

# Ernest L. Wilkinson and the 1966 BYU Spy Ring: A Response to D. Michael Quinn

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THE SUMMER 1993 ISSUE OF *DIALOGUE: A Journal of Mormon Thought* featured D. Michael Quinn's near-definitive discussion of Ezra Taft Benson's political activities during the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>1</sup> Despite Quinn's thorough documentation, in the section entitled "The 1966 BYU 'Spy Ring'" he claimed that Benson master-minded this episode of covert surveillance, labeling it "the best-known manifestation of Ezra Taft Benson's six-year-old encouragement of 'espionage' at Brigham Young University."<sup>2</sup> Aside from an anonymous informant, no contemporary, first-hand account supports Quinn's assertion. Instead, the documents clearly show that the student ringleader exaggerated his ties to Benson and that BYU president Ernest L. Wilkinson, not Ezra Taft Benson, instigated the spying.<sup>3</sup>

## THE 1966 BYU SPY CASE

In 1966 political controversy reached the quiet campus of Brigham Young University. Ernest Wilkinson, then president, was a conservative Republican and ardent anti-communist. To Wilkinson, anything that did not support the U.S. Constitution or free-market capitalism was commu-

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1. D. Michael Quinn, "Ezra Taft Benson and Mormon Political Conflict," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* (Summer 1993): 50-55.

2. *Ibid.*, 54-55.

3. The principal documents used in this research are in the Ray C. Hillam Papers, Brigham Young University Archives, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah. Other important documents are in private possession.

nistic<sup>4</sup> and ran counter to the doctrines of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. When members of the faculty supported or appeared sympathetic to ideas that challenged Wilkinson's ideology, he condemned them as "liberals."<sup>5</sup> These "liberal" professors were the focus of Wilkinson's attention in 1966 and the motivation for the administration-organized, student-run spy ring.

In April 1966 Wilkinson told his comptroller and aide, Joseph Bentley, that he was going to give a "powerful address" that would "rock the campus from one end to the other."<sup>6</sup> Wilkinson wanted the speech to be controversial and hoped that it would generate discussion on campus, especially among "liberal" professors. He believed that his speech was consistent with Mormon doctrine and that students and faculty needed to know how church leaders felt about these political issues.<sup>7</sup>

Hoping to catch professors criticizing his speech, Wilkinson asked Bentley if he knew any students who would report what their teachers said in class about the address. Wilkinson specifically wanted the reactions of certain "liberal" faculty.<sup>8</sup> Bentley said he knew of a student who could be trusted and shortly thereafter contacted Stephen Hays Russell, an economics major who had recently represented BYU at a conservative economics symposium in New York. Bentley asked Russell to keep his ears open to what certain professors said about Wilkinson's address.<sup>9</sup>

During his conversation with Bentley, Russell understood that "President Wilkinson did not want to get involved in obtaining such information . . . [and] if he [Russell] were caught official university reaction would be that . . . [he] was acting on . . . [his] own."<sup>10</sup> Bentley and Russell worked out a list of professors to be monitored and Russell copied their

4. Wilkinson also termed these ideas "liberal," and would later apply this label to certain professors to justify spying on them. For Wilkinson's ideas on capitalism, see Wilkinson, "The Changing Nature of American Government from a Constitutional Republic to a Welfare State," *BYU Speeches of the Year, 21 April 1966* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1966). Also see his "The Decline and Possible Fall of the American Republic," *BYU Commencement Address* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1965).

5. For the purposes of this paper, the term liberal applies to those who did not support Wilkinson or his political philosophy; a conservative is someone who supported Wilkinson's ideas.

6. Stephen Hays Russell Statement, 13 Mar. 1967, Hillam Papers. For the content of Wilkinson's address, see Wilkinson, "Changing Nature of American Government."

7. Wilkinson, "Report for the Board of Trustees on Surveillance of Teachers and the Hillam-Davies Case," 17 Apr. 1967, pp. 4-6, copy in private possession.

