

## Honoring George W. Bush: Academic Awards and University Governance

Arthur N. Gilbert

*(Josef Korbel School of International Studies, University of Denver, USA)*

**Abstract:** Over the past several years, colleges and universities in the United States have gone through the embarrassment of inviting and then disinviting distinguished and well known individuals to give commencement speeches, receive awards, and to be honored by the school. This paper does not attempt to resolve the problem of who should be chosen and who should not but addresses the issue of process. Is there not a better way to avoid the conflict and protests that have accompanied academic honors in recent years? The example here focuses on honoring President George W. Bush and suggests a way out for institutions of higher learning.

**Key words:** George W Bush, academic awards, disinviting speakers, university governance

The Evil that men do lives after them;

The good is oft interred with their bones

William Shakespeare, Julius Caesar, Act 3, Scene ii

In the fall of 2013, my University presented President George W. Bush with an honorary award at an annual and gala banquet at a hotel on downtown Denver.<sup>1</sup> The event was designed to raise money and has always featured prominent diplomats, military leaders and successful business men and philanthropists whose work is celebrated. Protests are rare but not unknown because famous figures make enemies as they rise to the top. They also make decisions which make people angry and create both ethical and moral problems that can be deeply troubling at the time and long after their careers have ended. Honoring George W Bush was bound to be problematic because he is not well loved in academe and because the original title of the award was announced as The Improving the Human Condition Award which angered people haunted by the Invasion of Iraq and the support of torture as part of his administration's war on terror. It was later changed to the Global Citizen Award which was certainly less provocative but also so innocuous that it could be given to anyone who travelled a lot. One angry Professor, on his blog, noted that the name change was akin to putting lipstick on a pig. Lost in the very public debate over honoring President Bush was the story of how the decision was made and any constructive ideas on improving the selection process to avoid public conflict in the future. The recent spate of commencement speaker outrage suggests that there is work to be done. I sometimes think that if Jesus Christ was being given an Improving the Human Condition award, there would be protests from the Society for the

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Arthur N. Gilbert, Ph.D., Professor, Josef Korbel School of International Studies, University of Denver; research areas/interests: genocide, US foreign policy, religion, the drug war. E-mail: [Arthur.Gilbert@du.edu](mailto:Arthur.Gilbert@du.edu).

<sup>1</sup> It is called the Korbel Dinner in Honor of the outstanding diplomat, author and educator Josef Korbel. Korbel was the founder of the school of International Studies.

Protection of Money Changers in the Temple demanding a dis-invitation to say nothing of protests from those scholars who believe that the onset of Christianity retarded scientific progress.

## 1. In the Beginning

Information on the origins of an award for George W. Bush is scarce. We do know that that three senior administrators, the Chancellor, the Provost, and the Dean of the Korbel School had been active participants in the process from the start. In the spring of 2013 there were several faculty meetings at the Korbel School but the idea of an award for Bush was not mentioned. If anyone on the faculty knew about this development it was kept a secret. Indeed the usual rumor mill that exists in what is essentially an academic village was silent on this subject. Only slowly and over a period of a month or so did word of the award begin to emerge. Perhaps the three administrators who did sign off on the Bush award made a conscious decision to present the faculty and students with a *fait d'accompli* or found it best not to stir up trouble prematurely. What we do know is as soon as what was initially The Improving the Human Condition award was announced the reaction at Korbel was fast and largely negative. Enterprising students went to Change.org and established a protest site with a petition that was ultimately signed by over 1600 people.<sup>2</sup> Many were students at the school but Change.org is designed to reach into many different communities and there was no shortage of people who were angry at the policies of the Bush administration. Faculty response was also swift from those who thought that an award for Improving the Human Condition was not warranted and several Professors began to draw up a petition designed to urge the Chancellor to rescind the honor. From the beginning the faculty and most students made it clear that there was no problem in inviting President Bush to attend the Korbel dinner or to appear on Campus but an award was another matter. As one might expect, blogs and commentaries on various news sites exploded. A few samples will suffice “The Only thing Bush should be awarded is a long prison sentence for war crimes.” “Perhaps Osama Bin Ladin should be awarded the humanitarian award. He is just as worthy as Bush.” “He implemented population control. He killed people.”<sup>3</sup> Suggestions for new titles were offered. The agent of Mass Destruction Award, The War Criminal Award, and, well you can imagine. Conservatives jumped in with several lines of defense. There were lots of comments on the good work that Bush had done in Africa supporting HIV/AIDS program which purportedly saved the lives of many people. Other commentators pointed out that the very same people who were trashing Bush on torture charges would not protest an award to President Obama in spite of his policy on drones. This raised interesting problems of moral equivalency which we will touch on later. There were comments on the necessity of water boarding and other enhanced interrogation techniques because the dangers of radical Islam made this essential. Money was also on the table. Pro award people arguing that money makes the world go round noted that in the brutal world of University financing it was important to cater to rich Republican donors who were committed to the idea of a Bushian resurrection for the sake of the party. Both the petition on Change.Org and in many other places contained pledges never to make a contribution to the school because of the cheapening of their degree because now associated with the award. At one point several articles were published claiming that the amount of money to be withheld by donors totaled \$335,000 or more.<sup>4</sup> There was, in the end, a modest victory for the faculty and student protestors when the name of the award was changed to the more neutral and

