

American's liberty contradicted

As promised, here is part two of the great Washington sojourn: former Students' Union president Phil Soper writes:

by Phil Soper

The pages of the or any student newspaper for that matter, remain a mystery to the vast number of its readers. Certainly one can appreciate and usually understand the information or idea that the reporter, reviewer, or editorialist has presented for perusal, but how often does the student, far removed from the dingy newspaper headquarters in the Students' Union Building, gain any insight into how the stories are compiled, or more importantly, why the paper says what it says.

The answer is quite simply, in the case of our beloved U of A rag: the pages of the Gateway are a product of the personal experience, beliefs, and prejudices of its staff. In my five years at this university I have seen the paper's bias extend from one end of the political spectrum to the other.

The Gateway has oozed with leftist drivel and spouted holier-than-thou conservative dogma (thank you messrs. Michalshyn and Andersen). With few exceptions, the paper appears to be a model for democracy, with major policies

presented to the staff as a whole, allowing their collective wisdom to reach superior decisions.

My recent trip to Washington D.C., for a student conference titled somewhat erroneously "Investigative Journalism" became a real eye-opener when I realized that not all students' newspapers or student governments, enjoy anywhere near the same freedoms as our Gateway or Students' Union. Take, for example, the case of a Southwestern college paper, Baylor's Daily News. This college was the subject of a Playboy magazine feature in which several of the young women on campus voluntarily participated. The President of the college was furious with the lack of moral fibre these women exhibited and subsequently expelled them. The student editions of the Daily News responded with an angry editorial expressing their belief that the President had "no right to force moral standards on these women." That was their last editorial at Baylor.

Michael Duffy, a contributor to the nationally syndicated column "Here and Now", related his experience as a student newspaper editor. Upon assuming the office of Editor, he was given a standing Monday morning invitation to visit the vice-president's office for tea and cake. At these meetings, which Duffy

came to enjoy very much, the university official would give him juicy 'information' on administration policy initiatives. At one point, when the university's South African investment policy was receiving some pointed questioning from the student body, the v.p. sent the kid from 'small town Idaho' on his first trip to New York City to attend an investment meeting, which enabled him to see the Administration's viewpoint. Needless to say, Duffy found it difficult to question his self-appointed mentor on the pages of the campus newspaper. In fact, it was not until much later that he realized the v.p. was "lying to him regularly."

Not all stories of news repression centered upon the questionable actions of a school administrator. One woman from a college in Norwidge, Vermont, related her frightening experience as a campus reporter at the hands of a secret student organization. The "Skull and Swords Society" exercised censorship upon the newspaper staff through threats of violence. Those silly enough to attempt any kind of expose on the all-male gang were literally tied to trees and beaten.

Going beyond the realm of the student newspaper to examine the role a student government plays in the American case was particularly enlightening as well. As President of the Students' Union, I sat as a regular member on the university senior-most Planning and Priorities Committee and the Board of Governors Finance Committee, along with another student selected from the student body at large. On both committees the dirtiest details of the internal workings and non-workings of the campus machinery were dissected and exposed. Students, academics, and senior administrators argued openly across the same table.

This kind of student involvement is the rare exception rather than the rule at American Universities. Cody Shearer, also a writer for "Here and Now", put things into perspective with his comments in a conference workshop entitled "How to Investigate your Campus Administration." One of the most difficult and important tasks for the campus reporters, in his mind, was to get information on the university's trustees (the equivalent of our Board of Govern-

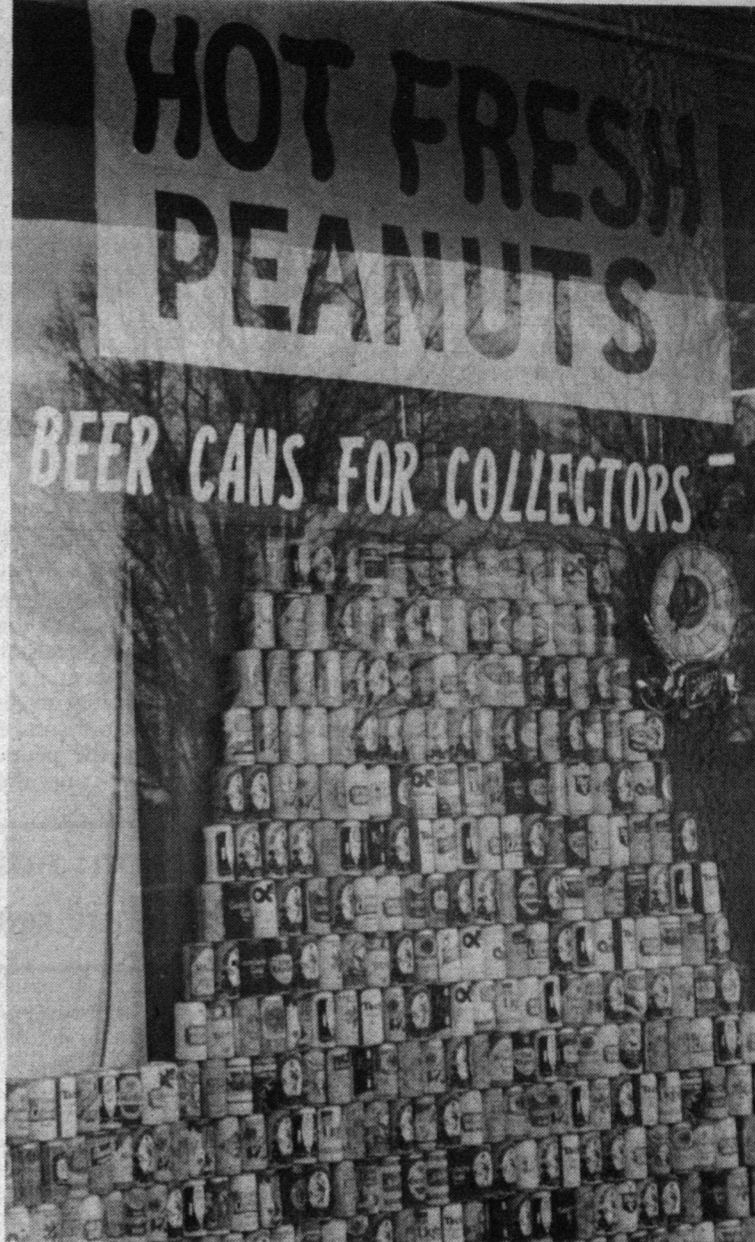


photo Phil Soper

Opiate of the masses: cheap American beer, and lots of it.

nors members), including finding out who these individuals were. I found this to be simply amazing. At the U OF A, any student can easily find out not only who the Governors are, but also where they work, their spouses' names and home phone numbers, simply by asking at the Students' Union.

In short, the famous liberal American idealism does not appear to extend to the halls of its Universities when the question at hand involves student participation in decision making, and the rights of student press and government to question those in authority at least not to the extent that is considered normal in a

Canadian institution.

In my mind, the strongest message consistently put forward by the famous participants in the conference attacked the question of secrecy in decision making by both university administrations and governments head on. The need and the right for the participants in a society, or a sub-society such as a university community, to have access to the offices and ears of decision makers was expounded upon again and again. And the use of the media through the diligent effort of its reporters and writers to achieve this end was emphasized.

continued on page 21



photo Phil Soper

The Capitol: that's the last best hope perched atop the Congress



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