



Letter to Robert G. Sproul from Clarence A. Dykstra, March 27, 1949

Sunday, March 27, 1949

PRESIDENT SPROUL AND THE REGENTS:

Yesterday, March 26, at about 10:00 o'clock the President told me over the telephone that a special committee of the Board was appointed at the Santa Barbara meeting to investigate why the University is in difficulty in connection with the so-called Laski affair. Since I am due in Cleveland for a meeting of the UNESCO Commission and must leave tonight, Sunday, if I am to be there, I asked the President whether I should put off this journey in order to be available for this committee hearing. He indicated that he believed I should proceed with my engagement in Cleveland. He also indicated that he believed the committee could do its business very quickly. Since the President is to be in this city on Tuesday, I am assuming that he will take the occasion to be in touch with the committee and I am leaving this statement of fact for the use of the committee.

On January 26 I had before as a request from the Institute of Industrial Relations, Southern Section, and the Political Science Department, and signed by Edgar Warren a request to have Professor Harold Laski speak on the campus on matters of interest to the Institute and, I presume, to the department. No topic was suggested in this request. I immediately inquired of the Institute whether Professor Laski would speak on the Berkeley campus as well and was informed that he would. I thereupon signed the permit for Mr. Laski to speak. (I had met Mr. Laski once before when he addressed the students at Wisconsin and I introduced him on what was our annual peace program. He was in this country to fulfill an engagement for a series of lectures at the University of Washington and he appeared, I believe, on both the Berkeley and Los Angeles campuses that year. He was given a luncheon on this campus.)

On March 3 I received a letter from Mr. Warren indicating the date April 14 and 15, as scheduled for Mr. Laski, and May 18 for Secretary of Labor, Maurice Tobin. In the communication Warren asked me whether I would be chairman of the first meeting of these three on April 14. Thereupon I asked Mr. Warren what sort of arrangements were being made on the Berkeley campus for these meetings and although I have no note on it, it is my recollection that he told me at that time that Mr. Laski had not been made available to the Berkeley campus by the Hillman Foundation which had offered him to the Institute and therefore he would not be speaking on the Berkeley campus. (I found out after March 10 that Mr. Warren did not know that Laski would not speak on the Berkeley campus until some time in February and that he thought no more about it.) Immediately I called Mr. Warren and told him I had given my consent to having Mr. Laski speak here on the theory that he was speaking to the all-University Institute including the Berkeley campus. I asked him to get in touch with Clark Kerr and Peter Odegard to inquire from the President's Office whether we could have Laski on the Berkeley campus and also whether, available or not, he would be welcomed to the Berkeley campus. There were several telephonic communications between Mr. Warren's office and mine to discover what results he was having from his inquiry. He gave me to understand that both Mr. Kerr and Mr. Odegard were very anxious to have Mr. Laski. On March 10 a teletype to Edgar Warren, a copy of which came to my office, signed by the President, reading as follows:

"Arrangement for Laski lecture about which you have been consulting Kerr and Pettitt has never been discussed with me and I am unfamiliar with the situation. Both for this reason and because permit for appearance of speakers on campus are function of chief local administrator under Regulation 17, I do not believe I should intervene. Dr. Dykstra has full power to act."

I knew that I had full power to act on the appearance of speakers on the campus but since there had been adverse comment on the meeting held on this campus at which Professors Benson and Phillips of the University of Washington spoke on two aides of the question, "Should Communists teach in Universities?" and since Laski, although not a Communist but a member of the British Labor Party and one of its leading lights, is sometimes the center of controversy, I wanted to be sure that there would be no objection to Mr. Laski on the Berkeley campus. Meanwhile, at a President's conference in Berkeley, the President had told me that the Regents felt strongly that Phillips should never have been on the campus and that he wished from me a statement of the facts in that situation to present to the Board at the next meeting. A copy of that statement is appended as an exhibit to this one.