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<sup>2</sup> Change.Org, Bush Petition.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Donors Threaten U., Denver over George W. Bush Award, College Insurrection, July 18, 2013. Alumni May Withhold \$335K, The Clarion, July 15, 2013.

ambivalent Global Citizenship Award.<sup>5</sup>

While 24 faculty members signed the anti Bush petition, it should be noted that a significant minority did not. One faculty member wrote that it might endanger contributions to AIDS in Africa programs. Honorary Award realists, Korbel is a school of international studies, argued that you have to do messy things for the greater good. This reflected Winston Churchill's comment about making an alliance with the Devil to defeat Adolph Hitler and, for the historically minded, Francis I alliance with the Turks. Others, no doubt, with thoughts of retribution in mind, decided to put their personal interests ahead of principle which is, of course, a common response in and out of academe. Bystanders to conflict are never in short supply.

The press, Lead by the Denver Post responded in a number of articles in June and July. The Conservative editorial writer for the Post, Vincent Carroll titled his op ed piece **Bush League Protest at DU** (Vincent Carroll, 2013). The faculty, retitled a posse, was accused of not respecting the office of the President and then referenced an invitation from Notre Dame to President Obama to speak at the 2009 commencement in spite of differing views on abortion. Carroll brought in the now popular drone argument and in a quote from the Dean of the Korbel School expressed support for the award in the name of "presenting multiple points of view and promoting civil discourse among diverse individuals." (Vincent Carroll, 2013). This became a common theme for those supporting the Bush award to encourage open debate, and the beauty of campus ideals like academic freedom, uncensored discourse, and the advancement of learning.

Perhaps the most interesting exchange occurred in the Sunday Denver Post in a segment titled Point-Counter Point where William Stanfill the Chairperson of the Social Science Foundation, an independent board that supports the Josef Korbel School and Professor Alan Gilbert who teaches political theory at the institution. Arguing that the University made the right call, Stanfill paid homage to Josef Korbel the founder of the Graduate School and referenced Dean Hill's distinguished public service (William D. Stanfill, 2013). While there was no reference to the award, Stanfill argued that the school had a long tradition of welcoming opposing points of view and that he looked forward to a dialogue between Bush and Hill which he thought would be enlightening. Whether a hotel banquet is the proper venue for such a dialogue was not addressed. Professor Alan Gilbert focused on torture and in particular water boarding which he called a "paradigm of torture" (Alan Gilbert, 2013). He mentioned Guantanamo where prisoners of the United States are held without trial and argued that "Torture is a war crime and that Bush's policies were a violation of International Law and concluded that "torture crosses a line from the civilized world to barbarism. It violates the core of law" (Alan Gilbert, 2013). After references to the illegality of the war in Iraq, Gilbert argued that Bush made the United States a rogue state and should not be honored by a school devoted to human rights .

