

May 15, 2012

Powers' comments about regents didn't have to be 'strong' to be too much

On his Burkablog on May 9, the senior executive editor of Texas Monthly, Paul Burka, who has long covered the governor's office in Texas politics, reported that University of Texas President Bill Powers' job might be in jeopardy because of his "strong opposition" to the decision of the UT System Board of Regents to freeze tuition at the UT flagship for the next two years. When I read Burka's blog entry and the comments on it, I wondered what Powers said or did that would constitute "strong opposition."



UT President Bill Powers

I kept in mind that, in Texas, presiding over the 29th-ranked university in the world, according to the most recent survey in the Times Higher Education, does not necessarily give the president a lot of what the Romans called *auctoritas* or *dignitas*.

To understand the UT System power hierarchy, just remember that etymologically a president sits, regents play at being kings, and the governor pilots the ship of state, often, it seems, without a rudder, map or sextant.

Luther Stark, who for 24 years (1919-1943) made being a regent his "outstanding hobby," held this view: "The president of the University of Texas occupies the position to the board of regents as a general manager of a corporation does to its board of directors." Indeed, according to the Handbook of Operating Procedures, the president "serves without fixed term, subject to the pleasure of the chancellor and with the approval of the Board of Regents."

The president of UT Austin may make more than \$600,000 per year and sit in his very own skybox at sporting events, watching the Longhorns Network. He may oversee profound changes in the undergraduate educational experience for the better, like the Undergraduate Studies initiative that has all UT students studying ethics seriously for the first time in years. He may guide the University through consecutive cuts in state appropriations of 10 percent and 5 percent. He may push forward much-needed expansion of classroom and laboratory space. He may make sure jewels like the Humanities Research Center and the Blanton Museum continue to sparkle. He may ask for a tuition increase of \$260-\$400 per year, knowing that 70 percent of UT students come from families with annual incomes of \$60,000 and up, and that sizable mandat-

A UT president has to have the approval of regents to hold onto his job another day.

ed set-asides will cover the increases for truly needy students. But he still has to have the approval of regents to hold onto his job another day.

Having to please a group of highly partisan political appointees, few of whom are ever experienced and legitimate educators, is not conducive to independence of action.

The one president in the mythology surrounding the University of Texas at Austin who broke from this pattern was Homer Rainey. But as a contemporary put it, Rainey was actually "the regents' kind of man if they had the sense to see it."

They didn't. And they didn't count on the one "trifling shortcoming" Rainey had that made him an abysmal failure as president in the regents' view: "moral courage."

We get presidential types who share Rainey's flaw every once in a while in Texas. Twenty years or so after Rainey, a more important president, and a quintessential Texan, Lyndon Baines Johnson, according to biographer Robert Caro, responded to advisers who asked him why in the world he would devote so much of his time, energy and moral reserves to the lost cause of trying to change the attitudes of Southern members of Congress on civil rights: "Well, what the hell's the presidency for?"

In my years on faculty council committees, I never heard Powers swear like LBJ, so I went looking for some milder form of "strong opposition" — anything like Johnson's Great Society legislation or Rainey's list of 16 items of "improper official behavior by the board of regents" would have been all over the news. I found the molehill that the current political climate has made into a mountain: Powers' reasoned response on his blog Tower Talk on May 3, after only UT Austin, among the members of the UT System, had its request for a modest increase in full-time, in-state undergraduate tuition turned down.

He wrote there in plain English, "I'm disappointed to report that the Board (of Regents) declined to adopt our tuition recommendation."

Well, what the hell is the presidency for, if the president of the University of Texas at Austin cannot say something like that?

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taking in has been off the charts," she said. "When you have nowhere else to put the animals, it is hard to come up with any other options."

The news is tough for officials to fathom; they said Austin was the first major city in Texas to achieve no-kill status. The center officially became a no-kill facility this year after reaching its goal of saving more than 90 percent of the animals it received in 2011.

The City Council passed the no-kill plan in March 2010, shifting the focus to

2011, the shelter euthanized 1,418 – 8 percent – of the 18,067 animals it received.

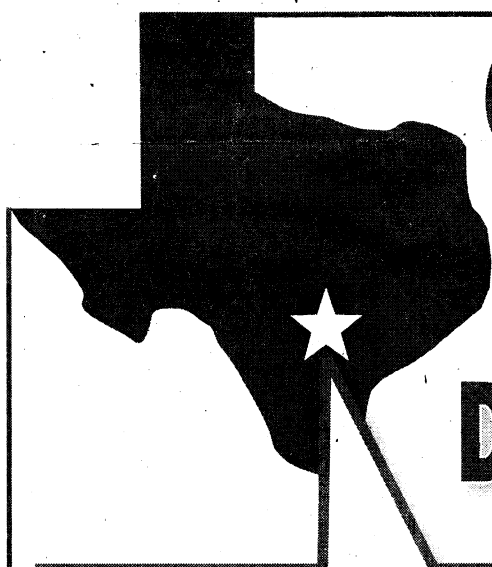
But as of Saturday, the shelter had taken in 140 more animals and had 139 fewer adoptions than at the same time last year, a net increase of 279, according to the animal center.

Austin Pets Alive, a nonprofit that takes in the overflow of animals from the center and tries to find them homes, is finding it hard to keep up with the arrival of new animals. It has taken in 261 dogs and cats over the past two weeks and is working to have more transferred

utive director. Though the take animals across the state from Austin, Texas take p About 20 p the area we nonprofit as person said.

"As intake going up, ev lence," she we have tran mals from th are right the es" with she

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