

## The Dismissal of Ralph Turner: A Historical Case Study of Events at the University of Pittsburgh

Curtis J. Good

In the early 1930s, the University of Pittsburgh found itself in a period of increasing uncertainty about what academic freedom meant. The previous decade had been a time of strenuous struggle between the faculty of the institution and chancellor John Gabbert Bowman with regard to scholarship. Bowman had arrived at the university in 1921 with the perspective that faculty serve institutional and community desires and objectives; as a result, a faculty member's responsibility to his or her discipline was routinely ignored. By 1934, the university still had not created a workable definition of academic freedom. Faculty members were appointed, reappointed, or nonrenewed without a defined protocol, and served in one-year appointments. Lacking the protections of tenure and due process, they were subject to immediate removal by the chancellor for whatever reason or whim without any right of appeal, but with only payment for whatever remained of the one-year appointment.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the best known, most negative, and egregious example was the case of Ralph Turner. In 1934, Turner was unjustifiably dismissed from his post at the University of Pittsburgh. His case epitomizes the extent to which academic freedom was ignored at the University of Pittsburgh during this era and his experience ultimately contributed to a better understanding of the principle at the institution.<sup>2</sup>

Turner, professor of history and an accomplished scholar and teacher, experienced an unprecedented academic freedom violation at the completion of the 1934–35 academic year when his contract was not renewed for the next year. The stated reasons for his dismissal from the university were highly suspect. The university's primary justification for Turner's dismissal was his discussion of religion in the community and the classroom. Upon further inspection, though, it is evident that Turner's community activism and political affiliations most likely contributed to his eventual termination. Regardless of the official justification for his termination, it is clear that Turner's dismissal was unwarranted and a violation of academic freedom.

This work details the experiences of Ralph Turner and the series of events that led to his nonrenewal, including his interactions with Chancellor Bowman and the community leaders in Pittsburgh. The article also discusses Bowman's purported reasons for dismissing Turner, in contrast with the speculative reasons that may have contributed to the dismissal. Finally, this document will examine the contested terrain of academic freedom at the University of Pittsburgh in 1934 and how the investigative team appointed by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) ultimately determined that his dismissal was unfounded. This case demonstrates the fragility of academic freedom during this time period and how one professor was unduly harmed without its protection.

### Background of Ralph Turner

Turner's time at the University of Pittsburgh had been relatively peaceful since his initial appointment. He came to the university in 1925 after completing his education at the University of Iowa, just a few years after John Gabbert Bowman had accepted the chancellor position.<sup>3</sup> At the time of his appointment, Turner was already a published scholar, having written the textbook *America in Civilization*.<sup>4</sup> Turner advanced at the university, moving from assistant professor to associate professor by 1927. Additionally, the courses he offered were well attended even though they were not required for many students, evidence of his popularity and

---

teaching ability.<sup>5</sup> Until 1933, Turner spent the majority of his time teaching a freshman course in history. He asked early on to be removed from this course, suggesting that first-year students would struggle with the content and that he wished to pursue deeper historical questions. His requests were denied, but he did eventually receive other course assignments as well, including one in English history that he had requested.<sup>6</sup>

Turner's record at the university from his arrival in 1925 up until 1934 contains no official mention of note.<sup>7</sup> Turner later reported that the university was not pleased with his inquiries into an incident involving the university's Liberal Club, but this was common to several faculty members throughout the college, not unique to Turner. The Liberal Club, which became active at Pitt in 1929, often protested about social issues, at times drawing the ire of the administration. After one incident, Bowman expelled three students; his handling of the incident resulted in numerous negative reactions, both from the community and from faculty. Turner was one of several faculty members who signed a petition against the administration's actions.<sup>8</sup> But while documents show that the chancellor was not in favor of faculty support for the Liberal Club and its student membership and activity, the faculty members were never called out by name in any official record that was obtained in this research. Turner stated that over the course of his tenure at the university, during which he had taught more than 2,900 students, he had only received six complaints related to his teaching. The university administration placed the number slightly higher, but the perspective of both parties was relatively consistent. The complaints dealt mostly with Turner's discussion of evolution in the introductory course from which he had sought to be released. A separate complaint involved a claim (later proven erroneous) by the Sons of the American Legion that Turner had attended a meeting of the Friends of the Soviet Russia, an organization connected to the Communist Party of America and founded in the 1920s to raise famine relief funds for Russian citizens.<sup>9</sup> Beyond these events Turner served without any significant incident until his involvement with the Pennsylvania Security League, of which he became the chairman in 1933. The Pennsylvania Security League advocated for social change and was viewed as a support organization for New Deal politics during the Franklin Roosevelt

