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Willie Morris's First Fight for Press Freedom:
Collegiate Journalism in the 1950s at *The Daily Texan*

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Willie Morris, *Harper's* magazine's editor-in-chief during the tumultuous late 1960s, has most often been noted for his writings on the South and Southern culture. But Morris began making his mark much earlier as the editor of *The Daily Texan* at the University of Texas in the 1950s. In addition to taking on civil rights issues in the Deep South, Morris criticized the foundations of the Texas economy—the oil and gas industry—to the chagrin of the UT administration and Texas politicians, who repeatedly fought to censor him. He garnered national attention prior to his graduation and remains an important influence on *The Daily Texan*, one of the most revered collegiate newspapers, to this day.

Willie Morris' First Fight for Press Freedom: Collegiate Journalism in the 1950s at *The Daily Texan*

Willie Morris is a well-known literary figure in 1960s magazine journalism. Yet, his rise to the helm of *Harper's*, America's oldest continually published news and literary magazine, came about largely because of his hard-fought battles over press freedom he waged while in college at the University of Texas in the mid-1950s. His year as editor of *The Daily Texan* made national headlines several times, and he was invited to write guest pieces for *The Nation* and *Harper's*.

Before taking on Texas in college, Willie Morris's innate curiosity and extroverted only-child personality made him a well-known adolescent reporter in the Mississippi Delta town of Yazoo City. His experiences in the segregated South, where religious people practiced a "respectable racism," helped shape his distaste for hypocrisy, while not dampening his ambition. It was evident from a young age that Morris had more tenacity than most grown men, and he had no trouble going after what he wanted and asking questions of what he did not understand. This caused him little trouble as a child. In Texas, however, he began taking on powerful and political figures. He was no longer surrounded by his townsfolk, who knew him and loved him in spite of his quizzical nature. The powers-that-be at the University of Texas grew to view the meddling Mississippian as a threat to their long-standing traditions and policies of closed doors and closed minds. What they didn't realize was Morris had been gearing up for fame nearly since the day he could talk and hold a pencil. Morris was a big fish in the little pond of Yazoo City, and he would not settle for less status on the campus of nearly 18,000. It would take more than the wealthy Texas oil and gas industry to silence him, as long as there was freedom of the

press. Texas, his opponents would learn, wasn't enough of a platform for him. He would take his opinions to the national stage by the time he was old enough to vote.

Morris matured from a budding high school journalist, serving as editor of the *Flashlight*, to a zealous outsider taking the University of Texas by storm and calling the administration and politicians to account for archaic policies, segregated practices, and attempted censorship of opposition. His experiences as a reporter and editor of *The Daily Texan*, recognized as one of the most-respected college newspapers in the country then and now, shaped Morris's outsider persona as much or more than any experience that would follow.

The perspective of the critical outsider would become a predominant theme throughout his professional life and in his writings, and it began at the University of Texas. He criticized the very foundations of the Texas economy—the oil and gas industry—without even the slightest notion of the economic and political ramifications of his editorial actions. It would have been like Morris criticizing cotton in Mississippi, but it doesn't seem anyone ever addressed that with Morris.

The more fights he picked and the louder he yelled, the more attention he garnered for whatever his cause de jour. And every cause was carefully couched as a First Amendment freedom of the press issue. Morris made a name for himself and got the attention of state and national news organizations. Some who worked with him on the newspaper and in other student activities would see his causes as self-promotion. However, the majority of student letters printed in *The Daily Texan* and editorials in other news-

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papers about the troubles at the university—including the nation’s newspaper of record, *The New York Times*—sided with Morris. Regardless, his Southern good old boy charm aided him in his professional endeavors on the newspaper, where he became the first freshman to get a by-lined column and first non-native Texan editor. Morris went after what he wanted and succeeded. He never compromised his principles as editor at UT, though what his principal concern was would be debated. What cannot be debated, however, is that Morris’s actions at *The Daily Texan* brought about extensive coverage of campus, state, and national issues in other newspapers during his tenure because of his strong stand against oppression of Texas power and money, or more specifically oil and gas.

Arguably, his work on *The Daily Texan* sealed his Rhodes Scholarship, his future editorship of the *Texas Observer*, and his *Harper’s* editorship. Yet, what he left for those in his wake on *The Daily Texan* to deal with was stronger control on the editorial policy as a result of his inability to compromise with authority.

Morris’ father, Rae Morris, encouraged his son to spread his wings and get out of his comfort zone. Two months before his graduation from Yazoo High, his father was reading the Memphis newspaper, the *Commercial Appeal*. “He turned to me and told me, quite simply, to get the hell out of Mississippi,” Morris would later write.¹ Initially, Morris ignored his father’s advice. He had a steady girlfriend, was an athlete and editor of the Yazoo High *Flashlight*, his proudest achievement.² He saw no reason not to attend the University of Mississippi, affectionately called “Ole Miss.”

Rae Morris told his son about the University of Texas after having driven to Austin to check it out. “That’s one hell of a place they got out there,” he said. “They had a main building thirty stories high, a baseball field dug right out of stone, artificial moonlight for street lamps, the biggest state Capitol in the republic, and the goshdamndest student newspaper you ever saw. I think you ought to go to school out there. Can’t nuthin’ in this state match it.”³

Morris would later pontificate on his decision to leave his home state:

What was it, then, that led me to leave, to go to a place where I did not know a soul, and eventually to make such a sharp break with my own past that I still suffer from the pain of that alienation? Was there some small grain of sand there, something abrasive and unrecognized in my perception of things, some hidden ambition and independence that finally led me away from everything I knew and honored? Was there something in me that needed some stark removal from my deepest loyalties?⁴

If not for Rae, Morris’s life would most definitely have been quite different. In fact, many writers and great works of literature and journalism would most assuredly not exist today had Rae Morris not encouraged his son to dust off his Mississippi roots and head west to the University of Texas for college. One of the biggest selling points for Morris, of course, would be the outstanding daily student newspaper, *The Daily Texan*.

The Daily Texan

The first issue of the University of Texas’ student newspaper was published Oct. 8, 1900. The then-weekly paper had two nineteenth century predecessors, the *Calendar* and the *Ranger*, which soon joined forces as the *Ranger*, realizing the small student body of less than 600 could not support two newspapers. Neither of these earlier papers was political, and it is not clear in the history books why the *Ranger* ceased publication or why the new newspaper became *The Texan*.⁵ *The Daily Texan* emerged thirteen years later becoming the first daily college newspaper in the South.⁶

The early *Texan* showed few similarities to the envelope-pushing agenda of its mid-twentieth century editors. Early editorials urged increased school spirit among the student body and remarked on the need for a gymnasium.⁷ The dissociation from anything remotely political seems odd considering the political climate at the turn of the twentieth century. Yet, a steady

succession of *Texan* editors vowed to keep the paper nonpartisan.

In 1908, however, editor William A. Philpott seemed to have had his fill of editorial fluff and wrote in his farewell editorial column that “we have felt cramped all the session.” He spoke out because a proposal was afoot to cut the funding for the newspaper, which he said would be even worse than a press that was not free.⁸ And he admitted that during his tenure the editorials had done anything but editorialize on anything of import.

It would not be until after the 1931 U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Near v. Minnesota*, which would prohibit the state government from censoring the press. Early college newspaper editors feared reprisal from the state and university administrators if they tried to speak out in opposition, and they had no legal protection. The earliest critical editorials would be on matters of campus garbage pick-up and extending the hours the library was accessible to students – hardly damning issues.⁹

Race Becomes *Texan* Issue

The Daily Texan was an early supporter of civil rights. Beginning in the early 1940s, the newspaper cautioned against racist ideology.¹⁰ Editor Bob Owens in 1943 took *The Texan* to the position of equality among races—an extremely controversial position in the South at the time. He wrote to the Texas Student Publications Board (on the day he resigned as editor to enter military service) that “Minorities have rights to full citizenship,” and “If we are to win the peace, we must first erase all traces of fascism in this country.”¹¹ Owens went further, comparing the American treatment of blacks to the Germans’ treatment of the Jews. The editor following Owens continued the progressive treatment of equality discussing racial politics on the *Texan*’s front page.

The overt liberal agenda of the campus journalists did not sit well with the powers-that-be. In a unanimous resolution by the TSP Board in March 1945, the *Texan* was ordered to cease discussing race issues as it was “inflammatory.”¹² The silence was short-lived, however. In 1946

UT had its first black applicant for admission to the law school. Herman Marion Sweatt, an academically gifted student from Houston, was denied admission. *The Texan* covered the story extensively and urged for open-mindedness to rule.

