Committee, or Jane Smith and the other militant conservatives, for all of them wanted Grebstein dismissed; not the faculty, or the AAUP, or the review committee, or Grebstein himself, for all of them felt the evidence demanded unconditional reinstatement. "In this job, there are always two major groups I have to answer to," said John Allen: "the faculty and the Board of Control. I can't afford to completely alienate either of them." So he chose instead the only alternative course--partial alienation of both groups, and of all the other principals in the conflict.

On the floor of the Florida Senate the following week, Senator Bernard Parrish of Titusville gave an indication, from yet another front, of just how vulnerable John Allen and the University of South Florida were. The atheists and others down there criticizing the Johns Committee ought to leave the state if they don't like it, he said, and "I hope when they go home their mothers will run out from under the front porches and bite them."

Somehow, the institution staggered into 1963 with its structure and its roster of employees more or less intact. Grebstein announced in the spring that he had accepted a new teaching post out of the state and would be leaving at the end of the semester. He turned down a raise and a promotion from USF. In an atmosphere of relative calm, President Allen carried on a campaign of quiet diplomacy aimed at building pressure in the legislature to abolish the Johns Committee. Once again, it was the newspapers that did the most to shape public opinion, calling editorially for a denunciation of all the committee stood for--censorship, secret police methods of surveillance, attacks on civil liberties and academic freedom.

The campaign was somewhat effective, even in the supercharged atmosphere of arch-conservatism and massive resistance to change that

characterized the South in those times. When the Florida Legislature was in session in Tallahassee in April of 1963, Senator Charlie Johns felt compelled to go before an extraordinary joint session of both houses and plead for a vote of confidence and a new appropriation of funds to support the committee's probes. Aside from John Allen, the most steadfast critics of the committee were in the press. Editors Emmett Peter of the Leesburg *Daily Commercial* and Mabel Norris Chesley of the Daytona Beach *News Journal* personally produced lengthy investigative reports and editorials of the highest quality. Mr. Peter concluded his series by saying "A \$267,000 safari for sinners has yet to bag its first communist or homosexual." In Tampa, Editor James A. Clendinen consistently hammered away on his editorial page, even when the news side of the *Tribune* under Managing Editor Virgil M. Newton was closer in sympathy to Charlie Johns than John Allen. And at the St. Petersburg *Times*, Publisher Nelson Poynter and Editor Don Baldwin exhibited the highest professional skill and commitment to fairness, both in their news columns and on the editorial page.

Senator Johns, in his plea to the legislature (with Governor Bryant and the state cabinet also in attendance), adopted a conciliatory tone. But then his staff attorney, Mark Hawes, took over for a 90-minute blast at USF and President Allen. The familiar charges were trotted out--communism, atheism, immorality. In one case after another, he said, Allen had failed to set the proper moral tone and to keep his faculty in line. Johns then returned to give a sort of biennial box score--X number of teachers caught in illicit and immoral sex acts, X number of professors and deans removed, et cetera. He closed by requesting \$155,000 for the 1963-65 biennium. "The work of this committee has to go on," he pleaded. "It's larger than any of us."

The press heaped scorn on Johns and the committee. Three days later, the Hillsborough County delegation of senators and representatives decided the time had come for a counterattack. They asked John Allen if he would like to address both houses--he leaped at the opportunity--and later that week, on April 24, 1963, the scene was set for one more dramatic and memorable climax to the continuing crisis.

An atmosphere of tense excitement pervaded the Capitol on that day. The formal appearance of a state university president before the General Assembly was unprecedented, and the galleries of the Senate chamber were packed with spectators. As they had been for the committee's presentation, Governor Bryand and the members of his cabinet were in the audience. The parallel ordeals of John S. Allen and the University of South Florida had reached a decisive crucible, and the future of the man and the institution hung on the outcome of that session. When he finally stood, tall and ramrod straight, at the rostrum of the Florida Senate, John Allen was once again both figuratively and literally alone.

For 25 minutes, he presented his rebuttal to the charges of Johns and Hawes, and his words and gestures were in stark contrast to the tent-revival techniques of the committee counsel. Allen's speech was short, succinct, and polished; his delivery was calm and unemotional, and his voice was firm without being defiant. While his audience sat at rapt attention, he focused on the behavior of attorney Mark Hawes and refuted his charges one by one. Then, on a positive note, Dr. Allen cited the concrete accomplishments of the university during its first three years. "To me, it is inconceivable that there can exist a true community of scholars without a diversity of views," he said. Professors who examine communism in their classes, like ministers who talk

about sin in their churches, are "not trying to sell it," but rather trying to promote understanding, defense and control of it."