years. It sought to advance unemployment insurance; old age pensions; adequate relief for the poor; minimum wages for women and minors; and abolition of child labor, sweatshops, and “starvation almshouses.”<sup>10</sup> This was the only activity on which Turner received official feedback during his tenure, and he eventually ended his involvement with the league because his superiors at the university viewed it unfavorably. In fact, he was only renewed for the 1933–34 academic year on the condition that he suspend his involvement with the league. After doing so, he was viewed more positively, and was reassured that his position at the institution would not be at risk in the future.<sup>11</sup> Turner operated during the 1933–34 academic year without any record of incident. He taught the same courses, experienced no enrollment decline, and received no complaints with regards to his classroom behavior. After teaching a brief course during the summer session, Turner was reappointed for the next academic year in May 1934. However, his reappointment was quickly rescinded and he was informed of his nonrenewal in June 1934.<sup>12</sup>

### Turner’s Dismissal

During the year of reappointment that Turner received after relinquishing his Pennsylvania Security League post, he was “given assurance by administrative officers that his position was no longer in jeopardy.” He was further assured that he “had played the game and lived up to his promise not to engage in outside activities.”<sup>13</sup> Although Turner was assured by both his department chairman, John Oliver, and head of the college, dean L.P. Sieg, that his position was secure, those assurances were quickly challenged.

On June 29, 1934, Professor Turner was informed of his nonrenewal by Oliver, who offered no explanation for the reversal.<sup>14</sup> Sieg offered Turner the same lack of specifics.<sup>15</sup> Mulcahy describes Turner as being “shocked” by the course of events, and writes that Sieg eventually told Turner that “if he wanted the full story, he would have to see Chancellor Bowman.”<sup>16</sup>

Based on this recommendation, Turner sought to meet with Chancellor Bowman directly to understand the intricacies behind the reversal of his renewal. The two men met on July 5, 1934, to discuss his status with the university. Turner was primarily interested in knowing what had

occurred between of the time of his reappointment in May and its reversal at the end of June that had resulted in his dismissal.<sup>17</sup> A 1935 report produced by an AAUP investigating team states:

On July 5, Chancellor Bowman and Dr. Turner, at the latter's request, met in conference. Dr. Turner said that he raised the same question with the Chancellor that he had raised with Dr. Oliver and Dean Sieg, "What happened between May 9 and June 30 to cause my dismissal?" He said the Chancellor replied, "Absolutely nothing." He stated that he then asked "What did cause my dismissal?" and the Chancellor, speaking very slowly, then said, "The University can carry on its policy better with you away from here," and added "There is discontent in the community." The Chancellor was then asked among whom there was discontent and the Chancellor again speaking slowly said, "The Board of Trustees is a group of business men and among them there is a great deal of discontent." Dr. Turner's next question was, "Among what other group in the community is there discontent?" He stated the Chancellor said, "Turner, I want to talk to with you as a friend." Dr. Turner told the committee that he replied, "No, Dr. Bowman, this is official. Dr. Oliver and Dean Sieg referred me to you for an official explanation and I want it." After a long silence, he said, the Chancellor stated, "It is not politics," and said nothing more.<sup>18</sup>

The version of events from Bowman's view was quite different. He described Turner as being in an "emotional state" and unwilling to listen to the reason that Chancellor Bowman could, and was willing to, offer during their conference.<sup>19</sup> In the days that followed the meeting between Turner and Bowman, the matter took new shape and the main news sources in Pittsburgh offered a full description of the events.

### Fallout from the Turner Dismissal

Following the meeting between Turner and Bowman, Turner created an extensive follow-up letter to Bowman that outlined further questions, and recorded the highlights of their

conversation. Turner was determined not to let the matter rest and pressed for answers. It was at this point that he contacted the AAUP regarding his situation at the university and began to formally question the motives and nature of his dismissal.

