

# Comments on the Presidency

Herb Hollomon came within an inch of losing his job on June 25. Only 2 days prior to the monthly meeting of OU's Board of Regents, even he was sure he would be fired. But he was not. The regents voted 4 in favor of rehiring, 1 against, and 1 abstaining. The seventh board member was not present.

Curiously, it was Oklahoma's governor, Dewey Bartlett, himself who probably swung the decision in Hollomon's favor. And that wasn't what he intended to do at all. Rumors and speculation that Bartlett had instructed newly appointed regent Dr. Vernon Lockard to vote to fire Hollomon had been standard fare for some 2 weeks before the meeting. The regents themselves weren't talking much to reporters.

On Friday, the day after the regents renewed Hollomon's contract, Bartlett held his weekly press conference. Asked about the regents' action, Bartlett said he felt the regents made a mistake in retaining Hollomon. He said it takes strong statewide support to build a strong state university and that he does not feel the OU administration has such support.

More than that, however, Bartlett confirmed reports that he talked with all 7 regents prior to the regents' meeting. He said he told them he wanted Hollomon fired.

Boards of regents in Oklahoma are constitutional bodies, established to work independent of politics. For the governor to try to dictate the actions of the board is a clear breach of constitutional intent.

The regents themselves were in a box. There are a lot of people who would have been glad to see Hollomon ousted for all the reasons the governor gave. The regents were perfectly aware of this feeling. They were equally aware of acute political pressure. Board members probably were closely divided in their feelings on the issue, and no one can say with certainty what the outcome might have been had press and political influence not been such factors.

To have fired Hollomon on June 25 would have meant that for all time everyone would have believed the regents' votes were dictated by the governor. The vote to rehire brought bitter objection from many of Hollomon's foes.

The problem facing the regents that Thursday was to decide whether the charges against Hollomon outweighed the good he had done and his potential for further progress. They had to decide whether his opponents were simply upset because University reform had stepped on sensitive toes or whether there had been real harm to the University.

There were no concrete charges. Clearly Hollomon had done much to improve the institution. He had brought bright new people to the campus; he had put up a strong fight for better financing; he had instituted new programs. On the other hand his personal abrasiveness had irritated a lot of people--people in high places as well as people in general.

Compounding the situation was press coverage. The state's major papers had been editorializing for weeks and were giving front page play to the latest speculation. As late as the morning of the meeting some papers were predicting a 7-0 vote to fire.

At the meeting itself the pressure was strong. More than 100 people jammed the meeting room. The regents had been dogged by reporters during the days preceding the meeting, had been besieged with letters, phone calls and wires.

Before hot television lights and crowds of people the regents filed into the room. Conspicuously absent was regents' chairman Reuben Sparks. Sparks had been in Norman and Oklahoma City for at least 2 days prior to the meeting consulting with other regents 1 or 2 at a time. His absence from the meeting was clearly intentional. He was known to be anti-Hollomon.

Presiding in Sparks' place was vice chairman Tony Calvert, also known to be anti-Hollomon. Other regents present were Huston Huffman, Walter Neustadt, Nancy Davies, Jack Santee and Lockard.

The regents took up the Hollomon matter early in the meeting. Had they wished, they could have gone into executive session, clearing the room of all but board members. They are to be commended for keeping the meeting open, although everyone knew their decision had been reached before the meeting.

Santee moved to retain Hollomon; Mrs. Davies seconded. Calvert stated his position, saying he had "reluctantly concluded" that (1) Hollomon had "lost the confidence and support of a substantial portion of the senior faculty, the alumni, many of the students, and other principal constituencies of the University," (2) that "the campus appears to be divided into factions and cliques" which is damaging to "the proper functioning of the University," (3) that Hollomon had "failed to honor the long established principle...of effective and meaningful faculty participation" in policy making, and (4) that the president suffered from a major credibility gap.

"For these and other substantive reasons," Calvert said, "I believe that for the best interest of the University the Board of Regents should not retain Dr. Hollomon."

With that the board voted. Santee, Huffman, Neustadt and Mrs. Davies voted to rehire. Calvert voted not to rehire. Lockard abstained. By that time the vote did not really come as a surprise. When Sparks did not show up at the meeting, it became abundantly clear what the outcome would be. Sparks commented later that he did not attend because he did not want to be present when Hollomon's contract was renewed. On Friday, June 26, Sparks resigned from the board.

Although Hollomon was rehired, the old animosities are still there in various areas of the state. Hollomon-studying will continue to be a public pastime. What the president needs now is a new image, one that is dignified without being stuffy, straightforward without being rude. He has pledged to try to heal the divisions in the University. Being a college or university president today is a hard job under any conditions. Hollomon's is harder than most because he knows he's had his second chance. The regents were willing to give him that chance, and it is now up to the alumni, faculty, students and general public to see to it that it is a fair chance. To do less would mean irreparable damage to the University.--CBR