8. *Ibid.*

9. Stephen Hays Russell to Jeff Blake, 1 July 1994.

10. Russell Statement. It should be clear that this was Russell's own opinion. Bentley may or may not have actually used these words.

class schedules from office doors.<sup>11</sup>

Russell then acting on his own initiative contacted ten students he had met through BYU's conservative community.<sup>12</sup> These students were selected because of their known conservative views and because Russell felt they could be trusted. The small group met in room 370 of the Wilkinson Center, where Russell explained their purpose and mission.<sup>13</sup> Russell informed them that they were to attend the classes of the selected professors for two or three periods after Wilkinson's address and to write down any remarks the professors made about the speech.<sup>14</sup> After attending the classes, they were to turn in their notes to Russell, who would then prepare a report and submit it to Wilkinson.

Wilkinson presented his forum address as planned on 21 April 1966. Following the talk, the designated professors were monitored by Russell's group. Each student-spy took notes on what the professors said about the speech and gave the information to Russell, who typed a composite report for Wilkinson.<sup>15</sup> Bentley then arranged for Russell to deliver his report directly to Wilkinson. Russell said that when he went to Wilkinson's office he "read a few of the more explosive and derogatory remarks . . . and then handed him the report." The president thanked him and Russell left.<sup>16</sup>

Wilkinson gave the reports to Clyde Sandgren, BYU's general counsel, with instructions to verify them. Sandgren contacted Russell and asked for a list of all the students who had gathered information. Sandgren then met with the students individually to confirm Russell's report.

BYU political scientist Ray Hillam, one of the targeted professors, learned about the spy ring from one of his students who told him he had been called in to verify allegations made against Hillam by Russell.<sup>17</sup> Members of the spy ring also talked about their activities to people out-

11. The professors monitored were Ray Hillam, Jesse Reeder, J. Kenneth Davies, Richard Wirthlin, Stewart Grow, Louis Midgley, Briant Jacobs, and Melvin Mabey. "Chronology of Events," Hillam Papers; see also Russell to Blake.

12. Russell to Blake. Some accounts state that there were as many as twenty student spies, but only ten names are known. These include: Stephen Hays Russell, Ronald Hankin, Michael Call, Curt Conklin, Lyle Burnett, Everett Bryce, Lloyd Miller, Mark Skousen, Lisle Updike, and James Widenmann. See Russell Statement and Ronald Ira Hankin statement, Hillam Papers.

13. Hankin Statement and Russell Statement.

14. Each student was asked to monitor two specific teachers, so not every spy went to the same class at the same time. See "Chronology of Events."

15. Russell Statement.

16. *Ibid.*

17. The student who told Hillam about the spy ring was not a member of the spy ring himself. He was a member of one of Hillam's classes and was contacted at random by the administration to confirm the allegations against Hillam. Hillam Papers.

side BYU and this information found its way back to Provo. Upon learning about the spy ring, Hillam requested that a formal hearing be arranged.<sup>18</sup>

Relying on information gathered by the spies and others outside the spy ring, Wilkinson intended to use the hearing to formally charge Hillam.<sup>19</sup> In September 1966 Wilkinson appointed BYU vice presidents Earl Crockett, Ben Lewis, and Clyde Sandgren to preside over the hearings. They were to decide if the allegations were true and what, if any, punishment should be handed down against Hillam.<sup>20</sup>

At the first hearing on 15 September Hillam was charged with being pro-communist and disloyal to BYU. These charges came from information gathered by the student spies and by others.<sup>21</sup> Hillam denied the charges and protested the "motives and methods" of those involved in the spying.<sup>22</sup>

Prior to the second meeting, Hillam and his colleague, Louis Midgley, contacted one of the student spies, Ronald Hankin, who was willing to expose the "administration-organized spy ring."<sup>23</sup> Hankin appeared at the second hearing, and when Vice President Lewis asked him who the administration was, Hankin responded that "Brother Sandgren," one of the vice presidents presiding at the hearing, should know because Sandgren had personally received reports from him. Russell, who was also present at this hearing, said that with Hankin's testimony Sandgren became nervous and demanded that Russell answer the allegations.<sup>24</sup> Russell asked for, and was allowed, three days to prepare a statement and present it to the vice presidents.

