

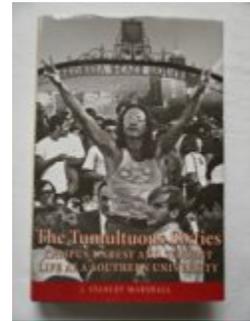
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

J. Stanley Marshall. *The Tumultuous Sixties: Campus Unrest and Student Life at a Southern University*. Tallahassee: Sentry Press, 2006. xxvi + 316 pp. \$27.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-889574-25-7.

Reviewed by David Lee McMullen (Department of History, University of South Florida at St. Petersburg)

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Was Florida State Really the “Berkeley of the South” in the 1960s and 1970s?

J. Stanley Marshall was president of Florida State University from 1969 to 1976, during one of the most fascinating periods in the university’s history. These years were a period of conflict between the old and new, when student life at the university changed dramatically. As president, Marshall faced student and faculty activism on a variety of issues, including free speech, the Vietnam War, civil rights, the status of women, environmental concerns, labor, and the nomination of a Tallahassee judge to the U.S. Supreme Court. Beyond this, there was streaking, famous and controversial visitors to campus, including the Jordanian King, Helen Hayes, Jane Fonda, and Abbie Hoffman. From the perspective of FSU today, it was also the beginning of the Bobby Bowden era. There can be little doubt that this was a tumultuous period in the university’s history and reading this book helps to explain why Marshall became one of FSU’s more controversial presidents.

I approached the book with considerable knowledge of the events depicted. I know many of the key participants discussed in the book, including President Marshall. I was a student at Florida State during the late sixties and early seventies. During that time I worked on the student newspaper, *The Flambeau*, and served as its editor-in-chief in 1971. As editor, I meet with President Marshall regularly to discuss some of the events and issues presented in his book.

The Tumultuous Sixties will certainly be of interest to

those familiar with the university during this time period. More importantly, however, this book provides a valuable perspective for students of Florida history. For scholars, *The Tumultuous Sixties* provides meaningful insights into the challenges of running a large state university under the microscope of the numerous publics it must serve, including students, faculty, staff, parents, alumni, and major donors. Because it is located in the Florida capital, FSU also falls under the watchful eye of a large capital press corps, a perspective that is often magnified by the demagoguery of public officials. Further, this book provides a window into the thought process of a community leader confronted with the challenges of a rapidly changing society. Interestingly, I found the university’s response strikingly similar to what occurred in the 1920s and 1930s when labor unions attempted to organize southern workers, and in the 1950s and 1960s during the civil rights movement.

A primary strength, as well as a weakness, of this book is that it focuses intently on the exploits of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) chapter at FSU, often short-changing far more important events. At first I thought this was simply a marketing ploy to sell more copies of the book. Then I discovered that approximately half of the book is devoted to SDS and realized that from Marshall’s perspective this brief series of events overshadowed much of his presidency. While SDS was involved in the most dramatic student demonstration of the period—what became known as the “Night of the

Bayonets”—SDS never represented more than a few dozen of the more than twenty thousand students attending FSU at the time.

Marshall took over the leadership of the university unexpectedly upon the resignation of President John Champion. Champion, a man Marshall describes as a classic southern gentleman, appears to have been overwhelmed by faculty and student protest over his decision to burn an edition of the campus literary magazine because it included a short story that contained the words “shit” and “fuck.” Interestingly, those same two words could be heard in the movie version of *Ulysses*, which was being shown at a local theatre during the “Free Speech” demonstrations at FSU. Protests centered on the First Amendment right and generated considerable debate among students and the faculty of the College of Arts and Sciences. The confrontation drew statewide media coverage and a great deal of political rhetoric. I was a reporter for the *Tallahassee Democrat* during these events and remember how Mallory Horne, a prominent legislator, told our capitol reporter, “The whole thing makes me goddamn mad. If I used language like that they’d throw my ass in the poky.” The heat was apparently more than Champion wanted to deal with, so he passed the presidency on to Marshall.

Suddenly thrust into the presidency, Marshall was immediately faced with the resignations of several other members of the university’s administration, which helps to explain his preoccupation with faculty and student activists. Beyond this, given the far more serious student demonstrations occurring on campuses in other parts of the country, Marshall focused his attention on issues related to campus security and holding the university to the letter of the law. The “Night of the Bayonets,” for example, was ultimately the result of trying to prevent SDS, an unrecognized student group, from using a meeting room in the university union, something the group had done several times earlier.

