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The Missing Link: The Search for the Connection Between Young Americans for Freedom and Charles Willoughby

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Abstract

Last semester, Gettysburg College was abuzz with controversy over the ultra-conservative messages that the Young Americans for Freedom organization was spreading around campus. As the *Compiler's* unofficial, wannabe muckraker, I wanted to dive into the discussion. My entry point was a rumor that a reactionary Gettysburg College alumnus helped establish the organization in the 1960s. I jumped at the opportunity to uncover the link. [*excerpt*]

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

The Missing Link: The Search for the Connection Between Young Americans for Freedom and Charles Willoughby

January 8, 2016

By Jeff Lauck '18

Last semester, Gettysburg College was abuzz with controversy over the ultra-conservative messages that the Young Americans for Freedom organization was spreading around campus. As the *Compiler's* unofficial, wannabe muckraker, I wanted to dive into the discussion. My entry point was a rumor that a reactionary Gettysburg College alumnus helped establish the organization in the 1960s. I jumped at the opportunity to uncover the link.



Gettysburg College graduate and right-wing army officer Charles Willoughby '14 in 1918. Photograph courtesy of the Library of Congress, via Wikimedia Commons.

The only information I had to work with was his name, Charles A. Willoughby, and the fact that he was one of General Douglas MacArthur's prodigies. A quick Google search revealed that Willoughby was indeed involved in YAF. However, the only sources were blogs and books that also claim that Willoughby was involved in the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. These are obviously not the most reliable sources. The search also revealed ample evidence that

Willoughby was an ultra-conservative with connections to fascists. He was good friends with conservative icons like Billy Hargis and John Rousselot and even testified before Joseph McCarthy's House Committee on Un-American Activities to try to label an elderly woman as a "communist subversive." He also idolized Francisco Franco and Benito Mussolini. Yet this doesn't prove he was involved in YAF; it merely proves that he was an extreme right-winger. I was determined to find hard evidence to support a link to YAF.

I started my search with a book called *A Generation Divided: The New Left, The New Right, and the 1960s* by Rebecca E. Klatch. According to Klatch, Young Americans for Freedom was the brain child of Doug Caddy and David Franke, who originally collaborated to advocate for a national loyalty oath for all college students. In 1960, Caddy and Franke, along with over 100 other delegates, met at the estate of conservative icon William Buckley in Sharon, Connecticut, where they established Young Americans for Freedom (YAF). Willoughby was mentioned nowhere in the founding of the group, or anywhere else in the nearly 400-page book. According to the book, the maximum age for members of the organization was set at 39. Willoughby was born in 1892, however, and would have therefore been 68 years old at the time of the Sharon Conference. Despite these dubious prospects, I pressed forward.

My next step was to visit the college archives in Musselman Library Special Collections, where I was told there was an entire collection of Willoughby's papers. Certainly, if he was involved in the founding of YAF, there must be some record of it in the Willoughby collection. The majority of the papers were related to his World War II and post-war service in the military. None of the correspondence included in the collection dated later than 1956, four years before YAF was conceived. The only item of interest was "A Statement by Major General Charles A. Willoughby" that made his antagonistic views toward left-leaning Americans very clear, even referring to them as "travelling dupes and befuddled liberals." But still, no evidence of a YAF connection.

Next, I turned my attention to the Douglas MacArthur Archives at the MacArthur Memorial in Norfolk, Virginia, where I was told there was a sizeable collection of Willoughby's papers. I contacted an archivist at the library there and asked him if there was any correspondence or any other evidence that could link Willoughby to YAF. He replied that there was no such evidence, but I requested and received the finding aids for their Willoughby files anyway. After spending about an hour reading through all the items, I still could not find anything.

With my options dwindling, I decided to venture into the belly of the beast. Putting my political aspirations to be a progressive reformer on the line by talking to an arch-conservative group, I decided to contact the YAF Headquarters and ask if they had any evidence that Willoughby was involved in any way with their organization. About a week later, I was contacted by Wayne Thorburn, the man who literally wrote the book on YAF. According to Thorburn, Willoughby was not involved in the establishment of YAF but he did serve on the National Advisory Board, which he claimed was a largely ceremonial role without any actual influence on the policies of the organization. This seemed like a plausible solution to the conflicting evidence I uncovered. YAF was probably not an important part of Willoughby's life if he only served in a honorary role, which would account for the lack of evidence of his involvement. At the same time, this

honorary position with YAF was apparently enough for conspiracy theorists to make the claim that he was involved in the death of JFK.

Even though I finally found my link, I had to conclude that it was so tangential that I could not make an honest story out of the Willoughby—YAF connection. I could have still run with the story and explained how a Gettysburg alumnus, who MacArthur referred to as “my little fascist,” was deeply involved with an organization that is going to controversial extents to make itself known on campus. But this would not qualify as acting like an honest historian. In truth, I would be no better than the JFK conspirators or the conservative bloggers who ranted on Breitbart or The Blaze claiming that Gettysburg College stifled YAF’s freedom of speech. Instead of connecting points that weren’t there and overlooking evidence in order to make a political point, I did hard research that thoroughly evaluated the evidence and the lack thereof. In the end, I could not write the story I wanted, but I learned an invaluable lesson in the values of being true to honest historical methodology, and maintained my integrity as a historian.

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<http://gettysburgcompiler.com/2016/01/08/the-missing-link-the-search-for-the-connection-between-young-americans-for-freedom-and-charles-willoughby/#respond>