Bowman offered no public comment on Turner's nonrenewal, though the dismissal had garnered some attention in the local press. Bowman remained silent for some time until Pennsylvania congressman Henry Ellenbogen demanded that the chancellor explain at length the reason behind Turner's dismissal. Bowman's letter to Ellenbogen stated that Turner's attitude toward religion, mainly sarcasm and ridicule, were not consistent with the expectations that the university had for scholars.<sup>20</sup> Ellenbogen's requests for information were coupled with requests from David Lawrence, the state's Democratic chairman, and Gifford Pinchot, the state's Republican governor.<sup>21</sup> Pinchot, calculating that Turner's dismissal was political in nature, was particularly aggressive, stating that, "If the Mellons want a school to teach their ideas, then let them support it. The Commonwealth cannot." The affluent Pittsburgh Mellon family was a major donor to the University of Pittsburgh.

### Possible Reasons for Turner's Dismissal

While Chancellor Bowman affirmed to Congressman Ellenbogen and Governor Pinchot that Turner's dismissal was related to his discussions of religion, this is merely one reason that historian Richard Mulcahy offers in his examination of Turner's dismissal. Mulcahy believes that apart from Turner's comments regarding religion, his support of campus activities and his political activism in social settings all extensively contributed to his eventual nonrenewal.

Mulcahy documents three areas of concern connected with Turner's eventual dismissal: antireligious behavior, campus support for liberal activity, and public speeches and advocacy. With respect to religion, Mulcahy outlines the comments made by students following his dismissal. According to one student, Charles A. Rucks, "Turner compared baptism to a hog wallow, and he could turn a staunch Catholic boy into an agnostic in two years."<sup>22</sup> Turner would deny making such statements and if similar complaints were made to the college by

---

students, the record indicates that they were never formally discussed with Turner. Along with the official statements made by students and community members after Turner's nonrenewal, at issue was also a speech Turner gave in January 1930 titled, "Why Religion?" Notes from this speech, taken by student pastor Kinley McMillan, became a part of the state investigation into the Turner dismissal. McMillan states that Turner compared religion to superstition, questioned the role of women in the church, talked about the erroneous representation of race in religion, and discussed the ills of institutionalized religion as it existed at the time.<sup>23</sup> Turner's views are represented as antireligious in McMillan's notes, as they should be, according to Mulcahy. Mulcahy demonstrates that in this speech, part of a series sponsored by the Pittsburgh Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), Turner had been asked to discuss the unfavorable side of religion.<sup>24</sup> Turner's position and comments on religion received further attention as the investigations into the matter matured, which is especially evident in the report put forth by the AAUP investigative committee that examined the matter.

The second area that Mulcahy speculates contributed to Turner's nonrenewal is Turner's previously mentioned support for Liberal Club activities on campus. While the AAUP report downplays this, and focuses more on how Turner may have offended prominent university representatives both in teaching and community activity, Mulcahy (and Turner himself) states that Turner's initial support of events might have made him a target early on during his service to the university. As Mulcahy describes Turner's opinion on the reason for his dismissal:

Turner believed it lay in a faculty petition he signed and delivered to Bowman. Signed by fifteen faculty members, the petition asked the chancellor to reconsider his actions concerning the Liberal Club. According to Turner, this made him a "marked man," and all have believed this to be true.<sup>25</sup>

The state investigative committee would later look into this claim and determine it invalid. Turner's comment shows that perhaps he had felt for some time that he was not in the good graces of the chancellor, but if this was the case there was no official record of hostility on the part of the chancellor towards Turner. It was not until Turner's service with the Pennsylvania

Security League that Turner was officially questioned and cautioned.

Turner's outside activities, his advocacy and public speeches, make up the last of the three reasons posited by Mulcahy for Turner's dismissal. They include Turner's involvement with Pennsylvania Security League events that drew the ire of the upper administration. The first documented event to draw the chancellor's attention occurred when Turner was linked with a gathering of the Friends of Soviet Russia meeting. Turner was erroneously listed as presiding over the meeting, a meeting that he had agreed to attend based on the invitation of a student. Turner, however, was not actually at the meeting even though event literature listed his presence (he was out of town, in New York discussing the publication of historical textbooks). Regardless, the Sons of the American Legion wrote a letter of complaint to Bowman expressing discontent with Turner's association with such an organization. Turner was cautioned regarding such activities (in a way described as "friendly") and upon meeting the chancellor at an annual faculty dinner offered his apology for the misunderstanding. The chancellor was quoted as saying, "Yes, you don't know how much trouble that incident caused." Though the chancellor was described by many as being "nettled" with his conversation and attitude toward Turner during this event, he did tell Turner to forget the matter.<sup>26</sup>

