

The Gus Hall Affair



COMMUNIST SPEAKER—Communist Gus Hall stood on a truck on the Oregon College of Education football field as he spoke to 2,000 persons in the rain Monday. His appearance at OCE was the second at an Oregon college. (Capital Journal Photo)

On February 12, 1962, the General Secretary of the Communist party USA, Gus Hall, spoke to an overflow crowd of nearly 2,000 people at the Oregon College of Education Stadium. Hall spoke about thirty minutes and then fielded a few questions from the audience. After about six questions he left, escorted by two bodyguards and the crowd quietly dispersed in the drizzling rain. Although this scene does not lend itself to excitement, it is the tumultuous uproar that preceded that is the heart of the story.

On February 2, student leaders at OCE, received a letter from a group at Reed College, asking if they would be willing to have a leader from the Communist Party USA come speak on campus. Fred Staab, editor of *The Lamron*, reported this to OCE's Administrator in Charge, Ellis Stebbins, who stated that if OCE's two previously existing political groups, the Young Democrats and the Young Republicans, would both sponsor Hall's appearance, he would consider it.

The presidents of both groups responded in favor of the invitation. However, among the Young Republicans, there was an inconsistent opinion concerning the invitation to Hall. Some members felt it was against Republican ideals to support the presence of a Communist speaker on campus. In response to this, Judi Wells, president of the club, issued an emergency meeting to vote on the issue. In front of an audience of 125 faculty, students, and representatives of the news media, the club members debated the pros and cons of supporting a Gus Hall visit. The vote was 14-9 in favor of supporting the Hall invitation, and subsequently, several members resigned from the club in protest of the decision.

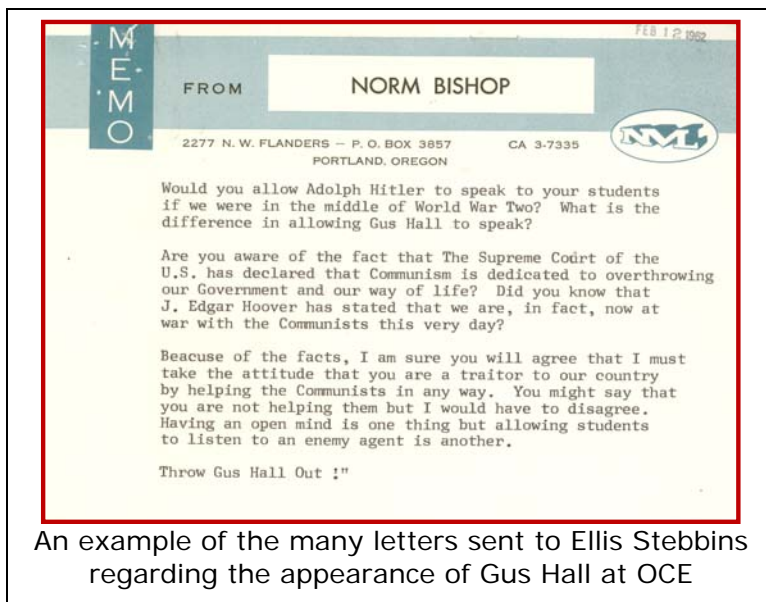
The general opinion of the OCE community was in support of Stebbins' and the club members' decision. Most people considered Hall's right to free speech as the pivotal reason for allowing him to speak on campus; others also felt that it was their job as students to learn different points of view and philosophies.

Some merely supported the decision as a backlash to the communist phobia that had permeated the country. In response to massive opposition, President Stebbins issued this manifesto to defend his decision to allow Hall to speak at OCE.

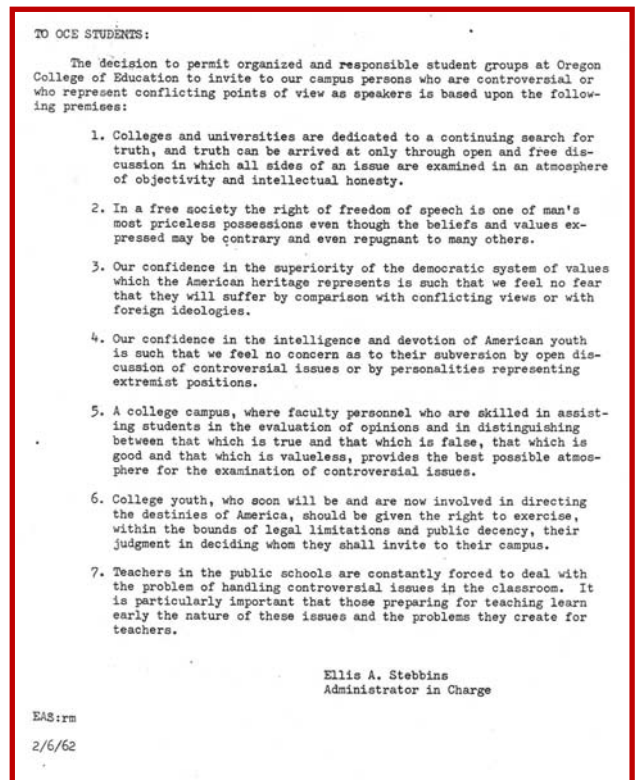
As other schools struggled over the decision whether to allow Hall to visit their campuses as well (excepting Oregon State University's President Jensen, who issued an immediate and firm 'no'), Stebbins received much criticism from local residents and government officials, including Governor Mark Hatfield. The chancellor of the state system of higher education and the former president of OCE, Roy Lieuallen, maintained a neutral position on the situation and allowed individual institutions to make their own decisions.

