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Black Symposium Letter from Winthrop C. Libby In Response to a Complaint on Symposium on Black America

Winthrop C. Libby
University of Maine

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Copy of a letter written by President Libby to a person in Ellsworth, Maine under date of February 20, 1969.

February 20, 1969 (cont.)

"Mr. Robert Haskell of our Board of Trustees has forwarded to me your recent letter in which you express concern about the S. D. S. and certain programs held here on campus. I want to explain our position to you without trying to justify it.

"Currently here at the University of Maine, Orono, we have 7,500 students enrolled. In a group this large you are bound to have a few extremists of all kinds who feel strongly about a great many things. I know students fairly well and I can assure you that our student body is not particularly different than the population of a city like Ellsworth. The great majority (at least 90 percent) are just a sample of good middle class people such as live in Maine. The bulk of our students come from middle class homes bringing their convictions and prejudices with them. They leave with them intact. The University does not change their values particularly. Yet within any group this large you are bound to find a few who want to change things because they believe we (the middle aged) haven't done too well in running things. I'll guarantee that you have these kinds of people in Ellsworth too. Any future we have is in the hands of people like our student body. Frankly, I hope they do better than some of us.

"The S. D. S. organization on this campus has fewer than 50 members. They exist legally. They have not broken any laws of Maine or of this University. I haven't any sympathy for them but I necessarily must support their right to exist until such time as they do something (as they may) which violates regulations. I have made it clear to this organization as well as others that the University will not tolerate disruption of any kind. I am convinced that they have no ties to the Communist party and that they are not setting out to destroy the University. If newspaper, magazine and television publicity on the organization stopped I believe the organization would gradually wither away. They function as a kind of yeast within our system and many of the problems they tackle are genuine ones. This doesn't mean I like their answers though.

"Insofar as the current program on Black America is concerned, you should understand this is not sponsored by the S. D. S. but instead by the Student Senate which is a representative student body elected on a proportionate basis in exactly the same manner as the Maine Legislature. Just as I don't always care for the actions of the Legislature I don't always care for the decisions of the Senate. This is part and parcel of the democratic process, as I see it. When asked, I recommended that the Senate build a program about the problems of Maine rather than the Blacks. But as you know the press of this country is full of stories on the problems of the Black people and their militancy or drive for equality. The Senate in its wisdom felt that Maine students should understand the nature of militancy as a phenomenon of the age. They selected their own speakers. They may very well be right since as they said most of our students will eventually leave Maine and be confronted with this problem wherever they go. The programs on Black America were well attended with 200 to 250 students out of 7,500 present at each session. A singing group on campus will attract 3,000 to 4,000. This means, I guess, that more people are interested in the arts than in social problems. I, personally, attended two or three of these sessions. Nothing has been said or done at these meetings which couldn't have been said or done in any Maine community. The Senate organized the series well. The audiences have been orderly. The speakers have been questioned sharply. Experience indicates to me that when public scrutiny is brought to bear on any controversial issue or speaker that common sense prevails.

Letter from President Libby to a person in Ellsworth, Maine under date of
February 20, 1969 (cont.)

"I hope you agree that students are entitled to have exposure to controversial ideas. This is a controversial time in history and citizens have a responsibility to make judgments. My personal experience indicates that students must be given credit for being able to make reasonable, sensible judgments. I have respect for them. Let me assure you that, in my opinion, if we have student difficulties at Orono it is not apt to be over political ideologies but rather over regulations on such things as drinking.

Sincerely,

Winthrop C. Libby
Acting President"