Perhaps the culminating event in Turner's dismissal, and certainly a hallmark of his outside activities, was a speech that Turner made to the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania. As historian R.C. Alberts notes:

[O]n April 24, 1934, [Turner] made a speech at the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania that he, later testified was the "last straw" that caused his dismissal. This lecture, "History in the Making in Western Pennsylvania," was never published ... . More clearly than any other document, it tells what Turner was thinking and saying in the spring of 1934 that caused so much trouble, and it reveals perhaps, something of his controversial classroom conduct.<sup>27</sup>

The speech was a sophisticated argument against the rise of corporate power and domination in the American economy. Turner argued against the classic liberal approach to

economics, and discussed how, in such an ultra-capitalistic environment, a dominant group of entrepreneurs is created, able to suppress and manage those with lower status. Turner used the classic *bourgeois* versus *proletariat* argument, and suggested that in such economic conditions those without power, and essentially without freedom, become trapped in an unjust system. There is no doubt, in Pittsburgh during the 1930s, that those with financial means would have found Turner's speech disconcerting. Alberts points out that, although the prominent Mellon family is never referred to by name in the written version of the lecture, the way that Turner characterizes the actions of wealthy individuals leads to the conclusion that he is speaking about them and their influence in Western Pennsylvania.<sup>28</sup> The speech charged the affluent with destroying a culture of true progress and freedom, imposing on others conditions that negatively impacted their talents, retarding scientific progress, lessening the pursuit of good intentions, and corrupting the overall purpose of education and human exploration.<sup>29</sup> The fallout from this lecture hit Turner almost immediately. According to Alberts,

John S. Fisher, ex-governor of the state and president of the Historical Society, and several others who were present at this exegesis, were displeased, and they expressed their displeasure to the chancellor and to some of the trustees of the University.<sup>30</sup>

Turner was dismissed from the university shortly following this speech. Though Bowman would later contend that the speech was not part of the reason for his nonrenewal, it most likely contributed to the dismissal decision. While Turner's outside activities cannot be definitively identified as the motivation behind his dismissal, they did create a sense of alarm and confusion about what might be occurring at the university. In the months that followed, the AAUP would send an investigative team to research the matter and obtain a more complete picture of Turner's dismissal. Furthermore, the Association wanted to gauge the health of academic freedom at the university and its relationship with the faculty.

### AAUP Investigation

During the latter part of the summer of 1934, an AAUP investigative committee began its work

in Pittsburgh, researching the status of academic freedom at the university. The committee's work was prompted by Turner's request to the AAUP, citing his personal experience and dismissal from the faculty. As the final report from the investigative committee states, the construction of the committee was delayed as Chancellor Bowman sought final approval of its membership.<sup>31</sup> Bowman had dealt with members of the AAUP previously regarding academic freedom at the university, when the AAUP conducted a general investigation into the faculty hiring and firing situation at the university near the beginning of his tenure. Bowman was frustrated and untrusting of the AAUP in general after this experience, and he deemed the original investigative team unfavorable.<sup>32</sup> In the end, three members that Bowman approved were dispatched to represent the AAUP: committee chairman Ralph Himstead, professor of law, Syracuse University; A.B. Wolfe, professor of economics, Ohio State University; and James B. Bullitt, professor of pathology, University of North Carolina. The committee researched the Turner case for nearly four months during 1934, making visits to the University of Pittsburgh campus in August and November, and conducting extended correspondence during that time.

The report was finished in 1935 and appeared in the AAUP's annual *Bulletin*. It began with a full account of events from the perspective of Turner himself and then offered the perspective of the chancellor. While the first part of the report concerned itself only with the nonrenewal of Turner, the second half examined academic freedom at the university more broadly. In Bowman's portion of the report, he gives the most extensive remarks he ever offered for Turner's dismissal. He emphasized that Turner's termination was not based on his economic policy or political activities. Additionally, he stated that he had received complaints from businessmen in the community regarding Turner, typically at the Duquesne Club, a prominent Pittsburgh social club since the nineteenth century. But the chancellor maintained that he had not received complaints about Turner from university trustees. He also stated that Turner's dismissal was in no way related to the university's quest for capital to complete the Cathedral of Learning, though the investigative committee would differ significantly in its findings with