The Stanfill\Gilbert exchange took place only a few days before the Korbel dinner which sold out. A protest was organized outside of the hotel which was attended by students and others in the community but not by faculty members from the Korbel School. The University closed the event to the press so we have no written reports about the dinner, or if the hoped for dialogue between Hill and Bush materialized. One of my colleagues who attended told me that President Bush was warmly received and received a standing ovation from the audience. The school raised a great deal of money and it was the most successful fund raising event in the history of the Korbel Dinner. Afterward, there seemed to be a desire to get back to normal as quickly as possible. All references to honoring Bush disappeared from University sites by the next morning and the faculty turned quickly to the more

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<sup>5</sup> University of Denver Caves to Pressure, Nixes Humanitarian Award for Bush, *National Review*, July 9, 2013.

comfortable tasks of teaching courses and interacting with students. Case closed.

## 2. University Honors and the Human Condition

Not many would have predicted that an award conflict would break out over the good and evil that is present in the lives of those in public service. How does one reconcile on the well known scale of justice supporting HIV/AIDS research vs. Water boarding? I have saved lives. I have tortured and killed people. We do not have a formula for University administrators to consider when passing out University honors. Those who accused the protestors of hypocrisy for castigating Bush and remaining mute on drone issues have a point. Where is the line and how should it be drawn in the honors arena? My thoughts on this problem lead me to reflect on American presidents and other powerful statesmen who might draw protest if institutions considered them for honors. Going back to the original award title, Improving the Human Condition as opposed to the mushy phrase global citizen, here are some thoughts on who may or may not pass muster. The most obvious example of statesmen who might not meet the awards standard is President Richard Nixon and his Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. In a recent book by Gary J. Bass, *The Blood Telegram: Nixon, Kissinger, and a Forgotten Genocide*, the author begins by reminding us that “untold thousands of people were shot, bombed or burned to death in Dacca alone” during the attempt to suppress the rebellion in East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, in March, 1971 (Gary J. Bass, 2013). The United States under Nixon and Kissinger were allied with Pakistan and loyally stood by its ally in one of the worst slaughters-some would say genocide- of the latter twentieth century. Without qualification, Bass states that “Nixon and Kissinger’s support of a military dictatorship, engaged in mass murder is a reminder of what the world can easily look like without any concern for the pain of distant strangers.” (Gary J. Bass, 2013). Because of its dislike of India and its use of Pakistan as its gateway to China, the United States partnered with genocidal killers. If you add to this fearful story, the role of our two leaders in Vietnam and Cambodia as well as intervention in Chile to bring down the Allende regime, (we don’t even have to put Watergate on the table) to walk away from academic honors consideration for these two gentlemen. They crossed the line.

In order to demonstrate that denial of academic honors is not a war on Republican leaders, it is fairly easy to put President Johnson in the not acceptable category. In spite of his war on poverty and his 1965 success in pressuring Congress to pass civil rights legislation, he remains saddled by the war in Vietnam. Historian David Kaiser called this war which the United States lost “the greatest policy miscalculation in the history of American foreign relations” (David Kaiser, 2000). Much of this places blame for the escalation of conflict under Johnson and his Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara. If you add to this tale of manipulating the country into enhanced conflict because of the Gulf of Tonkin incident the Vietnam conflict looks vaguely like the war in Iraq. Fredrik Logevall in *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and Escalation of War in Vietnam* makes a similar argument that Johnson was not pulled into this war because of structural forces but because of his own decisions which ultimately make him unworthy of awards (Fredrik Logevall, 2001). Issues like necessary and unnecessary wars, the amount of blood on the hands of American decision makers, and the results of conflicts which cannot be seen in advance.

Lets deal with some tougher cases. If we could resurrect President Franklin Roosevelt from the grave, Universities might rush to give him an improving the human condition award because of his significant role in winning World War II. Students of foreign policy, however, and this includes many Roosevelt fans know that part of the story includes a fake story which is very much on a par with the Gulf of Tonkin and weapons of mass

destruction. It is the Greer incident of 1941. Here is how Robert Dallek tells the story.

