

CAMPUS GESTAPO?

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For years, the UGA police department has enjoyed a reputation for being overzealous and highhanded in its tactics. In their unhealthy passion to be the very model of modern policemen UGA cops have acted as if they believe students and criminal suspects are guinea pigs they can use to practice the intrusive techniques they learned to love at the police academy. They have engaged in Orwellian surveillance activities. They overcharge suspects. They display a grimness of purpose and coldness of attitude that alienates just about everyone except cop groupies.

In my 27 years as a law professor here I have discovered that the UGA police long ago lost any sense of balance and fairness in the way they go about their business.

Years ago there was a snowstorm in Athens. When UGA students threw snowballs at persons and property they were arrested by campus cops and charged with aggravated assault--a 20-year felony (attempted murder is punishable only with 10 years).

During lawful peaceful demonstrations UGA cops have repeatedly videotaped demonstrators. I remember one protest outside Memorial Hall where I saw officers standing on the roof or balcony videotaping participants. During anti-Vietnam War demonstrations UGA cops had a photographer take pictures of demonstrators. Both the cops and the photographer denied the photographer was working for the cops. But after the demonstration a newspaper reporter followed the photographer, who marched right down to the Public Safety Building (UGA police headquarters), and the truth came out.

It is believed by persons familiar with campus police activities that UGA cops have purchased and used thousands of dollars worth of elaborate electronic equipment for photographing and monitoring and other snooping purposes.

UGA police have been known to hide in tall buildings on campus with binoculars to catch marijuana users.

UGA police have been known to take persons arrested for possessing small amounts of marijuana to an interrogation room in the Public Safety Building to obtain a confession.

The fear of campus cops for their own safety approaches paranoia. They have been known to frisk joggers wearing shorts for razor blades. Until made to stop they used to handcuff behind the back students, including coeds, arrested for minor traffic offenses.

In the mid-1980's campus cops crusaded against homosexuals on campus. When allegedly reports came in of homosexual activities in UGA building bathrooms, UGA police responded by sending in undercover policemen, who then made arrests, claiming they had been propositioned.

Only recently an episode occurred in which a campus cop, not in uniform, claimed that he had

been attacked by frat boys at a fraternity house party which he entered without invitation. The alleged attackers were arrested and paraded before the press. UGA police spokesmen made wild and extravagant statements excoriating the frat boys. These statements turned out to be erroneous and a cause of embarrassment to the University. It also turned out that the cop had an unsavory background. Shortly thereafter, the charges against the students were dropped and the policeman was allowed to resign.

I am therefore pleased to note that for the first time I can remember the UGA administration has officially reprimanded the UGA cops for their heavyhanded behavior. In a letter to the UGA police chief of July 28 (released to the public on August 11) Allen Barber, Senior Vice President for Finance and Administration, informed the chief that in their dealings with students and others the UGA cops have been "reactive and punitive as opposed to pro-active and helpful" and requested "a change of attitude."

In his letter Barber noted that previously he had been required to order UGA police to stop handcuffing motorists charged with routine traffic violations on campus. He also noted that "the old feeling of ... overbearing still exists generally in [the UGA police department]." He directed UGA cops to "differentiate student pranks from what is generally considered criminal acts."

Typically, officials of the UGA police department declined to respond to inquiries by reporters concerning Barber's amazing letter. Is it any wonder, therefore, that earlier this month a local newspaper interviewed an Oconee County resident who had numerous complaints about the allegedly abusive way UGA cops treated his son when he was arrested for underage drinking? (The son was later found not guilty in court.) Is it any wonder that, in reference to the UGA police, the Oconee County man was quoted as asking: "Does the word Gestapo come to mind?"