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Evangelizing for the American Way: The Professed Mission of Harding Under George S. Benson's Presidency

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REMEMBERING LOCAL HISTORY



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Evangelizing the American Way: The Professed Mission of Harding Under George S. Benson's Presidency

by Laren Houstoun

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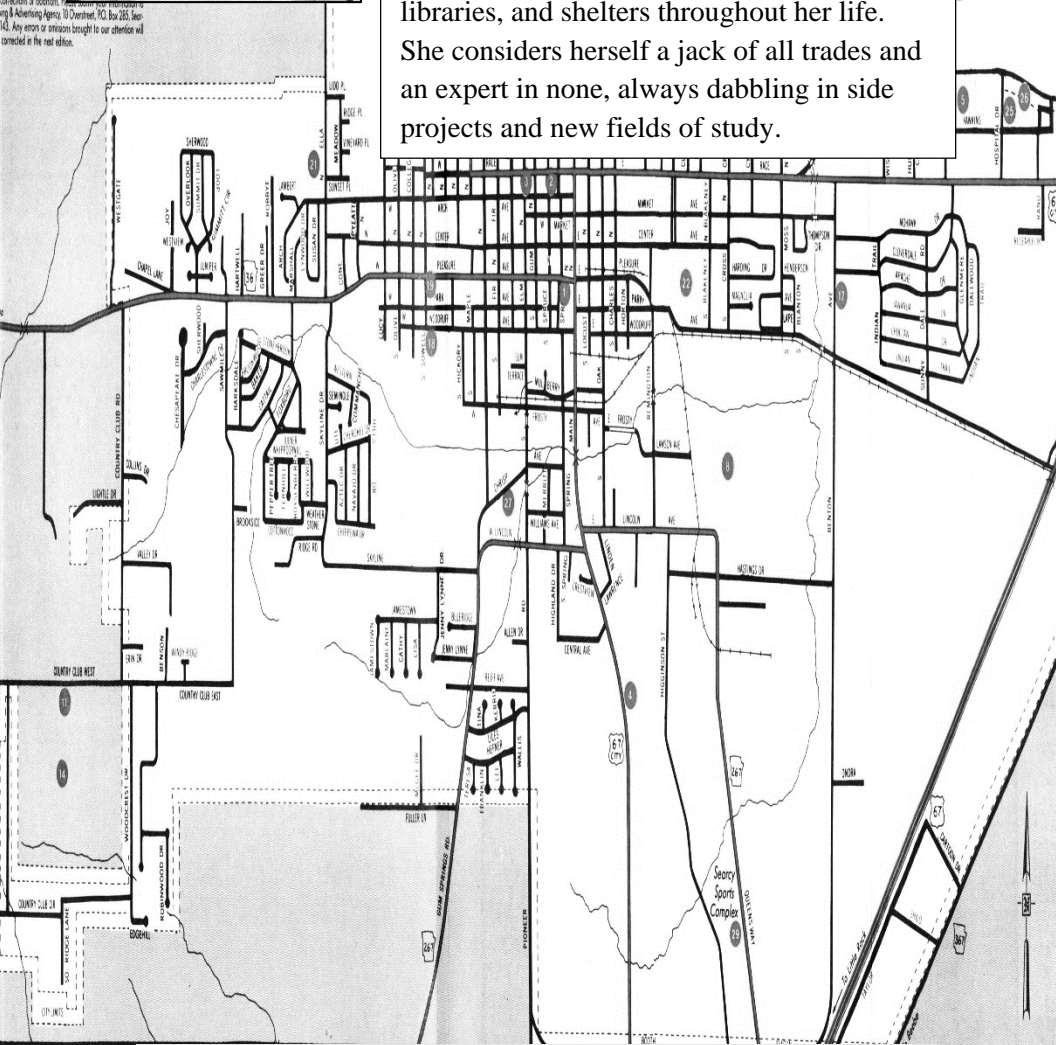


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Laren Houstoun is a History major and a Spanish minor at Harding university. After completing her Bachelor's of Arts and Humanities Degree, she plans to further her education by pursuing a Master's Degree in Library and Information Science. Laren thoroughly enjoys volunteering in the communities in which she lives, and plans to continue volunteering for local museums, libraries, and shelters throughout her life. She considers herself a jack of all trades and an expert in none, always dabbling in side projects and new fields of study.

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EVANGELIZING FOR THE AMERICAN WAY: THE PROFESSED MISSION OF HARDING COLLEGE UNDER GEORGE S. BENSON'S PRESIDENCY

By Laren Houstoun

At its beginning, Harding College was created from the union of two poor junior colleges, Harper College and Arkansas Christian College. Harding first found its home in Morrilton, Arkansas, in the foothills of the Ozarks, in 1924, and then relocated to a campus in Searcy, Arkansas in 1934 as the student body blossomed.¹ Affiliated with the Restoration churches of Christ, the foundations of the rural Arkansas college were biblical. However, the primordial image of the quaint and humble Harding College Bible school of the twenties and thirties does not align with the following description of Harding's home depicted by the *New York Times* on May 18, 1961: "This small town in central Arkansas is perhaps the most prolific center of aggressive anti-Communist propaganda in the United States."² In the decades following its inception, Harding College became heavily associated not only with biblical schooling, but also with Americanism, capitalist ideology, and anti-Communism. The clear display of fervent evangelism for political-economic agendas that developed early on was no accident. Rather, Harding's second president, George S. Benson, deliberately crafted a new reputation for the institution while in office from 1936 until 1965. Though Benson was undoubtedly a devout member of the churches of Christ, the overwhelmingly conservative political and economic agenda he disseminated during his presidency distracted onlookers outside of the churches of Christ from the mission of Christian evangelism and education upon which the school was created.

Many historians have written about Benson and his profound effect on Harding's trajectory. In 1991, John C. Stevens published the seminal biography on Benson, *Before Any Were Willing*, which expands

¹ "History," About Harding, accessed September 18, 2017.

² Cabell Phillips, "Wide Anti-Red Drive Directed From Small Town in Arkansas: Dr. George S. Benson, Head of College and 'National Education Program,' Aims to Alert the Common Man," *New York Times*, May 18, 1961, microfilm, p. 26.

over the entirety of Benson's life to reveal both his remarkable character and actions. Having corresponded with and personally interviewed Benson himself, Stevens' work provides credibility and chronology to events mentioned in various other sources. In his dissertation, "George S. Benson: Conservative, Anti-Communist, Pro-Americanism Speaker," Donald P. Garner describes the cultural background of Benson to give light to the circumstantial motivations behind the president's speeches. In another notable work, *Sometimes Wrong But Never in Doubt*, L. Edward Hicks argues that Benson's extensive efforts in the grassroots movement for small government and free market values culminated in the successful presidential election of Ronald Reagan in 1980. In addition to these secondary sources, a wealth of primary documents regarding Benson's presidency is available. Student, regional, and national newspaper articles provide crucial insight into contemporary perspectives on Benson's actions. In particular, the campus news publication, the *Bison*, reported on contemporary developments of and reactions to Benson's presidency. An interview with Clifton L. Ganus, friend and successor of Benson, is utilized to breathe personality into Benson's narrative. Additionally, Benson's own voice is heard through the use of his media productions and autobiographical accounts.