---

Bowman on this particular assertion. The AAUP documented Bowman's position on the Turner dismissal, stating:

The complaints, he said, which caused him to dismiss Dr. Turner came from parents, ministers, and students, and were that Dr. Turner's attitude toward religion was flippant and sneering. He told the Committee that after a ministers' meeting he had been asked to address, several ministers had said to him that this man Turner was undoing all they were trying to do. A large number of such complaints had been brought to his attention, he averred, but they had all been oral and therefore he had no written evidence of such complaints received prior to the dismissal to show the Committee.<sup>33</sup>

Chancellor Bowman could not provide any written documentation of complaints regarding Turner's behavior toward religion prior to July 7, 1934, two days after Turner had met with Bowman and discussed his nonrenewal, and several days following Turner's June 30, 1934, meeting with department chair, John Oliver. As the report states, most of the letters were written after July 10, 1934, following Chancellor Bowman's first public comments on Turner's situation. The chancellor described how he had been getting complaints about Turner's discussion of religion since his arrival on campus, and said that although the frequency had been less over time, he dismissed Turner because his "patience at hearing complaints about religion had become exhausted."<sup>34</sup> Bowman added

that he had dismissed Dr. Turner not only because of a flippant and sneering attitude toward religion, but because Dr. Turner sought to break down the faith of his students. The Chancellor stated that there were two qualifications which he insisted all professors should possess: they must be patriotic, and they must be reverent in their attitude toward religion. Dr. Turner, he said, did not have the latter qualification, and that was the sole reason for the dismissal.<sup>35</sup>

While Chancellor Bowman decided to dismiss Turner because of his impatience with the complaints, he stated that he had made that decision prior to June 30, 1934. Bowman told the committee that he had brought the matter of Turner's nonrenewal to the board of trustees in

March (at a meeting in which they approved the Turner's dismissal), but they decided not to make the matter public for two reasons. First, the university had begun another capital campaign for the Cathedral of Learning and the trustees wished not "to be embarrassed by the undesirable publicity which they feared might be caused by Dr. Turner's dismissal."<sup>36</sup> Second, Bowman stated, by delaying the release of Turner until after the end of the academic year, he was assisting Turner with further financial support. Dismissing him at that point would allow the chancellor to pay Turner for the following year, although he would no longer be part of the faculty. Although Bowman supplied the AAUP with his time and testimony, the findings of the investigating committee were not in line with much of what the chancellor said.

### AAUP Committee Findings

The investigating committee report outlines testimony provided by various groups, including professors at the university, administrators, trustees, and students. The professors were consistent in their belief that Turner's dismissal was very much connected with the chancellor's capital campaign, and that religion was not the reason for his termination. There was a split among the faculty as to whether the chancellor was against all those who shared antireligious beliefs, or simply against those who did it in a way that might negatively impact the university. The faculty was also skeptical that Turner was actually dismissed in March, and not at the end of the academic year. The committee tried to verify the date of the actual dismissal from the minutes of the trustees meeting, but no record could be found. When the committee spoke to the chancellor regarding this, his comment was that "the action had been more or less informal and that would explain why it did not appear in the minutes."<sup>37</sup> The president of the board of trustees added further intrigue by reporting to the committee that he could not recall when the decision had been made.

The report's treatment of testimony from administrators, trustees, and students was brief. The committee noted only that the collective of this body believed that religion was not the

reason Turner was dismissed. They, much like the faculty, felt that Turner's activities with economics and social causes were the primary motivations for the nonrenewal. The majority of students spoke highly of Turner and his ability to inspire learning and a motivation to engage with material outside the classroom. The trustees who were interviewed offered very little, stating only that they were not aware of who Turner was and tended to agree with the chancellor on personnel matters.

The committee members reported that they viewed Turner as an able scholar and educator, and that his personality and approach generated strong reactions. They felt that such reactions by those in positions of leadership most likely had a negative impact on Turner during his time at the university. In particular, the committee addressed the speech that Turner gave to the Western Pennsylvania Historical Society in April of his final year at the university. Discussing the speech, the committee stated:

The Committee desires to comment briefly about his speech before the Western Pennsylvania Historical Society. ... His subject was, "History in the Making in Western Pennsylvania." He read this address, which was a scholarly presentation of his interpretation of the forces of industrialism and capitalism which have shaped the destinies of this great coal and iron region. The testimony concerning this meeting indicated that a considerable number of those in the audience were not used to critical historical analysis, were not expecting that sort of thing, and consequently felt distaste rather than enthusiasm over his logic and conclusions. It seems that several prominent individuals, including certain political personages, were in the audience, and that they were more than a little irritated.

