

Palaima: No more excuses for UT's excesses

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Way back in 1990, the sage Bob Dylan wrote a song about a character in London's Hyde Park who gives passers-by some advice about television: "It's all been designed to make you lose your mind/ And when you go back to find it, there's nothing there to find./It will scramble up your head and drag your brain about./Sometimes you gotta do like Elvis did and shoot the damn thing out."

It took me 20 years — and not that I'm following Elvis' lead exactly — but I am now living without a television and relying on print media, mainly the American-Statesman and The Daily Texan for my information.

Most world languages have words for "newspapers" that stress how ephemeral they are. The modern Greeks, in fact, call newspapers ephemerides — "things for a day." Still, by reading the news in print carefully, it is possible to make connections and see what goes unsaid. This is one advantage over televised news entertainment that disappears once the images vanish.

Let's start with something that has many people worried. Last December, the regents and the president of the University of Texas at Austin, over the strong objections of many members of the Faculty Council, gave head football coach Mack Brown a \$1 million raise, making his annual salary \$5.1 million. The Longhorns were about to play in the national title game. Brown was praised as a coaching genius, as was his anointed heir apparent, defensive coach Will Muschamp.

The Longhorns have been coached this season to a subpar record while playing a style of defense few coaches would want to take credit for. So I kept waiting for a journalist to question whether we were getting our extra million dollars' worth of special coaching acumen.

In the Statesman, Kirk Bohls pointed out in his Nov. 13 column that the players are of the highest quality: four recruiting classes ranked in the top five nationally since 2005. Brown was quoted on Nov. 10 as saying "It's all on me." And Brown gave himself and his coaches a grade of "F."

UT has the best facilities in the nation. It has a full team of blue-chip players. Its head coach publicly admits that the coaching staff has failed. So when will the regents and president, who wasted so much money, be held accountable or hold the coaches accountable? It is not against any law I know to lower salaries to meet performance levels.

Several other cases of playing with donated money, even as budgets for important social programs, public services and education are slashed, were fit to print. In The Daily Texan, a Nov. 10 front-page story laid out the amounts that regents are reimbursed from "discretionary" funds to cover travel to and attendance at football games while they stay in the poshest hotels.

The practice will not stop anytime soon because the current chairwoman, Colleen McHugh, viewed it as vital to higher education in our state that she spend \$950 to stay at the Montage Beverly Hills Hotel in the Golden Triangle near Rodeo Drive when UT lost to Alabama in the national championship game. Its website, www.montagebeverlyhills.com, advertises "a mélange of luxurious décor," so she could at least get some practice accenting French words correctly. The industrious Texan reporter even found a former student regent and an anthropology professor who defended this shameless waste of public funds.

Lastly, in the Nov. 7 Statesman, lifestyle columnist Michael Barnes reported on the gala held at the former Byrne-Reed House. It has been renovated with millions of dollars from private donors and the National Endowment for the Humanities because Humanities Texas, our state affiliate of the national endowment, decided it "needed a higher profile home to go with their higher-profile mission."

When Barnes was covering the project in 2009, he referred, without irony, to "The Great Gatsby." Indeed, to lavish so much on remodeling even a historic building when authors, writers, filmmakers, artists, historians and educators need grant support strikes me as Gilded Age priorities that do little to further the organization's stated goal to "strengthen Texas communities and ultimately help sustain representative democracy by cultivating informed, educated citizens."

Even in the newspapers, human beings entrusted to serve the public good just won't stop doing stupid, foolish, sordid or selfish things.

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