Concluding, Allen said "The Florida of the future is a dream of unlimited promise and potential which all of us share and work for. More than any other thing, outstanding universities will make this dream come true. But our university system cannot prosper, it cannot fulfill its responsibilities for leadership and service, in a climate of fear and distrust."

Long and sustained applause followed, though it did not include even a polite clap from Charlie Johns. Governor Bryant quickly left the chamber, waving to Allen as he departed; when asked for comment later, he was his usual noncommittal self. The newspapers of Florida were virtually unanimous in their praise of Allen's performance. But in a disappointing footnote some weeks later, the Senate voted 30 to 14 and the House 90 to 32 in favor of the full appropriation for the Johns Committee. The only consolation was that in times past, they had been funded virtually without opposition. Governor Bryant let the new funding bill become law without his signature. Later that summer, the committee fired attorney Mark Hawes and investigator R. J. Strickland--a condition the legislature had attached privately to its favorable vote.

And thus the third year of the University of South Florida ended, and with it was buried the last major trauma of its nightmarish years as a young target of the Florida Legislative Investigating Committee and others who could not grasp the vital importance of free inquiry.

There is one final note to add to this story. In 1965, after the Johns Committee had made another major blunder by publishing a booklet on homosexuality so misdirected in its content and purpose that it became a

bestseller in a New York gay book club, the Florida Legislature once again faced a decision on extending the life of the committee. But in a surprise move, Charlie Johns resigned, and other members and staff followed suit, and the legislature, by a vote of silence, carried out the anticlimactic funeral of the Johns Committee.

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As he began his seventh year as USF's president in the fall of 1963, John S. Allen was a personification of the hopes and fears of the university. The man who was loved and hated, followed and chased, heeded and ignored, was within himself a complex personality. Throughout almost two years of continuous controversy he had found himself and his school anchored in a public fishbowl. He was a public figure who never sought publicity for himself and often deliberately avoided it, but he was always eager to bring institutional honor to USF. He wanted desperately to preside over a tight-knit organization, yet he was more of an individualist than a silk-smooth organization man. John Allen was a genteel, urbane, cultured and sensitive man in a job that sometimes required crude, earthy, cut-throat maneuvering; he was dignified, formal, often aloof and detached when open and ingenuous informality might have served him better. Though he disliked bluntness and coercion, he was called upon to use those tactics, and he used them half-heartedly at best. He was ill at ease and often ineffective among politicians, and disdainful of greedy, self-serving, self-important people, yet his job often compelled him to swim with the sharks. Outwardly warm and friendly, he was in many ways a lonely man who withdrew into self-imposed solitude in the face of trouble; even in less trying times he resisted directness and shielded his personal inclinations and convictions from practically everyone

except his beloved wife, Grace. So peaceful was his Quaker demeanor that he avoided dispute assiduously, and seldom did he show impatience or anger when provoked.

John Allen was a patient, disciplined, highly competent and dedicated man of vision. He saw, perhaps better than anyone, the USF of the future, and he knew that growth and prosperity and quality would inevitably come to the institution. It was to this university of the future that he dedicated himself, and it was for its sake that he chose, time and time again, to sacrifice, to compromise, to buy time against the future. Dr. Allen's own best interests and those of the university were inseparable; for good or ill, the destiny of the institution in those years of crisis was firmly bound with the destiny of its president. There is little doubt that his departure would have set off the "wholesale housecleaning" once predicted by Thomas Wenner, and ushered in an era of reactionary control under a hand-picked puppet of the governor and the Board of Control.

Keep in mind that these were tumultuous years in the South. Black citizens were demanding an end to the laws and policies of white supremacy and segregation. The governors of Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas and other states were personally blocking the admission of black students to public universities. No university in Florida had enrolled a single black student--until the University of South Florida took that step. The relentless assault on intellectual freedom and civil liberties that took place here--an outrageous attack described by a local reporter as "a search for sex, sin, smut and subversion"--was also an attempt on the part of some state and local public officials to punish the university for violating the racial and social taboo that held white supremacy in place.

The University of South Florida in its formative years may have suffered at times from a lack of dynamic leadership; it suffered, on occasion, from inexperience, timidity, and even betrayal by some of its deans and directors, and from naive and misguided idealism among its faculty. But it suffered most of all from the oppressive control of a governing body and a governor, Farris Bryant, who neither understood nor appreciated the vital need of a university to be free from political and ideological manipulation. Given the system into which it was born, and the men who controlled the system, it is hard to imagine the University of South Florida as a stronger, freer institution than it was at the end of its nightmarish ordeal in 1963.

And so, as incredible as all this may seem to you, that's how your university got started. I don't know what it's like now, but I hope you will forgive me for believing that it would have to seem a little dull after an adventure like that.