Recognizing Those Who Sacrifice:
Reflections on Presidential Use of the
Bully Lectern

The theme of Presidents as Public Intellectuals is an important and intriguing one. Defining our respective publics and determining our role in their arenas is a complicated task. Some people criticize university leaders if they speak out on any matters that touch on broader politics and priorities. Others dismiss presidents as timid wimps who never speak out other than to protect or enhance resources for their institution.

As one who served as a president and who is also an American historian, I confess that I never felt particularly nostalgic for the days of Nicholas Murray Butler, the Columbia president for much of the first half of the 20th century who--with others to be sure--spoke out, long-windedly, on various matters of the day. H.L. Mencken observed that, "as a class" college presidents "are platitudinous and nonsensical enough, God knows."

In the late 1960s and 1970s as a young faculty member, I certainly shared my opinion on various issues—and I suspect that I did so long-windedly as well. But as President of Dartmouth, I assumed that while I had a responsibility to speak on matters that affected my institution or impacted higher education, I had no particular wisdom to share on most matters of public debate. This was simply my own approach—with an exception that I will discuss. I never had any conversation with the Board about my participation in public controversies and they never set boundaries on my comments. We simply had shared assumptions – and trust.

As president, I spoke out on affirmative action. I wrote an op-ed piece on the need for New Hampshire finally to recognize Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday as a holiday, and I commented on *Gruter v. Bollinger*. I wrote an editorial on the need to rein in early recruiting of college athletes. I spoke out, as a member of a College Board task force, on the national tragedy of declining rates of college and high school graduation in this country.

In 2008 I was one of the original signatories of the Amethyst Initiative, urging a national study and discussion of the drinking age. Because this was potentially controversial and was a bit outside my institutional

responsibility, I checked with the Board prior to doing this. They encouraged me—and it indeed proved to be controversial. I never experienced over any other occasion negative feedback of the quantity and emotional anger as the emails I received from members of Mothers Against Drunk Driving.

Despite these and a few other forays into public debate, I did stay away from anything associated with electoral politics, even though as a New Hampshire resident I had an opportunity every four years to be drawn into political campaigns. I met the candidates, but this was in my role as host. I stayed away from public debates about taxes and about war and peace. As someone who had once been active in politics and political issues, I had views on these things. But I kept them to myself. I had no presumption that my opinions had much more value than those of others—and I understood the traditional constraints upon partisanship for the head of an institution whose members have a rich and vociferous range of views on matters of political controversy.

It is not my argument that my position on public debate was correct. If college presidents don't need to return to the politicized roles of Butler, this does not mean that there are not some broader public responsibilities that we might assume. There is a public lectern. I understand that each of us must determine our role based on the issue at hand, our own convictions and expertise on the particular issue, and the traditions at our own institutions and the guidance of our own boards. Let me describe my engagement with an issue that had no special relationship with Dartmouth and did place me in the middle of some policy and political controversies. This relates to my advocacy on behalf of our injured war veterans

My involvement with veterans, particularly wounded veterans, of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq came about with no planning and with no agenda—with absolutely no premeditation. I had expressed to a friend my concern about the heavy casualties our forces were suffering in Iraq late in 2004, particularly during the battle for Fallujah. The young Marines there were the same age as I was when I was in the Marines over 40 years earlier. And they were the age of the undergraduate students at Dartmouth. This friend, a retired Marine officer, encouraged me to visit the wounded Marines at the Bethesda Naval Hospital and helped to arrange for me to do this in the summer of 2005.

This set me on a new path—if not a mission. I have now been engaged in working with wounded veterans for the seven years since that 2005 visit. During the first four of these years I was President of Dartmouth. I am scheduled to go to Bethesda/Walter Reed hospital in ten days, and this will mark over two dozen visits to military hospitals. In many ways this engagement flowed naturally from my background and experience as a young man—even if it and the advocacy that followed sometimes seemed to fit uneasily on someone who in his early faculty years opposed the Vietnam War and had spoken out in opposition to ROTC.

It is important to note how members of my campus community supported what I was doing. Faculty friends, some who clearly were uncomfortable with the wars we were fighting and who perhaps hadn't even known I had been a Marine, encouraged my work. My own views on several matters evolved. I began sending a package to any Dartmouth graduate who was serving in Afghanistan or Iraq. These parcels generally included maple candy, a Dartmouth cap and t-shirt, and a book of Robert Frost poetry. Frost had spent a semester at Dartmouth in the 1890s before he decided that the classroom was not for him. I received nice, newsy notes back, sometimes with photos of a soldier with his weapon, smiling and waving from under a Dartmouth cap!