The Texas Attorney General Grover Sellers sided with the law school’s denial of admission and decision to instead admit Sweatt to Prairie View, a historically black college, citing the university’s longstanding segregationist policies.¹³ Campus support among the student body already existed for integration, however.¹⁴ *The Daily Texan* ran editorials and columns on both sides of the issue offering up open debate. The Sweatt issue did not soon die, and the 1947 and 1948 *Texan* editors were even more vocal in their integrationist stands. Sweatt appealed his decision to the Texas Supreme Court, and again he was denied entrance. *The Texan* ran an editorial condemning the state for not coming to the aid of its citizens and forcing the federal government to make Texas do the right thing.¹⁵ Sweatt won his appeal in the 1950 case of *Sweatt v. Painter*, which would pave the way for the 1954 culture-shifting *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* case.

The 1940s had been the most eventful decade for *The Texan* thus far, but that was all about to change. As the decade dawned, Ronnie Dugger, *Texan* editor for the 1950-51 school year, took the university to task on a variety of issues. Dugger’s politics and editorial style would have the most effect on Morris of any of his immediate predecessors, and Dugger would later mentor Morris at his own new liberal weekly, the *Texas Observer*. Dugger applauded the arrival of the university’s first black students in the summer of 1950, immediately after the Supreme Court decision in *Sweatt*.¹⁶ Under Dugger’s direction the paper made little of any animosity toward the two dozen minority students that summer and focused on issues that brought the campus together—football games and the angst about rising barbershop prices. By 1951, the Korean conflict was of much larger importance, and it seemed any racial tension that still existed was replaced with worry over war. *The Daily*

Texan printed the obituary for UT's first student war casualty in February 1951 on its front page.

The Texan continuously boasted it was the "most unrestricted paper in the world,"¹⁷ but that changed in May 1951 when the TSP reinstated its editorial council to influence the paper's policy decisions. This was the beginning of a near decade-long power struggle over press freedom, which Morris would bring to a climax.

Morris Enters the University of Texas

In the fall of 1952, Morris began his college career in Austin. Morris took courses in radio and television broadcasting his first semester at UT, and at the end of the fall he was offered a job as an announcer for the minor leagues in Austin. However, by that time the print journalism bug had bitten hard, and he turned the position down.¹⁸

Early in his academic career, Morris found his calling in the pages of required literature reading assignments. All students are exposed to classic literary works, but to Morris, they were more than words on paper—they were power. "Books and literature, I was beginning to see, were not for getting a grade, not for the utilitarian purpose of being considered a nice and versatile boy, not just for casual pleasure, but subversive as Socrates and expressions of man's soul. . . . Words make experience last," he would later write.¹⁹

Morris's freshman English instructor was Frank Lyell, a Mississippian like himself. He forced Morris to get out of his comfort zone and show rather than tell with his class compositions. Morris was flabbergasted when Lyell rewarded his essays D's instead of the A's and B's he was used to receiving. Lyell was not critical of Morris's grammar or word choice—rather his poorly-formed writing. Lyell told Morris that this was a symptom of a "poorly formed mind."²⁰ Lyell challenged him to write better, and an enraged Morris rose to the challenge before him.

Shortly after, a friend's wife asked Morris what he wanted to do upon finishing college. Without thinking, Morris immediately said he wished to be a writer. He could not tell her what

he wanted to write about, but he knew instinctively he had already begun to find his calling. In addition to checking out stacks of books from the library, Morris began spending all the money he earned from his newspaper writing on books by Thomas Wolfe, Theodore Dreiser, Ernest Hemingway, and William Faulkner.

Morris also befriended Bill Moyers,²¹ a straight-A journalism student who worked for Lady Bird Johnson's radio station, and Ronnie Dugger, who served as the editor of *The Daily Texan* in 1950, and was completing his master's degree in economics when Morris enrolled. Dugger was by this time in the process of starting a new liberal weekly newspaper in Austin, the *Texas Observer*.²² Both would be important figures in Morris's life. *The Daily Texan*, under editors like Dugger and Horace Busby, had earned a reputation as a muckraking newspaper.²³

As a freshman, Morris was eager to write anything, according to Sam Blair, who was already a veteran sports writer for *The Texan* when Morris came on board in the fall of 1952. Blair wrote that a letter had been received in the sports editor's office from Morris's high school journalism teacher asking that her most gifted student be given a chance. "Willie hadn't been in the office five minutes before he was given the chance to cover intramural sports, the lowliest beat in the department," Blair recalled. "You'd have thought he had been handed a plane ticket to Cuba and told to go interview Hemingway."²⁴ Blair wrote that many realized quickly how brilliant and creative, but also how proud Morris was.

The Daily Texan had the reputation of being one of the top three college newspapers in the country. It was designed as a professional newspaper, and the students who worked on it took their positions seriously.²⁵ *The Daily Texan* has existed due to state legislation and appropriations but proclaimed itself to have always "been the freest newspaper voice in Texas."²⁶ Its nicknames have included the Freest College Daily in the South and the New York Times of College Journalism. It was nearly unheard of for a freshman to be given a bylined column, yet Morris

got just that. Morris wrote of the experience:

In its finest moments, and they had been often, *The Daily Texan* had defended the spirit of a free university even when the University of Texas itself was unable or unwilling to do so, and in these periods it had reached an eloquence and displayed a courage that would have challenged the mature profession. The tolerant seniors who ran it were bemused enough to give me a weekly column in my first semester, to report on the hundred or more college papers I was assigned to read every week.²⁷

Anne Chambers served as *The Texan's* editor Morris's first year on staff. She said he was a bright spot in what was often a sea of cynicism at *The Texan*.²⁸ It was she, along with her staff, who was convinced to give the young underclassman a column. He called it "Neighboring News" and reported on what was going on at campuses across the country. In one of his first columns, he wrote of a forest being planted at Stamford in Connecticut in honor of professor emeritus Albert Einstein, asking wittily "will all the trees have square roots?"²⁹ This column proved very popular among the student population and was innocuous enough to not catch the attention of the administration. That would come soon enough.

Those out-of-state papers were the source of ideas that had been completely foreign to Morris growing up in the segregated Bible Belt of rural Mississippi. At times, he spent all night poring over ideas like integration, academic and political freedom, nonconformity, and political criticism. Morris like many young and inexperienced journalists, wrote of "harboring dreams of revolutionizing the whole realm of journalism" in youth. The reality, however, would soon sink in when the writer discovered his own friends did not even read what he had written. Morris was determined to change that with interesting and provocative commentary.³⁰ This would have appeared to many readers to just be an enthusiastic and fresh voice, but upon review of Morris's actions and editorials and the growth in student involvement over the course of his *The Daily*

Texan career, Morris was in retrospect promoting himself from his first column. A by-product of that, of course, was that he did come to believe he—as a journalist—was in the enviable position of taking on society's wrongs and righting them by writing about them.

Morris introduced himself to *The Daily Texan* readers September 17, 1952, and then got right down to business. "My job, as long as it lasts, is to give you, the reader, personal insight on what's happening in other colleges—everything I can gather from whether or not the president at Weybeloe Normal bites his fingernails to how reserve seat tickets are holding out for the annual Susquehanna St. Teachers-Slippery Rock Aggies Game."³¹ His columns often included conjecture and conversation. This was the emergence of the writing style he would later develop into a strong narrative, but his natural ability, tenacity, and fearlessness of speaking out regardless of consequences was innate.

His sense of humor shined through, too. "Quite naturally I was disillusioned," he wrote in his "Oklahoma Aggies Have Sidewalk Problem, too," editorial column in the October 7, 1952, issue:

Prior to my pilgrimage into this great state, folks back in the Mississippi delta had informed me time and time again that I would soon be amongst the richest people on the face of the earth. In no indefinite terms I had been told that every man, woman and child owned at least one oil well, and many Texans stood on the street corners on Saturday nights distributing worn-out dollar bills.³²

He continued to express his surprise at learning nearly 75 percent of the Texans he had met have to "wash their own Cadillacs."³³ He used humor to get serious points across, as well. In his October 9, 1952, column, he wrote about a new program at the University of Alabama to test for tuberculosis. "In the deep South, specifically at the University of Alabama, a wholesale campaign is being waged, encouraging students to have chest X-rays taken immediately," Morris wrote. "The program has met instantaneous

success, reports indicate. 'TB or not 'TB, that is the question. And at Alabama, they're finding the answer."³⁴ Another time, in his column, he wrote, "A La Mode department: After weeks of anxiety, it's finally hit the campus. Last week, the Snak Shak upped coffee to ten cents. Bring out that Confederate money, boys."³⁵

Through humor and narrative, Morris was able to introduce an apathetic student body to unfamiliar issues and national voices to which it would not have otherwise been exposed. His wide-eyed enthusiasm and excitement about new ideas and information echoed in the words he wrote. Morris constantly devoured other campus newspapers and national publications to stay informed.

Morris took on heavier subjects as a freshman columnist, too. Being given a column as a freshman was a heady experience, and it allowed him to not only report but also criticize events and things going on around the country that he often did not fully understand. Growing up in rural Mississippi, Morris did not experience what life or politics were like in other areas of the country. Yet, his job on the paper was to read and write a subjective column on these matters as they affected other colleges and universities. Morris didn't always confine his critiques to other college campuses, however, much to the chagrin of faculty advisors and administration.

