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FREEDOM OF INFORMATION COMMITTEE

MILTON FREIER, Chairman  
United Press Newspictures  
1013 13th Street, N.W.  
Washington 5, D. C.



May 27th, 1956

Dr. Francis P. Gaines  
President  
Washington and Lee University  
Lexington, Virginia

Dear Dr. Gaines:

Thank you so much for your letter explaining in detail the incidents surrounding the unfortunate and untimely death of Sen. Alben Barkley. I fully realize the trying circumstances and how difficult it must have been for you personally. I too was shocked as the Senator and I had enjoyed a fine acquaintanceship during his years as a public figure in Washington.

Nevertheless, in light of your statements in which you conclude the action taken by the students was a "matter of taste" upheld by a mandate dating from primeval times "that there should be no desecration of the dead," I feel constrained to reply:

May I assure you that medias using visual means of reporting are obliged to present to their readers the same degree of proper taste as is used in the printed word. Unfortunately, the incident at Washington and Lee University permitted no opportunity for newspapers and television stations to choose "that" picture or "that" scene which could tell the story factually and yet with proper taste.

It is important to understand that news cameramen -- television, motion picture and still -- always make more than one picture of an incident. They change their angle. They seek additional pictures in an attempt to tell the story accurately and yet without exceeding the privilege of fair comment. Molested by self-styled censors, such was impossible in Lexington.

If the general public could only see the many gory and distasteful pictures that are never used because they violate good taste, I am sure they would be more cognizant of the true role of news dissemination.

I cannot argue that those organizations using sensationalism methods of journalism would not choose an unwholesome scene for reproduction. On the other hand, I am sure you would readily agree that it is totally unfair to penalize the whole United States for the action of a few.

In the instance where Mrs. Barkley pleaded that no pictures be made, I'm sure she now realizes -- no matter how distasteful it could appear for the moment -- that we necessarily are obliged to report the news to the general public about anything that happens to a person in the public eye. It is no pleasant task, I assure you. In fact, with eyes dampened

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Dr. Gaines

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with memories, I had the unpleasant assignment to photograph my late friend lying in state in Washington.

I find it difficult to understand the reasoning regarding your concern that you "should be unhappy to have to accept the responsibility" if the picture -- as you painted it in your own words -- "had gone out under a Lexington by-line." You maintain this matter does not involve freedoms yet you are completely protected by the State Constitution of Virginia which, in itself, establishes it a mandate OF the people to have the right to be fully informed on all subjects of interest to the general public tempered by the guarantee of retribution for the abuse of that right.

The incidents involving the Autherine Lucy affair at the University of Alabama, at Princeton where attempts were made to suppress pictures of Alger Hiss, and that which occurred at Washington and Lee, paint a grim picture of visual news suppression which could give college students a distorted impression about the right to gather news visually -- which they might carry through their lifetime.

May I pray that -- as an educator -- you will utilize the facilities of Washington and Lee University to explain the true role of visual reporting to the student body? This would do much to preserve for the future generation the right to be fully informed through every modern means of news dissemination. It would also enable photo journalists to report the news with accuracy without having to be subjected to possible bodily harm in the performance of their legal occupational pursuit.

If you wish, I would be pleased to discuss this further at some future time.

Respectfully yours,

Milton Freier

cc: Mr. Frank Parsons

Mr. James H. Moore  
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