

Duty to Defend: McNeill Smith and the Education of Southern White Liberalism

This thesis explores the operation of Southern white liberalism in North Carolina during the Second Red Scare and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and early 1960s. The project focuses on the character of McNeill Smith, a UNC and Columbia Law School graduate whose experiences in the Navy overseas moved him to confront racial and civil injustices at home in North Carolina. Some of Smith's earliest activism began in 1953, when he and others founded the American Freedom Association. As an anticommunist organization advocating for the leftist position of world nuclear disarmament, the AFA disguised its liberal positions with patriotic and anticommunist rhetoric. In 1958, Smith defended North Carolina Communist Junius Scales despite significant public opposition. Smith's persistent letter-writing campaign to a latent liberal base in North Carolina helped secure Scales's clemency in 1962. Finally, in 1959, Smith joined the State Advisory Board of the United States Commission on Civil Rights, a committee with the purpose of uncovering racial discrimination in North Carolina. In 1960, Smith also helped negotiate between the owners of Woolworth's Department Store and black activists during the Greensboro sit-in. The example of McNeill Smith shows historians how white Southern liberals operated during this time. Instead of vocally pursuing liberal, unpopular positions, such as nuclear disarmament, defense of a Communist, or racial integration, white liberals coopted the rhetoric of the conservative right to pursue their liberal agenda. In essence, white liberals received an education in mid-century North Carolina, and their moderate approach helped place North Carolina on a more progressive path by the early 1960s.