In his November 6, 1952, column, "52 Campaign Leaves Nation, Campus Limp," Morris tackled students' emotions on the presidential election. He wrote of the election's importance during difficult times and noted Adlai Stevenson's radio-broadcast "plea for unity."³⁶ In "The Round-UP" Morris urged the student body to vote in campus elections.³⁷ In the same column, his wry wit shined through in a tongue-in-cheek comment about cigarette smoking. "A mildly controversial article on smoking, which appeared in a national magazine recently, asserted that a cigarette will lessen one's life span by ten minutes or thereabouts," Morris wrote. "The boys down the hall did a little figuring the other night and found out they should've been dead ten years ago."³⁸ The harmless sarcasm appealed

to the college audience and probably gained him more support that would later work in his favor in his future campaign for *Daily Texan* editor.

By the end of his sophomore year, Morris had grown introspective. He devoted an entire column to the discussion of the flow of life and loneliness, ambition, happiness, love, and hatred. He was like everyone else, and he wanted the student body to understand these feelings were normal and common. His later writings and experience as a national editor and writer's friend would be reminiscent of this.³⁹

Initially, Morris took subdued stands on issues like integration. Both the editor before Morris, Shirley Strum, and her predecessor, Ronnie Dugger, were much more extreme in their civil rights columns. By the time Morris came to UT in 1952, black graduate students had already been admitted to the university. The majority of the student body by the 1950s supported desegregation. The University of Texas system behaved mildly compared to most other Southern schools and had created a separate state college in 1948 for blacks. Then the U.S. Supreme Court forced UT's hand further in the 1950 *Sweatt* ruling for a black student to be admitted to the law school. The integration of campus organizations and activities took many years longer thanks to the old-school administration.

In June 1953 the university graduated its first black doctoral student, and *The Texan* continued pushing for complete integration. At the 75th anniversary of its founding, the University of Texas boasted 173 black students out of 18,000. Though still vastly underrepresented for their population in the Lone Star State, which had about one million black residents, it was a start to a growing sense of equality among the student body—which Morris had no small part in bringing about.⁴⁰ The state legislature of Texas had moved from its lost battle against integration, and a new battle was waged against Morris and the progressive politics of his newspaper prose.

In the spring semester of his junior year, Morris decided he wanted to be the editor of the newspaper. Morris was driven and was not shy

about going after what he wanted. His zealousness for liberal ideas and issues consumed him, and he wrote about them. “We can’t forget Willie Morris,” wrote *The Daily Texan* Sports Editor Murray Forestall. “He was intramural coordinator last year. Willie, with his flair for the spectacular, has that certain ability to get the story that no one else can get.”⁴¹

Morris won the election for editor and made *Daily Texan* history. Winning the election over a San Antonio graduate student, Morris had broken a long-standing tradition of electing native Texan editors. Morris was the first outsider to hold the position, something that no doubt did not help him with the UT administration or government officials when he started his harsh critiques of long-held policies. In an article in Morris’s hometown *Yazoo Herald*—proud of its journalistic prodigy—Louise Yerger wrote that Morris began on *The Daily Texan* from the first semester of his college career, and, “knowing him, one feels sure that he had his sights set even then on the editorship.”⁴² Morris had reason to be proud of his accomplishment. However, that would hardly be his claim to fame at *The Daily Texan*. Morris had already started making ripples in areas of academic policies and de-segregation. And during his editorship, his position of righteous rebel would be clearly defined and force many altercations with UT administration and the Texas Board of Regents, the university’s governing body.

Morris as *Texan* Editor

Morris’s initial column as editor appeared in *The Summer Texan*, the summer edition of *The Daily Texan*, June 7, 1955. He wrote a column typical of the college firebrand editor—full of piss and vinegar, idealism, and attitude. The difference, as the nation would soon see, was that Morris was willing to get shot down rather than not take the chance of stepping out of his comfort zone. He wrote of *The Daily Texan*’s fifty-five-year tradition of speaking out as one that should be honored by all Texans, regardless of their political views, because in order for any to be free to speak, all must be free to speak. Free-

dom of the press should be important to everyone on campus and something that should be defended at all costs. Morris wrote:

The Daily Texan is bigger than any one man. We will protect it and its tradition, with our youth and our strength and—if necessary—with our personal reputation and physical well-being. . . . Tolerance and fairness provide the key; partisanship and prejudice do not. Ours is an idealism that shall bow neither before fact nor fancy. . . . We have been appalled by the tragic shroud of indifference which cloaks our undergraduate. This student apathy, this disregard or all save the most materials, is a thing of the mid-Twentieth Century. If we do not kill it now, here and on a thousand campuses, it will eventually kill us—an ugly cancer polluting the bloodstream of Democracy. . . . Texas students are much too easily twisted. Thinking hurts. They want their opinion ready-made, and they don’t care who makes it.⁴³

In the same column, Morris quoted from famed muckraking journalist Lincoln Steffens: “Here is a fine American population, with above average education, intelligence, culture, and traditions, doing little and caring less about their loss of liberty, their abdication to do something they are too lazy to find out about.”⁴⁴ Morris wanted the recognition that literary liberals like Steffens had garnered by mimicking similar ideologies yet more relevant to his time and audience. The values he espoused would become deeply heartfelt, as evidenced throughout his life’s works.

During the campaign for the editorship, Morris and the other candidates were questioned about their stands on issues at a big student rally. On the issue of desegregation, Morris issued his strongest statement to date: “There’s an inner turmoil in the United States; there’s an inner turmoil in me. The Supreme Court decision was inevitable, but I don’t think any universal rule can be applied to the entire nation when the time for integration comes. I don’t think Ole Miss is ready for integration. I think

the University of Texas is."⁴⁵ This was not the same fight at the University of Texas as it was in Morris's home state and many other places in the Deep South, which made it easier to make a strong stand in favor of integration. The racial climate in Austin was not comparable to that of the Mississippi Delta, and there simply was not much dissent left by 1954 among the student body in Austin.

In fact, partial integration at UT had begun nearly two years before the *Brown* decision. Following the law school integration, which had occurred in 1950, eleven African-American graduate students enrolled the fall of 1953, including one in journalism. Morris's successor to the "Neighboring News" column he had written as a freshman was the journalism department's first black student, master's student Robert Giles. Giles graduated with his master's in journalism in August 1954. "I don't recall any racial problems in my experience," Giles said, adding he barely knew Morris. "Integration went very well. There was no racial tension at all."⁴⁶ Morris portrayed an accurate picture in the pages of *The Daily Texan* of the lack of racial animosity among the students on campus, which would begin Morris's idolization by the student body and vilification by those in power. Yet, his firebrand editorials spoke of troubles in many other schools in the South from which UT was isolated. It was the administration in Austin that was much more concerned about the changes integration would bring. Morris would be editor when the undergraduate desegregation decision was made at UT, and he fully supported the decision. By that time he would have started his fight toward unrestricted press freedom, which would affect all important issues in longstanding Texas politics.

"Morris spent a great deal of his year as editor fighting," according to Copp and Rogers' history of *The Daily Texan*.⁴⁷ The "Segregation Decision Due" story was the headline story of the paper July 8, 1955, above the masthead of *The Daily Texan* in 60-point typeface.⁴⁸ Even this was a bold statement from a native Mississippi editor. The headline story of the paper a few days later declared "Desegregation in '56 De-

creed by Regents" in bold 48-point typeface.⁴⁹ The editorial in the paper praised the decision. Under the banner "A Historic Decision," he wrote:

RATIONAL AND TOLERANT. That is the University's new decision on undergraduate desegregation, passed here Friday. The University Regents and President Logan Wilson were judicious, humane, and courageous in handing down their edict. Their move, we believe, will go a long way in promoting understanding where understanding is needed, in smoothing raw sociological edges, and in proving to the entire South that tolerance is workable."⁵⁰

What Morris understood, and others attested to, was that while he was a liberal, he was also a Southerner, and he understood the temperament and stubbornness of the region. Morris believed integration was the correct and moral thing to do, but he believed it would best be achieved through a rational, slow changing of the heart. And he said so. "Many students, this editor included, are of East Texas or mid-Southern backgrounds. For us desegregation has never embodied an overnight maneuver. We will need time to adjust to the change, to temper deep-seated attitudes and traditions." Morris further wrote, "Their action is the stuff of which greatness is made."⁵¹ The University of Texas became the first major university in the South to admit black undergraduates, and 104 black students were accepted in the first fully integrated freshmen class in the fall of 1956.⁵²

Morris wrote that *The Daily Texan* under his leadership would make the student body think, be informed, and feel something. He asserted his obligation to inform students not only of campus news but also of what was going on in the country and around the world. Morris understood from an early age that a newspaper could be quite a powerful institution. He continued: "A newspaper is no schoolboy proposition. It affects minds, and minds affect people, and people affect other people, and soon there is a sociological reaction that reaches the very nerve-ends of our politics, our education and

our literature.”⁵³ He further wrote, “We accept the editorship of this the greatest of all college newspapers, with a confidence and faith—not in ourselves, for that would be blind egotism—but in the men and women of this University. Every word we print, utter, or delete is directed toward their better interests.”⁵⁴

When reading this, one does not doubt Morris’s innocent sincerity. Morris anticipated many students would have read this and wondered about the high-strung young editor. He volunteered his unyielding belief in the freedom of the press. He said he had not forgotten that Yankees destroyed his great-grandfather’s press during the Civil War. He stated unequivocally that neither he nor *The Texan* would be partisan. Morris wrote he was a liberal “if liberalism means open-mindedness, fairness, and support of change when change is needed. . . . To rephrase *The Texan* has no obligations.”⁵⁵ This lengthy soul-baring column foreshadowed things to come in Morris’s world decades later at *Harper’s* magazine. He wrote, “As for promises, he will commit himself to one: Should *The Daily Texan* ever become intolerant, illiberal, dependent, apologetic, fawning, or the megaphone of any man or group of men, he will resign without bearing.”⁵⁶ While, as evidence will show, Morris got into bitter fights with the University and the Texas Board of Regents during his editorship of *The Texan*, in the end, freedom of the press and *The Texan* won out. That would not be the case some sixteen years later at *Harper’s*, but Morris, true to his 1955 word in *The Texan*, stuck to his guns.

