

# VIEWPOINTS

## OTHERS SAY TOM PALAIMA

Special Contributor

# Delusions of grandeur hide reality from proud Texans

I have lived in Texas full time for almost 30 years. For the past 16 years I have written regular opinion pieces in the Austin American-Statesman. In my first piece I responded critically to the vision William "Bill" Cunningham, then chancellor of the University of Texas System, put forward in January 1999 of what UT-Austin would become in the new millennium, essentially a corporation-like economic engine for the state.

I have learned four things from writing my first piece and almost 300 others. First, even distinguished faculty and administrators do not feel free to speak their minds publicly when they disagree with the regents, chancellor, president and deans above them. Second, my own public views and reasoning have the same effect as the remarks of the proverbial gnat upon the elephant. Third, many Texans believe in their own positive illusions about the greatness of their state, its institutions and the Texas way of life. Fourth, the University of Texas at Austin now is what Cunningham set it on the road to becoming: a corporately managed business-focused institution with an affiliated Godzilatron-sized sports entertainment industry and television sports network.

I have thought about all this after reading the message our new chancellor, former Adm. Bill McRaven, sent on Jan. 6, his first day of office. McRaven's starry-eyed visions about Texas exceptionalism take American exceptionalism to the third power.

McRaven tells us that in his wide travels "everyone I encountered, from the youngest Afghan girl to the oldest African vil-

lager, had a common view of Texas and Texans. They understood that Texans were men and women of character and integrity — strong-willed, independent, bold, risk-takers, who helped the weak and downtrodden, who got up when they were knocked down, and who never complained about their struggles. Texans wore boots and big hats and sat tall in the saddle because there was a grandness in their manner. They understood that being a Texan was something special."

Such jingoistic cream-puffery hardly needs chocolate topping, but McRaven ladles on a dollop nonetheless: "This image of Texans was universal, and we have rightly earned that reputation through generations of men and women who came to this great land and made it what it is today."

All this proves that one thing has not changed in my 30 years in Texas: the grip that the myth of Texas has on the minds of our cultural, political and educational leaders.

Some 50 years ago Larry McMurtry published a collection of essays about Texas titled "In a Narrow Grave." As Texas writer and memoirist Alvin Carl Greene Jr. put it, McMurtry "(took) apart Texas with all the skill and sadness of a master surgeon performing a postmortem on his mother." McMurtry laid out in plain-spoken language the "megalomaniacal boosterism which afflicts almost all our cities." He singled out Austin as a "yet greater megalomaniac to be considered," adding, "what I have said about Houston and Houston's pretensions could simply be repeated for Dallas."

Unfortunately, as thinkers and writers know, thoughts and paper and blogs are ephemeral, but group cultural traits and dispositions, sometimes called prejudices, are fixed and long lasting. So despite McMurtry's insights that "a Quality-Quantity confusion is something most Texans have come by naturally" and that prominent Texans view things Texan as "biggest" and "best," the disease and its symptoms still persist.

Here's the medicine I would prescribe: tincture of reality. The poor people I met in Madagascar in 2007 had no idea what a Texas even was. But when outsiders know something about Texas, many think of a long, dark road in Jasper, the Texas School Book Depository in Dealey Plaza, the Branch Davidian Mount Carmel Center outside Waco, Charles Whitman and the UT Tower, Fort Hood in November 2009 and April 2014, Lyndon Johnson and the War in Vietnam, George W. Bush and our missions unaccomplished in Iraq and Afghanistan.

They think of Enron and its financially ruined employees. They note that in 2012-13 Texas ranked 47th in expenditure for public schools K-12 while the city of Allen spent \$60 million on a structurally unusable high school football stadium. They may also recall the July 2012 Associated Press story that "Texas ranked worst in the nation for health care" of its citizens

Texas is a nice state for a chosen few. It can become great for all of us if we look at its problems with a realistic state of mind.

Palaima is a classics professor at the University of Texas.

COMMENTARY SUBMISSIONS  
views@statesman.com

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PHONE  
512-445-1776