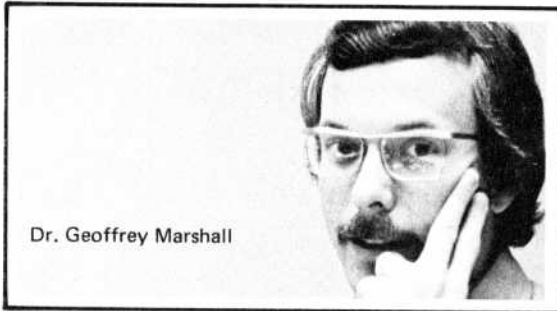
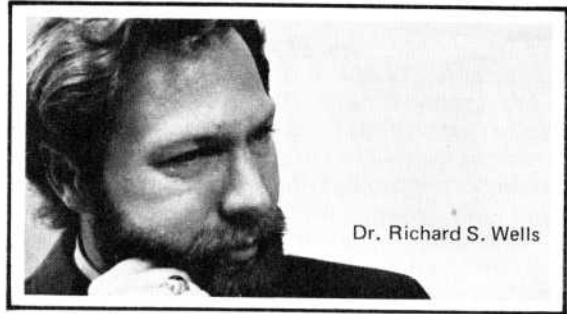


POINTBLANK



Dr. Geoffrey Marshall



Dr. Richard S. Wells

TENURE

IS IT A SHIELD FOR THE INCOMPETENT OR A SAFEGUARD FOR ACADEMIC FREEDOM?

Dr. Geoffrey Marshall

Pointblank is a new section which will frequently appear in the Sooner Magazine. The editors of the magazine feel this will be an appropriate manner for presenting the two sides of opinion on controversial matters of interest to alumni, faculty, staff and students. It is not intended that the responses appear as a debate but merely the representative ideas of varying or opposite opinions.

Few policy questions facing today's universities are more controversial than the question of academic tenure. Here, as elsewhere, many hours have been devoted to defining the tenure policy as it exists on the University of Oklahoma campus. The practice of tenure for university faculty members has been scoffed, cursed, lauded and applauded, and still no consensus exists as to whether tenure should be maintained, modified or discontinued.

Dr. Geoffrey Marshall and Dr. Richard S. Wells responded to our request for opposite viewpoints on tenure. Marshall is an associate professor of English, director of the Honors Programs and former president of the local chapter of the American Association of University Professors. Wells is an associate professor of political science and former assistant dean of the College of Arts and Sciences.

The fundamental definition of academic tenure is stated briefly and lucidly in the basic document of academic freedom in America: "After the expiration of a probationary period, teachers or investigators should have permanent or continuous tenure, and their services should be terminated only for adequate cause, except in the case of retirement for age, or under extraordinary circumstances because of financial exigencies." ("Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure," 1940, American Association of University Professors.)

In the last year it has been faddish to speak of "attacks on tenure," but these attacks are almost never directed to the principle stated above. Hardly anyone seriously argues against a probationary period, or for dismissal without cause, or for retention in times of financial disaster. Tenure requires only that after a time of testing no faculty member should be dismissed without a cause for dismissal. I have never read a reasoned disagreement with tenure so understood.

Tenure is necessary because of the historical and present fact that professors and investigators (researchers) are periodically threatened with the loss of their jobs for no sufficient reason, no "cause" at all. Professors

come in contact personally with hundreds of people each year and, by means of their writings and public speaking, with perhaps thousands of others. Some of these people want some professors fired for such reasons as the following: for teaching Darwin, de Chardin, Marx, Adam Smith, Charles Reich, B. F. Skinner; for discussing sex, politics, religion, asexuality, anarchy, atheism; for reading and not reading, speaking and being silent, conservatism and revolutionism.

Tenure attempts to assure every professor that he can do what he must in order to teach — that is, that he can and must explore all ideas which are relevant to his subject.

It is said that tenure protects the incompetent. Of course it does nothing of the kind; incompetence is one of the best reasons for firing a professor. What could be better? But, it will be urged, there are incompetents who seem to be protected by tenure. That may be the case, and when it is, tenure is being abused, either by the incompetent or by his administration.

Tenure does not protect incompetence. What protects incompetence are such matters as faculty unwillingness to scrutinize one another's work, the relative powerlessness of those injured by incompetence (the students), and human compassion—the virtue which reminds us that an incompetent professor is a

human being with a wife or a husband, two children, and a mortgage. These matters contribute to the tenacity of incompetents and, in the case of our unwillingness to scrutinize one another, can contribute to the hiring of an inadequate faculty member in the first place.