It must have been apparent to the administration from the start of Morris’s tenure that it was in for a fight. Immediately, the UT administration forced the paper to run a disclaimer above all editorials that read that the opinions expressed belonged solely to the writer of the article and the editor.⁵⁷

Changes took place at *The Daily Texan* under Morris’s leadership—changes for the better in the world of college journalism. A twenty-three-year precedent was ended by *Daily Texan* reporter Joel Kirkpatrick being admitted to a Faculty Council meeting in the summer of 1955. No

Texan reporter had previously been admitted to one of these closed-door sessions. Information and decisions about what took place had been tightly controlled by the administration.⁵⁸ Morris took time and space in the newspaper to applaud when the university administration acted to allow more press freedom on campus.

We are heartened by Chairman Tom Sealy’s announcement that Friday’s Board of Regents meeting will be open to the public and the press. This is a clear departure from the traditional ‘closed door’ policy. It should be a permanent one.

The people must have the opportunity to know. The officials to whom they have delegated responsibility should be held publicly accountable for their actions and their arguments. Indeed, this is one of the elemental keystones of American democracy.⁵⁹

Freedom of the Press

His mild-mannered opinions and praise of administration did not last, and during much of his senior year as editor-in-chief, Morris stayed in hot water. Everything became an argument over press freedom to Morris. Even desegregation, which he had expounded on freely several times in *The Texan* and been asked about during the debates for editor, became a rallying cry for freedom of the press the first time Morris did not get his way.

After being the first editor to get reporters admitted into formerly closed administrative meetings, Morris acted recklessly in immediately chastising administration when a meeting just weeks later regarding integration of campus activities was closed to reporters. Morris saw this expulsion as a major setback. Rather than work toward a compromise, however, a half-cocked Morris put pen to paper arguing First Amendment rights were being ignored—despite just one week earlier praising the Regents’ decision for allowing reporters into a formerly closed faculty meeting. Morris started making enemies in the administration with an editorial vehemently criticizing the board in the July 12

paper for expelling two *Daily Texan* reporters from a Faculty Council meeting, thereby making it impossible for the general faculty and student body to know what occurred. The fear of the council, which Morris did not find out until he had published his scathing critique, was that the newspaper would not adequately cover the complexities of campus integration. So the council simply refused *The Daily Texan* the opportunity to get the story wrong.

Self-Promoter or Serious Journalist

Sam Bradshaw, a classmate of Morris's who remains a friend of Celia Morris, said he saw Morris's interest in campus politics and policies as a way to promote himself. Bradshaw said he liked Morris and never quarreled with him, but the two saw issues quite differently. "He was very friendly, personable, but he was on a mission. Willie was great at promoting Willie," Bradshaw said. "He was sharpening his own ax at the expense of the betterment of the University of Texas."⁶⁰ Bradshaw said Morris's political views were not evident until he became an outspoken adversary of the oil and gas industry, which Morris argued was more about freedom of the press, in his column in *The Daily Texan*.⁶¹ "Willie started gleaming from the other paper's editors—what they were doing," Bradshaw said. "By spring he was saying, 'You can't censor me. You can't tell me I can't write something.'"⁶²

When Morris took the helm of *The Daily Texan*, it was already considered one of the best college daily papers in the country and was as professional as any newsroom in America, with a city room, two wire servers, and individual offices for all editors. *The Daily Texan* published 171 times a year, totaling 1,590,000 copies, compared to the average college daily newspaper that published 151 times a total of 755,000 copies.⁶³ Most colleges and universities did not publish daily editions of their newspapers. Putting out a daily edition requires much time and research spent on information. It would be understandable to think—like Bradshaw suggested—that by reading these newspapers from across the country that Morris was occasionally swayed or inspired by another article and got

information from it to form his own column. However, because of the social climate of the times, it was not uncommon for college papers to cover similar issues from similar viewpoints.

In January 1956, Morris was awarded one of thirty-two Rhodes Scholarships given nationwide to attend Oxford University in England. Rhodes winners are selected based on intellect, leadership, character, and athletics.⁶⁴ Morris's grade point average was a mere 2.7, yet one could not discount Morris's national fame during his time as an undergraduate at UT. Few journalism students have articles published in daily newspapers—fewer in national magazines like *Harper's*—as Morris had done while in college. Even fewer still earn the attention of *The New York Times*, which would author editorials in Morris's defense regarding freedom of the press over the oil and gas fiasco. Morris, in fact, was the first UT Rhodes Scholar in a decade, but he received no recognition on his achievement from the president, Board of Regents, or any UT administrator because he had become the enemy of the administration. Morris played off his hurt feelings with jokes that the UT administration had probably had never heard of Oxford⁶⁵ and therefore did not realize it an honor for Morris and the university.

Not stopping at the boundaries of the UT campus, Morris began writing in increasingly critical editorials and columns about Texas state and national politics—and framing any criticism as a press freedom argument. In a January 12, 1956, editorial, Senator Searcy Bracewell, chairman of the Senate committee given the task of investigating the state Board of Insurance Commissioners scandal, was lauded for defending the open meetings of the committee. Bracewell was outvoted.⁶⁶ Morris referred to the insurance scandal as "the tangled web of Texas' latest scandal" in his "Round-UP" column. In a closely related matter regarding freedom of the press, Morris took on Governor Allan Shivers' plagued administration and called for an explanation of the collapse of Texas depository, U.S. Trust and Guaranty. He wrote: "The whole chronology of the explosive U.S. Trust and Guaranty collapse reads like evasive fiction."⁶⁷ Morris listed all

questionable activity since an initial warning of bankruptcy in May 1954 by the state auditor Clark Diebel. Nearly 130,000 depositors were ripped off in the fiasco, which made national headlines for weeks.

The ballsy Morris did not let up. He continued his rant about this Texas scandal less than a week later with an equally harsh editorial. He wrote, "The State has been disgraced. Worse, official indifference has never been more obvious. . . . When a newspaper traditionally as conservative as *The (Houston) Chronicle*, and backed by Texas' biggest money, goes against the political grain, Texans should take notes. . . ."⁶⁸

Following the lead taken by Dugger at the *Texas Observer*,⁶⁹ Morris spoke out in his column and in the paper's editorial for the release of information regarding the operations of the U.S. Trust and Guaranty collapse and the closed-door meetings the state Senate had held.⁷⁰

Morris began using press freedom as his catch-phrase in nearly every issue beginning in January 1956—often in the headline—regardless of what the underlying issue was. This would be the issue that defined him. Morris was adamant that to let censorship of any newspaper go would eventually erode everyone's civil liberties, and he did not back down from writing so.

Maryland University, Morris wrote, had replaced its Student Government Association Publications Board, previously composed of six students and four faculty members, with a committee of eight faculty and two students. This "implies that the student newspaper at Maryland is now a megaphone for the administration. . . . If we cannot defend our basic American freedoms on the campuses of our state universities, where human dignity and prerogative should flourish for all to see, where indeed can we defend them?"⁷¹

Morris further urged every student at UT to be ready to defend against this kind of tyranny, as "the coercive conformity of a conforming age . . . may kill America quicker and surer than Marx and Lenin ever hoped."⁷² As any good Southerner would agree, these were fighting words. Yet, Morris did not stop there. On the

very same page, he pointed fingers at the "oil Senators" and questioned the morality of a natural gas bill they were supporting.⁷³ Presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson had gone on national television denouncing passage of the Harris-Fulbright bill saying it did not offer enough protection from would-be unscrupulous gas producers. On *Face the Nation*, Stevenson said an issue that affected the public interest required regulation to ensure the public access to natural gas at a reasonable price. Deregulation only ensured rising gas prices and deeper pockets for oil senators, according to Morris. Little did Morris realize the fight that was brewing. Within a few weeks, he would literally be covered by the Texas oil controversy.