The identification of the institution's origins, purpose, and tribulations is paramount to recounting the development of Harding's marriage with conservative American political-economic ideologies. As previously stated, Harding emerged from the union of two junior bible colleges. A. S. Croom led Arkansas Christian in Morrilton, Arkansas, one of the two junior colleges.³ Having kept a balanced budget for two years, Croom learned of the major financial difficulties plaguing a neighboring Christian college in Harper, Kansas.⁴ Due to conflict between influential locals, Harper College was not receiving the funds for necessary buildings.⁵ Harper's president at the time was John Nelson Armstrong, a well-known educator, evangelist, and writer trained by the

³ George S. Benson, Autobiographical notes typed for a speech, March 27, 1980, B-001, Benson Files, Special Collections, Brackett Library, Harding University, Searcy, AR, p. 3

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Lloyd C. Sears, *For Freedom: The Biography of John Nelson Armstrong* (Austin, Texas: Sweet Publishing, 1969), 192-197.

major church of Christ leaders, David Lipscomb and James A. Harding, at the Nashville Bible School and Potter Bible College.⁶ Together, Armstrong and Croom salvaged the mission of Harper College by reemploying nearly the entire faculty of Harper College at Arkansas Christian's Morrilton campus with the vision of creating a senior college out of the two schools in 1924.⁷ They modeled their new institution after the example of the Nashville Bible School and the theology of Lipscomb and Harding and named Armstrong its first president. As he presided over the newly formed Harding College, Armstrong set out to create a genuinely Christian atmosphere at Harding, stating, "The greatest gift of a college education should not be knowledge and facts, but enriched character and higher ideals."⁸

Armstrong's presidency was plagued with two critical issues: a lack of local support from churches and a sizable debt. The first issue involved Harding's increasingly damaged standing among the local churches of Christ as a "premillennial" institution due to the reputation of its president.⁹ The Premillennial controversy that plagued Harding's early support can be understood through the distinction of two terms, premillennialism and postmillennialism. Premillennialism is the assumption that Christ could return at any moment and socio-political turmoil would be the indication of this imminent arrival, while postmillennialism holds that a spiritual and cultural advancement of approximately one thousand years would precede to the coming of Christ.¹⁰ Closely associated with the more optimistic postmillennialism, the Restoration Movement advocated societal progress in the United States, and so did the contemporary churches of Christ in Arkansas.¹¹ Unfortunately, Armstrong did not refute regional premillennial leaders loudly enough to convince local churches of his lack of affiliation with the theology. This

⁶ Sears, 188-191.

⁷ Benson, Autobiographical notes for a speech, 3.

⁸ Sears, 235.

⁹ L. Edward Hicks, *Sometimes Wrong, But Never in Doubt: George S. Benson and the Education of the New Religious Right* (Knoxville, Tennessee: University of Tennessee Press, 1994), 19.

¹⁰ Hicks, 17-18.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 18.

blacklisted Harding as a “premillennial” institution, caused it to lose financial support, and perpetuated the outstanding debt.¹²

This large outstanding debt was the second critical issue Harding College faced. Stemming from the inability of local donors to meet their promised pledge sums, Harding’s indebtedness rose to \$45,000.¹³ After borrowing \$50,000 for a girl’s dormitory within the first two years of Harding’s , the indebtedness hit \$95,000.¹⁴ The college’s attorney, Judge Strait, admitted that Harding’s full indebtedness most likely was near \$175,000 to \$200,000 by 1926.¹⁵ For clarity, the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics’ consumer price index (CPI) inflation calculator indicates that the value of \$200,000 in 1926 is equivalent to more than \$2,700,000 in 2017.¹⁶ The unpaid debts fell heavily on Armstrong as their bank and insurance company foreclosed on the college.¹⁷ However, the bankruptcy of local banks and insurers due to the harsh economic conditions proved to be a blessing in disguise for Harding, as the college received debt forgiveness and barely survived through this era.¹⁸ The board that was originally responsible for the finances had only paid a fraction of the faculty salaries since 1925.¹⁹ In the 1930s, the college ran an annual deficit of \$6,000 to \$8,000.²⁰ Eventually, success in campaigning and frugality allowed Armstrong to absolve the mortgage in the mid-1930s. Yet, the increasing student body was outgrowing its campus at Morrilton.²¹ In 1934, Harding College purchased Galloway College, a women’s institution in Searcy, Arkansas, from the local Methodist Church for the bargain of \$75,000.²² However, two years later

¹² Hicks, 19.

¹³ Sears, 219.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 220.

¹⁶ “CPI Inflation Calculator,” Databases, Tables, & Calculators by Subject, accessed November 20, 2017, https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm.

¹⁷ Sears, 223.

¹⁸ Ibid., 224.

¹⁹ Ibid., 228.

²⁰ Sears, 229.

²¹ Sears, 240.

²² George S. Benson, Autobiographical notes typed for an interview with the Oral History Library, B-001, Benson Files, Special Collections, Brackett Library, Harding University, Searcy, AR, p. 7.

Armstrong had yet to pay a single dollar on the debt's interest, which was amassing at around \$4,200 annually.²³

Remarkably, the critical issues facing the adolescent Bible college did not deter teachers and students from the Christian environment at Harding. Though money was scarce, few teachers from the original faculty dropped, student enrollment continued to increase, and both teachers and students made generous donations to pay off the school's mortgage.²⁴ Comparatively, the school was in better financial and quality standings in the mid-1930s than it had ever been before. Nevertheless, on April 22, 1936, an aging and weary Armstrong announced that he would resign.²⁵ Through letters, he offered his position to a missionary in China, hoping this young leader would become the next president of Harding College.

Born to Scotch-Irish parents in Oklahoma's Dewey County in 1898, George S. Benson was reared under the values of thrift and hard work.²⁶ Benson went to high school in Oklahoma and college at both Harper College, later Harding College, and Oklahoma A&M.²⁷ He paid for his schooling through various local jobs and teaching and finally received his Bachelor of Science degree with a double major in history and economics.²⁸ His upbringing and dedication to paying for his own schooling molded his view that if a person was willing to work hard enough they could achieve nearly anything, especially a quality education.²⁹ After graduating in August 1925, Benson married, travelled to China with his new wife to dedicate their lives to mission work.³⁰ Unfortunately, the enthusiastic missionary couple encountered a confusing and violent political atmosphere when Communist

²³ Hicks, 14

²⁴ Sears, 226-228, 232.

²⁵ John N. Armstrong to George S. Benson, March 3, 1936, B001, Benson Files, Special Collections, Brackett Library, Harding University, Searcy, AR.

²⁶ Benson, Autobiographical notes prepared for an interview with the Oral History Library, 1.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁸ Benson, Autobiographical notes prepared for Interview with Oral History Library, 3.

²⁹ Benson, Autobiographical notes prepared for Interview with Oral History Library, 3.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

Kuomintang soldiers took control of inland China. Benson recalls this tumultuous period in one of his biographical essays:

In China, my reception was warm and kind, until the Communist propagandists arrived in 1926. Persecution immediately was rough. All missionaries were driven out. None were left. My own life was threatened every day during the six weeks required to reach HongKong.³¹

This early missionary experience with communism reaffirmed Benson's love for American democracy and free enterprise economics.

While in China, Benson had frequently corresponded with President Armstrong, and from March to May of 1936, Benson received a series of pivotal letters from his old friend. In these letters, Armstrong urged "Brother Benson" to accept the invitation of lead the college in the fall of 1936.³² At first reluctant to leave his dreams as a life-long missionary in China, Benson accepted the offer to become the new president of Harding College on behalf of the request of his old friend.³³ When Benson became president in 1936, Harding College changed. His longtime friend and colleague at Harding, Clifton L. Ganus, spoke of him saying, "Dr. Benson was a very economical man, very strong individual, very dedicated and harder worker," including that he often saw Benson still in his office working at 2:00 in the morning.³⁴ A man of wild ideas and unrelenting perseverance to realize those ideas, Benson often declared, "This life is for working, and the next one's for resting."³⁵ Additionally, he was a charismatic speaker, having acquired his persuasive speaking style through collegiate debate and missionary experience.³⁶ Although the issues that permeated Armstrong's presidency and encouraged his eventual resignation were cumbersome, they

³¹ George S. Benson, "The National Education Program," B042, Benson Files, Special Collections, Brackett Library, Harding University, Searcy, AR, p. 1.