Russell stated that immediately after the hearing he went to Wilkinson's office and "told him of Hankin's expose." Wilkinson responded, "You know of course this is the first I've heard of this group [the student-spies]." Russell understood this to be a reminder that Wilkinson was not to get involved. Wilkinson told Russell that he should talk to Joseph Bentley.<sup>25</sup>

After meeting with Russell, Wilkinson telephoned Bentley and suggested that Russell be the administration's "scapegoat so as not to be implicated." Bentley refused. Wilkinson and Bentley then arranged for an

18. Ernest L. Wilkinson to Clyde D. Sandgren, Earl Crockett, Ben Lewis, 21 July 1966 and 19 Sept. 1966, copy in private possession.

19. *Ibid.*

20. "Chronology of Events." Also see Gary James Bergera and Ronald Priddis, *Brigham Young University: A House of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1985), 209.

21. Russell to Blake.

22. "Chronology of Events."

23. Hankin Statement.

24. Russell Statement. Also see Bergera and Priddis, 211.

25. Russell Statement.

attorney to help Russell formulate his reply.

Bentley later told Russell that he was concerned about Wilkinson because "he's [Wilkinson's] involved and he's scared."<sup>26</sup> Bentley, Russell, and attorney H. Verlan Andersen wrote a five-page statement for Russell to submit to the vice presidents. The statement avoided the main issues and tried to discredit Hankin as a witness by claiming that he was neurotic.<sup>27</sup> This was the beginning of the administration's cover-up.

After the second hearing, Hillam and his colleagues started their own investigation. For example, "Hillam and [Louis] Midgley tape recorded an interview with Hankin and gathered testimonies from other students."<sup>28</sup> Another of Hillam's colleagues, Richard Wirthlin, confronted Wilkinson with the information and accused him of using Russell and other students to "spy on teachers."<sup>29</sup> At this, Wilkinson "exploded" and demanded all of Wirthlin's evidence, telling him that Hillam, not Russell, was on trial.<sup>30</sup> Wilkinson also wrote a letter to Hillam in which he denied encouraging "any student or others to 'spy' on University employees." Wilkinson claimed that the complaints against Hillam were unsolicited and that the students must have misunderstood the president and sought the information on their own.<sup>31</sup>

On 17 October 1966 the vice presidents issued their findings. Their report did not address Hillam's charge, that he was the object of an administration-organized spy ring, but simply accused Hillam of minor indiscretions.<sup>32</sup> Wilkinson did not approve of the report, calling it a "white wash job," because it advocated no disciplinary action against Hillam.<sup>33</sup> Wilkinson also continued to claim no previous knowledge of the spying and that no members of the administration were involved either.<sup>34</sup>

The truth about the incident began to surface in February 1967, when Hankin went public. He told local television and radio stations about his and others' involvement in the administration-sponsored spy ring.<sup>35</sup>

Hankin's statement drove Russell to confess his involvement to his

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26. *Ibid.*

27. *Ibid.*

28. The tape recording is the Ronald Hankin Statement. Also see Bergera and Priddis, 212.

29. Richard Wirthlin to Larry Wimmer, 22 Jan. 1968, Hillam Papers.

30. *Ibid.*

31. Wilkinson to Hillam, 4 Nov. 1966, Hillam Papers.

32. "Report, Findings of Fact, Conclusions and Recommendations," 17 Oct. 1966, Hillam Papers.

33. Wilkinson Diary, 20 Oct. 1966, photocopy in Special Collections, Marriott Library, University of Utah, Salt Lake City.

