Who is John Mac Govern?

And what drives him to sue his alma mater?
When the lawsuit that challenged Dartmouth’s board of trustees selection procedure was dismissed in June 2009, many observers believed the battle shifted between conservative reformers and the College establishment had finally come to an end. But like Rocky Balboa (or Freddy Krueger from A Nightmare on Elm Street, depending on your point of view) the challengers persevered, with seven alumni filing yet another suit last late year. Their goal: to regain a higher percentage of alumnio-nominated seats on a board that has expanded via internal appointment rather than contested election. (Alums vote to nomi-nate a few alumni to be considered by a committee.) Whichever film protagonist provides the apt metaphor, the executive producer of this drama, Hanover Institute founder John MacGovern ’80, presents one big bundle of contradictions.

A Republican insurgent who won an und ergone race for the Massachusetts legislature in the 1980s, MacGovern nevertheless earned a reputation for ideological independence that included spurning his party’s leadership. An activist who for years has railed against the political process, MacGovern has raised money for the effort, a skill that would once prove so thorny. That is good for fundraising, good for the close bond between MacGovern and many alumni involved in the selection of one-half the board of trustees. That is good for fundraising, good for the close bond between alumni and the College, good for the overall health of Dartmouth. For example, if alumni did not have the option to elect trustees, there would be no way to rally the players on all sides of the rancorous debate, with more than one observer citing MacGovern’s smarts and, especially, his tenacity.

But a different profile emerged from members of The Dartmouth Review, the student newspaper that MacGovern founded in the fall of 2008 (followed by a series of e-mail exchanges that dwindled and then went silent as my questions became more pointed): “The Hanover Institute believes it is good for Dartmouth to have many alumni involved in the selection of one-half the board of trustees. That is good for fundraising, good for the close bond between alumni and the College, good for the overall health of Dartmouth. For example, if alumni did not have the option to elect trustees, there would be no way to rally the players on all sides of the rancorous debate, with more than one observer citing MacGovern’s smarts and, especially, his tenacity.”

At our meeting MacGovern related the political epiphany that led to his participation with the Review as an undergraduate. He had been sitting in Aquinas House in the autumn of 1979 when Greg Fossedal ’86 walked in and announced that The Dartmouth Review had ousted him as editor in a dispute over his conservative politics. MacGovern, the product of a literally cloistered upbringing, was nearly a decade older than many of his schoolmates and had reached his senior year with an awed detachment from much of mainstream college life. But this news plunged him in. “It was outrageous,” he recalled. “I was, on some matters, more liberal than a lot of them, but the intolerance and suppression of thought in what had happened was just too much. That’s what led to my participation with the Review.”

MacGovern did not join Fossedal on the Review’s editorial ramparts, but he raised money for the effort, a skill that would prove so thorny. That is good for fundraising, good for the close bond between alumni and the College, good for the overall health of Dartmouth. For example, if alumni did not have the option to elect trustees, there would be no way to rally the players on all sides of the rancorous debate, with more than one observer citing MacGovern’s smarts and, especially, his tenacity.

Our conversations, I recollected. “There was no contact with the outside; no newspapers, no radio, no television.”

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The next year MacGovern opted for fuller immersion, enrolling in a Catholic school in Rome. Eventually returning home, he dieded a career in college and, like Fossedal, arrived at Dartmouth grade Choice made. MacGovern majored in Chinese, “which I loved,” he told me, “but I never lost my belief in the greatness of Western culture.”

After four terms in the Massachusetts statehouse (and a turn as campaign adviser to Donald Rumsfeld’s 1988 exploratory bid for the GOP presidential nomination), MacGovern took aim at Congress. “I was a kid of 30 with two points of uneasing Democratic U.S. Rep. Chester Atkins. He remained active in party circles, serving as Massachusetts co-chairman of Indiana Sen. Richard Lugar’s 1996 presidential bid, and then re-engaged with the Review in the late 1990s. There he became lead fundraiser for the paper’s nonprofit parent in what he called an attempt to “expand” and “professionalize” the paper. It was an effort he abandoned after a few years, because, as he told me, “It’s ultimately a student paper and needs to remain that.”

Who abandoned whom, however, is an open question. A half dozen former Review staffers would not be bound by the severance and would work for the paper during the days of MacGovern’s tenure—are critical of their former fundraiser.

“Revenue rose slightly, but expenses rose astronomically,” re-called Andrew Grossman ’02, a former editor who is now a senior legal policy analyst with the conservative Heritage Foundation in Washington, D.C.

Added a veteran of the Review’s business side who asked that his name not be used: “After a while it became clear that he had nearly bankrupted the organization somehow. So he was pushed out. And then he threatened to sue the paper for back pay. So I’m not sure what happened to him. He pushed the organization to the brink and then threatened to sue for his own financial aggendizatize.”

One more insult was added to the injury, said former Review president Harry Camp ’04, now finishing up at the University of Virginia School of Law: “It’s very clear to me that he took the Re-view’s fundraising list. My father was a subscriber to the Review when he worked for the paper during the days of MacGovern’s tenure—are critical of their former fundraiser.

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MacGovern maintains a modest Web site and PR campaign.

But his fundraising has become after becoming convinced that the law would save lives. He even garnered a reputation as an ardent environmentalist.

The last, perhaps, should not have come as a surprise. MacGov- ern was in 1951, but he didn’t grow up in Jeffrey Hart’s 1950s. His childhood home, in fact, bore a striking resemblance to a hie hip commune. Children wore robes, milked cows, tilled an organic farm. “The goal was to be totally self-sufficient,” MacGovern later recollected. “There was no contact with the outside; no newspapers, no radio, no television.”