³² Armstrong to Benson, March 3, 1936.

³³ Benson, Autobiographical notes prepared for an interview with the Oral History Library, 7.

³⁴ Clifton L. Ganus, interview by author, Searcy, AR, November 13, 2017.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Hicks, 4-5.

provided the necessary backdrop for Benson to materialize his political and economic philosophies during his presidency.

When his presidency began in 1936, Benson inherited the challenge of solving Harding's financial problems. In his letters, Armstrong made it clear that Benson would not inherit any of his precedents.³⁷ As long as Benson found a way to salvage the Bible school from \$67,400 in debt (roughly equivalent to \$1.2 million today) he was free to transform Harding into something uniquely his own.³⁸ Benson established four goals for his presidency: attain regional accreditation, pay off the debt and add to Harding's funds, stabilize and increase salaries for the faculty, and continue forming genuine knowledge and faith in the present student body of 250 young men and women.³⁹ To meet these goals, Benson established an operating monthly salary schedule and a fundraising drive to foster donations from local churches by October of 1936.⁴⁰ Through his fundraising, Benson received donation pledges from students and staff, local churches, and churches in Northeast Arkansas amounting to a enormous \$15,000 by November of the same year.⁴¹ But as the shadow of Armstrong's premillennial association persisted, local churches became increasingly reluctant to continue their monetary support for Harding.⁴²

Alongside his desire to financially stabilize the Bible school, Benson also felt compelled to advance what he referred to as the "American Way."⁴³ When Benson returned to the United States from China, he found his country in poor spirits from the economic hardships of the Great Depression. Moreover, United States President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal had implemented numerous federally-sponsored relief programs for Americans. According to Benson, "This led, for the first time, to the American people believing that the federal government

³⁷ Armstrong to Benson, March 3, 1936.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Benson, Autobiographical notes prepared for an interview with the Oral History Library, 8.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 7.

⁴¹ Hicks, 15.

⁴² Hicks, 16.

⁴³ "Benson Talks to Groups in Little Rock," *Bison*, January 27, 1942.

owed them a living.”⁴⁴ The polices of the New Deal motivated Benson to become a public speaker upon returning from China.⁴⁵ He later reflected on the context of his return and said, “I had gone to China eleven years earlier because I thought I had a message for China... Now, back in America, I felt I had a message for Americans.”⁴⁶

The concept of the American Way that Benson sought to vindicate is best elaborated by Garner. In his dissertation, Garner categorizes Benson as a voice of classic conservatism in mid-twentieth century America by listing his political and economic preferences. Benson favored laissez-faire economics, the use of private capital, a balanced budget, and an increase in patriotism, and he opposed the expansion of the federal government, welfare programs, increasing national debt, and heavily progressive taxation.⁴⁷ Benson also viewed as a threat and regularly equated communism with socialism.⁴⁸ Equally important to Benson’s American Way ideal was his view that God himself had established free enterprise economics in the world.⁴⁹ These combined beliefs allowed Benson to perceive an education in Americanism as seated upon a Christian worldview.

At the beginning of his role as president, Benson’s ultimate ends were twofold: elevate the economic standing of Harding College and revitalize the American perception of free enterprise. Receiving rejection from local coreligionist congregations, Benson turned away from pious generosity and sought capital from regional and national businessmen, who were themselves in deep need of credible and charismatic free-enterprise avocation. Benson first entered into this market through a man named Clinton Davidson. A graduate of Armstrong and James A. Harding’s Potter Bible College in Kentucky, Davidson was a prominent insurance salesman, financial counselor, and member of the church of

⁴⁴ Benson, “The National Education Program,” 2.

⁴⁵ Donald P. Garner, “George S. Benson: Conservative, Anti-Communist, Pro-Americanism Speaker,” (PhD diss., Wayne State University, 1963), 87.

⁴⁶ George S. Benson, “The Beginning of the National Education Program,” B-042, Benson Files, Special Collections, Brackett Library, Harding University, Searcy, AR, p. 2.

⁴⁷ Garner, 102, 104, 106, 111-113, 115, 119, 124.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 105, 120, 121.

⁴⁹ Garner, 127.

Christ who had associates in New York and Washington.⁵⁰ Flooded with fond memories of his time under Armstrong's teaching, Davidson felt convicted to help Harding, and in turn donated \$10,000 for Benson's campaign efforts.⁵¹ Davidson also secured Benson meetings with executive officers of influential companies such as DuPont Chemical, International Harvester, Quaker Oats, and numerous prominent oil and steel corporations.⁵² Furthermore, George Pepperdine, a Kansas native and the recent endower of the George Pepperdine College in Los Angeles, was moved by Davidson to give nearly \$25,000 to Benson in order to secure more foundations for Christian education and future missionaries.⁵³

According to articles at the time in Harding's student newspaper publication, the *Bison*, Benson's presidency from 1936 to 1939 was consumed with financial campaigns. In search of pledges and donations, the students remained constantly informed about Benson's trips and successes. The *Bison* publication on January 5, 1937 notified students that Benson would "hold rallies all over the southern states" and would "visit a different community each week in behalf of the drive."⁵⁴ By April of 1939, the *Bison* recorded that Benson had travelled to cities all over Arkansas, Illinois, New York, California, Florida, Oklahoma, Kansas, Washington, and Montana.⁵⁵ Through his growing regional connections, Benson was able to start up a series of lecture programs at Harding in the late 1930s that featured successful Arkansas businessmen. The publicity generated by the success of these speaking series encouraged him to broadcast his ideas beyond the Arkansas borders.⁵⁶

Early opportunities and successes gave Benson the funds to pay off the mortgage. "Mortgage Paid!" read the front page of the December 5, 1939 edition of the *Bison*, with multiple articles following to report the

⁵⁰ Hicks, 19.

⁵¹ Sears, 260.

⁵² Hicks, 19.

⁵³ Sears, 261.

⁵⁴ "Benson Leaves for Rally in New York City," *Bison*, January 5, 1937.

⁵⁵ See *Bison* articles from September of 1936 until April of 1939 for a fuller picture of Benson travels as portrayed in the student newspaper.

⁵⁶ Hicks, 31.

enthusiastic moment of debt cancellation.⁵⁷ On Thursday afternoon of November 30, 1939, students, alumni, faculty, and friends stood around as the president emeritus, J. N. Armstrong, was given the honor of tossing the Harding mortgage into a giant fire.⁵⁸ “All eyes watched the flames envelope the blue paper and no longer it blacked the name of Harding.”⁵⁹ In an open letter to the president, the *Bison* staff portrayed Benson as the savior of the times stating, “We are anxious to see a financially secure Harding, and we feel that we could never find a better leader in accomplishing that goal.”⁶⁰ Paying off the mortgage gave Benson, the faculty, and the students much needed confidence in the college’s future. All of those associated with Harding now felt that they could move forward in some important way, and Benson was sure to determine what that important next step would be.