The Committee has read the speech and can find nothing in it that need offend an open-minded person, but it was the wrong speech for that particular audience. It was an address better adapted to an audience composed of students of history. Whether Dr. Turner misjudged the character of the audience or simply neglected to adapt himself to it, the Committee does not know. There is some testimony, however, to the effect that

his manner of address, characterized by his usual energetic positiveness—easily misconstrued as combativeness—augmented the irritation of those who disagreed with the ideas he expressed. A large number of the individuals with whom the Committee conferred believe that this particular speech was a powerful factor in causing Dr. Turner's dismissal.<sup>38</sup>

The speech and its aftermath were of some concern, but the committee began its search into the Turner dismissal with the simple task of determining whether or not his termination was justified. On that matter, the committee found unanimously that Turner had been subjected to "an unjustifiable termination of his services," and that the behavior of the university was "without any justification."<sup>39</sup>

### Bowman's Reaction to the AAUP Report

A copy of the draft report was sent to Chancellor Bowman in February 1935 with a letter from the AAUP office asking Chancellor Bowman to check the report for factual errors and to keep the report private until its eventual publication.<sup>40</sup> While the report was a carefully crafted piece on the conditions of academic freedom, with evidence suggesting that Bowman's reign was not at all pleasant for faculty and students alike, it made an egregious error that Bowman would take advantage of when dealing with the AAUP.<sup>41</sup> In one passage the authors say

In the world of the existing Pittsburgh, with its extremes of riches and poverty, its unrelieved dirtiness and ugliness, its ruthless materialism and individualism, its irrepressible industrial conflicts, its lack of any integrating principle other than the sign of the dollar, the Chancellor moves with one immediate driving motive; to wring from the community the money essential to the development and support of the kind of university which his mind conceives as the ideal for this particular city. <sup>42</sup>

Bowman seized on this language to characterize the committee as harsh critics of a fine community, and released the draft report to the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* the next day. Bowman's

critique of the committee's findings are recorded in full detail, as is an overview of the full report.<sup>43</sup> Alberts describes this tactic as "shrewd" and notes that Bowman's approach shifted community reaction, causing a "noticeable swing of support and sympathy to the University as part of the public anger at the insult to the city."<sup>44</sup> The AAUP printed the report in its annual *Bulletin*, though changes were made to the passage that described the city unfavorably. Although Bowman had changed the conversation around the report, members of the legislative branch of the commonwealth still sought to discover what was happening at the university. While Bowman pushed attention toward a few unflattering remarks, the largest part of the report detailed Bowman's authoritarian rule. For these reasons, the state investigated the conditions at the university in spring 1935.

### State House of Representatives Investigation

While the AAUP had fully investigated matters leading up to Turner's dismissal, members of the state legislative branch were also concerned about the health of the institution following the dismissal. As Alberts states, several Democrats (all serving on the House Appropriations Committee) under the direction of university alumnus Eugene A. Caputo conducted what was viewed as a more transparent investigation, wherein witnesses were called and interaction amongst the participants was encouraged. The state team had limited backing and its legislative process lasted for two weeks. The process involved many of the same witnesses from the AAUP investigation, one of whom was Turner. While Turner's initial testimony was perceived positively by those involved, he included in the second part exaggerations that raised criticism. The dispute centered around Turner's assertion that any faculty member who supported the Liberal Club was "marked." According to Alberts, Turner claimed that all of the faculty who signed the petition supporting the Liberal Club had been targeted and eventually dismissed. Charles F. C. Arnsberg, the university's legal representative, however, showed evidence that of all the men who signed the petition only two had been dismissed. Further, Arnsberg provided records showing that a majority of those signers had actually been promoted and honored by

the university since the incident. While Turner participated in initial testimony, he left the city and never appeared for his full cross-examination. The reason for this absence has never been adequately explained.<sup>45</sup>

The findings of the state investigative committee were bland and noncommittal, taking a soft position on all material matters. While the committee was supportive of how Bowman transformed the university, its findings regarding Bowman's handling of political matters on campus were neutral. The committee also found that it did not have enough evidence to rule either on the Turner matter or the state of academic freedom at the university.

