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COMMENTARY

Palaima: No profiles in courage when it comes to university presidents

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Austin American-Statesman Friday, May 14, 2010

In April 1963, a young Bob Dylan went on legendary social historian and cultural commentator Studs Terkel's radio program in Chicago. After coaxing Dylan to play "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall," Terkel ventured: "I think it will be a classic. Even though it may have come out of your feelings about atomic rain."

Dylan cut him short: "It's not atomic rain, it's just hard rain. I just mean some sort of end that's just gotta happen which is very easy to see, but everybody doesn't really think about overlooking it."

Dylan then talks about nuclear weapons, racial hatred and violence, widespread poverty and neglect, and "all the lies people get told on their radios and in their newspapers."

What he meant, of course, is that the problems facing the United States were hiding in plain sight. For many different reasons besides disinformation, people were not looking at those problems or seriously trying to solve them. Hard rain would soon fall: assassinations, race riots, antiwar demonstrations, My Lai, Kent State, Watergate.

A similar dilemma is facing us now. When were we last challenged to live up to "Profiles in Courage" and do what we can do for our country? And it seems clear that some kind of hard rain will fall once more.

Sometimes we can understand why big things happen by studying smaller things. Or so it seems to me as I conclude my second year as the University of Texas' representative on the national Coalition on Intercollegiate Athletics.

Many serious problems with NCAA sports have been widely acknowledged by such figures as Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, Southern Methodist University President Gerald Turner (as co-chairman of the national reform-minded Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics), and an overwhelming majority of presidents of academic institutions that field NCAA Bowl Champion Series football teams.

But these problems have not been solved since the 1920s when a Carnegie Foundation study first identified them.

In 2007-8, 94 out of the 119 BCS institutions lost nearly \$10 million dollars apiece on average, enough to fund four good-sized academic departments. The University of California at Berkeley

had to cover a \$31.4 million sports debt in 2007 and is now looking at paying off an additional \$24.4 million.

College and university presidents have allowed this to happen. They have also done nothing while admissions standards for athletes have been virtually eliminated and the NCAA system of measuring athlete academic achievement has been watered down so that an institution gets a passing grade if 35 percent of its players graduate in 6 years.

Duncan expressed public concern that in some football programs the number of athletes arrested by police in a given year is greater than the team's grade point average. Six of Mack Brown's Longhorns have been arrested since last June. No one on the 40 Acres seems to care.

The poster child for a university leader "not really thinking about overlooking" serious problems is Turner. While decrying high coaches' salaries, he presided over a 300 percent increase in the head football coach's salary at SMU to well over \$2 million. He glibly explains that much of that salary comes from donations. Yet simultaneously SMU's distinguished university press, with an annual total operating budget of \$400,000, is suspending its operations.

Turner, like other presidents, says no one president can do it alone. But there are almost 90 presidents nationally who have said salaries and athletics expenditures need to be reined in. There are faculty and students and alumni at all institutions who would support bringing sanity to athletics spending and educational practices. No president has led them where they want to go.

No president can do it alone so long as they lack the strength of character to do something much less threatening to their own salaries, personal comfort and careers than one person named Rosa Parks did in Montgomery, Ala., in 1955. A hard rain truly did fall on the many individuals who stood up for their rights as citizens. But wrong was made right.

By contrast, all Turner has to do is say to one wealthy donor, "Please make your check this year out to the SMU Press, not to the football coach." But it seems no college or university president in our great land has yet seen fit to make a simple request like that.

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