Benson’s persistent success and plentiful connections inspired him to invent something of his own. In the late 1930s, Benson initiated Harding’s “Department of National Education,” an entity soon to be renamed the National Education Program (NEP) in 1941.⁶¹ The purpose of this new “non-profit” and “non-partisan” organization was to create a better understanding of the American Way through various mediums.⁶² Benson incorporated the already well-received speeches into the NEP, and due to the popularity of these lectures, he was invited to write a newspaper column in the early 1940s. This syndicated column, “Looking Ahead,” included the political and economic opinions of Benson, and was eventually featured in about 3,600 different newspapers with millions of weekly readers.⁶³ These political columns were even included in the college’s monthly bulletin.⁶⁴ The NEP also sponsored a 15-minute

⁵⁷ Buck Harris, “Mortgage Paid!” *Bison*, December 5, 1939.

⁵⁸ Harris, “Mortgage Paid: Debt Completely Liquidated Under Benson’s Efforts,” *Bison*, December 5, 1939.

⁵⁹ Buck Harris, “Mortgage Paid: Debt Completely Liquidated Under Benson’s Efforts,” *Bison*, December 5, 1939.

⁶⁰ “An Open Letter to President Benson,” *Bison*, December 5, 1939.

⁶¹ Hicks, 22.

⁶² George S. Benson, “The Purpose of the National Education Program,” Typescript, B042, Benson Files, Special Collections, Brackett Library, Harding University, Searcy, AR, p. 1-2.

⁶³ Frank Hughes, “College is Champion of U.S. Way,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 19, 1948.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

weekly radio program that was used by 137 various stations in 39 states.⁶⁵ Produced in New York by professional speakers, the program called “Land of the Free” dramatized the lives of notable Americans such as Henry Ford, Ted Williams, and Marian Anderson.⁶⁶ In later years, the NEP would formulate new methods of delivering their message to the common man. Hicks wrote, “Happily, the need to save Harding coincided with [Benson’s] urge to vindicate American private enterprise and its constitutional system.”⁶⁷ From here on, Harding would be represented by both the gospel message and Americanism education.

With the mortgage cleared, Benson embarked on a new financial campaign to stabilize Harding’s finances and grow the campus infrastructure, in addition to pursuing regional accreditation.⁶⁸ Benson found a national platform to meet this goal after Wilbur Mills, the Chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee and friend of Benson’s, offered him an extraordinary invitation to speak before Congress.⁶⁹ On May 15, 1941, Benson achieved national fame for proposing a two million dollar cut from the upcoming tax bill to the Ways and Means Committee in the House of Representatives.⁷⁰ The *Bison* was certain to let campus know of this event, and noted that Benson introduced his speech to the Committee as follows:

My name is George S. Benson. I am president of Harding College of Searcy, Arkansas. I represent a small college, located in a small town, in a small state, but I know of no bigger, nor more important idea than the one to which we wish to add our testimony. Gentlemen, the citizens of Arkansas are interested in economy—individual economy and governmental economy.⁷¹

Continuing, Benson warned of aggressive future inflation, socialism, and dictatorship if Congress did not take proper action against rising national

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Hughes, “College is Champion of U.S. Way.”

⁶⁷ Hicks, 21.

⁶⁸ Anne French, “Pres. Benson Sets Forth College Financial Program,” *Bison*, October 22, 1940.

⁶⁹ Ganus, interview by author.

⁷⁰ “Benson Delivers Report On Tax Reduction Before House Ways and Means Committee,” *Bison*, May 20, 1941.

⁷¹ Ibid.

debt.⁷² On May 16, both the *New York Times* and the *Chicago Journal of Commerce* printed Benson's entire speech in their editorial columns.⁷³ This speech made a poignant statement about Benson's purpose as an American citizen and the president of Harding College. In reflection on this event, Ganus recalled, "... speaking before the House of Representatives in Congress, opened a door, and many businessmen then became interested in what he had to say."⁷⁴

Benson found another speaking opportunity on August 21, 1941. He presented to the Senate Finance Committee about the Tax Bill.⁷⁵ In November, Benson made the front-page of the *Arkansas Democrat's* Sunday Magazine with an article titled, "A One-Man Economy Crusade." Oren Stephens began the article by stating, "How strange that the head of a small Arkansas college should become a national figure overnight by the simple act of pleading for economy in non-defense expenditures!"⁷⁶ Stephens continued on to explain how Benson's pioneering background led him to become a man of self-reliance who was able to rescue an indebted school.⁷⁷ This magazine assumed, as many others did, that Benson's mission was a patriotic one, and so was the mission of that "small Arkansas college."

The *Bison* informed students that their president's financial philosophy became increasingly popular following his testimony in the House.⁷⁸ Business clubs, Civic Clubs, Rotary Clubs, Lions Clubs, newspaper alliances, State bank associations, advertising committees, various state Chambers of Commerce, and numerous manufacturing corporations eagerly invited Benson to lecture on the national economy and non-defense expenditures.⁷⁹ Benson's travels took him on an

⁷² "Benson Delivers Report on Tax Reduction Before House Ways and Means Committee," *Bison*.

⁷³ Hicks, 37.

⁷⁴ Ganus, interview by author.

⁷⁵ "Business, Civic Groups Hear Benson Lecture On National Economy," *Bison*, September 30, 1941.

⁷⁶ Oren Stephens, "One-Man Economy Crusade," *Arkansas Democrat*, November 9, 1941.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ "Business, Civic Groups Hear Benson Lecture On National Economy," *Bison*, September 30, 1941.

⁷⁹ "Business, Civic Groups Hear Benson Lecture On National Economy," Hicks, 38-39.

“extensive lecture tour” to Missouri, Louisiana, Kansas, Illinois, Ohio, Iowa, Tennessee, and Wisconsin, with future engagements planned for Oklahoma, Alabama, Iowa, Minnesota, and Maryland.⁸⁰ In an interview with an Oklahoma Congressman on the National Broadcasting Company (NBC), Benson declared that the reason Harding graduates were in such high demand was because “they have learned to economize.”⁸¹ Also telling of Harding’s budding reputation was a statement from a contemporaneous *Bison* article that read, “Both Dr. Benson and Harding College have gained nationwide attention as a result of the economy program which he advocates.”⁸² Benson’s message for America was quickly becoming synonymous with Harding’s message for America.

The awards Benson received also indicated how the nation viewed his efforts. In October of 1941, a group of Michigan citizens sent Benson a gold boxing glove with the engraving “Champion College President of 1941.”⁸³ Dr. Hugh S. Magill, the president of the American Federation of Investors, referred to Benson’s speech to the Senate Finance Committee as “one of the most valuable contributions yet made to our national economy and the preservation of our American system.”⁸⁴ Additionally, the Tax Foundation in New York City presented Benson with a medal in honor of his efforts to create a sound national economic philosophy.⁸⁵ In the Special Edition of January 6, 1942, the *Bison* dedicated the majority of the articles in the student newspaper to their president in order to express praise and gratitude for the “Bensonian Doctrine” of American hard work and thrift that had garnered such attention.⁸⁶

⁸⁰ “Business, Civic Groups Hear Benson Lecture On National Economy,” *Bison*, September 30, 1941.

⁸¹ “Dr. Benson Talks to Nation in Broadcast: President Interviewed by Member of the House Ways and Means Committee,” *Bison*, November 4, 1941.

⁸² “Business, Civic Groups Hear Benson Lecture On National Economy,” *Bison*, September 30, 1941.

⁸³ “Dr. Benson Receives Title of ‘Champ,’” *Bison*, October 7, 1941.

⁸⁴ “Benson in Commended For His Contributions to National Economy,” *Bison*, October 7, 1941.

⁸⁵ “Tax Foundation Gives Plaque to Pres. Benson: Large National Group Praises His Efforts As Educator, Citizen,” *Bison*, December 16, 1941.

⁸⁶ See articles from the Special Edition of the *Bison* on January 6, 1942.