Eventually, several other local universities joined OCE in its decision to allow Hall to speak. Later, the presidents of these schools, along with Stebbins, were nominated for the American Association of University Professors' Miekeljohn Award, an award honoring those upholding the freedom of speech.

Letters of Protest and Support



An example of the many letters sent to Ellis Stebbins regarding the appearance of Gus Hall at OCE



Numerous letters from concerned parents, alumni, church groups, members of the American Legion and general anti-Communists were sent to President Stebbins before and after the Gus Hall incident. Although a small percentage of letters were supportive, the overwhelming majority were in opposition and sometimes derogatory.

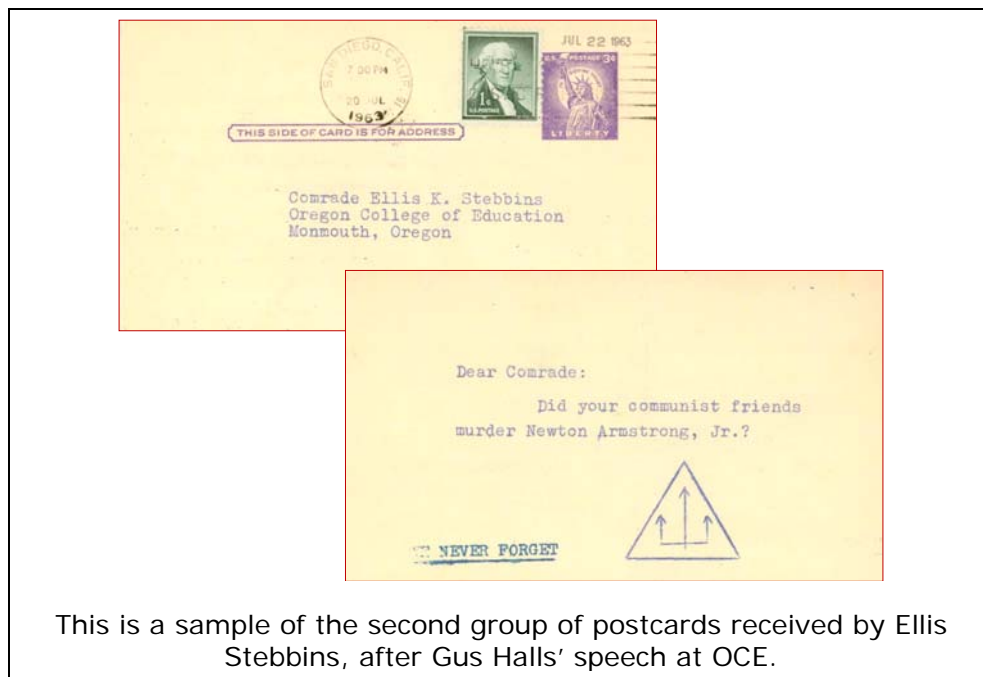
Support came largely from the academic community, especially from Stebbins' own faculty, students at OCE and other schools and the media.

Hall's visit is best summed up by a headline featured in Salem's *Capital-Journal* the next day: "Gus Hall's talk fizzles in the drizzle at O.C.E." His audience felt that his speech was unpersuasive and that he evaded the questions asked by students. The pandemonium caused by Hall's possible appearance at OCE was made to seem ridiculous by the anti-climactic event held on February 12, 1962.

Nuisance Cards

In early April of 1962, a boy was found hanged from the beam in his parent's bedroom. The person was Newton Armstrong Jr., an editor for a right-wing student newspaper at San Diego State College. His father, a member of the extremely anti-Communist group, the John Birch Society, claimed that the boy's death was the result of a "ritualistic murder by Communists or other subversives." No proof of foul play was found and the coroner stated that the death was due to suicide or accident.

One month later, Ellis Stebbins began to receive postcards from an anonymous source. The majority of the cards were received during the months of May and June of 1962, and about 112 cards in all were collected. An inspector from the Postal Department took these cards for investigative purposes, but the cards were only labeled as 'libelous' and no investigation commenced.



One year

later,

Stebbins received 99 cards of the same nature, but with "We Never Forget" stamped at the bottom of each. Though other schools in Oregon allowed Gus Hall to speak on their campuses, OCE's Administrator-in-Charge was the only one to receive these cards.