Ignoring any criticism over his actions, Morris continued his personal quest toward press freedom. When free expression took a hit on a North Carolina campus, it did not go unnoticed by the opinionated Morris. Despite being deeply embroiled in a time-consuming battle over editorial constraints at UT, Morris seemed almost obsessed with his mission. The co-editors at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, Ed Yoder and Louis Kraar, faced a recall election after publishing an opinion column in which they complained of college athletics, in particular of the hiring of the head football coach, Jim Tatum. Both editors stated it was not the opinion of the student body, merely their own. Still, students signed petitions asking for Yoder's and Kraar's removal from the paper. Realizing the parallels in their situation to his own, Morris wrote, "We cite these developments, not because they are bizarre, but because they strike rather close to home: here and on a hundred campuses."⁷⁴

Yoder and Morris met through their respective editorships, Yoder said. "We both got into trouble and so our first contact was writing sympathetic pieces about the other's difficulties, and more generally, comments on the issue of freedom of the press," he said. Ironically, Yoder and Morris would both be chosen as Rhodes Scholars and study together in Oxford, England.⁷⁵

At the beginning of February 1956, above the editorials, Morris began running the follow-

ing sentence in italics, presumably as a result of the Yoder-Krarr incident in North Carolina. “Opinions expressed in *The Daily Texan* are those of the editor or the writer of the article and not necessarily of the University administration.”⁷⁶ Underneath it, in the February 3, 1956, edition, was another request for the Board of Regents to keep meetings open, as is the right of the Texas taxpayers.⁷⁷

Texas’ Twin Deities

In *The Daily Texan*, Morris fought against passage of the bill to deregulate natural gas from the Federal Power Commission, known as the Harris-Fulbright Bill. That would be his legacy politically, and it leaves one to wonder if it was the deregulation he wanted so much or rather his hatred of being told what he could not print. Regardless, *The Daily Texan* was inarguably not a typical college newspaper, which tackled issues like dating, curfew, classes, and parking woes. Whether or not Morris believed in every stand he took remains up for debate. What is not is the fact that he got students and the administration involved in events and issues that affected them in a way that few college newspaper editors at UT had ever done.

Bradshaw said the Board of Texas Student Publications, on which he was a student member, went along with Morris’s vapid criticisms opposing the end of federal control of natural gas until it “became excessive.”⁷⁸ Bradshaw grew up in the oil fields and realized he had a better understanding of the need to repeal the federal government’s control. He said, “It was clear the repeal would be a great benefit to the University of Texas, the state of Texas, and all other producing states.”⁷⁹ Morris did not understand or care. “His position was basically a political one that would create controversy, which helped his self promotion,” according to Bradshaw.⁸⁰ The more obvious it became to the Board that oil and gas was his cause du jour, the more the entire board and faculty turned against him. Bradshaw remembered an advertising professor calling Morris a propagandist.⁸¹

DeWitt Reddick, the acting chair of the School of Journalism agreed with Bradshaw’s

summation of Morris. A major problem he had was getting the facts straight, Reddick said. Reddick recalled one editorial in which three of the seven sentences had factual errors. Rather than admitting he had made an error, Morris told Reddick, “it’s the idea that counts.” That was something he had to unlearn, Reddick said, and his time at *The Daily Texan* forced him to learn to word his editorial opinions from his head based on facts rather than using emotional heartfelt half-truths.⁸²

However, one Texas troublemaker came to his defense. Well-known Texas writer Frank Dobie, who had been fired from his teaching job at the University of Texas in 1946 after campaigning for Dr. Homer Rainey for governor, sympathized with young Morris.⁸³ Dobie’s letter, however, was censored by the Board. The *Texas Observer* obtained it and printed it in its entirety.⁸⁴ Dobie argued that the oil and gas issue was merely the latest issue the university was using to silence any opposition to the status quo with liberal ideas. Dobie wrote that the Regents thought that if “16,000 students and several hundred faculty members would confine their interests to football, parades, Dad’s Day, Dead Week and no blunder bigger than a comma blunder, we’d have a peaceful institution.”⁸⁵ Dobie believed this bordered on totalitarianism and could not be ignored.

The TSP board, which had a student majority, also had five faculty members. Two of the six students were Morris’s fraternity brothers, and three were editors of the newspaper, yearbook, and campus magazine. Three of the faculty members were journalism professors, so it would not have made sense for them to be opposed to press freedom as Morris suggested. Bradshaw said it was Morris’s desire to make a name for himself and not the loftier “freedom of the press” that Morris cared about. “Willie pursued these editorials and the controversy for his own benefit even when it was contrary to the best interests of the University of Texas and the State of Texas,” Bradshaw said.⁸⁶ The criticism did not silence Morris. He had found his sticking point. The school administrators and state and national government officials might

have been able to ignore his earlier innocuous arguments over issues that had already been settled, but his overt attack on the Texas way of life cloaked in a call for constitutionally protected press freedom could not be ignored.

Press freedom had become his immutable clarion call. Arguably, his most famous editorial appeared February 7, 1956. The headline was printed above the masthead of *The Daily Texan*.⁸⁷ He listed the reason for this editorial in bold type: “However, the editor firmly believes with a conviction born of everything noble and decent in our American philosophy that the trend has been toward absolute censorship of *The Texan*. He has also seen this trend is [*sic*] not exposed before the nation's public, it will destroy us.”⁸⁸ A disclaimer at the top of the editorial read, “This editorial was rejected for publication by the Editorial Director of Texas Student Publications, Inc., and the acting Director of School of Journalism but was approved later by a majority vote by members of the Board of Texas Student Publications at a meeting Monday night.” This was followed by “DON’T SKIP THIS EDITORIAL,” in all capital letters.⁸⁹ “He got the attention of legislators, government; these people didn’t think this was a joke,” Bradshaw said.⁹⁰

The majority of the front page of this edition dealt with the censorship issue. In the February 7, 1956, issue, the lead news story headline read: “Banned Editorials Accepted After Five-hour TSP Meeting,” with a lengthy sidebar on the history of censorship at *The Daily Texan*.⁹¹ Page Three in its entirety was devoted to press freedom articles produced both in-house and comments and writings of famous political philosophers—Thomas Jefferson, Walt Whitman, Horace Greeley, and Herbert Hoover.

Morris elaborated on why both *The Daily Texan* and society were in danger from censorship. In all capitals he wrote: “A SOCIETY THAT ENCOURAGES STATE INTERVENTION INTO IDEAS WILL FIND ITSELF AN EASY PREY TO STATE INTERPRETATION IN OTHER REALMS AS WELL.”⁹² He became increasingly adamant in his editorializing about censoring the newspaper, and

at the same time sarcastic in his presentation—running a serious, damning editorial “Regents’ Latest Decision Would Kill Texan.”

Morris wrote intending to evoke fear in the students and faculty. He wrote if the newspaper could be silenced, it would be easy to silence an individual from expressing opinions. He wrote that the paper could not back down else it would be destroyed. And Morris believed the use of House Bill 140, which prohibited state funds from being used to influence political elections, being used to silence criticism was wrong. “The intent of the Legislative rider on appropriations bills was to prohibit State money from being spent on partisan projects. To deny *The Texan* the right to criticize measures and issues is a dangerous misuse of the rider.” Likening *The Texan* predicament to that of revolutionary days of both American freedom and press freedom, he compared his cause with that of American patriots. “The tradition of American democracy, with its Jeffersons, Franklins, and Pulitzers, is on our side, and the issues have never been more tightly drawn. We feel the faculty and the students are with us. We have no fears,” Morris wrote.⁹³

The Board of Regents, however, did not see it this way. The Regents believed Morris and *The Daily Texan* were going out of the way to make an issue where there should not be one. Regent Claude Voyles said Texas received two-thirds of its tax revenue from oil and gas, and to be against the critical Harris-Fulbright natural gas bill would be self-defeating to *The Texan* and the university.⁹⁴ The bill would have exempted independent natural gas producers from the jurisdiction of the Federal Power Commission (now called the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission), as they had been under since the Natural Gas Act of 1938. After the bill's passage by Congress, President Eisenhower vetoed it, much to the dismay of the Texas oil industry. In the editorial that ran beneath the one on the Harris-Fulbright Bill, Morris again took to satire and printed “Let's Water the Pansies.” This editorial sarcastically urged students to water the flowers in front of the Union and urged the adminis-

tration to appoint a Pansy Watering Subcommittee.⁹⁵

In the next edition, Morris ran an editorial on the front page arguing for academic freedom. He stated his position on what he believed was the Board's erroneous defining of House Bill 140, prohibiting state funds to be used to "influence elections or legislative measures." The Board of Regents had used it to infer that off-campus readers of *The Daily Texan* may be influenced by the editorials. And since *The Daily Texan* was funded by the state it was not legally permitted to comment on controversial national or state issues.⁹⁶ Morris wrote that everyone – not just the student body—had his American civil liberties at stake.