Another significant publicity opportunity for Harding arrived less than a year later after Harding students made a bold statement to the National Youth Association (NYA), a government organization formally established in 1935 to provide federal grants to students struggling to pay for schooling.⁸⁷ A *Bison* article published in 1937 reported that there were 67 Harding students at the time who were receiving a total of \$780 dollars each month from the NYA.⁸⁸ However, the NYA was considered a wasteful “alphabet agency” by those opposed to President Roosevelt’s New Deal programs, such as Benson.⁸⁹ Benson’s persistence on the dissolution of this organization culminated into student action when, on January 24, 1942, twenty of his students signed a letter to Secretary Henry Morgenthau of the US Treasury Department desiring elimination from NYA payroll because they could “secure employment and make [their] way in college without receiving NYA assistance.”⁹⁰ Though Aubrey Williams, head of the NYA, issued two press releases to disparage the action, many applauded Harding students for performing such a bold statement of self-reliance.⁹¹ The article ultimately made an economic statement by asserting, “If any youth is not now employed, it is his own fault,” by quoting Benson’s understanding of alphabet agencies as “extravagant and wasteful,” and by concluding with the phrase, “Self-reliance epitomizes the American Way!” Benson applauded the students’ action, as he continued to mention this event at conferences as an example of applying his doctrine of American thrift.⁹² It appears that both participants at Harding and onlookers saw a college that preached the restoration of traditional American values more strongly than Christian-based higher education.

From this time until the end of the spring semester of 1945, Benson continued to pursue his economic policy preferences in federal

⁸⁷ Harding students to Secretary Henry Morgenthau, January 24, 1942, reprinted in “The Flame That Must Not Die,” on p. 11, B0037, Benson Files, Special Collections, Brackett Library, Harding University, Searcy, AR.

⁸⁸ “NYA Funds Are Furnished 67 Local People,” *Bison*, April 27, 1937.

⁸⁹ “Bensonian Doctrine: ‘Thrift and Work,’” *Bison*, January 6, 1942.

⁹⁰ Harding students to Secretary Henry Morgenthau, January 24, 1942.

⁹¹ Frank Hughes, “\$75,000 Debt Just Memory for College: President Leads It to Fame,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 22, 1948.

⁹² “Benson Speaks to Citizen Body About Economy: He Is Selected to Serve on Organizing Committee of the New Association,” *Bison*, February 3, 1942.

and state administrations while simultaneously visiting cities to fundraise for Harding's endowment. On April 15, 1942, Benson paid a visit to the Senate Labor Committee to urge the abolition of the NYA and other alphabet agencies.⁹³ Every Friday at 6:30 p.m., Benson spoke through Little Rock's KARK and Memphis's WMC about the importance of corporations and the effects taxes have on them.⁹⁴ In May of 1942, Clinton Davidson spoke at Harding on financial investments and industry to satisfy Benson's goal that Harding graduates "depend in large part upon their opportunity to engage in private enterprise and understand it."⁹⁵ At the end of 1944, Benson announced a detailed plan for securing the endowment program, elucidating the need of at least \$500,000 to reach its goal of accreditation.⁹⁶

After 1945, Benson focused his crusading efforts against federal aid and communist philosophy in the US through radio broadcasts and NEP publications.⁹⁷ In January of 1946, Benson gave a speech to a crowd of 20,000 at Madison Square Garden, New York City on his "cure for Communism."⁹⁸ His cure was a "return to God," vaguely meaning a return to the harmonious cooperation between agriculture, labor, and industry.⁹⁹ In this speech, Benson promoted the idea that the principles of free enterprise are the principles referred to by Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount.¹⁰⁰ The "sound reasoning" of this speech and many others continued to espouse much attention, and landed him recognition in the September issues of both the *National Geographic* and the *Reader's*

⁹³ "Benson Appears Before Senators," *Bison*, April 21, 1942.

⁹⁴ "Hear Benson on KARK; WMC," *Bison*, September 29, 1942.

⁹⁵ "Economist Talks to Student Body Thursday Night: '1942 Model' Economy Expert, Yale Graduate, Well Known as Business Trends Forecaster," *Bison*, May 5, 1942.

⁹⁶ "Benson Announces Program Which Will Endow College: Seek 150 Subscribers to Pledge Hundred Dollars Each Year," *Bison*, December 12, 1944.

⁹⁷ Review of *Bison* articles from 1945 to 1947.

⁹⁸ "Dr. Benson Gives Cure for Communism: Presents Answer to Ideology of Karl Marx Before Audience of 20,000 in Madison Square Garden," *Bison*, January 15, 1946.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ "Dr. Benson Gives Cure for Communism: Presents Answer to Ideology of Karl Marx Before Audience of 20,000 in Madison Square Garden," *Bison*, January 15, 1946.

Digest.¹⁰¹ These beloved national magazines emphasized his opposition to “free scholarships” from the government and three techniques he claimed would be used by Communists to destroy American freedom.¹⁰² Benson received additional widespread recognition for a booklet he wrote entitled “America In The Valley of Decision,” which became so popular that it required a third printing of 143,000 copies.¹⁰³ Also, the 1946 edition of the Biographical Encyclopedia of the World included Benson under the section, “Who’s Important in Education,” elucidating Benson’s notable effects on American educational thought.¹⁰⁴

Additionally, the *Chicago Daily Tribune* released extensive press coverage of Benson’s Harding in January of 1948. After studying what the *Tribune* considered “the operations of a small college in Arkansas dedicated to the glorification of Americanism,” the paper’s staff writer, Frank Hughes, wrote enthusiastic articles about Harding for four consecutive days.¹⁰⁵ In the first article published January 19, Hughes praised Harding’s “militant message” for traditional American values, overtly crediting Benson with the feat of reaching reportedly 25 million Americans weekly.¹⁰⁶ He believed the “one man” college’s message was most clearly rendered through Benson’s four essential factors for American happiness and prosperity: upholding constitutional government, honoring private property, encouraging cooperation between the various industry sectors, and fair taxation.¹⁰⁷ Hughes’s interpretation of what Harding stood for reflected the reality of the institution’s mission under Benson. Hughes’s second article published on January 20 was titled “Work, Profit! It’s Credo Of This College.”¹⁰⁸ He immediately bragged about how the students at that institution learned about capitalism, asserting that it must be a morally justified cause

¹⁰¹ Mary Jean Godwin, “Dr. Benson Widely Quoted in Leading U.S. Journals,” *Bison*, October 10, 1946.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ “Valley of Decision Booklet by Benson Has Large Response,” *Bison*, October 17, 1946.

¹⁰⁴ “Benson Is Included in ’46 Edition of World Encyclopedia,” *Bison*, February 27, 1947.

¹⁰⁵ Hughes, “College is a Champion of U.S. Way: 25 Million Get Its Message.”

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ Hughes, “College is a Champion of U.S. Way: 25 Million Get Its Message.”

¹⁰⁸ Frank Hughes, “Work Profit! It’s Credo of this College: Students Live the American Way,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 20, 1948.

because of the students' professed faith in Christ.¹⁰⁹ The third article he presented on January 21 uniquely focused on Harding's spiritual mission; nevertheless, Christianity is merely used as the third bullet point for how to cultivate an effective Americanism education school.¹¹⁰ Lastly, Hughes's fourth article on January 22 is a biography of Benson, honing in on the former missionary's experience with communism and anti-business attitudes while triumphing over Harding's dire financial conditions.¹¹¹ Hughes noticed that, at the beginning of Benson's presidency, very few Americans outside of Searcy, Arkansas' White County were cognizant of the existence of Harding, yet in 1948 the tiny rural school managed to actualize unprecedented fame.¹¹² How the tiny, rural college managed to make headlines spoke volumes about its professed mission.

