

Guest Commentary

President Boren's Fresh Perspective on Power

Three years ago, U. S. Senator David Boren surrendered 16 years seniority in one of America's safest seats to serve as 13th president of the University of Oklahoma.

Frankly, I was astonished. Why would this most popular of all Oklahoma politicians trade Washington power and glory for the truly tedious, day-to-day grind of heartland academia?

That's the question everybody asked. President Boren always answered, "Because I can do more good for Oklahoma, America and the world at the University than in the Senate." What a refreshing perspective on power and its possibilities!

Several U.S. presidents, including Garfield, Wilson and Eisenhower, moved from campus to White House. But here was a man—clearly qualified to be the president of the United States—moving the other way. Not because he wanted a more comfortable life, but because he sought the fullest ultimate leverage for his creative leadership.

At his inauguration three years ago, President Boren made three promises. That's enough time for his mid-term grade. Comparing what he said he would do to what he has already actually done, I am no longer astonished. I am astounded!

First, President Boren promised to build a world-class academic institution. Within three years, he has recruited the largest student enrollment with the highest ACT and SAT scores in state history. His bright new students include more National Merit Scholars per capita than any other public university in America.

Incredibly, he has also established 90 new endowed faculty positions, which literally doubles the University's first 100 years. Moreover, to assure that a huge state university matches the heady atmosphere of the Ivy League, he established the Honors College and recruited a renowned Oxford scholar as founding dean. Now, 1,400 students luxuriate in very small classes with very large intellectual stimulation.

But David Boren is no elitist. A former Rhodes Scholar with an open-ended universal vision, he quickly

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recruited a former United Nations ambassador to head a powerful international academic program. Now 2,000 students come to Oklahoma from more than 100 countries. OU's exchange agreements with 100 foreign universities place it first in the Big 12 and within that handful of academic cultures with the most intense international orientations.

Above all else, President Boren knows nothing replaces the power of classroom teaching. He brought 50 retired full professors back to teach freshmen and sophomores. He dramatically increased faculty salaries and student scholarships. He personally teaches an introductory political science course where enrollment is so prized it almost has to be handled by lottery.

Eventually, the academy will measure OU most rigorously by its research capacity. Despite shrinking government resources, OU's faculty broke all previous records by contracting \$330 million of externally funded research in just three years. At the same time, their president quietly added 500,000 volumes in library holdings.

Second, to afford an academic quantum leap—along with \$160 million in new buildings—President Boren promised to raise mind-boggling amounts of money. But first, he froze executive salaries, slashed millions in administrative costs and pushed the savings into essential academics.

With one hand, he doubled the number of private individuals giving to the University to 50,000 per year. With the other hand, his magic facilitated three years of the largest increases in tax support from the state legislature.

Most courageously, President Boren launched the largest private fundraising drive for any purpose in the entire history of the state of Oklahoma! Already, he has raised \$200 million of his \$250 million goal. With two years left to go, he will exceed success by many millions. Consequently, in just three years, OU's permanent endowment fund has mushroomed by

60 percent, joining the elite 20 most richly endowed state universities.

Third, President Boren promised "to create a sense of family and community on campus." Why would he so highly prioritize a spiritual value like that? Because this seasoned chairman of the U. S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence knows just how desperately divided and dangerous our world is! He knows we will either build community or blow ourselves apart. He knows the most powerful place to start is with the unique campus community.

Therefore, he has moved faculty families into student dormitories, started an "adopt-a-professor" program for fraternities and sororities, built a new student center at the Health Sciences Center and refurbished the Memorial Union in Norman. His OU Cousins program matches international students with American students who include their "cousins" in social activities and home visits.

In this deepest desire to create family, David's own family, led by his beautiful wife Molly, sets the very highest possible 24-hour standard. Foregoing the usual weekend anonymity, David and Molly moved back into the renovated 1906 president's home at the heart of the campus, smack-dab in the middle of frenetic student activity.

Since 1891, the University of Oklahoma has had historic presidential leadership—David Ross Boyd, William Bennett Bizzell, George Lynn Cross. But columnist George Will has already christened this latest Sooner boom: "If an institution is the lengthening shadow of a leader, this university is increasingly the shadow cast by David Lyle Boren."

Like Wilson from Princeton and Eisenhower from Columbia, if David and Molly ever trade the Boyd House for the White House, we'll all help. But 'til then, the millions of us who love OU—where all four of our sons were educated—are thrilled to say, "Thank you, Mr. President."

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