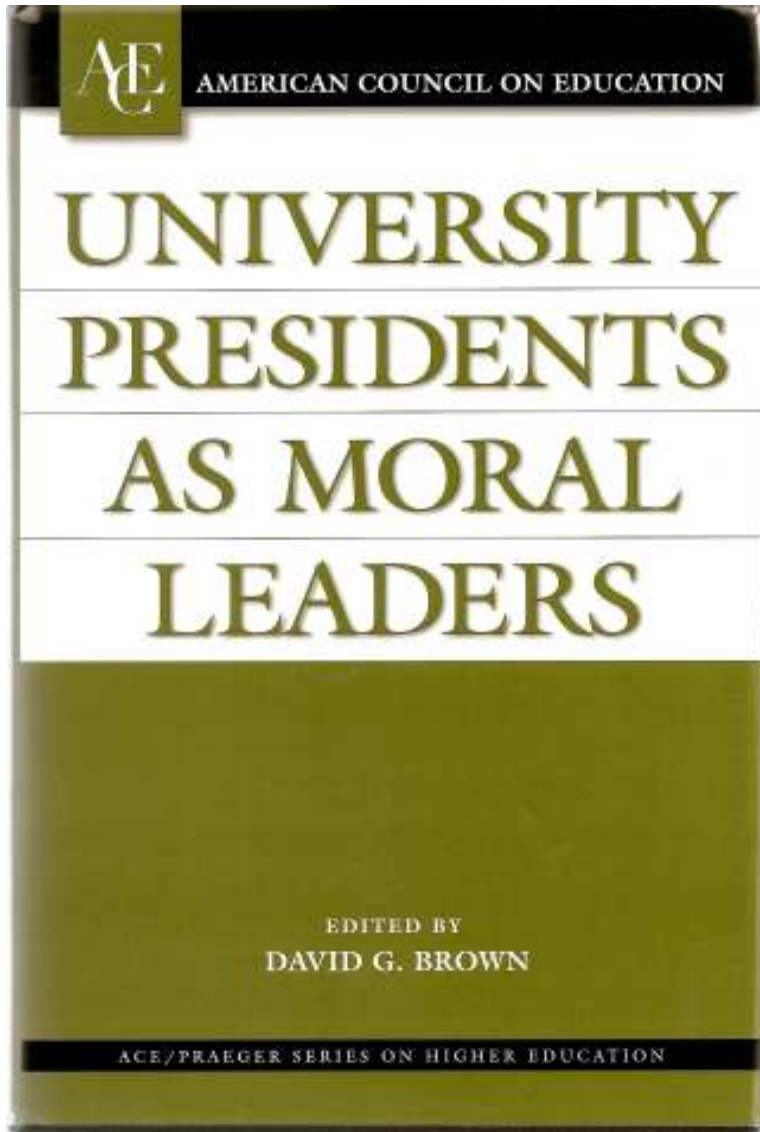


Chapter 2, "Carpetbagging and Conflagration: Vanderbilt University Makes Enemies of Old Friends," by E. Gordon Gee, from "University Presidents As Moral Leaders," edited by David G. Brown, American Council on Education, ACE/Praeger Series on Higher Education, Westport, 2006.



Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

University presidents as moral leaders / edited by David G. Brown ; foreword by Thomas K. Hearn Jr. and John Alexander.

p. cm.—(ACE/Praeger series on higher education)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-275-98814-7 (alk. paper)

1. College presidents—Professional ethics—United States. 2. Education, Higher—Moral and ethical aspects—United States. 3. Leadership—United States.

I. Brown, David G. II. Series.

LB2341.U59 2006

378.1'11—dc22 2005019266

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data is available.

Copyright © 2006 by David G. Brown

All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be reproduced, by any process or technique, without the express written consent of the publisher.

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2005019266

ISBN: 0-275-98814-7

First published in 2006

Praeger Publishers, 88 Post Road West, Westport, CT 06881

An imprint of Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc.

www.praeger.com

Printed in the United States of America



The paper used in this book complies with the Permanent Paper Standard issued by the National Information Standards Organization (Z39.48-1984).