Benson vigilantly worked to make the dream of a financially stable Harding come true, and his work with the NEP and other events was paying off, quite literally. Harding College purchased the WHBQ radio station in Memphis for \$300,000 in 1946.¹¹³ This purchase would accordingly profit around \$60,000 annually for Harding, which initially helped Benson raise teachers' pay.¹¹⁴ Benson set another financial campaign in motion on the first day of March in 1948 to raise 1.5 million dollars for much needed campus infrastructure.¹¹⁵ By the end of that same month, the *Bison* reported Benson had already raised \$872,570, the equivalent of approximately \$9.2 million today.¹¹⁶ College staff declared this to be the most momentous feat in Harding's history since the

¹⁰⁹ Hughes, "Work Profit!"

¹¹⁰ Frank Hughes, "How College Finds Pro-U.S. Instructors: Looks for Truth, Christian Ideals," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 21, 1948.

¹¹¹ Hughes, "\$75,000 Debt Just Memory for College: President Leads It to Fame."

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ "Harding Buys Memphis Radio Station WHBQ," *Bison*, May 21, 1946.

¹¹⁴ "Harding Buys Memphis Radio Station WHBQ," *Bison*, May 21, 1946; Frank Hughes, "Work Profit! It's Credo of this College: Students Live the American Way."

¹¹⁵ "Initial Success of Campaign Celebrated: Dr. George Benson Breaks Ground For First of Proposed Buildings," *Bison*, March 30, 1948.

¹¹⁶ "Initial Success of Campaign Celebrated: Dr. George Benson Breaks Ground For First of Proposed Buildings," "CPI Inflation Calculator," Databases, Tables, & Calculators by Subject, accessed November 20, 2017, https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm.

mortgage liquidation in 1939.¹¹⁷ In 1948, Harding also owned and managed 1,500 acres of farmland for profitable livestock, a block plant, and a laundry and dry cleaning plant, all operations that did considerable business for the college.¹¹⁸ By 1949, the *Bison* laid out the new objectives Benson had for Harding College, namely more buildings, more teachers and maintenance workers, and individual academic guidance for students.¹¹⁹ The school also continued its presentation for admission into the North Central Accrediting Association.¹²⁰

In the mid-1940s, Benson fashioned a new and groundbreaking product through the NEP. Dreaming of producing quality film for Americanism education, he consulted with the most well-known figure in the cartoon industry, Walt Disney, about the best way to go about making short films.¹²¹ Disney then referred Benson to John Sutherland, a former executive of Disney Studios and then-current film producer in Los Angeles.¹²² Sutherland and Benson corresponded throughout 1946 about film possibilities, and Sutherland initially informed Benson that the cost for producing one film would be about \$50,000.¹²³ Both Sutherland and Benson shared the vision of educating viewers on patriotism and free enterprise, but both also lacked the funds to do so.¹²⁴ Therefore, the duo sought help from Mr. Alfred Sloan, the former Chairman of the Board of General Motors and the president of the Sloan Foundation.¹²⁵ An advocate of Americanism himself, Sloan ended up donating an astonishing one million dollars towards the film production.¹²⁶ Though Sutherland's colleagues produced the films rather than the NEP staff, Benson made sure to have the official address for the films be written as

¹¹⁷ "Initial Success of Campaign Celebrated: Dr. George Benson Breaks Ground For First of Proposed Buildings."

¹¹⁸ Hicks, 29.

¹¹⁹ "Benson Reveals New Objective in College Improvement Program," *Bison*, February 1, 1949.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ Hicks, 63.

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ John Sutherland to George S. Benson, December 26, 1946, B-057, Benson Files, Special Collections, Brackett Library, Harding University, Searcy, AR.

¹²⁴ John Sutherland to George S. Benson, October 2, 1947, B-057, Benson Files, Special Collections, Brackett Library, Harding University, Searcy, AR.

¹²⁵ Hicks, 63.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

Harding College, Searcy, Arkansas. More than 30 unique films were eventually produced through the NEP under Benson's direction.¹²⁷

Though the overall themes of the videos were plainly pro-Americanism and anti-Communism, the actual content and storylines were surprisingly creative. In the comical "Albert in Blunderland," an American mechanic named Albert falls into a dream world called "Antrolia."¹²⁸ In this world, ant citizens live under a government that has total control and authority in every aspect of public life, including job classification and what films are shown.¹²⁹ Albert protests against such destructions of personal liberties and, as a result, is sent to be killed by the "planning board," an assembly that has recently been reelected for its fiftieth consecutive term.¹³⁰ He screams, "Get the exterminator, get the DDT," as he wakes up from the dream.¹³¹ Once awake, he uses this insight about communist ruling to spread the truth about Communism.¹³² In another film titled "Dear Uncle," Uncle Sam appeals to a bickering farmer, businessman, and laborer.¹³³ As the Soviet sickle and hammer enlarge on the screen, Uncle Sam says, "Unless your government practices some good old-fashioned American thrift, a bunch of certain sharp operators may be able to pick up our country at a bargain price."¹³⁴ In "Make Mine Freedom," the narrator blatantly displays anti-communist attitude by depicting a crooked salesman, named Dr. Utopia, who attempts to sell discouraged Americans a magical elixir called "ism."¹³⁵ These NEP films overtly expressed Benson's worries about planned economy, economic illiteracy, and the spread of non-traditional philosophies by the intellectual elites. Benson hoped these films would cause others to worry and take action as well.

¹²⁷ Benson, "The Purpose of the National Education Program," 3.

¹²⁸ "Albert in Blunderland," John Sutherland Productions, 1950, Special Collections, Brackett Library, Harding University, Searcy, AR.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² "Albert in Blunderland."

¹³³ "Dear Uncle," John Sutherland Productions, 1952, Special Collections, Brackett Library, Harding University, Searcy, AR.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ "Make Mine Freedom," John Sutherland Productions, 1948, Special Collections, Brackett Library, Harding University, Searcy, AR.

Due to the use of Technicolor's superior color processing and various economic specialists for script writing, the films produced over the next decade were of such high quality that Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) voluntarily distributed these productions across 5,000 of their theaters around the nation.¹³⁶ MGM later reported that the "Harding cartoons" became the corporation's most popular short subject films.¹³⁷ In 1950, *Business Week* applauded the films for being both educational and entertaining.¹³⁸ By 1952, 63 out of 107 total national television stations had displayed the film "Going Places."¹³⁹ People who had never heard of Harding would now have their first association through visual lessons on the American way.

The NEP hosted another successful program, the Freedom Forums, which annually featured nationally recognized businessmen and anti-communist speakers in a lectureship often on Harding's campus. Occasionally, the Forums were outsourced to different cities to allow for larger audiences.¹⁴⁰ In 1950, the NEP sponsored Freedom Forum VII at Purdue University on the topic "Arming the Home Front," using lectures and then-state-of-the-art flannel board presentations.¹⁴¹ Americanism and economic education dominated the discussion of Freedom Forum IX, with nationally recognized economists and large corporation executives heading the lectures at Harding in March of 1951.¹⁴² In October 1951, Freedom Forum X invited an especially well-known keynote speaker, Louis Budenz. An economics professor at Fordham University in New York, Louis Budenz was celebrated at the time for being the star witness in a fiery trial that led to the deportation of eleven Communist Party

¹³⁶ See the following sources: Sutherland to Arnold Zurcher, September 2, 1947; Alan Valentine to George S. Benson, May 22, 1947, B-057, Benson Files, Special Collections, Brackett Library, Harding University, Searcy, AR; Bethany Moreton, *To Serve God and Wal-Mart* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2009), 166.