Roosevelt found the basis for an announcement of his policy in an exchange of fire between a German submarine and the American destroyer Greer in the North Atlantic. On September 4, after a British plane informed the Greer of the presence of a U-boat ten miles ahead, the destroyer and the plane stalked the submarine. Before returning to base, the plane unsuccessfully attacked the U-boat with four depth charges. Some two hours later, with the Greer still in pursuit, the submarine fired a torpedo. The Greer answered with eight depth charges and the submarine fired one or two more torpedoes. When the Greer relocated the U-boat two and a half hours later, it dropped eleven more depth charges without effect, and an hour later ended its chase. There was “no positive evidence that [the] submarine knew [the] nationality of [the] ship at which it was firing,” the Navy reported to FDR on September 9. (Robert Dallek, 1993)

Like President Johnson at the Gulf of Tonkin which Dallek refers to in his account, President Roosevelt announced his escorting and shoot on sight policy by informing the American people that the sub had fired on an American ship claiming that this was an act of piracy on the high seas. The announcement of undeclared war in the Atlantic was a significant escalation toward war and involved twisting the evidence and deviously pushing the country into what turned out to be World War II. Roosevelt also ordered FBI investigations of his political opponents, unlawful wire taps, and notoriously supported the internment of Japanese Americans during the war. Still he has a monument on the Mall and while he is not on Mount Rushmore, he would probably end up in a second edition of that monument if a patriotic sculptor undertook that task.

We could go on and saddle any President and his crew with evil deeds. The complicity of President Eisenhower in the overthrow of President Arbenz was a disaster for the growth of democracy in Guatemala. The role of the same administration in the overthrow of Mossadegh in Iran in 1953 has poisoned relations between and the United States to the present day. Iran contra saddled the Reagan administration with a trading arms for hostages scandal that might have destroyed his ability to govern. As one of my colleagues recently noted in a conversation, Thomas Jefferson was a slave holder and Woodrow Wilson was a racist. In the end the charge that a line has been crossed runs into the thorny problem of where is the line, can it be drawn in any kind of consistent manner. Is the idea of a line in the honorific sand tainted immediately by political, ethical, and moral bias? What is unacceptable behavior for decision makers and how should it be applied in by colleges and Universities? Crossing the line is like the now fashionable and equally imprecise phrase, inappropriate behavior.

### **3. University Governance and Awards**

Throughout the debate on honoring George W. Bush, there were only a few references to how awards should be made by academic institutions. The most impressive was a short but powerful letter to editor of the Denver Post in early September by the Chair of our local AAUP chapter, Dean Saitta who is a stalwart for the cause of academic freedom and shared governance at American colleges and Universities. Challenging a comment by Vincent Carroll in the aforementioned op ed piece attacking left leaning college faculty, he argued that the real problem was the failure of “autocratic administration” for not consulting with “stakeholders” which was the faculty, staff, students and alumni before presenting a controversial award. Unfortunately the Saitta statement did not spark a debate on the nature of University governance and the consequences of failing to broaden the decision making process.

Let us follow up on the Saitta statement not to resolve the issue of what statesman or politician has crossed ill defined lines, but to focus on a process which might improve selection. In politics we know that one of the

problems of autocracy is that while you are free to make decisions at will, if things go wrong you will also take all of the blame for the consequences. Thus all power becomes all weakness and the lack of shared governance can lead to a catastrophic fall from grace. We have many examples of this in history but I always think of the last days of the Shah of Iran who was assumed, in particular by the United States government, to be all powerful but who quickly lost power when a coalition of the many blamed him for everything that they perceived as disastrous in Iranian life and politics. There are too many cases in history of all power turning into all weakness to mention here but one would like to think that the Chancellors and Provosts in academe might want to examine this record before taking on the responsibility of honoring individuals like President Bush. While it may be cumbersome there are many advantages for proceeding with more than a troika behind you.