The Board of Regents and the university administration held a meeting to discuss with *The Daily Texan* the implementation of a more rigid interpretation of the Texas Student Publications Handbook. A new deadline was set for editorial page articles of 9 a.m. instead of the previous 5:30 p.m. so that editorial opinions might be more closely scrutinized.

Morris tested the new policy by submitting guest editorials from *The New York Times*, the most respected paper in the nation, and writings by Thomas Jefferson on press freedom. Both failed to pass muster with the TSP board because the material did not present a balanced view and not enough material was there to promote further discussion on the matter.⁹⁷

Students on the Censorship

From liberals to self-proclaimed arch conservatives, students wrote letters to the editor in support of Morris. A student who emigrated in 1954 from Argentina because of the fascist political regime in his country and a student who said he disagreed with nearly editorial Morris ever printed were in complete agreement that the student editor, as a duly elected representative of the student body, should have the right to publish an opinion on any issue without fear of censorship or reprisal.⁹⁸ Students were outspoken about the censorship controversy. In the same edition, another article about the problems of Yoder and Kraar at North Carolina ap-

peared with inferences that similar student presses were also being investigated at Louisiana State University and the University of Minnesota.⁹⁹

The Student Assembly also backed Morris, passing a resolution in support of a free editorial policy by 25-1.¹⁰⁰ *The New York Times* supported the young whipper-snapper, too. On February 10, the nation's paper of record reported the story of the dispute over the editorial on the gas bill, giving it much more publicity than if *The Texan* had been allowed to print the dissenting editorial in the first place. According to *The Times*, the editorial "was rejected by the faculty editorial director on the grounds that material on the other side of the issue had not been presented in balance."¹⁰¹

Two days later, the Texas Student Publications Board issued an attempted compromise with Morris and *The Texan* staff regarding the turmoil brewing between the editor and the state's Board of Regents. The publications board, composed of five faculty and five students, suggested:

- Morris to avoid "facetiousness" in his editorials
- The controversy over editorial censorship should take up much less space in the newspaper
- Good judgment should be exercised when discussing controversial matters.¹⁰²

The Texan responded with its own expectations to have:

- an independent newspaper
- freedom to cover all news
- freedom to make editorial comment on such news
- freedom of the editor to express his personal views
- Labeling of all editorial comment explicitly as editorial comment.¹⁰³

Morris responded, "If I submit to any restrictions, we will be fighting censorship with censorship, but I realize the wisdom of the board and in a broad sense the suggestions are good. I accept the suggestions, but I will not

under any circumstances accept any restrictions.”¹⁰⁴

The first sign of tempers cooling came in February 1956. Dozens of letters from students were printed calling for a consensus for the good of the university even though it was evident to Morris that “a student editor in Texas could blaspheme the Holy Spirit and the Apostle Paul, but irreverence stopped at the wellhead.”¹⁰⁵ Still, pragmatism had to prevail. Most UT students, like the elected officials and Regents, had ancestral and political ties to oil and gas, something Morris had not considered. Claude Voyles and Leroy Jeffers were the two most vocal board members who argued for *Texan* censorship. Voyles was an Austin rancher and oil operator, and Jeffers was a Houston attorney who represented management in labor relations cases. The chairman of the board, Tom Sealy, was a Midland attorney with oil and gas royalty interests.¹⁰⁶ Sealy told the UT faculty not to fear, that “Some misguided individuals have used the term to promote movements or doctrines which are entirely foreign to education. . . . It is associated in the minds of many with left-wing elements.”¹⁰⁷ Sealy further implied that it would be wise to “avoid ill-timed and ill-advised public acts or utterances which may do serious harm to you, to the University, to your profession, and to education in general.” His comments injected a fear into the faculty of being aligned with communism, something Morris had suggested of those who would try to silence any opposing ideas.¹⁰⁸

Finally, on Feb. 15, a definitive answer was given on the use of the House Bill 140 interpretation. Bill Wright, attorney general for the Students’ Association, issued a statement that House Bill 140, Section 4, Article VI, which the UT Board of Regents had been using to censor *The Texan*, based on state funding, could not be interpreted that way. Wright further stated he had consulted thirteen other attorneys and not one agreed with the Regents in the matter. “If H.B. 140 could be construed to apply to the newspaper’s operations, it would have ‘terrifying implications’ against students and faculty members of the University,” Wright said.¹⁰⁹

Unbelievably, a week passed with no action from the university administration on Student Attorney General Bill Wright’s interpretation of H. B. 140. In the February 22 issue, an editorial appeared urging immediate action.¹¹⁰ The immediate action Morris was requested was not met, however. The next action taken was the censorship of *The Texan*’s editorial four days later. The reason given by Harrell Lee, Texas Student Publications editorial director, for the rejection of the editorial was it “was ‘unduly partisan’ and not in line with ‘wise editorial management.’” The editorial stated part of an article reprinted from the *Amarillo News* that it would not endorse Texas Gov. Allan Shivers for another term in office. Morris chose to run a blank space in the place the editorial would have been printed under the bold headline “This Editorial Censored” and beneath it “The Editorial Director of Texas Student Publications has invoked his right to withhold until TSP Board consideration. See story, Page 1. –Ed.”¹¹¹

The February 28 editorial, “Drastic Implications: Ike’s Gas Veto Shuffles Political Scene—Far Too Many People on Far Too Few Limbs” was censored as too controversial and withheld, as well. Still, UT President Logan Wilson held no conference to discuss matters prior to making the executive decision to ax the editorial.¹¹² The censorship by the administration tactic backfired, however, and the story and editorial were published in newspapers across Texas and by the Associated Press. *The New York Times* again picked up the story on February 29, and printed a story on the withholding of an editorial on the “political consequences of the veto of the natural gas bill,” in which Morris stated that the president’s veto of the bill “served the best interest of the nation” because it would have exempted gas producers from the federal government’s ability to set a fixed price.¹¹³

The Board of Regents and/or the UT Administration censored or openly objected to editorials authored by Morris opposing the Fulbright-Harris natural gas bill, in favor of integration and higher state taxes on oil and gas, and critical of Gov. Shivers and other state and national politicians.¹¹⁴ This added credence to

Morris's belief that they just wanted to silence the dissenting voice when it came to money and power.

In order to save face, the student faculty publications board conceded there were "some errors of fact and some instances of questionable editorial presentation." The board also "asserted the right of the editor to express his opinions on state policies if he has laid a factual basis for them."¹¹⁵ Morris was the sole dissenting vote on the committee because he refused to admit any wrongdoing. Morris's lack of ability to compromise would continue to plague him throughout his life.

College newspapers across the country began openly defending *The Daily Texan*, including newspapers at the University of North Carolina, plus *The Daily Iowan*, *The Kansas State O'Collegian*, *The Baylor Lariat* and *The Mississippian*. An editorial stated more than one hundred college campus newspapers had sent notice they were on guard for this at their schools, as well. *The New York Post*, also, sent Morris notice of its "campaign in the Texan's behalf."¹¹⁶ Further, *The New York Times*,¹¹⁷ which had published one of the rejected editorials, planned a series of articles on the censorship controversy.

Morris had definitely made a lasting mark not only at *The Daily Texan* but also across the country on campuses and at major metropolitan dailies reaching millions of readers. While criticism of Morris was warranted in some regards, particularly by those more in tune with the Texas oil industry, the problem was that the Board and the state officials and Morris were at cross purposes. Morris only saw this as a First Amendment issue, and he dug in his heels at the suggestion that the censorship had to do with his presenting half-truths based on misinformation or lack of understanding on oil and gas. Morris was most undisciplined in his approach, which in turn came back to bite those UT journalists who followed in his footsteps because of the strict rules put in place to prevent this recurrence in an unrestrained editor.

The Texan on March 22, 1956, printed: "*The Texan* censorship issue, quiescent for weeks, is again quite real. The danger now comes from

within."¹¹⁸ The Board of Regents scheduled an April 5 meeting to announce results of the reappraisal of the Texas Student Publications Handbook. The subcommittee of the board listed its five-page recommendation, which the editorial called "highly dangerous." While allowing for some criticism by the editor, the board stated writers should not publish anything "likely to create ill-will among those who exercise some measure of control over the University's appropriations,"¹¹⁹ the same thing the Board of Regents had said all along using both the Student Publications Handbook and H.R. Bill 140.

Morris's strong opinions provoked a few outspoken opponents from the student body. The entire left two columns of Page Six of the March 25, 1956, issue were devoted to well-documented and informed letters from dissenters attacking Morris's behavior, word usage, and insensitivity to opposing views.¹²⁰ Morris's decision to print the letters further contributed to his position that his was a noble stand for a free and uncensored press.