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

CONTENTS

Foreword by Thomas K. Hearn Jr. and John Alexander xi
*About the Center for Creative Leadership, Wake Forest University, and the
Smith-Richardson Foundation* xiii

INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER 1. The Presidential Forum 3
David G. Brown

BIG OPPORTUNITIES FOR MORAL LEADERSHIP

- CHAPTER 2. Carpetbagery and Conflagration: Vanderbilt
University Makes Enemies of Old Friends 13
E. Gordon Gee
- CHAPTER 3. A Response to Chancellor Gee's Essay: Crises in
*Waiting: A Future Challenge for University
Presidents* 21
Pamela B. Gann
- CHAPTER 4. Presidential Leadership in Time of Crisis 29
Philip L. Dubois
- CHAPTER 5. A Response to President Dubois' Essay: *Moral
Leadership* 55
Scott S. Cowen

CHAPTER 2

Carpetbaggery and Conflagration: Vanderbilt University Makes Enemies of Old Friends

E. Gordon Gee

AN INSTANCE OF CHALLENGE

In 2002, Vanderbilt decided—meaning that our trustees, and a group of administrators, including myself, decided—to remove the word “Confederate” from the name of Confederate Memorial Hall, one of the residence halls on the campus of our education college. Although we could have guessed there would be a furor in some constituencies over our decision, we probably could not have anticipated its scope or volume. And I must admit that if I had not been guided by a carefully considered conviction that the university’s decision was ethically correct, the furor, which included grotesque caricatures of me and threats to my life, would have left me shaken.

Confederate Hall’s name had been an active issue on campus since at least 1988, when the hall was renovated without expunging the name, and the Student Government Association had voted just the year before the decision in support of changing the name of the building. Many African American students refused to step foot in the hall, which also served as a visible discouragement to many students (African American and otherwise) who toured Peabody’s campus as they worked to discern which college they would attend. Many young people would choose to attend a university other than Vanderbilt, which already suffered from a long and well-earned reputation for lacking diversity. For many students from the northern United States, the name of the hall evoked bemusement at its quaintness, or befuddlement at why Vanderbilt would keep

around something that was at best a dusty relic and at worst a painful reminder.

So, Vanderbilt decided that the name would have to be changed. The issue was not a burning, raging one but enough of a continued discomfort that we chose at last to do something about it. I have always believed that a university should align its symbols with its values. To designate a monument "Confederate" on a campus that wishes to welcome all people and that wishes to disseminate knowledge equally to all is counterproductive to that wish, to say the least.

The first and wildest shock at the news came from the members of the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC), a Southern heritage group, whose preceding members had contributed \$50,000 in 1935 to build the dormitory, which ultimately cost \$150,000. The UDC gave their support to Peabody College (which merged into Vanderbilt in 1979) because they wanted to instill in teachers of coming generations a Southern perspective on national and world events, and on condition that the UDC would approve the credentials and the pedigree of the young women who would receive room and board in Confederate Memorial Hall, and also on condition that the residence hall bear the name they had given it.

At the time the hall was built, the issue of its naming was not as conflicted. It was still fraught, but the constituencies that would have been caused pain by the name were not even allowed to enroll at Vanderbilt. We did not integrate until the 1960s, which is a polite way of saying that black people were not allowed to come to school here. Vanderbilt was very proud to be a Southern school, with all that comes with that designation (both good and nasty): proud of its civility and courtesy and grace, but also rather shameless about its treatment of minority presences. The conditions under which the UDC had given its donation were not out of keeping with this atmosphere.

Even though such a charge was problematic, the UDC felt it had some legal point about its initial investment and filed a suit against Vanderbilt to prevent the renaming of Confederate Memorial Hall. That case was decided in the university's favor on the thirtieth of September 2003.

Shortly after Vanderbilt's announcement and across the months to follow, my switchboard and my electronic mail and the switchboard and mail of Vice-Chancellor for Public Affairs Mike Schoenfeld were lit up, inundated, and flooded with angry messages excoriating Vanderbilt as a hotbed of political correctness (code for liberalism) and threatening to never again contribute to the school. Caricatures of Vice-Chancellor Schoenfeld and myself decorated Confederate web sites. But as in all

things, the first scorch of interest and attention began to fade, and we anticipated a more peaceful winter.

But according to the law of unintended consequences, the Confederate Hall controversy would shoot forth a branch that was not entirely related to, but became indistinguishable from, the events surrounding the renaming of the hall in the minds of the Confederacy's most fervent living proponents. In December 2002, just as the hottest furor over the renaming of the hall was beginning to simmer down, Jonathan David Farley, a brilliant and volatile mathematics professor who ran for U.S. Representative on the Green Party ticket and is a self-styled hellraiser and enthusiastic editorialist, wrote a column for the *Tennessean's* Opinions page that suggested that rather than being lauded as heroes by any generations past, present, or future, Confederate veterans should have met traitors' fates at the end of a gibbet.

