Dr. Roberts Addresses the AAUP, 11 December 1969

M. M. Roberts

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Dr. M. M. Roberts, president of the Mississippi Board of Trustees of Institutions of Higher Learning, discussed the past, present and future status of higher education in Mississippi and expounded several personal philosophies at the Winter Quarter meeting of the USM chapter of the American Association of University Professors.

President William D. McCain was among the approximately 50 professors attending the 8 p.m. meeting Monday night in Wilbur Stout Hall A.

"I have been on the board for nine and a half years now, and some of them haven't been so pleasant," Dr. Roberts stated.

"The first real task I had for myself was to try to decide what to do with (James) Meredith going to the University of Mississippi, and I said, 'No, he won't go.' I felt like he would go over my dead body."

"But as I've gone along through the years and looked back I've said to myself really that I am a racist. Every time I read a definition I say, 'Well, that's me.'"

"I have no apologies for it, though," he continued. "It's me. And maybe that's the reason why we have some of the problems we have--because of how I feel about certain things that have come out of my childhood long ago, but it's my philosophy. Many of you don't share that philosophy, and that doesn't bother me, and I hope it doesn't bother you that I don't share yours."

Dr. Roberts told the scholars that he admired the late U.S. Senator Theodore Bilbo. "He's the one who got us off accreditation, and I got tired of hearing that."

"Somebody said, 'If we don't do this we'll lose our accreditation,' and I always said, 'To hell with it,' you know, because what do we have? Do we have education for accreditation, or do we have it to educate boys and girls? Are the schools run for the students, or are the students run for a university complex?"

The noted lawyer quoted a section from the constitution of the Board of Trustees denying them the right to dismiss a faculty member for political reasons. However, he added, "It's difficult to do what we say there...because of this one thing: we get our money from the legislature."
"State legislators are elected. The legislature then is a political body. You can't go up there and say, 'Listen, you chuckleheads are going to give us this money; we're going to do as we please; we're independent; we're not going to let politics have anything to do with it.' Then you have to tell yourself, 'Well, just how stupid am I.'

Dr. Roberts urged the professors to "say kindly things about your fellows, about your institutions, and about the administrative heads, and be very kindly disposed in a Christian manner." He contended that the creation of such an atmosphere would cause the legislature to "be eager to do more than they have ever done" in appropriations for higher education.

"It really ought to be a rule on the campus of every institution that if one wants to talk about the other, they ought to leave. If they don't like their environment, they ought to leave, and that applies to presidents, vice presidents, and all the rest."

In response to a question submitted in advance of the meeting, Dr. Roberts asserted that there is no possibility of large numbers of full-time Negro faculty members being hired in the near future.

"I hope none of you are stirring for that kind of thing," he demanded. "I think if you want to be a stupid idiot just stir for that kind of thing. That's a thing that's destructive, and one who thinks it seriously in his heart ought to get out of here and get out of this institution, because you don't belong in our society if you think that is necessary--a thing we've got to do."

Southern hired two part-time Negro faculty members at the beginning of Winter Quarter to teach the two newly-created black studies courses in English and history.

Another question submitted to Dr. Roberts cited the fact that some members of the University were charged with condemacious conduct last Summer Quarter and asked, "How does the board define condemacious conduct?"

"The Lord in Heaven knows; I don't," Dr. Roberts retorted. "But I don't think you have lost any faculty members because of any accusations by one another," he added.

The board president mentioned the controversy that arose in the Department of History during the Summer Quarter and said, "It really made me sick...that things got in the press."
He condemned a news announcer from a local television station with regard to the incident. "I thought he was a stupid idiot to try to castigate others, throw them down the drain because he had something he thought was newsworthy, but destructive newsworthiness."

"I can't keep from being proud of Agnew that he would go out and say, 'Listen, why in the hell doesn't those that are getting protection under the First Amendment be worthy of the protection the First Amendment sought to give them.'"

Returning to the controversy itself, Dr. Roberts added, "I think it's a pretty poor position to take to have a fight in a university complex which can't do anything but harm. It must do violence."

Dr. Roberts did not confine his remarks to criticisms.

"I really am proud that this University has two colleges instead of one," he stated concerning the recently-approved division of the College of Arts and Sciences.

Effective Sept. 1, the college will become the College of Liberal Arts and the College of Sciences. Dr. Roberts said the division was necessary because "you have 16 different departments, and it's too many for any college."