Now You’ll See It, Now You Won’t

The Bizarre Story Of Timothy Leary’s No-Show At Hill

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For one brief moment, quiet little Spring Hill College found itself in the news spotlight, defending a man’s right to speak views that few others agreed with.

For the greater part of a week, the College rocked to a controversy reported on the screens of national television, discussed over telephone wires from Mobile to New York, and debated by alumni from East to West.

The frenzied activities began with an announcement by College President William J. Rimes, S.J., that Timothy Leary would not be coming to Spring Hill after all. The announcement came at a press conference on November 7, which was covered by members of the Mobile press, radio, and television media.

The “basic” reasons for cancellation of the scheduled date are inability to secure suitable facilities… and inability to provide police protection,” Father Rimes said.

He explained that Student Government had scheduled dates. Fort Whiting Armory was the last hope, but Father Rimes said that the commanding officer there was not able to reschedule Veterans Day ceremonies already set for the night of the speech.

Father Rimes also said that no volunteer policemen had signed up for security duty and that more protection was needed to meet possible trouble.

Mr. Page echoed Father Rimes’ words and added that “Mobile press and citizens would not look at the matter broadmindedly.”

Senior class President Ed McMahon, who had cast the dissenting vote during the Student Government meeting earlier on the question of rescheduling, asked the students “not to forget this incident” and proposed that students demonstrate in some way to show their feelings toward city opposition to the scheduled speech.

(Mr. McMahon in casting his vote at the earlier S.G. meeting, indicated he wanted Dr. Leary to

Learning of this new development, Father Rimes said he would “in no way” reconsider approving Dr. Leary’s speech.

At a Student Government meeting Sunday night, the College president repeated his position. But the student group, which also included other student leaders besides S.G. members, decided that if Timothy Leary came to Mobile, the students themselves would hear him anywhere he would be allowed to speak.

At this time Father Rimes indicated he would not have Dr. Leary removed from college property if he came on campus. But Father Rimes insisted that he would not condone either an appearance or a speech by Dr. Leary here.

The discussion ended, the meeting decided to proceed with the student demonstration as planned, but to forego placing the advertisement in the Mobile newspapers.

When Dr. Leary appeared on the “Today” show, he reaffirmed that he would come to Mobile to speak
"Nothing in life is to be feared. It is only to be understood."
Voted 10 to 1 the day before to reschedule the lecture, which was originally planned for November 11, at a later date.

But “when faced with this student decision, I found it necessary to intervene and refuse rescheduling,” said Father Rimes. He cited the “anticipated disruptive factors of the academic schedule” and “present distortion and misinterpretations of our motives” as reasons for the veto.

Both he and Student Government had waited until the last minute to cancel the date, Father Rimes said, because the students had hoped to somehow find proper facilities.

The program was to have included separate talks by Dr. Leary and Dr. Sidney Cohen, a recognized authority in the field of drug addiction.

Student Government president James F. Page stated during the press conference that S.G. was to blame for the cancellation, because “Father Rimes was allowing us to have Leary.” Father Rimes, however, said that the blame should be placed “partly” on himself for his failure to make necessary arrangements for the speech.

As soon as word spread around campus that the Leary date had been rescheduled and then vetoed, junior Kenneth Jaskot called a student meeting for that night in the Campus Center snack bar.

The meeting was called to explain to the students exactly why the speech was cancelled and to decide what, if any, further action should be taken.

Father Rimes opened the meeting with an exact explanation of his stance and the reasons for his veto.

He explained that no auditorium in the city would book the lecture because of previously appear on the date originally scheduled.

The Campus Center meeting then turned into a discussion. Most students favored Mr. McMahon’s proposal.

One student, echoing the feelings of many, said that Spring Hill was “letting the city of Mobile have its way and thus sacrificing our academic freedom.”

However, one sophomore took a lighter view of the whole issue when he remarked, “Give everybody a ‘nickel bag’ and let them blow their own minds.” (A ‘nickel bag’ is five dollars worth of marijuana.)

Finally, it was decided to stage a demonstration against Mobile the following Monday, to put an advertisement in one of the Mobile papers explaining the student position, and to place an article in Campus ‘68, the college quarterly sent out to parents and alumni.

On Friday, plans were drawn up at a Student Government meeting for the demonstration to be held Monday.

On Sunday afternoon, Dr. Leary called Mr. Page and junior class representative T.Q. Alarcon, asking them why the scheduled appearance had been cancelled. The former Harvard professor informed Mr. Page and Mr. Alarcon that he would come to Spring Hill anyway.

He said that he would contact Governor Albert Brewer to request necessary protection, and, if the governor refused, Dr. Leary said that he would ask for security forces from FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover.

Dr. Leary also said he would appear on the Monday morning “Today” show on NBC and explain why he was coming to Spring Hill in the face of the massive opposition to his speech in the community.

to Spring Hill students the following Thursday. He contrasted the student referendum held early last month on the Leary question with the recent national elections.

The presidential elections, Dr. Leary said, represented “the last spasm in a menopausal society.”

He reaffirmed on the show that he would wire Governor Brewer for assurance of protection. He predicted that his speech would draw the biggest crowd ever drawn by any college speaker.

Half an hour after noon that same day, some 600 students staged a demonstration mourning the “death of free speech in Mobile.” The demonstration consisted of a mock funeral procession from the Quadrangle to the Campus Center, with eight students bearing a coffin leading it off.

Some faculty members also turned out for the march, which was highlighted by speeches from Mr. Page and Assistant Physics Professor A. Ransom Marlow, S.J.

The S.G. president addressed the shining crowd eulogizing the “demise of free speech.” He blamed three groups for the call-off of the speech: Student Government, for not securing a place to speak and not gaining protection for Dr. Leary; Father Rimes, for a “somewhat justified” succumbing to mounting pressure and criticism; and the City of Mobile, for closing its mind to the scheduled appearance.

The demonstration was covered by both local and regional news media, including Mobile television.

Then, Monday night, almost anti-climatically, the whole thing was off. Dr. Leary called Mr. Page and told him that he had decided not to come to Spring Hill, since he did not want to make anyone “unhappy.”