If you have any experience with the South, you can imagine the furor that ensued over this. Professor Farley, who was at the time a faculty member-in-residence, received threats on his life and went into hiding. The *Tennessean* fanned the flames of the story it had created by publishing angry letters to the editor and opinion columns by resident columnists accusing Vanderbilt of the worst forms of political correctness. I received a death threat and spent a day with campus police in my office. Ardent devotees of the Confederate cause demanded Farley's job as well as mine and that of Vice-Chancellor Schoenfeld. Eventually, I had to write an editorial piece (also published in the *Tennessean*) clarifying the meaning of academic freedom at a research university and defending Professor Farley's protected right to write and think whatever he believes. I would learn that while Vice-Chancellor Schoenfeld and I were busy covering Professor Farley's hellraising, by the way, he had accepted a position as visiting lecturer at MIT, so in essence we were left to clean up in his wake. I have been happier! But I knew that academic freedom is a right expressly protected within the world of the university, and as the representative of a university, I had the duty to defend that right and to clarify it for those who may misunderstand.

We are still going to clean the name off the hall. We are looking for stonecutters who can do this without damaging the building's edifice. We retain the hall's dedicatory plaque in its entryway, in recognition of those who did give financial support to Peabody during the Great Depression in the hopes that some future would happen.

The Confederate Hall controversy benefited Vanderbilt by forcing us to a crisis at which we had to clarify our moral stances and positions. After years now of controversy that sometimes crests and sometimes

troughs, the affair has come to an anticlimactic end. In May 2005, a Tennessee Court of Appeals rejected the previous summary judgment on Vanderbilt's behalf. In July, we elected not to pursue the matter further, because Vanderbilt's resources need to be distributed in other directions. We are satisfied that we have made our discomfort and dissatisfaction with the inscription, and our disappointment with the court's decision, clear to the public. We have had to declare a moral victory and move on. The carving remains, but no longer receives any glory or energy from the university upon whose grounds it stands.

CONCEPTS AND ISSUES

As I have already stated, I have always believed that a university's symbols should accord with its values, that they should not be in contradiction. Teaching aspects of history is one thing, but celebrating particular aspects is another, and the name of Confederate Memorial Hall amounted to a celebration of a movement in time that was contrary to the university's ideals of equality and compassion, a barrier to a kind and welcoming environment. Our campus should not allow itself to commemorate systems that are inconsistent with Vanderbilt's beliefs and ethos, to imply endorsement of a system that is at the very least offensive to so many people.

Universities are utopian experiments, essentially, erected on the belief in the animate life of the mind that transcends skin color, gender, cultural origin, age, or bodily ability. They hold up humanistic ideals and a belief that humans have the potential to overcome constraints of culture and time.

I mention pain, and in the South pain rides on both sides. I knew when I made my decision that many people whom I knew and cared about would be caused psychological pain by the removal of the hall's name, as people are to the removal of the Stars and Bars from state buildings. So, there was going to be pain either way: by keeping those symbols or by stripping them. Many Southerners do still have a sense of the South as being an occupied territory. Since this sense has not faded in 140 years, who knows if it ever will? How many generations (of any country) does it take for the pain of being vanquished to evaporate when one losing side has been overwhelmed and subsumed by a victor? When a side loses, it keeps losing chunks of its identity and slivers of its spirit every single day. I could sense in my opponents both a silent knowledge of this and a deep denial of it. From the tone of some of the Confederate correspondence, one might easily infer that there actually are people among

us who believe the South shall secede again to rise and that every propitiatory gesture made by some carpetbagger like myself fights this eventuality even further back into the realms of impossibility. I was not certain exactly what better future those who disagreed with me dreamed would come by keeping the name of the hall, but I do know that the decision to revise that name caused a great deal of pain inside that constituency.

What administrators have to do in a situation such as this, ideally, is to weigh one type of hurt over the other and figure out which loss is the least costly to the university's spirit and to its ideals. I think that ignoring the fact that African Americans used to be slaves in Tennessee and that the name of Confederate Memorial Hall is a visual and aural reminder of this—a blunt and ever-threatening instrument—is much more costly to Vanderbilt, morally and ethically. But in order to make such a decision, I had to choose consciously not to give equal weight to the fact that race is not the only source of discrimination or prejudice in our country and that prejudice can also be economic and regional.

Movements of Southern heritage in their best and most ideal sense (minus the racism that can break through) hope that the South will be recognized for its own difference and diversity without prejudice, that Southerners will not be represented in the mass culture as backward hicks, that the South will be well-off materially and politically, and that all power will not be in the hands of northern states that do not understand the issues of the South. I referred to myself as a carpetbagger above, and one writer to the vice-chancellor did indeed mention carpetbagging in his letter. A feeling of disenfranchisement, both economic and political, still pervades the hearts of some people here, and that feeling is what makes their faces twist up in pain when they see the Confederate flag being taken down or when they see the name of a hall being expurgated.