¹³⁷ Hicks, 63.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹³⁹ Hicks, 64.

¹⁴⁰ "The Story of the National Education Program," *Bison*, April 18, 1963.

¹⁴¹ "National Education Program to Hold Freedom Forum at Purdue," *Bison*, October 14, 1950.

¹⁴² "Freedom Forum IX to Be Held at Harding March 19 Through 23," *Bison*, January 27, 1951.

members in 1949, and he visited the Harding event to speak on the corruption of America by communist philosophy.¹⁴³

In 1952, Benson successfully married the goal of the NEP with Harding's academic curriculum by the American Studies Program. Benson began seeking funds for this program as early as 1950. A financial report in Benson's personal files show that from December 30, 1950 to August 15, 1951, Benson solicited \$96,510 worth of contributions for the "School in American Studies Fund" through NEP connections with large corporations.¹⁴⁴ This allowed for the construction of a new, three-story American Studies building, and a budget of over \$500,000 for the first five years.¹⁴⁵ Opening in 1952, Harding's School of American Studies was multi-disciplinary program that offered a four-year degree program with courses in history, political science, economics, and public administration.¹⁴⁶ A two-year involvement in these new courses became a requirement for all students, while some could choose to pursue a full bachelor's or master's degree in the field.¹⁴⁷ Using mediums like lectures, films, research, and discussion groups, the American Studies Program seemed fairly similar to the NEP itself.¹⁴⁸

Benson's work for the NEP and Harding culminated in 1953 when he again made the front-page after being voted "Arkansan of the Year" in the *Arkansas Democrat* Sunday Magazine's sixth annual statewide poll.¹⁴⁹ This event exemplified the individual fame Benson had acquired for his Americanism mission. Jackie King, student writer for the *Bison*, wrote in commemoration of this event that Benson "raised

¹⁴³ Sarah Longley, "Budenz-Moses Scheduled For Freedom Forum X," *Bison*, October 6, 1951.

¹⁴⁴ George S. Benson, "Contributors to School in American Studies Fund," typescript, B-037, Benson Files, Special Collections, Brackett Library, Harding University, Searcy, AR.

¹⁴⁵ Bethany Moreton, *To Serve God and Wal-Mart* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2009), 166.

¹⁴⁶ Hicks, 67.

¹⁴⁷ "American Studies at Harding," in *School of American Studies: Full Scholarship for Teachers of American History and Social Studies*, 1961, pamphlet, B-037, Benson Files, Special Collections, Brackett Library, Harding University, Searcy, AR.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ C. C. Allard, "Dr. Benson Named Arkansas of Year in Democrat's '53 Poll," *Arkansas Democrat*, November 29, 1953.

Harding out of obscurity to national prominence,” elevating the value of the school to over \$4.5 million.¹⁵⁰ In the same edition of the *Bison*, a tribute was written to Benson honoring his selection as Arkansan of the Year.¹⁵¹ The author noted in regards to the congratulations, “Perhaps our motives are a little selfish in this respect, for we know that any honors that come his way will necessarily bring commendation on Harding itself.”¹⁵² Benson was the face of Harding, and as remarked in the tribute, his engagements and awards were also wedded to Harding.

Despite all the regional and national attention by 1953, Harding College still did not qualify for accreditation. The Chairman of the Board of the North Central Accrediting Association, Norman Burns, had purposefully turned down Harding College’s application.¹⁵³ According to Stevens, four rumored problems stood in the way of Harding’s long-awaited accreditation: first, many educators believed that he purposefully indoctrinated his students; second, many in the accrediting office disagreed with Benson’s opposition to federal aid for teachers’ salaries; also, many questioned his comfortable relationship with rich, corporate leaders; and lastly, others disliked that Benson criticized schools that did not offer American History and Comparative Economics as required courses.¹⁵⁴ When Benson confronted Burns on the matter, the Chairman confirmed these suspicions, and Burns suggested that Harding and the NEP teach communism and socialism alongside Americanism without making one appear the superior.¹⁵⁵ Unwilling to compromise on the American Way, Benson and the Chairman made a deal. If the NEP officially separated from Harding College, Benson could remain the president of both and Harding could achieve accreditation.¹⁵⁶ In 1954, the conjoined twins were officially separated, as NEP received its own charter and Board of Directors.¹⁵⁷ This event showed that Harding’s

¹⁵⁰ Jackie King, “Dr. Benson Selected Arkansan of the Year,” *Bison*, December 5, 1953.

¹⁵¹ “A Tribute to Our President,” *Bison*, December 5, 1953.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

¹⁵³ George Benson, interview about the NEP, typescript, B-001, Benson Files, Special Collections, Brackett Library, Harding University, Searcy, AR.

¹⁵⁴ Stevens, 165, 168.

¹⁵⁵ George Benson, interview about the NEP.

¹⁵⁶ George Benson, interview about the NEP.

¹⁵⁷ Benson, “The Purpose of the National Education Program,” 2.

Americanism message spoke loudly enough that the institution risked its accreditation if it did not separate itself from the NEP.

Although from this point on the NEP and Harding College were nominally divorced, an intimate relationship between the two still existed and never truly disappeared. The National Education Program had already portrayed Harding as a center for conservative economic and political philosophy to 25 million Americans through its versatile mediums. It also inspired the creation of the American Studies Program, a large part of campus curriculum and life. Also, the American Studies Building, created for Harding's American Studies Program, was in large part funded by NEP contributors.¹⁵⁸ For that reason, the NEP headquarters occupied five rooms on the building's third floor, and retained these offices after the split.¹⁵⁹ Yet in a confidential report, Benson asserted the money from the NEP was not used for Harding.¹⁶⁰ Ganus described the bond between Harding and the NEP as a "symbiotic relationship," noting the difficulty in advocating for one without the other.¹⁶¹ Whether through direct funds or indirect contacts, the fact that the NEP was Harding's most important financial asset during Benson's presidency created difficulty in distinguishing the mission of one organization from the other.

Anti-Communist themes persisted in the NEP and at Harding College, reminding onlookers that Harding itself was anti-Communist, too. In 1950, Benson invited the Hungarian, Frederic Pisky-Schmidt, to explain his experiences in a Hungarian labor camp due to his resistance against Communism. He shared his understanding that World War III had in fact already begun in 1945, yet Americans remained blind to their dire circumstance.¹⁶² Furthermore, Benson aided a textbook investigation in late 1953, where a number of books written by University of Pennsylvania professor, Dr. A. H. Hobbs, had been labeled as overtly collectivist, internationalist, and unfavorable towards traditional tenets of

¹⁵⁸ Benson, "Contributors to School in American Studies Fund."

¹⁵⁹ Maurice Moore, "Benson Likes Conservative Label, Detests Other Names," *Arkansas Democrat*, March 11, 1962.

¹⁶⁰ Stevens, 150.

¹⁶¹ Ganus, interview by author.