Let me present an example from the Academy awards which I follow every year with great attention. As an avid film buff, I have always developed a stake in the best picture of the year. Sometimes the choice makes me happy as was the case in 2013 when *Twelve Years a Slave* was victorious. It was time, in my view, for the Academy to pay attention to the dark side of American History and this searing account of being kidnapped into slavery in a country which celebrates freedom was long overdue. I worried that the movie *Gravity* would win because I found the story line trite, unimaginative, and boring. Would technological excellence triumph over the complexity of race and slavery in American life? I went to bed happy when the Academy made the right choice. In other years, I have been profoundly disappointed. I hated *Braveheart* with its made up Scottish history and anti English, anti gay, and souped up battle scenes later replicated in an even worse film, *The Patriot*. When *Titanic* won the academy award I could not help but remember that I was the only one in the theater cheering for the iceberg. You win some, you lose some but in the end, I cannot attack any individual voter because I do not know any of them and at least I have the comfort of knowing that lots of people participated in the decision. Thus, I cannot make the charge that Dean Saitta makes against a few autocrats who may have knowledge deficiencies but do have dictatorial authority. My anger is diffused and soon disappears because of shared governance in decision making.

In the case of University awards as opposed to academy awards the arcane autocratic system invites protest reminiscent of the aforementioned fall of the Shah. It is unfortunate that many University leaders do not recognize that shared governance might protect them from attack when they make controversial awards choices.

Let me conclude by setting up a hypothetical system for award choice and examining its strengths and weaknesses with regard to individuals like President George Bush. Whatever the convenience might be of having two or three individuals in high places make awards without consultation, the downside of this autocratic approach is obvious. Indeed it is ironic that in institutions of higher learning, individuals without the credentials to evaluate the life and career of a President like George W. Bush or any other important political figure are allowed to make the choice. By definition there needs to be some scholarly input and Universities are ideal places to find this kind of talent. In the Bush case, there were plenty of scholars who knew something about torture, the war in Iraq, HIV/AIDS, and so on to be on a committee of evaluation. Would this be perfect? Of course not, academics even fair minded and highly skilled ones are often prisoners of their ideologies and ideals. None the less this is better than turning the process over to those with no qualifications whatsoever. It also softens the charge that such selections are made solely because of financial considerations. Money may make the world go around as the song from *Cabaret* tells us but it cannot and should not be the only criteria for linking an institution of higher learning to individuals of questionable reputation. A special committee of scholars who have studied and taught about, in this case, foreign policy is superior to a few people who may know nothing at all about the person. If there are not

enough scholars, in this case, Bush scholars on campus, the school could appoint distinguished academics from other nearby schools or even ask for letters of reference, if you will, so that there is a dossier of worthiness or unworthiness on the table. At the same time the committee could make sure that the award was carefully worded so that problematic like Improving the Human Condition which turned out to be an invitation to conflict mismanagement would be avoided. In this case, lack of proper vetting resulted in a choice between a highly dubious generality and, with regard to global citizenry: mush. I would like to think that a responsibility, if they approved of an award might have simply focused on specific achievements and offered the controversial President an award on that which was less controversial: FOR CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE PREVENTION OF HIV/AIDS IN AFRICA. Angry liberal academics could mutter...and for starting an unnecessary war or for reintroducing water boarding into International politics. Angry conservatives could mutter...and helping to protect the United States from terrorism after 9/11. Some might even claim the HIV/AIDS award was also inappropriate but on that we could simply say that reasonable academics can disagree. Of course, this process would be less efficient than simply arbitrary decisions at the top. It would take longer and might lead to a great deal of contention in the committee. In the end, there would be a vote and some people will be happy and others sad. But like the academy awards everyone would know that there was a process which involved people of competence and concern and no one could legitimately quarrel with that. In a future of awards choices, I would expect to sometimes say this was the equivalent of giving an award to Twelve Years a Slave. Hooray. I would also expect to sometimes booooo. When an award was given to the academic equivalent of Braveheart. In the end I would say this is a process which is a vast improvement over what happened in the past and I would smile knowing that in an age of administrative over reach, a committee of experts was a step toward shared governance in academic institutions.

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