I told Mr. Warren that I was not satisfied with the message from the President for it did not cover the point at issue and would he therefore keep trying with his office on the Berkeley campus and have Mr. Kerr get into touch with President Sproul to give him a picture of the whole situation and again request permission to have Laski speak. Meanwhile it must be remembered that no notification was given by this office and at my request by the Southern Section of the Institute that Laski was to speak on campus. I wanted everything ironed out before the lecture was publicized. Since no news came from Berkeley, I took the occasion Tuesday morning after Charter Day to ask the President about the situation on the Berkeley campus with regard to Laski and related to him the situation as I saw it here. He said he did not know much about it, but he was sure that the appearance of Laski on our campus would not be pleasing to the Board of Regents because some have charged Laski with being ultra-left and the Regents have a very firm policy as to Communists and alleged Communists. I rose from this discussion believing that the University Administration wished me to have Mr. Warren call off the lectures. (Speaking to President Sproul later on the telephone and saying substantially what I said in the above sentence, President Sproul said that I must have misunderstood him.) At this point, or just after luncheon which I had with the President at my house, I had Miss Frederickson call Mr. Warren and I told him that I had been conferring during the morning with the President and it seemed to me that there was nothing for us to do, in view of all the problems facing the University, legislative and investigational, but to call off the engagement. This I think was the most difficult order I ever gave in all my life because I felt sure that we would all be misunderstood and we would have at least a brief tempest in a teapot, in fact perhaps more than a teapot. Warren sent the wire and its substance was given out in New York immediately to the Hillman Foundation because Mr. Laski had just arrived with Mr. Churchill from overseas. Almost

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immediately upon publication in the New York press, the papers and the news services began calling me and did for two days. It was a bitter and uncomfortable experience. I made up my mind that I would not in any way bring the President or the Board of Regents into this controversy and I prepared a case, perhaps pretty weak, but the best that I could consent to give the reason for the cancellation which every correspondent was asking for. Briefly it amounted to the following statement:

"I gave permission for Mr. Laski to speak on this campus under the assumption that he was speaking on the Berkeley campus to the Northern Section of the Institute of Industrial Relations as well as to the Southern Section. Since he was not being made available in the North I was taking the privilege of withdrawing my permission on this campus."

You may be sure I had every sort of question asked me, that I did my best to stick exactly to the above statement with the exception of one other statement that, "as yet we had not announced Mr. Laski's speech upon this campus." Our news bureau, I think, was quoted erroneously to the effect that Mr. Laski as yet had

not been invited. Of course there were many surprises I was asked directly over the telephone by the New York Herald Tribune and by the New York Times whether I had been ordered by the President or the Board of Regents to cancel. In this connection I said only that I was taking full responsibility for the action. Nobody, therefore, is involved in the situation so far as publicity is concerned except myself.

On March 24, in a telegram dated 4:10 p.m., New York, Mr. Potofsky of the Sidney Hillman Foundation wired me with a copy to Berkeley:

"We read in today's papers that the sudden and hitherto unexplained cancellation of Professor Laski's scheduled lectures at UCLA was due to a failure to schedule him for Berkeley as well as Los Angeles. You are quoted in this afternoon's papers as saying, 'I asked representatives of the University's Institute of Industrial Relations if Professor Laski would speak at both the Los Angeles and Berkeley campuses of the University and was told he would. I gave my consent to the talk. Then I learned he was not going to speak at Berkeley and withdraw my consent.' Last there be any question about the state of academic freedom at the University of California, we renew our offer to co-sponsor with the University of California lectures by Professor Laski at both Berkeley and Los Angeles. He can appear on any dates between April 8 and 18 inclusive. Please wire prompt reply collect."

Miss Frederickson and I then spent quite a bit of the afternoon making contact with Berkeley. We finally got Miss Robb but were unable to talk with Mr. Pettit who, it was said, was on the phone. We were told that President Sproul was unavailable, thereupon Miss Frederickson tried to give Miss Robb the background of this whole episode. It was a long telephone conversation and Miss Robb told us that the copy of the telegram would be in the President's hands before the Board meeting. Meanwhile, Miss Robb sent the following telegram to Mr. Potofsky:

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"Replying to your telegram March 24 President Sproul not available. However, Clark Kerr, Director of Institute of Industrial Relations, Northern Section, informs me that January 21 Stuart Meacham informed him that Laski would not be available for lectures at Berkeley. Otherwise Kerr would have invited him. Other arrangements were then made. In regard to Laski's speaking at Los Angeles, President Sproul telegraphed Edgar Warren, Director of Institute of Industrial Relations, Southern Section, on March 10, 'Permit for appearance of speakers on campus are function of chief local administrator. Dr. Dykstra has full power to act.'"

