

INSIGHT

Time to think

Impractical as it may seem in our results-oriented society, Texas can't afford to give up on the Ivory tower, says Thomas G. Palaima.

H3

Sunday, April 1, 2001 H3

Section H

Austin American-Statesman ■ statesman.com

Thomas G. Palaima REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR

How ivory is the University of Texas Tower?

On Sept. 15, 1961, a student enrolled at the University of Texas at Austin to study mechanical engineering. He held a prestigious Naval Enlisted Science Education Program scholarship. A senior officer attested "[h]e was a good marine. . . . I was certain

he'd make a good citizen." He moved with a friend and fellow NESEP scholar into the Goodall-Wooten men's dorm on Guadalupe. The dean of men appointed him a

dorm counselor. From the balcony of his room, he looked at the UT Tower and remarked to his friend, "A person could stand off an army from atop of it before they got to him."

Charles Whitman never thought that by entering UT-Austin he had become a member of an Ivory-tower elite. His actions a generation ago on Aug. 1, 1966, gave the Tower other meanings that we forget at our peril. Successive UT officials have tried hard to "ostrichize" the memory of Whitman's murders, but tragically precocious K-12 students remind us repeatedly that inattention to humanity and humanistic values in

their education and in our very lives can lead to Whitmanesque acts.

There was a time locally when use of the term "Whitmanesque" would conjure up lines from "Leaves of Grass," not from Kubrick's "Full Metal Jacket."

In those days, the image of the Ivory tower could be applied to institutions of higher learning. We had not yet acquiesced in the effective removal of the humanities from the core of higher education and substituted employment-based training as the norm. In those days, the etymology of scholarship was still grasped and facilitated. It is the Greek word *skhole* or "time free from practical cares"; time afforded to contemplate one's place in the world, one's human and moral responsibilities to one's fellow human beings, what one could best *do* in his or her full life ahead. Scholarship then made sense in Walt-Whitmanesque terms: "I loafe and invite my Soul."

The image of the Ivory tower suggests Oxford scholars such as Professor Edgeworth and Lawrence of Arabia. Edgeworth eschewed the use of conversational English. One evening he met Lawrence, who was returning from London, and asked, "Was it very caliginous in the metropolis?" Lawrence did not miss a beat, responding "Somewhat caliginous, but not altogether

inspissated." The generation represented by writer Robert Graves, who reports this exchange, made the first movement toward the destruction of environments in which such men as these could exist and think freely thoughts that transcend practical concerns. A world war will tend to impart a sense of practical urgency about education. Nonetheless, Graves went on to a distinguished career, producing masterpieces such as "I, Claudius" and "The White Goddess."

Nowadays, one can hear a key Texas legislator proclaim to a statewide meeting of professors, as I did in fall 1999, that he is proud that the Daily Texan uses the Latin term "xenophobic" to describe his position against supporting out-of-state students in Texas higher education. Lawrence, Edgeworth or any of my current first-year students might tell him that both roots in the adjective are pure Greek. We might also point out that the time has passed for such jingoistic provincialism.

Texas now has about 1 million students enrolled in higher education. At a recent meeting of their joint faculty senates, Provost Ronald Douglas of Texas A&M University and President Larry Faulkner of UT-Austin emphasized the glaring challenges facing this state. The Perry commission report

makes clear that in order to keep the state economically competitive, 500,000 more students will have to enter higher education and that they must represent the new demographic diversity of the state. We shall need one-third to one-half again new faculty and a like increase in graduate students training to assume positions at Texas colleges and universities. As Faulkner stressed, Texas does not have large, nationally prestigious private universities such as Stanford or Harvard. Higher education is public education.

I want my native Texan son in 12 years to have the best teachers, graduate students and fellow undergraduate students this state can attract and support. We need to be shamelessly xenophobic. We need to reverse the devastating budgetary legacy of former Gov. Bush's tax cuts. We also need to build in structures that will afford even first-generation college students some time to decide what they can best do with their talents for themselves, their families and the world around them. We need to strengthen and protect the humanities. They are as endangered as elephants and Ivory towers.

Palaima is Dickson Centennial Professor of Classics at the University of Texas at Austin. His next column will be on the Ivory tower and the economics of knowledge.