But there was also no tie-dying of shirts, no burning of patchou- li, no inhalation of illicit herbaceous combustibles. MacGov- ern’s parents belonged to the Slaves of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, a sect founded by a Jesuit activist (whom The Boston Globe called fanatic) who was ultimately excommunicated for preach- ing, among other things, that salvation was impossible outside of the Roman Catholic Church. MacGovern’s father died when John was a toddler, and his mother eventually became a nun within the order. Which might not have been as traumatic as it would have been in a secular context, given the order’s common practice was to dissolve the parental bond early anyway.

“If not sure if my mother was raising me after 1955,” MacGovern told the Globe (also in 1986). As for the rest of his childhood emotions: “It was like being in a boarding school,” he recalled. “My mother was one of the teachers.” The curriculum was rigorously classical—Greek and Latin, massive memoriza- tion, arguments and logic. But it was not intended as preparation for engaging the outside world. “I was raised to stay there my whole life and never leave,” he said.

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resignation as president, praising my achievements—fundraising, number of issues published per term, and conserva-
tive speakers—during my three years try-
ing to help the paper.”

However bitterly the Review period ended, one current Hanover Institute board member who could be reached for comment had nothing but praise for MacGovern. John Flierter ’52 said he met MacGovern roughly “five or six years ago,” after which he signed on to the institute. The board meets “infre-
quently,” he said, “often by telephone.”

Asked about the Review stories, howev-
er, Flierter demurred. “I don’t know about any of that,” he said. “I do know that John is good to work with. He’s fair-minded. He’s straightforward and courageous. And he’s tenacious.” On the other hand, Fli-
ner seems to be something of an absentee landlord. “I don’t ask for a breakdown of how our funds are spent or solicited,” he said. “When we retain attorneys, I don’t write the checks. But I know that one of our biggest expenses is litigation.”

MacGovern insists that his current ef-
fort is completely separate from the Review.

But, when asked by Human Events maga-
zine in 2002 to explain the publication’s prominence, even beyond the College, he seemed to provide connective rhetorical tissue to his present efforts: “The admin-
istration is dumber than the administra-
tion of Harvard or Brown,” he said. “It’s the administration’s attacks that made the Review.”

The critique of College administration that has animated petition candidates for the board of trustees it well known: a claim of mission drift from the school’s historic commitment to undergraduate education, allegations of putative repressive cam-
pus speech codes, the late President James Freedman’s championship of “creative lon-
ers” and Hardy perennial ferets about frats and football. (continued on page 95)

Although petition trustee Stephen Smith ’88 declined comment for this story, fellow petition trustee T.J. Rodgers ’76 explained that the governance movement was non-monolithic: “I first met John in 2004 after Dartmouth alumni elected me to the board. John has his own issues—he’s a Dartmouth masochist for example—but he saw an open mind in me….I’d say John and I ended up disagreeing half the time.”

For that reason the Hanover Institute has trained its focus on process far more than policy. It helped win a battle to allow all alumni to cast ballots in Association of Alumni (AoA) elections, overturn-
ing the prior practice of requiring a voter’s physical presence in Hanover for the vote. The much more bitter struggle, which continues to roll in the courts, turns on the issue of parity on the board of trustees.

Since the so-called agreement that was struck in 1891, half of the board’s membership has been reserved for alum-
ni-nominated seats, with the balance filled by board appointment. However, follow-
ing contested victories, most trustees have indicated that any other board members would be “outside groups” with greater access to alumni. T.J. Rodgers ’79 and recently elected trustee T.J. Rodgers ’79, executive director of the Indiana-based Center for Excellence in Higher Education (CEHE), acknowledged in a 2008 inter-
view with The Dartmouth that he had estab-
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half of Dartmouth alumni eager to support the suit. (CEHE strives to steer what it calls a “define in higher ed.”)

Why wouldn’t those alumni contrib-
ute in the open? “Many are afraid that their children or grandchildren might be denied admittance by the administration because of their backing,” said MacGovern. Why such donors would want any of their progeny to clamor in his or her sex in such a misgoverned collegiate enterprise, MacGov-
ern declined to explain.

How much support is coming from CEHE and DonorsTrust? None of the players will say. But the Hanover Institute’s most recent tax filing counts more than $459,000 in “indirect public support,” far exceeding its roughly $135,000 in “direct public support.”

The dynamic prompts Mathias to ask to what extent is CEHE “serving as a front for non-Dartmouth financing?” He add-
ed, “Until full disclosure is made of this highly material information, it is fair to assume that a substantial amount of Dartmouth money has been injected by the Hanover Institute into alumni politics and litigation against the College.”

Trustee Rodgers offered a rejoinder: “I am not concerned about ‘outside forces,’” he told me. “I know some of the Dartmouth alumni—including my-
self—who supported the petition trustees and, guess what? I also know many of the Dartmouth alumni on the other side, who retained the Washington P.R. consulting firm Edelman and Associates, which is well known for negative political campaigns. The most questionable mon-
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disclosed millions in Dartmouth funds that were used both in trustee elections and the recent campaign for Alumni elec-
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President for Alumni Relations David Spalding ’76 disagreed with Rod-
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posed the petition candidates, but the claim that the College has spent millions on alumni elections is simply not true,” he said. “However, Dartmouth has spent about $1 million defending litigation brought by supporters of the petition trustees, because the vast majority of alum-

MacGovern’s attempt to dismiss the claim was more of a misdirection. “Some Dartmouth alumni prefer to contribute to the Hanover Institute through Donors-
Trust,” he said. “I know Fred Fransen and have great respect for what he is trying to do. He feels he is being placed in a strong position by the administration because of his group directly influences the policies and actions of the institute is utter nonsense.”

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