Georgia, once again, is entering into a frenzy of race-based politics, centering this time on the children of undocumented aliens, and their audacity of working hard to be able to attend college and move Georgia forward out of its historic culture of prejudice and ignorance. As before, Georgia does not lead in this new apoplexy, for despite its renowned conservatism, the Deep South, and Georgia in particular, was not a major playing field for red scare politics in the 1930s and 1940s. That changed when Red met Black—when anti-communism was harnessed to racial hatred. That same hatred today is harnessed to anti-immigration and the new color is Brown.

A summary of the research by M. J. Heale in *McCarthy’s Americans* helps place today’s racist campaign in proper perspective. As Heale demonstrates, in the previous century, the ruling elite of the old South—plantation owners and farmers, town bankers and merchants, county lawyers and editors, landlords and low-wage paying textile mill operators—often needed whipping boys for elections, but these tended to be Washington bureaucrats, interfering Yankees, and “uppity” Blacks. There wasn’t that much need for a red scare. But the Communist Party’s championing of African Americans added one more element to the politics of hate and ignorance. Eugene Talmadge and his minions who ran the state in the mid-1930s and early 1940s concentrated their fire on Blacks, organized labor, and Atlanta. It was simply hard to find many radicals to lynch in 1930s-1940s Georgia. Not until 1953 did Georgia politicians determine that they needed to offer up a communist control program in an effort to use populist rhetoric to mobilize support for the rule of propertied local interests. And in 1953, race was the underlying issue, and the battleground during that period, as today, was the University System of Georgia.

But even then, the “threat” was seen as “foreign influence”—which included FDR and the federal government—and the threatened principle was racial segregation and white control. Thus in 1941 governor Eugene Talmadge led an assault on “any person in the university system advocating communism or racial equality” especially “foreign [i.e., not Georgian] professors trying to destroy the
sacred traditions of the South,” and attempted to expel two professors from the University of Georgia, ultimately resulting in the dismissal of ten university employees, the banning of “subversive” textbooks from the libraries, and the loss of accreditation by Georgia’s state universities.

Returning to the offensive in the 1946 gubernatorial election, Talmadge once more home on on the foreign threat: “The people of Georgia must declare whether or not they will continue to run the state or whether they are willing to turn it over to Moscow-Harlem zoot-suiters. . . Once firmly entrenched as voters, the Moscow-Harlem-Zootsuiters with the aid of local quislings will strike the death blow at our segregation laws.” Any threat to Georgia’s traditional political, social, and economic arrangements were damned as outside agitation by a unified “foreign” cabal of integrationists, labor organizers and Communists. But the threat to Georgia was seen coming not so much from Moscow as from Washington and “the north.”

In 1948 the University of Georgia terminated the contract of an assistant professor nominated by the Progressive Party—a breakaway party of radical Democrats—as candidate for governor on the grounds that his extensive political activities interfered with his work. The Atlanta Constitution’s Ralph McGill, a so-called Georgia moderate, simultaneously led a press campaign against another Progressive Party activist, Don West, leading to his dismissal from Oglethorpe University. Critics of segregation were now routinely smeared as Communists by the Talmadgeites. In the 1948 gubernatorial election, Herman Talmadge railed against President Truman’s civil rights program, “this oppressive, communistic, anti-Southern legislation” that would lead to white women taking orders from black foremen. Georgia had finally achieved status as an emerging purveyor of race-based red-scare politics.

Georgia was fortunate, however, that the Talmadgeites were not the only forces in the state. The University System regained accreditation and the Board of Regents constitutionally removed (in law at least) from the arena of demagogic fear-mongering state politics. Less fearful leaders such as Ellis Arnold, Carl Sanders, and Jimmy Carter attempted to protect education from the worst of the rabble
rousers. True educational leaders emerged who propelled the University of Georgia and Georgia Tech into genuine positions of world prestige in higher education.

The question that we face today is whether we return the state to the Talmadgeites, rearing back in Murphyesque parody and snarling that the children of undocumented aliens be thrown out of the universities, investigated for possible felonies in applying for admission, claiming thus to protect “the people of Georgia” from a new “Brown threat.” We have ex officio educational leaders among administrators and faculty in the University System of Georgia; the question before us is whether we have leaders. Georgia, so long a state with one of the lowest higher education participation rates in the industrialized world, can ill afford to lose intellectual talent among its students, regardless of their color or where their parents were born, or from what country their parents took them as babies. As children, these young people could not comprehend the impact of their immigration status, but during high school they become all too aware of the grim futures awaiting them in the United States: physically demanding low-wage work, no opportunities for economic advancement, and sometimes even deportation. In the long term, we need comprehensive immigration reform that includes all immigrants. In the meantime, while immigration reform is still under debate, and tuition costs creep up, we in higher education must determine whether we are to serve all students or the hate mongers.

Georgia can further ill afford to return control to purveyors of race-based politics, who lacking the force of faith in reason rely solely on force. Now, let the hounds of hell bark.