34. Faculty Meeting Minutes, 20 Oct. 1966, quoted in Bergera and Priddis, 212.

35. "Free Forum Filled With Charges," *Daily Universe*, 1 Mar. 1967.

faculty advisor, Larry Wimmer, and to his local church leader. Wimmer asked Russell to repeat his statement to Elders N. Eldon Tanner and Harold B. Lee, both members of BYU's board of trustees. Tanner and Lee then requested that Wilkinson submit a statement to the board explaining the situation. In his statement Wilkinson explicitly admitted asking "Bentley to recruit Russell and other students" to report on faculty members.<sup>36</sup>

Later, the vice presidents' report was amended to include information on Russell's activities and eventually to admit Wilkinson's participation. The amended report stated that "Stephen Hays Russell, at the request of President Wilkinson, organized a group of students to obtain reactions to the president's speech of April 21, 1966."<sup>37</sup>

Even after Wilkinson left the university, conflict over this issue did not die. When Wilkinson edited the official history of BYU in the mid-1970s, he included the spy case but still maintained his innocence.<sup>38</sup> This omission elicited a swift reaction from Hillam, who in a letter to Wilkinson stated that Wilkinson had "given an untruthful account, blaming others rather than fixing responsibility with the person [Wilkinson] who initiated the spying."<sup>39</sup>

#### QUINN'S SPECULATIONS

In Quinn's essay, Ezra Taft Benson's support of the John Birch Society is a major theme. By labeling the BYU spy episode "a Birch crisis," Quinn attempts to portray the Birch Society as playing a significant role in the spying.<sup>40</sup> Because Benson supported the society, and some society members were involved in the spying, Quinn reasons that Benson was behind the spying.<sup>41</sup> In fact, Birch Society involvement was coincidental. True, some of the spies were members of the society, but this does not necessarily suggest that the Birch Society organized the spy ring.<sup>42</sup> The students were chosen because they were all "politically conservative," not because

36. Wilkinson to the Board of Trustees, 17 Apr. 1967, photocopy in private possession.

37. Vice Presidents to Hillam, 15 May 1969, Hillam Papers.

38. The history stated that "[p]eople often misunderstood President Wilkinson when they came to him with complaints. . . . His cross-examination efforts gave the impression that people should go out and gather evidence. This led to what came to be known as the 'spy scandal of 1967-68'" (Ernest L. Wilkinson and Leonard J. Arrington, eds., *Brigham Young University: The First One Hundred Years* [Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1976], 775).

39. Hillam to Ernest L. Wilkinson, W. Cleon Skousen, Leonard J. Arrington, and Bruce C. Hafen, 1 Nov. 1976, Hillam Papers. Also see Bergera and Priddis, 453.

40. Quinn, 50.

41. *Ibid.*, 50-52.

42. Russell states that he was the only Birch Society member among the spies. Russell to Blake.

they were society members.<sup>43</sup>

Quinn also states that Stephen Russell, the student organizer, had on at least one occasion prior to the spy episode met Benson. He points out that Russell told those present at the first meeting of the spy group "that 'the General Authorities' authorized this espionage" and specifically used Benson's name.<sup>44</sup> Ronald Hankin also said that Russell mentioned Benson's name and said "that he [Benson] was behind it [the spying], because he [Russell] was a friend of President Benson, he might find that he supported it if he was [sic] to speak with him."<sup>45</sup>

Russell left first-person statements in 1967, 1983, and 1987 regarding his involvement in the spy ring. None of these mentions any connection with Benson, except to point out that both shared similar political views. Russell did say he met Benson once, but this meeting was very informal.<sup>46</sup> Clearly, Russell was claiming in 1966 a much closer association with Benson than actually existed in an attempt to "legitimate" the spying.