A young army airborne lieutenant, a graduate of our ROTC program, wrote thanking me especially for the book of Frost poetry. He said he led his platoon on patrols nearly daily through some hostile areas in Iraq. When they returned he had started reading them a poem to help them unwind. Most of them had no college background and had limited experience with poetry but he wanted them to appreciate it. He said that since he had started reading from Frost they had come to look forward to it and wanted him to read more. There could be no better reminder that there was indeed a place for liberal arts graduates in the military!

I have always followed the same pattern in my hospital visits. I move bed to bed, talking to young servicemen and women, many of them horribly wounded and disfigured, in obvious discomfort, and I ask them what happened. No one has ever balked at telling me, sometimes in detail. I ask what they would like to do next and I encourage them to think about continuing with their education when they are discharged. In 2005 following my first three visits to Bethesda and Walter Reed hospitals, I recognized that these young patients often asked about specific schools,

often near their homes. The questions were basic—whether all the buildings had elevators, a crucial question for those with leg amputations, or inquiries about a specific major or transferring a credit to a school that interested them. I couldn't answer these but I could try to get an answer for them.

Late in 2005 I approached David Ward, then the president of the American Council on Education, to ask him about setting up a counseling program at some of the major hospitals. The ACE had access to nearly all schools in the country and could get answers to these individual questions. I told David that if he could get something in place I would raise some money to support it. He did and I did. We had the counseling program up and running by early 2007. It is still working at Walter Reed/Bethesda and I recently received a commitment for a gift to sustain it for two more years. And right now, at the invitation of a senior officer at the Defense Department, we are working on a plan to expand this counseling program to several more hospitals.

Even though wounded veterans suffering from disabilities have their own program for educational support, early on I became aware of the shortcomings in the GI Bill. The Montgomery Bill, which was the only program until 2008, was simply inadequate to meet the basic costs of a college education. I worked with individuals and with groups such as the Iraq Afghanistan Veterans of America to encourage a more generous GI Bill. Early in 2008 Virginia Senator Jim Webb, the sponsor of the major new GI Bill legislation, invited me to a meeting. I spent several hours with Senator Webb and we met with two other veterans, Senator Chuck Hagel and then Senator John Warner.

It was while Jim Webb and I were in the office of Senator Warner that I encouraged them to include tuition options that would cover the costs of private schools in this legislation. The draft then under consideration would have capped private college payments at the highest public tuition charges in the same state. Senators Webb and Warner, each of whom had attended private schools on GI Bill assistance, were sympathetic. And we, three old Marines I would note, developed what has been called the Yellow Ribbon program, which allows private schools to elect to join the program and to cover up to one half of the difference between public and private costs, with the VA matching this amount.

Most of the veterans work I have done has been uncontroversial. Few people after all challenge supporting veterans, particularly wounded veterans, at whatever level is necessary. Ironically this new GI Bill was controversial. The Department of Defense and the Bush administration opposed it because it would likely reduce reenlistment rates. They were struggling to maintain continuity in trained non-commissioned officer ranks. While I understood this, I really did not agree that a veteran's benefit, one that had been provided for every war since World War II, should become a personnel management tool.

I picked up the bully lectern, recognizing that I received a little more attention because I was a curiosity: an Ivy League President who had served in the Marine Corps advocating on behalf of war veterans. I had conversations and debates about the Webb bill with a senior official at the Pentagon and with Republican leaders in Congress. I wrote an op-ed supporting the bill. In short, I got involved—publicly involved. And once a compromise was developed allowing continuing personnel to transfer the benefit to a family member, the legislation was approved and signed by President Bush.

Even as I have become outspoken in my support of the veterans, I have stayed away from speaking out on the purpose and the wisdom of these wars. Of course I have views, but I am not sure they are relevant and I determined early on that if I was going to meet with wounded veterans, I did not want to be assessing whether or not I thought what they had suffered was the inevitable cost of a good cause or the unfortunate consequence of a foolish war. They did not need these judgments from me.

This story could end here. I have reflected on my public role, with my background as a Marine and my position as a college president converging to lead me to involvement in setting up counseling programs for wounded veterans. But there is another leg on which I stood, that as a historian, and that relates perhaps more directly to your interest in public "intellectuals." I will let others assess my standing as an intellectual, but I am a historian. And as I was working on these various projects in the period from 2005 to 2009, I became more curious about some of the history of America and her veterans.