The state investigation made no significant impact on the chancellor or the university, and in the end its findings were essentially a nonissue. Between the two investigations, it was only the AAUP findings that created any reaction, and it is clear that the AAUP report negatively impacted the university to some degree. The matter of tenure haunted the chancellor in the years following the Turner dismissal. In fact, it was not until Rufus Fitzgerald took over as chancellor in the decade that followed that the matter of tenure was put to rest and formally approved.<sup>46</sup> Beyond that aspect, Bowman ignored the entire ordeal and much of the reaction it caused. Some years after the event, in 1940, Chancellor Bowman said of the AAUP investigation and Turner controversy:

The officers of the American Association did not, in my opinion represent the membership of the Association. The officers I came in contact with were a radical group. The outcome of the whole matter has been some unfavorable publicity but beyond that the effect is negligible.<sup>47</sup>

## Conclusion

Three main events symbolize the tenure of chancellor John Bowman at the University of Pittsburgh. The first was his ambitious and successful completion of the Cathedral of Learning. The second was his campaign to regulate athletics and "restore order" to the university's

athletics program, which entailed pushing out John “Jock” Sutherland, then the most successful football coach in university history.<sup>48</sup> The final was the dismissal of Ralph Turner. The Turner case could not have happened at a worse time for the university, and the events that followed put many of Bowman’s plans at great risk. For this reason, it is evident that Ralph Turner was not dismissed from the university for his religious beliefs alone. Given that no letters of concern regarding religious discussion were received by Chancellor Bowman prior to July 7, 1934, and that the rates of complaints had actually decreased since Turner’s arrival, it is highly unlikely that Turner was released on grounds of religious discussion alone. Rather, it is more likely that Turner was dismissed because he had offended affluent members of the community and had put the university in a precarious position while they were attempting to raise funds. Bowman’s astute management of the case, however, placed him in a position to turn a public problem into public sympathy for the university, and ultimately raise the capital needed for the massive building project.

For his part, Turner found success following the University of Pittsburgh debacle. He continued to teach history, first at the University of Minnesota and then at American University, eventually becoming a full professor at Yale University. He also worked for the State Department and assisted in the creation of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organizations. Perhaps Turner’s most lasting contribution, at least for the university, was the carefulness and caution that future administrators would exhibit when dealing with future faculty issues. It is clear, as Alberts illustrates, that in the administrations that followed Bowman, more prudence and respect was given to such matters. Furthermore, it can be argued that academic freedom at the university was advanced. Ralph Turner suffered a tremendous violation of his academic freedom, but it was his case that primarily altered the relationship between the faculty and administrations in the decades that followed. His case was of public importance, and accordingly, future administrations sought ways to avoid such public spectacles and enhance teaching at the university.

## Notes

1. American Association of University Professors, "Academic Freedom and Tenure: University of Pittsburgh," *Bulletin of the American Association of University Professors* 21, no. 3 (1935): 224–66.
2. R. C. Alberts, *Pitt: The Story of the University of Pittsburgh* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1986).
3. Bowman had come with a plan to reshape the University of Pittsburgh, which then primarily drew students from the local community and was not recognized nationally. His plan included an expansion of physical grounds (notably the Cathedral of Learning, the university's towering center for classes) and the creation of a faculty team that supported his grand vision for change. Alberts, *Pitt*.
4. R. E. Turner, *America in Civilization* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1925). See Alberts, *Pitt* and R. P. Mulcahy, "The Dark Side of the Cathedral of Learning: The Turner Case," *Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine* 69, no. 1 (January 1986): 37–53.
5. Alberts, *Pitt*.
6. AAUP, "Academic Freedom and Tenure: University of Pittsburgh."
7. The official papers of Chancellor Bowman contain no mention of Turner until his dismissal was described in considerable detail, and no other files mentioning Turner prior to the dismissal are available.
8. Alberts, *Pitt*.
9. The AAUP said in its report that Turner's continued assignment to this course after he requested a change created an environment where controversy was probable and noted that more seasoned students would not have been alarmed by Turner's discussion. The Sons of the American Legion is an American group of male, military descendants, which operates as patriotic organization under the larger American Legion. AAUP, "Academic Freedom and Tenure: University of Pittsburgh."
10. Alberts, *Pitt*.
11. AAUP, "Academic Freedom and Tenure: University of Pittsburgh."
12. This article will use dismissal, nonrenewal, and termination interchangeably as they relate to the Turner case.
13. AAUP, "Academic Freedom and Tenure: University of Pittsburgh," 230.
14. AAUP, "Academic Freedom and Tenure: University of Pittsburgh."
15. AAUP, "Academic Freedom and Tenure: University of Pittsburgh" and Alberts, *Pitt*.
16. Mulcahy, "The Dark Side," 37.
17. AAUP, "Academic Freedom and Tenure: University of Pittsburgh" and Alberts, *Pitt*.
18. AAUP, "Academic Freedom and Tenure: University of Pittsburgh," 231.
19. AAUP, "Academic Freedom and Tenure: University of Pittsburgh," 232.
20. John Gabbert Bowman to Henry Ellenbogen, July 10, 1934. Chancellor John G. Bowman Files, University of Pittsburgh Archives.
21. Alberts, *Pitt*.
22. Mulcahy, "The Dark Side."
23. "Notes of McMillan," January 1930. Bowman Files, University of Pittsburgh Archives. McMillan was, as a document in the Bowman files states, "at the time Student Pastor to the Presbyterian students under