This same week Morris's first piece appeared in a national magazine, calling even more attention to the tensions at UT. "Mississippi Rebel on a Texas Campus" appeared in *The Nation* March 24, 1956, and solidified Morris as an up-and-coming journalist to watch on the national level, as a Southern liberal trying to bring the University of Texas into the mid-twentieth century. Morris wrote of the censorship controversy and the seemingly scandalous (if not illegal) behavior of the administration regarding the entangling of the education system to promote passage of the Harris-Fulbright bill that would have deregulated the oil and gas industry. He stated in the first sentence the issue was much deeper than it appeared in the newspaper. "The controversy transcends the locale. It represents a typical intrusion of state politics into education," Morris wrote. "It underscores the coercion exercised by economic interests whose endeavors to mold conformity and stifle dissent are rather prominent in our country today."¹²¹

Morris believed he was on the side of righteousness, and he would continue to refuse to back down from perceived immorality

and unethical practices throughout his career, even when that meant leaving behind a lucrative or life-changing professional opportunity. He remained true to his causes and to fighting a losing battle against the commodification of American culture toward the greater good of an informed society and believed society was intelligent enough to make up its mind for the good of all, if given access and opportunity to all information and sides of controversial issues. In many ways, his Southern stubbornness was always evident. In other ways, he fought what he believed hypocritical—segregation, status quo, authoritarianism.

Conclusion

As Morris's reign at *The Texan* came to an end, he ran a review of the biggest editorial issues. Noticeably, the editorials chosen were not the harshest or the ones that provoked the most ire or a national response. Rather, they were the best written and most literary. His advocacy editorials were not forgotten either. The freshmen car ban, increasing professors' salaries, and the death of a student were all dealt with in a thoughtful and introspective manner, as one might expect of an English major. The two issues that graced more of the editorial pages during the 1955-56 school year than all the others added together—segregation and censorship—were simply listed among the highlights. The editorials Morris chose to reprint were those written with a cool head and temperate pen.

Morris's final issue as editor came out May 20, 1956. It was written neither by a jaded nor an innocent young man but one who had grown both in wisdom and in writing ability:

One final word on *The Daily Texan* controversy before the defense rests its case.

The year has been a clamorous one, simply supplied with its vicissitudes, but it has served to prove one point: free expression at this largest of Southern universities has undergone a trying chapter.

The 55-year freedom of *The Texan*, of course, has suffered a telling blow. An associate professor of journalism will remain in these offices each publication night from 6 p.m. to 2 a.m., checking all editorial and

news matter. No longer may *The Texan* discuss "personalities;" it must now limit itself to "issues." And the editorial director of the three student publications has now become "editorial manager" solely of *The Texan*, in itself indicative of the trend.

This was the price paid for the editorial treatment of certain dangerous state issues. . . .¹²²

In closing, one got the distinct impression that in the end, Morris wanted to be remembered as much for his literary words as for the issues he thought were important. This, too, would be his life's pursuit. Morris's final column eloquently drew readers into a dissertation of his strong disdain of the evils still afoot on the UT campus and throughout the nation. He wrote that it would be the job of a free newspaper to announce those wrongdoings.

Mike Quinn was managing editor under Morris at *The Daily Texan* and later became a journalism professor at UT. In an interview with the *Austin American-Statesman* in 1999, he recalled that Morris was wise beyond his years and fearless in his liberal views.¹²³ Morris's legacy remains active today at *The Daily Texan*. Nearly ten years after his editorship, Morris told *The Daily Texan* that the administration at UT had tried to "stifle some of the very ideals it spawned."¹²⁴ The oil and gas promoters who controlled the state were also trying to control the university, and the prevailing idea was that the system was fine the way it was, but Morris disagreed vehemently and as editor made people not only on the campus but across the country pay attention. By doing so, Harris-Fulbright bill and the anticipated affects of its passage got much more attention that it would have otherwise. The attention Morris brought, in fact, may have played a significant role in the bill's being vetoed by Eisenhower, who had originally supported the bill.

In the 1956 yearbook, *The Cactus*, Morris wrote of his tenure over *The Daily Texan*, "This was an unusually noteworthy year for a liberal, hard-hitting *The Daily Texan*. A heated controversy with the Board of Regents concerning

editorial policies made national headlines. The 1955-56 *Texan* pioneered ‘a new concept of college journalism,’ according to *The Houston Post*. *The Texan* had never before taken on controversial subjects not directly pertaining to campus issues.¹²⁵ In a 1980 retrospective in the *Houston Post*, Elizabeth Bennett wrote, “Under Morris’s leadership *The Texan* stuck to its guns, maintaining that a campus newspaper’s duty was to cover all issues, no matter how controversial.”¹²⁶

Morris received a letter from a former journalism professor and supervisor of the University of Oklahoma’s *Oklahoma Daily* student newspaper in 1983. Louise Moore wrote she had come across a file of hers from 1956 with clippings she had saved from *The Daily Texan*, which she still considered the best campus newspaper in the country. She wrote, “This is an overdue fan letter.” Moore had followed his career throughout the years.¹²⁷

In 1999, *The Daily Texan* published a one-hundred-year retrospective, and honored its most famous editor, with these words: “Morris stood tall against an administration hell-bent on shutting him up. He hollered for integration, for intellectualism, and for an end to corrupt ‘business as usual.’ In response, the Tower installed barrier after barrier to keep his content ‘to a college yell.’” Throughout the decades, Morris never truly left *The Texan*, offering advice any time it was asked for by an editor needing an extra shot of courage.¹²⁸ Morris wrote the foreword for this one-hundred-year retrospective three months before he died, and it was obvious he considered his time there of utmost importance to the editor and writer he became. He admitted to making some “youthful mistakes” during his tenure, but he believed he was fulfilling a duty in speaking out for right.¹²⁹

During his tenure at the University of Texas, Morris awakened a new breed of college journalists. College rebels had all but disappeared by World War II, and many who have studied the 1950s have reported political rebellion to be dead on campuses during this time. However quiet post-war campus life might have been in Texas, Morris revived it in a big way during his 1955-56 editorship.¹³⁰

Morris, who graduated magna cum laude and a member of Phi Beta Kappa¹³¹ with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English June 3, 1956, found it ironic that American universities were set up to not only educate but inspire young people to develop critical thinking and reasoning, to explore their values and find purpose—to spread their wings and stretch the boundaries of their imagination in new and profound ways—yet when doing so, the university was the first to balk when the institution found itself under the attack of one of its own pupils. Rather than look inward, the powers-that-be chose to castigate and discredit Morris. That being said, Morris exercised no restraint when his actions could prove hurtful to the institution as a whole and other students. From his writings and actions, it looked like Morris was his own main concern. This behavior would also be evident in Morris’s future endeavors, most notably his ordeal at *Harper’s* magazine. Sadly, Morris would recognize his lack of diplomacy during his tenure at *The Daily Texan*¹³² in his memoir *North Toward Home* in 1967, but he was apparently unable to stop it from signing his death knell in New York by 1971.

Notes

- ¹ *North Toward Home*, 140.
- ² *Ibid.*, 141.
- ³ Sam Blair, "Willie Morris's brilliance proved in UT Days," *Dallas Morning News*, Aug. 4, 1999.
- ⁴ *North Toward Home*, 142.
- ⁵ Tara Copp and Robert L. Rogers, *The Daily Texan: The First 100 Years*. Austin: Eakin Press, 1999, 1-2.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 12.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 54.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 55.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 55.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 56.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 56.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 61.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 62.
- ¹⁸ Bales, *Willie Morris: An Exhaustive Annotated Bibliography and a Biography*, 26.
- ¹⁹ *North Toward Home*, 165.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*
- ²¹ Moyers is an American journalist and political commentator, who has won numerous awards for his work, most notably for his programming for public television. He also served as the White House press secretary under President Richard Nixon from 1965-67.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 175.
- ²³ Doug Rossinow, *The Politics of Authenticity: Liberalism, Christianity, and the New Left in America*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998, 33.
- ²⁴ Blair, "Willie Morris's brilliance."
- ²⁵ *North Toward Home*, 162.
- ²⁶ "The Texan Tradition," *The Daily Texan*, Aug. 12, 1955, 4.
- ²⁷ *North Toward Home*, 162.
- ²⁸ Bales, *Willie Morris*, 27.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*
- ³⁰ Willie Morris, "\$6,500 Is Chickenfeed To Our Aggie Friends," *The Daily Texan*, Sept. 18, 1952, 4.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*
- ³² Willie Morris, "Oklahoma Aggies Have Sidewalk Problem, too," *The Daily Texan*, Oct. 7, 1952, 4.
- ³³ *Ibid.*
- ³⁴ Willie Morris, "Aggieland Is No Longer Restricted to Just Cows," *The Daily Texan*, Oct. 9, 1952, 4.
- ³⁵ Willie Morris, "The Round-UP," *The Daily Texan*, clipping from Jack Bales Collection, undated.
- ³⁶ Willie Morris, "'52 Campaign Leaves nation, Campus Limp," *The Daily Texan*, Nov. 6, 1952, 4.
- ³⁷ Morris, "The Round-UP," *The Daily Texan*, Oct. 28, 1953, 1.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*
- ³⁹ Morris, *The Round-UP*, Feb. 11, 1954, 1.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 66. The year was 1958.
- ⁴¹ Murray Forestall, "Sports Staff Small But Highly Capable," *The Daily Texan*, clipping from the Jack Bales Collection at the University of Mississippi, Box 1, Folder 1, undated.
- ⁴² Louise M. Yerger, "Willie Reaches High Rung in His Ladder Of Success," *Yazoo City Herald*, May 5, 1955, 4.
- ⁴³ Morris, "A New Year for the Texan – We'll Play Hard and Clean," *The Daily Texan*, June 7, 1955, 4.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁵ *North Toward Home*, 175-6.
- ⁴⁶ Robert Giles, phone interview, Sept. 15, 2008.
- ⁴⁷ Copp, 69.
- ⁴⁸ Morris, "Segregation Decision Due," *The Summer Texan*, July 8, 1955, 1.