Early in 2009, as I was in my last months in the Dartmouth presidency,

Chancellor Robert Birgeneau of the University of California, Berkeley, invited me to deliver the Jefferson lecture at Berkeley during the next academic year. I was honored by the invitation and I agreed to take on the assignment. The committee in charge of the program hoped that I would talk about my work with veterans. I said that I would be happy to discuss this–but that I was a historian and that I wanted to understand better the history of the relationship between Americans and those who fought the country's wars. So I jumped into this subject and soon came to realize that there was not a single volume that discussed the role of veterans in American history.

I read widely in preparing for the Berkeley lecture and became fascinated by the history of the subject. I was particularly intrigued by the comparison between the veterans of the Vietnam War and the veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The current wars were really as unpopular as the Vietnam War was, yet the treatment of the veterans could not have been more different. Curiosity about this and other related matters and my expressions of frustration with the absence of any books to help me understand, led a friend to suggest that I write such a book myself. So I did.

Over the last two and a half years I have been fully immersed in reading, researching, and reflecting upon the history of America's views of wars and those who have fought them. I can't tell you how much I have enjoyed being a historian again! And I claim this while acknowledging that one does not simply pick up a discipline after twenty years of administrative service.

Full immersion on a specific set of questions can speed the process of re-introduction. Last spring the Dartmouth library said I had more books checked out than anyone—several hundred on shelves and stacked on the floors of my off-campus office and my home. I read scholarly studies and memoirs, and if new books were not immediately available in the library, I bought them. I found documents and news sources online, and learned to use the internet to monitor casualty reports.

I will soon learn whether others think I have met the standards of my profession in my book. I hope that I have, but perhaps even more importantly, I hope that I can contribute something to a public conversation that needs to take place. Americans need to recognize fully that those who fight our wars are not representative of our population. We need to acknowledge that most of us sacrifice nothing for these wars—these are

really the first major wars in American history for which there has not been any wartime taxation. We need to confront the serious nature of the injuries from these wars and make provisions for those who have suffered them—provisions that will afford them an opportunity to dream again and to reach their dreams. My book will need to meet scholarly standards, but it is not a standard historical synthesis. It is also an interpretive look at how Americans have viewed and remembered their wars and cared for those who fought them. It is a book in which I share my point of view on the treatment of our current generation of veterans.

It would be too self-confident of me to conclude that this presentation represents my personal example of Presidents as "Public Intellectuals." Perhaps it more accurately, and modestly, describes a college president and now a former president, engaging in public service and public commentary. But even this is an after-the-fact effort to summarize my own involvement in a way that conforms to the theme of this conference. This may be too artificial. Life is seldom so programmed and deliberative. Let me share a related example of the joy of the unexpected.

In the spring of 2009 as I was preparing to step down from the Dartmouth presidency, I decided that I wanted to climb Mount Moosilauke, an iconic Dartmouth mountain. My wife Susan was pleased to join me and I asked a few colleagues to come along as well as several students. These included two undergraduate Dartmouth Marines. One I had met in 2005 at Bethesda Hospital where he was recovering from gunshot wounds suffered at Fallujah. He had become quite fit and was willing, even eager, to join in this exercise. I reminded the two Marines that they had a special responsibility: Marines don't leave other Marines behind along the trail.

I increased my treadmill exercises and walking that spring in preparation for this hike. I was pretty confident. Too confident. I learned early on that I could not keep up with the pace of those young legs leading the climb. The two Dartmouth Marines were never far away. I would feel their hands at my elbow if I stumbled on rocks. Each of us on the hike carried backpacks with some additional clothing, water, and food. After a few hours the Marines asked if they could carry my pack. I declined. When they asked again my weariness exceeded my pride and I handed the pack to them.

We reached the top of the mountain and got back down again. I was too tired to find much immediate pleasure in the fact. I knew that due to my pace we

had probably taken two or three hours longer than most hiking groups. As we sat at the bottom of the mountain, the young Marine handed me my pack. I asked him if when we first talked at Bethesda he would have predicted that we would climb a mountain together. He said he would not have. Then I asked if he ever thought he would be the one carrying my pack. He said no. I acknowledged that I would not have imagined this shared experience either. But life takes on some strange twists. Both of these Marines have now graduated from Dartmouth. I have retired from mountain climbing.

I understand how demanding your day jobs are—these "day jobs" that define days as 18 to 20 hour constructs and in which every day is a day at work. So perhaps the best I can offer to you is encouragement that you already make a difference on your own campuses and of course this is your priority. You can make a difference on some matters off your campuses, consistent always with your own institutional culture and board expectations. And if there are too many constraints, too few hours in the day, for you to consider taking on another challenge now, let me assure you that there is life after a presidency! There will always be mountains left to climb—and bully lectern opportunities – and you will find unanticipated rewards and help in unexpected places.

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