Universities increasingly have to operate no longer just on a regional scale, but on a national and even a global scale. Every decision Vanderbilt makes must raise and sustain our acumen among our colleagues, or no one will take us seriously. Allowing on our campus a building whose very name gives offense to a cross-section of people from around the world strongly reinforces the worst stereotypes of Vanderbilt as an institution trapped in a distant past. Vanderbilt cannot afford to appear "backward," and we therefore must balance the parts of our regional identity that we can cultivate in order to maintain our distinction and charm with our aspirations to be a global university that is respected by all peoples. We cheer for Vanderbilt because it is a great Southern university: it sprung from the soil and has its magnolias, and it brings distinction on the South when people read about one of the university archaeologists

in the *New York Times* and think, Oh, I was wrong, the South is legitimate after all, and smart people *do* live there! But the price that Vanderbilt has to pay for that is a little stone polishing there and here, and a little pain.

REFLECTIONS AND LESSONS

In order to weather forces that would have your job—or even your life—you need the courage that grounds you in the sense that what you are doing is right. And I should clarify in this age of overly simplistic demagoguery that “right” does not mean “self-righteous,” but means simply that what you are doing contributes to the healing and repair of the world. I have invoked in several of my speeches the Jewish mystical concept of *tikkun olam*, which means to repair a world that is essentially broken and in need of our service and action to put it back together. I have always held that universities are ideal engines of that repair.

Keeping about a relic that maintains brokenness, that sustains severance, is not in service to healing. It puts nothing back together but rather rends the world apart. The name of Confederate Memorial Hall has been a harmful force, a polarizing force, that reminded black students of their blackness and white students of their whiteness and made them all aware, however barely conscious they might be of this awareness, of their differences from one another and of the historic circumstances that would set their interests at odds. The name of the hall has been a threat, however symbolic, to the integrity of the university's mission. Even while acknowledging that Confederate sympathizers would feel pain over the name's removal, I never could justify that the name merited preservation simply because of its sentimental value to a politically invested faction.

One of the most powerful forces one can ever encounter as a leader of any organization is resistance to change. I would submit that such resistance can be even greater surrounding an academic community, because the people who belong to that particular community have involved their identities and emotions with their idea of what that institution stands for. What that institution means to them is bound up, for example, with the alumni's own ideas of themselves as alumni, what experiential associations their degrees carry with them, and how their identities as alumni signify within their larger conceptions of themselves.

A leader has to be sympathetic to this feeling, even if he or she is not sympathetic to its particular manifestation. The people involved with any organization want to feel as though they are involved with, and invested in, a force that is ongoing and relevant. They do not want to feel as though they are outdated or obsolete or old guard, that they are no longer

needed by the institution that has formed such a vital part of their self-identity. They dread the sense that their ideas are held in contempt and that they are without power and influence.

Knowing these things can help make a leader able to approach and respond to resistant factions in creative and compassionate ways, instead of viewing them as the wild-eyed fanatical opposition. In Vanderbilt's case, the Confederate alumni's desire for belonging became bound up with greater national forces of race and regional identity and sparked a conflagration that had to do with far more than the edifice of a single residence hall. The one regret I do have over this episode is our neglecting to tell the UDC directly of the decision as soon as it was made. They heard of the action from a reporter for the student newspaper, so not only were they offended by the change of the name itself, but they were also insulted by our insensitivity toward their concerns and their investment. I do believe that even if we had notified the UDC prior to making the announcement, they still would have raised a row and still would have filed a suit, but they would not have felt as though we treated them with contempt, and they might not have pursued legal action against us—or at least as aggressively or in exactly the same fashion as they did. We may have been able to undertake a more dialogic communication with them. We would not have alienated them to the extent that we did, and we would not have intensified the brokenness that already existed. We would have had good manners on our side and would have been able to act in the service of evolution without an utter disregard for our past. We may have had different results to show for it.

Even I have to admit that as Vanderbilt rises through the ranks as a world-class university, people will always think of it as a Southern university. But in order to bring distinction on the living South, in order to do the best credit to those who have supported this university through all its years of being, we have to give up a little here and there. We have to maintain our charm and our civility and our magnolia arboretum, but we also have to be willing to see what parts of our past might frighten away the best and brightest students whom we want to enroll here, whom we want to be a credit to us and to our great university. Vanderbilt has a role in the economic and cultural life of our region as it lives today, as it is vital and alive and moving into the future. The greatness of any body should lie in its present and future as well as, and even in spite of, its past. Much as we may grow attached to the traditions of an institution or to its artifacts, we have to recognize that a university is not a museum. We are a place of ideas, and we must live in response to the world, or we disable ourselves from relevance.