Authorization by any other general authority cannot be supported either. N. Eldon Tanner and Harold B. Lee were brought in after the incident occurred only at the request of the professors involved. Quinn alleges that Tanner and Lee "declined to pursue the matter rigorously" in order to cover up Benson's involvement.<sup>47</sup> In fact, both apostles told the professors that they should keep duplicate records of what they discovered as they continued their own investigation.<sup>48</sup>

Quinn also uses a 1966 letter written by Louis Midgley, one of the targeted professors, in which he said that Benson was "the real home of the group."<sup>49</sup> More recently, however, Midgley has stated that when he wrote the letter he was speculating on a possible connection with Benson. This speculation was based on Benson's political stance and its possible similarities with those involved in the spying. Midgley now believes that no connection existed with Benson.<sup>50</sup>

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43. Russell Statement. Hankin also stated that at their first meeting the students were told, by Russell, that they were chosen because they were "conservative, fundamentalists." Hankin Statement.

44. Quinn, 53. Also see Hankin Statement. Russell claims that those assertions "are all categorically false." Russell to Louis Midgley, 4 Feb. 1994, copy in my possession. Russell's letter to Midgley also reports: "If they were true, I suppose that after 27 years and in the context of Quinn's large 'exposé' on the supposed propensity of Elder Benson to orchestrate espionage against BYU faculty, I would admit to what Quinn calls my 'obvious . . . [intention] to shield others beyond the BYU administrators who were involved.' But these assertions of Quinn are not true."

45. Hankin Statement.

46. Russell to Gary J. Bergera, 5 Jan. 1987, letter in private possession.

47. Quinn, 54.

48. Hillam to Tanner, 22 Sept. 1966, Hillam Papers.

49. Quinn, 54. Also see Midgley to Hillam, 11 Nov. 1966, Hillam Papers.

50. Midgley, interview, 8 Nov. 1993.

Finally, Quinn mentions in a footnote an interview he had with "a highly placed official at LDS church headquarters in 1966" and who without solicitation offered the name of Stephen Russell "as the person who forwarded the spy ring's findings to Benson."<sup>51</sup> Since readers do not know who this person is, they must take Quinn's word that he/she is a reliable witness. But both the available documents and Russell himself deny this allegation.<sup>52</sup> Remember too that Ernest Wilkinson admitted to the Board of Trustees that he was responsible for the spying and that all reports were given to him or to Vice President Sandgren.<sup>53</sup> This clearly contradicts the statement made by Quinn's anonymous source.

#### ERNEST L. WILKINSON'S INVOLVEMENT

The mastermind of the spy ring was Ernest Wilkinson. Many of those directly involved with the incident have said that the "spy ring was a Wilkinson operation," and even Wilkinson himself admitted his own guilt.<sup>54</sup> Wilkinson's confession is well documented in his report to the Board of Trustees on 17 April 1967. In that report, Wilkinson wrote, "I wanted to know from regular students what their regular teachers were teaching, and I think information of that kind is proper for me as the President to know, and I think this method of finding out is a proper method."<sup>55</sup> Aside from Wilkinson's admission, other evidence exists which implicates him as the one responsible for the spy ring.

Wilkinson was an ultra-conservative Republican and ardent anti-communist who shared his political philosophy with BYU faculty and students.<sup>56</sup> George S. Ballif, a close friend of Wilkinson and BYU employee, said that "there had been some activity politically [on campus] . . . before Ernest Wilkinson became President, but not nearly as much as since his administration began."<sup>57</sup> Student criticism of Wilkinson's politi-

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51. Quinn, fn 216. Also see Russell to Quinn, 4 Feb. 1994, copy in my possession.

52. Russell to Blake.

53. Wilkinson to Board of Trustees, 17 Apr. 1967.

54. Hillam, interview, 4 Nov. 1993.

55. Wilkinson to the Board of Trustees, 17 Apr. 1967, photocopy in private possession.

For other testimonies of Wilkinson's guilt, see Richard Wirthlin to Larry Wimmer, 22 Jan. 1968; Russell to Wimmer, 19 May 1968; Hillam, conversations with Joseph T Bentley, Sept. 1967 and Sept. 1968; Hillam to Wilkinson, Skousen, Arrington, Hafen, 1 Nov. 1976; all in the Hillam Papers.