Looking back at the “Night of Bayonets,” even Marshall suggests that the university played directly into the hand of SDS activists. SDS was known for incendiary rhetoric and playing confrontational politics. Its members wanted to be arrested, they wanted to make headlines around the state. Even then, the event would have failed if it were not for the heavy-handed approach taken by Leon County Sheriff Raymond Hamlin, who enlisted the support of 35 volunteer riot police. The sheriff and his men came on to campus with loaded M-1 rifles and fixed bayonets to arrest a small group of non-violent students—

58 according to Marshall’s account.

I was not on campus when this event took place, but students who were, and whose opinions I respect, felt strongly that Sheriff Hamlin—an old-school southern lawman who liked to chew unlit cigars—made an excessive and unnecessary display of force. If anything, the actions of the sheriff exacerbated the situation. Such a confrontation is reminiscent of numerous encounters between local southern law enforcement and labor and civil rights demonstrators during earlier decades. Scholars will find the numerous parallels of considerable interest.

“Night of the Bayonets,” perhaps more than any other event in Marshall’s presidency, was responsible for driving a wedge between him and a vocal minority of faculty and students within the university. It is for this reason that I believe the author goes to such lengths to explain his thought process during the period, inflating the dangers facing the university in order to justify the actions he took. Personally, I think he would have been better served to let the matter die and focus on the numerous other events that occurred during his years at the helm of the university. However, because these events are the subject of an unpublished doctoral dissertation by Stephen Parr,[1] it appears that Marshall felt a need to offer his side of the story. Regardless, as someone who has studied radical protest, I found Marshall’s thought process extremely fascinating.

SDS at Florida State, according to Marshall, was lead primarily by two students—Phil Sanford, an Australian, and Jack Lieberman, a South Floridian. “Radical Jack,” a student Marshall said was “the leading figure in the FSU protests,” was considered “comical” by most of the students who knew him (p. 68). Jack was a nice guy with a few groupies, mostly young women. He enjoyed the limelight and was willing to do almost anything to stay in it. If he was a serious threat to the safety of the university, I never saw it. As Marshall suggests, although he never comes out and says it directly, Radical Jack was probably a pawn of Sanford, who appears to have been the one serious radical on campus. Sanford was arrested on charges of disorderly conduct and interfering with police officers. Sentenced to 18 months, he was ultimately deported, a historically common method for getting rid of radicals.

As for Lieberman, he was ultimately expelled from the university for a controversy that centered around a course he wanted to teach as part of the Center for Participant Education (CPE). CPE was a non-credit curriculum developed by students that offered a variety

courses—99 percent of which were totally noncontroversial. Lieberman proposed teaching a course called “How to Make a Revolution.” The course, I suspect, would have been rather harmless and attracted mostly Lieberman’s groupies and a few curious students. Unfortunately for Jack, the course was discovered by State Senator Dempsey Barron who turned it into a statewide scandal, and half the capital press corps showed up for his first class meeting. If there was ever a mountain created from a molehill, this was it.

Perhaps the most revealing comment in the book is when Marshall recounts a confrontation with a group of anti-Vietnam war protestors who displayed a Vietcong flag. Marshall said, “[M]y reaction was a mixture of anger and fear” (p. 98). That probably explains much about why Marshall made many of the decisions he did during his presidency. It was a period of dramatic change, and fear and anger are two emotions that were shared by many Americans during this period.

The second half of the book is a collection of snippets—accounts of other groups on campus, tales of visiting dignitaries, anecdotes about prominent figures on campus, the hiring of Bobby Bowden, the basketball team that made it to the national championship game in 1972, and the time a member of the Florida Board of Regents called FSU dormitories “Taxpayers’ Whorehouses.” This is the part of the book that will be of greatest interest to those who are familiar with Florida State during this period. Sadly, Marshall whets our appetite without satisfying our need to know more, in many cases

much more. Further, he short-changes some very important groups, such as African-American students, women students, and the environmental movement, giving them only passing mention.

Finally, at several points throughout the book, Marshall refers to FSU as the “Berkeley of the South.” Apparently, Parr referred to FSU as the “Berkeley of the East.” During my years at Florida State, I never recall hearing either of these references. I personally think they are a bit of an exaggeration. Florida State had its moments in the 1960s and 1970s, but we were never a hotbed of radicalism. We were a fairly average southern university dealing with dramatic changes in society. That in itself is significant and makes *The Tumultuous Sixties* a meaningful contribution to Florida history and southern history in general.

Marshall concludes his book with the comment that we still have much to learn about this period of time. I agree, and this book ultimately asks more questions about the late sixties and early seventies at Florida State than it answers. Hopefully others will continue to explore this rather fascinating period.

Note

[1]. Parr was a student at Florida State during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Although we were on campus together during these years, we never met. He returned to the FSU in the 1990s, earning a Ph.D. in History in 2000. I have not read his dissertation as yet; however, it is clearly must-reading for anyone researching these events.

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