Professors are required to be thoughtful, innovative, and inquisitive human beings and must be free from attack by whimsy, prejudice, irrationality, and other insufficient causes for dismissal. We have no evidence that such protection can be afforded either by short-term contracts of, say, from three to seven years (because they simply require that evaluation be undertaken periodically, a requirement which would, if fulfilled, assure the working of the current system of tenure) or unionization (an alternative which is economically inviting but intellectually frightening if one thinks of the freedom—academic or otherwise—of the United Mine Workers.)

The rules governing the process of dismissal of a professor are elaborate and cumbersome. They were intended to be so because simple-minded and impatient attacks are what are feared. The mechanism assures that a cause for dismissal be established and not simply asserted or believed to exist.

Tenure gives strength (or courage, if you will) to a profession which occasionally must do battle with some of the most powerful forces in society — politics, ambition, public opinion, religious hysteria, moral outrage, immaturity, and ignorance. The history of these battles shows victories for both sides, but the opponents are powerful, and, at times, only the principle of tenure has made the professor their equal.

Dr. Richard S. Wells

Academic tenure seems to have been developed to serve a worthwhile purpose—i.e., to further the best interests of society by providing a full range of responsible viewpoints on social issues. Ideally, professors are people who pursue knowledge and speak truth from an informed basis of examined fact and opinion. Their freedom to do so thus ensures that we will have

timely warning that the emperor may really not have any clothes on.

Few other occupations in American life have the sort of tenure enjoyed by professors. Some judges have what we might call tenure for life and good behavior; the obvious purpose is to have justice served by people who need not be swayed by the varying heat of intense public opinion. While the case for judges strikes me as a sound one that should be continued and broadened, I cannot say the same thing for academic tenure. Let me try to make my reasons clear.

If universities were our society's major source of viewpoints that were helpfully different — "radical" might just as well be used—and therefore functional, in that they caused us to rethink our positions on matters that need continual re-examination, then tenure would make considerable sense to me. It is imperative that any society, at any time, have a group within it that examines and responsibly criticizes what we are doing. But in American society today, the university must stand in line to serve that function. The number and variety of groups that point to our social inadequacies are large and growing. If anything, the university has often been defender of the status quo and is, in my view, less helpfully and responsibly critical than it should be.

Just why this is happening, I am not sure. But tenure as a protector of those who are daring enough to speak the unspeakable is more mythical than real, given the actual behavior of most professors. We gesture mightily, but I fear that we are a rather timid and conservative lot when it comes to getting at and examining the more deep-seated problems of our social system.

On a more practical basis, however, tenure systems perpetuate in lifetime jobs people who do their work in widely varying degrees of competence. As in all occupations, some professors are better than others, and some are just plain bad. No organization, existing for whatever purpose, can long operate by enabling its least productive members to remain. I fear that academic tenure often encourages just that.

In the case of OU, it is a University which, like many today, faces the prospect of reduced operating costs. OU in particular has distinct problems due to the fact it has long operated on politically inexcusable deficiencies of funds; further reductions in available funds will inevitably result in excruciating decisions about the reduction of teaching personnel. On what basis should this proceed, should matters worsen to a given point? The tenure system would call for those without tenure to go first; the University is under no obligation to retain those without tenure, because they are considered to be in some sort of probationary limbo. Of course, proper notice must be provided, but these are procedural matters that are easily met.

The difficulty with this situation is that the University would be denying itself the services of what, in my opinion, we might regard as its "youth" or its most vital, productive and needed element of the faculty. This, of course, is not to say that anyone over thirty is suspect, but that new blood must be infused and retained.

It seems to me that a modified system of tenure is something that we should consider. My proposal is far from original, except in the sense that I do not believe that it has been considered at OU. I would grant tenure to a professor of any rank at the time he is hired. Thus, he would be protected to voice his professional opinions, and no distinctions would be drawn among the faculty. But tenure should be reviewed for all faculty periodically — perhaps every five years. This would require the University to face up to what it has neglected — the development of a reasonable basis of evaluation for a professor. It would also enable us to effect a better balance of competence than we now have and introduce more young faculty than we have been able to over the last ten to twenty years.

I think that some revision of tenure is in the best interests of the institution; at the present time the system is non-functional. Tenure is not something that I deprecate, but its current uses, given the needs of the University, are in serious need of review.