56. "There were a number of strong Republicans that grew up in the faculty as it expanded after Ernest came. Of course, he was the prime moving Republican" (George S. Ballif, interview by Kay Alta Haynes, 18 Feb.-8 Mar. 1974, 33, Charles Redd Center for Western Studies, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah; see also Edith Johnson, interview by Hollis Scott, 24 Apr. 1984, Brigham Young University Emeritus Club and University Archives, Brigham Young University).

57. Ballif, 32-33.

cal bias touched on this issue in the early 1960s.<sup>58</sup> Some also claimed that Wilkinson's political activism extended to using the university as a stepping stone to the United States Senate.<sup>59</sup>

After his unsuccessful bid for the Senate in 1964, Wilkinson "returned to campus with a vengeance."<sup>60</sup> He was especially upset with certain members of the faculty who had supported his Republican opponent in the primaries, Sherman Lloyd. Three of the eight targeted professors had signed an advertisement supporting Lloyd, an action Wilkinson saw as disloyal and others felt prompted the spying.<sup>61</sup> Also upon his return Wilkinson learned of "a group of 'liberal' teachers [who] had decided to attempt to change the political and social atmosphere of BYU." He said that these professors were moving BYU away from its "traditional conservative view" to bring it "into line with the prevailing political trend towards Socialism."<sup>62</sup> This prospect drove Wilkinson to use extreme measures to correct the unwanted trend.

Ray Hillam, who has been at BYU since 1960, believes that "Wilkinson politicized the campus with his perverted brand of conservatism, particularly after his bid for the U.S. Senate." At this time, Wilkinson also brought "Right Wing speakers . . . to campus, [and] gave highly politically charged speeches," such as the one on 21 April 1966, which were designed to elicit a reaction from the faculty, especially from those whom Wilkinson labeled "liberals."<sup>63</sup>

Besides feelings of faculty disloyalty, Wilkinson believed that he had the unqualified support of the general authorities. At Wilkinson's inauguration a BYU Board of Trustees member, Stephen L Richards, charged the new president "to implant in youth a deep love of country, and a reverential regard for the Constitution of the United States."<sup>64</sup> Wilkinson saw it as his duty to defend the Republic, and he felt justified in using his ties to BYU to further his own political and economic ideas, which he strongly believed were in complete harmony with the teachings of the LDS church.

Wilkinson once told Hillam, when explaining why he ordered the monitoring operations, that church president David O. McKay had urged

58. Jim Duggan, "Opinions Needed," editorial in *Daily Universe*, 19 Apr. 1962. See also, *Daily Universe*, 23 May 1961.

59. For a treatment of Wilkinson's Senate bid, see Gary James Bergera, "A Strange Phenomena: Ernest L. Wilkinson, the LDS Church, and Utah Politics," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 26 (Summer 1993): 89-115.

60. Hillam, interview.

61. David Whittaker and Chris McClellan, "The Collection Description," Hillam Papers. See also Priddis, 11; and Hillam and Midgley, interviews, 4, 8 Nov. 1993.

62. Wilkinson to the Board of Trustees, 17 Apr. 1967, photocopy in private possession.

63. Hillam interview.

64. Stephen L Richards, "The Charge," *The Messenger*, 1951, 16.

him to prevent the advocacy of the two "isms" (communism and socialism) on the campus. Wilkinson also stressed his "need to know" what the faculty was teaching.<sup>65</sup> These facts spurred Wilkinson in his desire to run the campus according to his own conservative ideology and to use the methods he deemed necessary to prevent the spread of ideas contrary to his own or to what he believed were the church's.

#### CONCLUSION

D. Michael Quinn's suggestion that Ezra Taft Benson organized, directed, or in any way was connected to the 1966 BYU spy ring is not supported by the available evidence. The primary documents, first-person testimonies, and interviews with those involved clearly point to Ernest Wilkinson as the one responsible.

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65. Wilkinson to Hillam, 31 Mar. 1968, transcript of phone conversation, Hillam Papers.