

Seeing Red

BY JAMES TOBIN

MR. TAVENNER: “After the service of the subpoena on you, did you advise any administrative officer of your school that you had been a member of the Communist Party?”

DR. NICKERSON: “I advised the administrative officers of my department, the Medical School and the University that I had received the subpoena.”

MR. CLARDY: “That wasn’t Mr. Tavenner’s question. It was whether or not you advised them that you had been a member of the Communist Party.”

DR. NICKERSON: “I decline to answer that question on the basis previously stated.”

MR. CLARDY: “Well, isn’t it a fact that you did so advise them?”

DR. NICKERSON: “I decline to answer that question.”

THOSE SIX WORDS, SPOKEN

by pharmacologist Mark Nickerson, M.D., Ph.D., in 1954, were at the center of one of the most wrenching episodes in the Medical School’s history. The impact blew apart careers and troubled the University’s conscience for decades.

In the 1950s, fear of a communist conspiracy to control the world pervaded the U.S. Investigations probed allegations of communist subversion in government, industry, entertainment and education. Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin was only the best known of many “Red hunters.”

Communists past and present insisted that American party members trafficked only in arguments over Marxist-Leninist doctrine, not bomb plots. But that did little to soothe fears. Communists were seen as dedicated to the violent overthrow of the

U.S. If suspected members refused to reject the party and name associates, they were assumed to be guilty. Many paid the price of their livelihoods.

At the U-M, the U.S. House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) zeroed in on three faculty members suspected of party membership: H. Chandler Davis, Ph.D., in mathematics; Clement Markert, Ph.D., in biology; and Nickerson,

an associate professor in the Medical School Department of Pharmacology.

In HUAC hearings conducted by U.S. Rep. Kit Clardy, known as “Michigan’s McCarthy,” and HUAC counsel Frank Tavenner, all three refused to answer questions about party membership, denying any belief in the violent overthrow of the government.

U-M President Harlan Hatcher promptly suspended them pending a faculty inquiry. Officially, the issue was their “intellectual integrity,” but it was also clear Hatcher was worried lest the University be tainted as radical.

Davis and Markert had support in the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts, where many faculty members believed academic freedom was at stake. Many faculty in the Medical School felt the same. But Nickerson had an adversary in Maurice Seevers, M.D., Ph.D., chair of pharmacology from 1942-71 and an international expert in toxicology.

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Nickerson had worked as a teenager in the lumber camps of the Pacific Northwest. Amid dangerous conditions and basement-level pay, he came to admire communist union organizers whom he saw as dedicated to bettering the lumberjacks' lives. In graduate school at Brown, Johns Hopkins and the University of Utah, he was a member of the party.

Hired at Michigan in 1951, Nickerson did first-class research and received tenure. But he ran afoul of colleagues, including Seevers, who, in later testimony, called Nickerson "a troublemaker ... one who has a type of personal arrogance and a lack of candor, and a desire to get ahead, which means tromping on everybody else ..." Nickerson believed, though apparently never proved, that it was Seevers who named him to HUAC.

Two faculty committees examined the three. Queried by colleagues, not the government, Davis again refused to answer. Markert and Nickerson, drawing a distinction between HUAC and the University, now spoke about their pasts. They said they had left the party. Nickerson said he had drifted away under work pressure, though his beliefs were unchanged.

One committee recommended Nickerson be retained, the other that he be discharged. The Medical School broke the impasse. The executive committee, headed by Dean Albert Furstenberg, advised Hatcher that Nickerson's refusal to answer HUAC's questions had "weakened seriously the confidence of a large number of his colleagues in him" and "led to serious internal conflicts within the



Mark Nickerson participates in a panel discussion following the first Davis, Markert, Nickerson Lecture on Academic and Intellectual Freedom, February 18, 1991.

Department of Pharmacology." This was "harmful to the Medical School and may damage the reputation of the University as a whole." Hatcher sided with the school. Nickerson was fired. So was Davis, who later served prison time for contempt of Congress. Markert was retained but censured and left the University soon afterward.

Nickerson became the founding chair of pharmacology at the University of Manitoba. He later moved to McGill University in Montreal and was eventually recognized as "the father of Canadian pharmacology."

In 1989, the American Association of University Professors' U-M chapter asked the University to make "a significant gesture of reconciliation" to the three, resulting in the annual Davis, Markert, Nickerson Lecture on Academic and Intellectual Freedom.

More than 20 years after the episode, Nickerson was elected president

of the American Society for Pharmacology and Experimental Therapeutics. By tradition, the new president invited all former presidents to a luncheon. Nickerson attached a note to Seevers' invitation. It said: "Dr. Nickerson would especially appreciate Dr. Seevers' attendance at this event."

MORE ON THE WEB ✦

Sources include the papers of Marvin Niehuss, U-M Vice President for University Relations, at the Bentley Historical Library; Edward F. Domino, ed., *Sixty-One Years of University of Michigan Pharmacology, 1942-2003 (2007)*; David A. Hollinger, "Academic Culture at the University of Michigan, 1938-1988," in *Science, Jews and Secular Culture: Studies in Mid-Twentieth Century American Intellectual History (1996)*; Ellen W. Schrecker, *No Ivory Tower: McCarthyism and the Universities (1986)*; Peggie J. Hollingsworth, ed., *Unfettered Expression: Freedom in American Intellectual Life (2007)*, and Betsy Runyan, "Academic Freedom at the University of Michigan, 1954" (unpublished student paper, 1977).