

# The University of Chicago Law Review

---

Volume 62

Fall 1995

Number 4

---

© 1995 by The University of Chicago

## Walter J. Blum

*Hanna Gray*†

Late on a Friday afternoon in the spring of 1979, I received a phone call from Wally Blum. It was by no means the first and certainly not the last of such communications made to reveal an idea or plan for solving the plight of the university, or for doing something dramatic that would put it more fully on the map and dazzle its competitors; to share some inside information or startling gossip gathered, as by osmosis, from innumerable unnamed sources; or to let me know what I should think about, what he was appalled about, what I should be really worried about, and what I should do right away if I had an ounce of sense. But it was the most memorable of these calls, even in a spring that had seen him preoccupied with the unanswerable question of whether it was a plain strawberry or a cherry cream Sara Lee pie, partially thawed, that a demonstrator had hurled in the face of a police commander who was trying to clear University Avenue of people re-enacting the radical gestures of what was by then a half-imagined past.

That occasion was grist for Wally's mill. He had no need of imagining a past that he remembered all too clearly for its implicit and explicit assaults on the university, and he was severe in his condemnation of the almost playful replication of those events, for these were issues one did not play with. Any

---

† Harry Pratt Judson Distinguished Service Professor of History, The University of Chicago; President of the University of Chicago, 1978-83. These remarks were given at a memorial for Walter Blum on February 4, 1995.

threatened erosion of the integrity of the university and its fundamental processes was for him the worst of sins. At the same time, he took a mischievous delight in the mystery of the pie and the absurdity of the scene, not to mention the appearance of a paddy wagon and its subsequent disappearance, replete with passive resisters, in the direction of the police station.

There, as he knew, and complained vociferously, they would be quickly bailed out by the institution whose immoral conduct they were protesting. He was, to put it mildly, rather upset by this. But Walter had an eye both for sin and for folly, for the conservation of basic principle and the inevitability of confusion and disorder. And he had faith that good teaching and rigorous scholarship and intelligent discussion could make rightness prevail, above all in his university, and despite the failings and delusions to which it could be subject and which required constant vigilance.

On this particular afternoon later that May, Wally said urgently, "You have to stop it." "Stop what?" I asked. "It just can't be allowed," he replied. "It is an outrage. Did you know about it? Why isn't anything being done? If it's not stopped today, it will be too late." "What?" I asked again. "You mean you don't know?" he said. "That's just incredible."

Well, this was truly alarming. It turned out that the catastrophe had to do with the installation and impending dedication of the bright stained glass created to replace the faded rose window in the Rockefeller Chapel. Wally did not like the new window. He felt it would introduce a jarring, even lurid, conflict with the tenor and original design of the chapel. He thought it a monstrous violation of settled norms that the university would rue for years to come. He thought, I believe, that I should take a ladder and an axe and deal with the problem head on. For Wally had an impassioned concern also for the physical integrity of the university, its campus plan and architecture, its landscaping and harmony, its reflection of the values of intellectual community and pride that were his as well.

The rose window went in, and Wally went on. It was characteristic of Wally to urge the impossible, with energetic optimism and unrelenting purpose. What is remarkable is how often he made the apparently impossible become possible. If, for some reason, he could not, as in the instance of the rose window or that of providing the world's largest ferris wheel as an attraction on the Midway during the centennial, he moved on, with good cheer and undiminished zeal, to the next project and made that

happen. It is true that his next project for the centennial, which was to procure a woolly mammoth for display, did not work out either. But most things, including the centennial itself, most assuredly did.

Wally had great dreams, but he was a realist, too, always wanting people to do better, yet clear eyed about the wily imperfections of a human world filled with pitifully inept legislators and bumbling citizen tax-evaders. He was always ambitious for his university to surpass itself immediately, yet deeply understanding of the processes of consultation and negotiation and rethinking and constructive compromise by which things ultimately do get done, sometimes in fits and starts, sometimes in great lurches forward, mostly by steady collaborative activity and mutual persuasion, in institutions like ours.

The centennial was a wonderful accomplishment. Wally led the faculty committee that brought it into being, pushing and goading and exhorting, making sure that it represented what this university and its history are most centrally about, taking care that the celebrations should look forward, however great his reverence for the university's traditions, and that they be driven by lively and serious intellectual initiatives of real breadth; insisting that they be inclusive and that a spirit of light-heartedness and a dash of self-mockery should also enrich the centennial menu. As in all enterprises one shared with Wally, he made it fun while never swerving from an intensely focused set of goals, endowing it all with his instinctive sense for the *persona* of the institution.

Walter served on and guided many important university committees, from the Committee of the Council and its spokesmanship to the committees on benefits and pensions and retirement that shaped so many of the policies we have today. He also took on the major issues of student life and residence, participated in the development of individual buildings (such as this law school) and was engaged in all the activities of campus planning. In each of these matters, he always saw and stressed some larger vision. He saw the university whole, as an integrated physical and intellectual space. His mind's eye visualized not an abstraction but a full-scale model in minute detail, with each tree and crosswalk, each common room and barber's chair in its proper place and playing its appropriate part in the vivid perspective of the total composition.

Walter was a generous man with a great talent for friendship. His incessant questioning, demanding as it was, looked

always to the common good, not to personal victory. His was a nature never self-pitying or querulous. He managed to combine a certain stoicism with kindness and empathy, a profound private reserve with a joyful and unending sociability.

Walter spoke to us in many ways. The resounding statements made by his selection of neckties stand out as especially striking. The Law School yearbook of 1973 chose as one of the year's highlights a Wally Blum Tie Contest, with Wally serving as judge. The yearbook author wrote: "Judge Blum stole the show with his twinkling bow tie. It was like having Raquel Welch judge the Miss Hyde Park Beauty Contest."

I always thought Wally's ties represented a remarkable means of self-fashioning in his relations with the world. Through them, I imagined the University High School student staking out his personal niche, the College student claiming his role as Big Man on Campus, the jaunty editor of the *Law Review* asserting his place, the young attorney defining his individuality, the emergent law school professor etching his identity as a classroom legend. Those neckties, far more lurid than the rose window he deplored, expressed a certain defiant humor. They were also the sartorial equivalent of the phrase, both dreaded and welcomed, which tended to be Wally's opener: "Oh, by the way . . .," he would say, with deceptive innocence. When he said that, you knew something was coming, something big, something that could not be overlooked.

When Walter received the Law School's Distinguished Alumni Award last November, he had planned to conclude his remarks, which sadly he was unable to make, with an account of his happiness on being awarded a \$300 scholarship to the College. According to his notes, his father reacted to the good news by saying: "Walter, remember this: it is good to give to a college. It is not good to take from the college unless you are borrowing with the intent to pay back the loan."

Walter was a giving man, and he realized his intent a thousand fold. And of course it is *we* who are in *his* debt.

His association with our university spanned well over half its history. Walter rattled our consciences, stretched our aspirations, and raised our spirits. The university he cared for and challenged and defended with so fierce a loyalty, the community he celebrated with such loving warmth, are gathered to acknowledge an incalculable debt of gratitude and affection. To remember Walter is to mourn his loss, but it is also to affirm his enduring presence

in the fabric of our common lives here at his Law School and throughout his university.