---

the Presbytery of Pittsburgh." His notes appear to include only some of the comments made by Turner during his speech. Notes from the other speeches, if there are any in existence, are not contained in the file.

24. Mulcahy, "The Dark Side."

25. Mulcahy, "The Dark Side."

26. AAUP, "Academic Freedom and Tenure: University of Pittsburgh," 228.

27. Alberts, *Pitt*.

28. Alberts, *Pitt*.

29. Ralph E. Turner, "History in the Making in Western Pennsylvania" (speech presented at the Western Pennsylvania Historical Society, April 24, 1934). Bowman Files, University of Pittsburgh Archives.

30. Alberts, *Pitt*

31. AAUP, "Academic Freedom and Tenure: University of Pittsburgh."

32. Alberts, *Pitt*.

33. AAUP, "Academic Freedom and Tenure: University of Pittsburgh," 233.

34. AAUP, "Academic Freedom and Tenure: University of Pittsburgh," 235.

35. AAUP, "Academic Freedom and Tenure: University of Pittsburgh," 238.

36. For this reason, the investigative committee was confident that some connection between the raising of capital and Turner's dismissal was evident. The chancellor would protest that this was not the case, but the committee maintained its position in its final report on the matter. AAUP, "Academic Freedom and Tenure: University of Pittsburgh," 236.

37. AAUP, "Academic Freedom and Tenure: University of Pittsburgh," 242.

38. AAUP, "Academic Freedom and Tenure: University of Pittsburgh," 244.

39. AAUP, "Academic Freedom and Tenure: University of Pittsburgh," 248.

40. W.W. Cook to Bowman, February 1935. Bowman Files, University of Pittsburgh Archives.

41. Alberts, *Pitt*.

42. W.W. Cook to Bowman, initial draft of AAUP Report, February 13, 1935.

43. *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, February 21, 1935.

44. Alberts, *Pitt*, 152.

45. Alberts, *Pitt*.

46. Rufus H. Fitzgerald served as provost under Bowman before becoming chancellor in 1945 and serving in that capacity for ten years. Fitzgerald Field House, an athletic center on the Pitt campus, was named after him.

47. Bowman's reaction was documented in correspondence with L.N. Duncan, the president of the Alabama Polytechnic Institute. Duncan, who had dismissed staff members at his institution, was facing penalties from the AAUP. He wrote to ask Chancellor Bowman about his reaction to the "blacklisting" of the University of Pittsburgh and whether or not this label had caused any substantial injury to the University. John Gabbert Bowman to L.N. Duncan, June 9, 1940. Bowman Files, University of Pittsburgh Archives.

48. This restoration, known as "Code Bowman," restricted funds and scholarships for athletics, thus reorganizing what some thought was an untamed mess. Sutherland's dispute with Bowman and his resignation, which took place shortly following the Turner case, were viewed very poorly by both the community and, especially, the alumni, who staged a series of protests. His resignation was another indication that the operations of the university were autocratic and poorly planned. Alberts, *Pitt*.