¹⁶² "Hungarian Speaks on Communism in World Today," *Bison*, December 9, 1950.

the American way.¹⁶³ Labeled a “witch-hunt” by one state representative, the textbook scandal was settled when Benson and a few others spoke before the Arkansas Legislative Council with their reviews of four of the allegedly pro-Communist books.¹⁶⁴ In 1956, Freedom Forum XVII was consumed with the threat of communism in the United States, as Benson stressed the importance of selling citizens on the American way of life in light of the current successful communist activities.¹⁶⁵ As a guest speaker for the American Studies program, the former secretary to the Foreign Minister of Czechoslovakia visited the campus to discuss “Techniques of Communist Conquest” in 1960.¹⁶⁶ On multiple occasions, former undercover agent for the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) appeared on campus to reveal the intentions of the Communists Party members in the country.¹⁶⁷

Heavy criticism from predominantly liberal crowds soon followed Harding’s close association with anti-communism in the last few years of Benson’s presidency. Stevens describes the years following 1961 as “the storm” due to a bombardment of criticism in the media against the Benson-NEP-Harding trio.¹⁶⁸ Inspired by some of the NEP’s prized films, the *New York Times* writer, Cabell Phillips, wrote an article entitled “Wide Anti-Red Drive Directed From Small Town in Arkansas” in 1961.¹⁶⁹ Disapproving of the Benson, Harding, and NEP trinity, Phillips mocked the inaccuracy and unapologetic right-wing propaganda

¹⁶³ “Textbook Investigation Ends With Book Reviews,” *The Arkansas Democrat*, December 13, 1953; Matilda Tuohey, “Textbook Probe Climax Seen in Session Today,” *Arkansas Gazette*.

¹⁶⁴ Matilda Tuohey, “Textbook Probe Climax Seen in Session Today,” *Arkansas Gazette*.

¹⁶⁵ “Benson Opens Freedom Forum,” *Bison*, April 25, 1956.

¹⁶⁶ “Czech to Speak Thursday Evening on Communism,” *Bison*, February 11, 1960.

¹⁶⁷ See the following articles from the *Bison*: Jackie King, “Freedom Forum XV to Emphasize Youth,” *Bison*, April 10, 1954; “Philbrick Tells About Life as Communist,” *Bison*, October 5, 1961; “Bales, Philbrick Collaborate on Red’s Attack on Religion,” *Bison*, November 15, 1962; “FBI Agent to Speak October 1,” *Bison*, September 28, 1961; “Philbrick Speaks on Communist Role in Kennedy Assassination,” *Bison*, March 11, 1965; “Communist Take-Over Near, Philbrick Informs Audience,” *Bison*, May 5, 1965; and more.

¹⁶⁸ Stevens, 184.

¹⁶⁹ Phillips, “Wide Anti-Red Drive Directed From Small Town in Arkansas: Dr. George Benson, Head of College and ‘National Education Program,’ Aims to Alert the Common Man.”

of the 45-minute Technicolor production “Communism on the Map.”¹⁷⁰ Correspondingly, Norman Thomas, the Presbyterian American and six-time presidential nominee for the Socialist Party of America, berated the film for being “false or misleading” and for incorrectly equating communism with socialism.¹⁷¹ *The San Diego Evening Tribune* echoed Phillips’ journalism in July of 1961 to inform Californians of that Harding College was a fervent influence in the anti-Communist grassroots movement.¹⁷² At the University of Washington, a collaborative letter from 92 professors avowed that the educators were especially disturbed this film’s “irresponsible mingling of fact and falsehood and by its gross distortion of historical events.”¹⁷³ In response to these criticisms and others referring to Harding as “ultraconservative” or “ultrarightist,” Benson said, “Harding College is conservative and it is anticommunist. But standing for these fundamentals doesn’t make the college radical, extremist or ultrarightist.”¹⁷⁴

The influence of Benson’s presidency at Harding from 1936 to 1965 is astounding to say the least. According to Benson himself, one million dollars a year for 29 years was added to Harding’s capital while he served as president.¹⁷⁵ Future presidents have also not been shy in acknowledging his accomplishments. Ganus reflects on Benson’s presidency by remarking, “He was the guy for the time.”¹⁷⁶ Another former president of Harding, Dr. David B. Burks, considers Benson to be “one of the most unique and significant individuals of the 20th Century.”¹⁷⁷ Along with other notable recognitions, Benson received

¹⁷⁰ Phillips, “Wide Anti-Red Drive Directed From Small Town in Arkansas: Dr. George Benson, Head of College and ‘National Education Program,’ Aims to Alert the Common Man.”

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷² Dick Eby, “Dr. Benson vs. Kremlin: Tiny Arkansas Town Picks Up Red Gauntlet,” *San Diego Evening Tribune*, July 19, 1961.

¹⁷³ Phillips, “Wide Anti-Red Drive Directed From Small Town in Arkansas: Dr. George Benson, Head of College and ‘National Education Program,’ Aims to Alert the Common Man.”

¹⁷⁴ Moore, “Benson Likes Conservative Label, Detests Other Names,” *Arkansas Democrat*, March 11, 1962.

¹⁷⁵ Benson, “The National Education Program,” 6.

¹⁷⁶ Ganus, interview by author.

¹⁷⁷ David B. Burks, preface to *Before Any Were Willing: The Story of George S. Benson*, by John C. Stevens (Searcy, Arkansas: Harding University, 1992).

numerous awards at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania from the Freedom Foundation for “helping to bring about a greater appreciation and understanding of the American Way of Life...”¹⁷⁸ The honorary chairman and president of this foundation were President Eisenhower and former President Hoover respectively.¹⁷⁹ Benson explained that he repeatedly received offers for more lucrative and noteworthy positions than serving as president of Harding.¹⁸⁰ After President Eisenhower took office, Benson recalled taking a long distance phone call that inquired if Benson would like to become the new Secretary of Indian Affairs, to which he replied, “I’m sorry but I am in a work I can’t leave.”¹⁸¹

Both Hicks and Stevens propose that Benson’s influence far extended the era of his presidency. Hicks’s main argument in *Sometimes Wrong, But Never in Doubt* relies on the idea that Benson’s sweeping influence on conservative political and economic principles were vital to Reagan’s success in 1980.¹⁸² Stevens concurs that Benson merits more credit for fostering the conservative political triumph at the end of the twentieth century.¹⁸³ President Reagan himself also had considerations about Harding’s second president. In a speech recorded specifically for Benson’s birthday in September of 1987, Reagan remarked that Benson began warning of the danger that communism posed for America “before any were willing to accept the warning, or to believe that it could possibly have any bearing on us.”¹⁸⁴ Reagan added that he could not even count the number of times he had quoted Benson in his own speeches.¹⁸⁵

As a strong member of the churches of Christ with missionary aspirations and achievements, Benson strongly believed in Harding’s original mission of providing quality Christian education while president. Benson assumed that Christian beliefs formed the foundation of the

¹⁷⁸ “Benson, Ganus Receive Recognition Awards From Freedom Foundation,” the *Bison*, February 25, 1960.

¹⁷⁹ “Benson, Ganus Receive Recognition Awards From Freedom Foundation.”

¹⁸⁰ Benson, Autobiographical notes for a speech, 5-6.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁸² Hicks, xxv.

¹⁸³ Stevens, foreword to *Before Any Were Willing: The Story of George S. Benson* (Searcy, Arkansas: Harding University, 1992), 3.

¹⁸⁴ Stevens, foreword to *Before Any Were Willing: The Story of George S. Benson* (Searcy, Arkansas: Harding University, 1992), 3.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

Evangelizing for the American Way

American Way, and allowed him to advocate simultaneously for the gospel and capitalism. This is evident when Benson responded to harsh criticism over NEP materials by testifying, “My aim is to move public opinion at the grass roots in the direction of godliness and patriotism.”¹⁸⁶ This proclamation accurately reflected Benson’s dual mission for Harding. Nevertheless, Benson’s work while serving at Harding College is regionally and nationally remembered not for selling the common man on Christ, but rather for selling him on the American Way.

¹⁸⁶ Phillips, “Wide Anti-Red Drive Directed From Small Town in Arkansas: Dr. George Benson, Head of College and ‘National Education Program,’ Aims to Alert the Common Man.”