The first thing Friday morning I got the President on the telephone at Santa Barbara and asked him whether he had Potofsky's wire. He told me he had not seen it and so I read it to him over the telephone. I told him I had prepared two replies and read then to him.

"We have your proposal to present Laski on both major campuses of the University. Have just had President Sproul on the phone with regard to Berkeley campus and he joins me in accepting early April dates."

The other answer read as follows:

"Since you have now offered Laski to both campuses my reason for withdrawing my earlier consent no longer applies and I am glad to reinstate my approval of having Professor Laski on this campus on the dates as given."

I felt that I too had to reply to this telegram or be misunderstood. The President suggested that I send neither telegram until after he had an opportunity to discuss the matter with the Board and said that he would call me at the earliest possible moment. I tried to get hold of the President till the switchboard shut down at Santa Barbara and we left word at El Encanto to say that I was trying to get into touch with the President. I thought it would be very late because I knew that the President was undertaking a public meeting that night plus a dinner and doubtless many other things were taking his attention. Eventually the President and I talked to each other

on Saturday morning after I had gone to Laguna Beach. Meanwhile, fearing I might miss the President, Mrs. Dykstra went to town and sent the following message to head off, if possible, another story about the telegram from Potofsky.

"Have been attempting to contact President Sproul on your proposal of yesterday. Hope to work it out."

Meanwhile, Mr. Miller of Town Hall at Los Angeles called me to ask whether it would be embarrassing to me to have Town Hall invite Harold Laski to speak at the Biltmore Hotel later. I told him to hold this matter also until I had further discussion of the matter. Meanwhile I had told the President that Harold Moulton of Brookings Institution was giving three lectures on this campus in April and Eric Johnson was giving a talk to the students in May and that it seemed to me we were adequately presenting various points of view. Meanwhile also, the Spitzer case (Oregon University) came up and I refused permission to have him speak on the campus. Meanwhile, it should be pointed out also that the student body in general

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and the student papers on both campuses are constantly expressing the opinion that defenders of the status quo may speak on our campuses but the critics may not. There is, of course, a great deal of commotion about Regulation 17.

I did not assume for a moment that Laski came under #17, nor by the way, did Mr. Phillips. I have always assumed that any subject might be debated on the campus if only the participants were of somewhat equal stature and presumably competent to discuss the subject. I cannot believe, therefore, that Regulation 17 is involved in this question.

I should add that in discussing this matter with the President I told him that Schuyler Wallace would introduce Laski at Columbia University, of which General Eisenhower is President; that the new Senator from North Carolina, Frank Oraham, who has been president of that University for some time, would introduce him at North Carolina; that he was going to speak at Harvard and then at the University of Denver, Ben Cherrington, a graduate of Berkeley and a distinguished figure in the field of international relations, would introduce Laski. As I remember his schedule he was also to speak at the new School for Social Research in New York and at Roosevelt College in Chicago.

These are the bare facts of the total situation as I see it, unvarnished, brief, and, I hope, to the point. It never would have occurred to me to question the appearance of Mr. Laski on our campus, except for the discussion we have had in the last year or two on both campuses about the invitation of speakers. Knowing, however, that at this particular time many of us are sensitive in this area on account of legislative investigation and our own predilection for our way of life, I stopped to look and listen and make inquiry as to whether both campuses were going together in the Laski matter.

I think I should state frankly that I feel that I have been put in the middle in this whole matter and I have spent some pretty bad nights. The last thing I wish to do is to hurt this University in any way, nor do I wish to reflect on its administration or its Board of Regents. It is because of that that I have assumed complete responsibility to date so far as the public is concerned, although I feel that this responsibility should be shared. I would not have acted here in signing permission for this speaker or in retracting permission, that same permission, except for the fact that I believed it was the desired thing. I published my articles of faith at the Charter Day Dinner and these I desire to uphold. Except for the fact that I was finally convinced that the Regents would be quite outraged if Laski appeared at Los Angeles, I would not have asked Edgar Warren to wire that I had withdrawn my consent to the meeting. To one looking at it from the outside, it may appear that this whole incident was badly bungled. I hope this recital will convince the committee that the Provost on the Los Angeles campus acted honestly and as he believed in the interests of the University. As I see the picture now, I can extricate myself in only one way, by having the President and the Regents approve of my sending one of the

two telegrams which I gave to the President over the phone Friday morning. This must be done soon to be of any service.

Yours very sincerely
C. A. Dykstra