- 49 "Desegregation in '56 Decried by Regents," *The Summer Texan*, July 12, 1955, 1.
- 50 "A Historic Decision," *The Summer Texan*, July 12, 1955, 4.
- 51 *Ibid.*
- 52 Copp, 67, 69.
- 53 Morris, "The Round-UP," *The Daily Texan*, June 7, 1955, 5.
- 54 *Ibid.*
- 55 *Ibid.*
- 56 *Ibid.*
- 57 Copp, 69.
- 58 Morris, "The Round-UP," *The Summer Texan*, June 21, 1955, 5.
- 59 Morris, "The Round-UP," *The Summer Texan*, July 8, 1955, 4.
- 60 Sam Bradshaw, phone interview, Oct. 8, 2007.
- 61 Sam Bradshaw, phone interview and e-mail, Nov. 9, 2007
- 62 *Ibid.*
- 63 Bob Kenny, "Texan Issued 20 Times More Than Average College Paper," *The Daily Texan*, Oct. 6, 1954, 4.
- 64 "Morris to Enter Oxford Next Fall," *The Daily Texan*, Jan. 4, 1956, 6.
- 65 *North Toward Home*, 183.
- 66 "Threats or Preservers," *The Daily Texan*, Jan. 12, 1956, 3.
- 67 Morris, "The Round-UP," *The Daily Texan*, Jan. 12, 1956, 3.
- 68 "Chronicle Acridly Views State's Latest Scandal," *The Daily Texan*, Jan. 17, 1956, 4.
- 69 Dugger had already started taking on the state government on the insurance scandal in issues of the *Texas Observer*.
- 70 Morris, "The Round-UP," *The Daily Texan*, Jan. 12, 1956, 3.
- 71 *Ibid.*
- 72 *Ibid.*
- 73 Morris, "The Round-UP," *The Daily Texan*, Jan. 31, 1956, 3.
- 74 Morris, "The Round-UP," *The Daily Texan*, Feb. 2, 1956, 3.
- 75 Ed Yoder, e-mail interview, July 18, 2007.
- 76 *The Daily Texan*, all issues February 1956.
- 77 "Open Meetings," *The Daily Texan*, Feb. 3, 1956, 3.
- 78 Bradshaw, typed letter to author as follow-up to phone interview, Nov. 9, 2007.
- 79 *Ibid.*
- 80 *Ibid.*
- 81 *North Toward Home*, 190.
- 82 Elizabeth Bennett, "A look at the workings of a campus paper and its editors," *The Houston Post*, Jan. 13, 1980, BB1.
- 83 Rainey had been fired from his job as university president in 1944 when he fell out of favor with the Board of Regents over educational and philosophical difference. "Willie and the College Yell," *Texas Observer*, Feb. 22, 1956, 6.
- 84 J. Frank Dobie, "Dobie Unexpurgated," *Texas Observer*, Feb. 14, 1956, 3.
- 85 *Ibid.*
- 86 Sam Bradshaw, phone interview, Oct. 8, 2007.
- 87 "Daily Texan Press Freedom – It Involved Every UT Student," *The Daily Texan*, Feb. 7, 1956, 1.
- 88 *Ibid.*
- 89 *Ibid.*
- 90 Bradshaw, phone interview, Oct. 8, 2007.
- 91 "Banned Editorials Accepted After Five-hour TSP Meeting," *The Daily Texan*, Feb. 7, 1956, 1.
- 92 "55-Year Daily Texan Tradition Endangered; Submission Would Injure Collegiate Press," *The Daily Texan*, Feb. 7, 1956, 3.
- 93 *Ibid.*
- 94 "Prerogative of Dissent Defended by Texan," *The Daily Texan*, Feb. 9, 1956, 4.
- 95 "Let's Water the Pansies," *The Daily Texan*, Feb. 9, 1956, 4.
- 96 "Academic Freedom In Censorship Issue," *The Daily Texan*, Feb. 9, 1956, 1.
- 97 *Ibid.*
- 98 "The Firing Line: Students Respond to Texan Censorship," *The Daily Texan*, Feb. 8, 1956, 4.
- 99 Robb Burlage, "Editors Attacked, Freedom at Stake," *The Daily Texan*, Feb. 8, 1956, 4.
- 100 Byron Lindsey, "Principles, Not Issues, Dr. Reddick's Concern," *The Daily Texan*, Feb. 10, 1956, 1.
- 101 "Gas Issue Stirs Texas U. Dispute," *The New York Times*, Feb. 10, 1956, 23.

- ¹⁰² Doyle Harvill, "Suggestions for Interim Given to Morris Friday," *The Daily Texan*, Feb. 12, 1956, 1.
- ¹⁰³ "Regents Didn't Foresee Censorship Implications," *The Daily Texan*, Feb. 12, 1956, 5.
- ¹⁰⁴ Doyle Harvill, "Suggestions for Interim Given to Morris Friday," *The Daily Texan*, Feb. 12, 1956, 1.
- ¹⁰⁵ Morris, *North Toward Home*, 186.
- ¹⁰⁶ "Report of the Regents' Ire Over 'Politics,'" *Texas Observer*, Feb. 15, 1956, 1.
- ¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁰⁸ Copp, 52-3. In 1941 a bill was proposed in the Texas Legislature, which would have required all educators in the state to take a loyalty oath and denounce communism. *The Daily Texan* under editor Boyd Sinclair openly opposed the measure. The fight against the "Red Scare" lasted throughout the decade, and the Legislature went so far as to pass a resolution condemning *Texan* editorials promoting tolerance.
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- ¹¹⁰ "Legal Conference Urged On Controversial Rider," *The Daily Texan*, Feb. 22, 1956, 4.
- ¹¹¹ "Lee Withholds Texan Editorial," *The Daily Texan*, Feb. 26, 1956, 1; "Mud and Vainglory," *The Daily Texan*, Feb. 26, 1956, 3.
- ¹¹² "Drastic Implications," *The Daily Texan*, Feb. 28, 1956, 4.
- ¹¹³ "Gas Editorial Ban Ordered at Texas U.," *The New York Times*, Feb. 29, 1956, 16.
- ¹¹⁴ "Regents Told *Texan* Free But Editorial is Held Out; Regents Reaction Awaited," *Texas Observer*, Feb. 29, 1956, 6.
- ¹¹⁵ "Student Editorials 'Questionable,'" *Texas Observer*, Feb. 22, 1956, 1.
- ¹¹⁶ "Texan Stand Defended," *The Daily Texan*, Feb. 17, 1956, 3.
- ¹¹⁷ "Texas U. Editor Pushes Crusade," *The New York Times*, Feb. 19, 1956, L60.
- ¹¹⁸ "Don't Ruffle Gentlemen With Bankbooks," *The Daily Texan*, March 22, 1956, 4.
- ¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*
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- ¹²¹ Morris, "Mississippi Rebel on a Texas Campus," *The Nation*, March 24, 1956, 232.
- ¹²² "A Word in Closing," *The Daily Texan*, March 29, 1956, 4.
- ¹²³ *Ibid.*
- ¹²⁴ Sharon Shelton, "1950s: Morris Says Administration Stifled Ideals It Spawned," *The Daily Texan*, Oct. 14, 1965, 1.
- ¹²⁵ James Van Richard, Ed., *The Cactus 1956*, Austin: Texas Student Publications, Inc., 1956, 158.
- ¹²⁶ Elizabeth Bennett, "A look at the workings of a campus paper and its editors," *The Houston Post*, Jan. 13, 1980, BB1.
- ¹²⁷ Louise Moore, handwritten letter to Willie Morris. Norman, Oklahoma, Aug. 10, 1983, From the Willie Morris Collection, Box 27, Folder 3.
- ¹²⁸ Tara Copp and Robert L. Rogers, *The Daily Texan: The First 100 Years*, Austin: Eakin Press, 1999, vi.
- ¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, vii.
- ¹³⁰ Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Campus Life: Undergraduate Cultures From the End of the Eighteenth Century to the Present*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987, 16-17.
- ¹³¹ Bales, *Willie Morris*, 32.
- ¹³² Morris, *North Toward Home*, 186.