



One Job, One Year, One Life

At 8:20 A.M. on June 17, 1969, one day after his last ordeal as acting president of the University of Oregon, Dr. Charles Johnson rounded a sharp, blind curve and drove his Volkswagen head-on into a Mack B-61 diesel log truck and Peerless log trailer with a load of thirteen logs weighing sixteen tons. Johnson died instantly. He was forty-eight.

Johnson's body was so mutilated that not even his closest associates could identify him with certainty. Many thought he had committed suicide. They said: "He was depressed." "Everybody knows it." "I heard it on the radio." "Just ask anybody." "He always took the easy way out. He always caved in to student demands. His suicide was just one more easy way out." James Jensen, the president of Oregon State University, said something else: "This is a terrible tragedy. I hope now the people of Oregon will understand. . . ." He paused. "Well, perhaps I'd just better not say what I hope the people of Oregon will understand."

The county medical investigator ruled the death an accident. The curve was a difficult turn that had to be made very carefully, and the sun had been in Johnson's eyes. A psychiatrist who had seen Johnson several days earlier felt that the cause

was "partial dissociation, a situational depression caused possibly by some recent campus crisis." Johnson was also weak from a recent bout with Asian flu. And he was known to be an erratic driver. All that we know with any certainty is that many in Oregon, and especially those connected with the University of Oregon, shared after the fact a morbid sense of collective guilt.

Four years after Johnson's death, Ken Metzler (1973) published *Confrontation: The Destruction of a College President*, a faithful chronicle of one year in the life of a university president. Metzler had been an associate professor of journalism at the University of Oregon (UO) and editor of its alumni magazine. He had also served as a secretary to the presidential search committee, which, six weeks before the acting president's death, after excruciatingly intense and erratic deliberations, had finally passed over Johnson, the favorite of many, to choose a former University of Oregon dean, Robert D. Clark, then president of San Jose State University.

Reading the book some years removed from the acrid stench of the Kent State and Jackson State tragedies is an eerie experience. The problems now facing higher education seem so different, so businesslike—they are concerned with fiscal viability, affirmative action for blacks and Latinos that seems to translate into quotas for Asians, students more interested in vocational training than education, and other penultimate questions such as "Who benefits from higher education?" and "Who should pay for it?" Today, college presidents are concerned about the relationship between jobs and education, about growing parsimony at the federal and state levels, and about ways to balance the books. They wince at the memory of the unsystematic growth of the 1950s and 1960s, when most universities (the University of Oregon is a brilliant and bittersweet example) grew and grew like Topsy, proliferating their functions, diffusing their purposes, just doing what came naturally during the two golden decades: operating on margin, very like 1929's speculators. They were hiring four professors on "soft money" (federally supported grants) to every one hired on "hard money" (general funds). They saw graduate education, the indicator of a university's prestige, seriously jeopardized not only by fewer

funds (a 40 percent dip in federal fellowships in the sciences alone between 1970 and 1973) but also by fewer students and, worse, fewer jobs. For every four graduate Ph.D.'s in the two decades between 1950 and 1969, three found positions with expanding or new campuses, while only one replaced a professor who had died or retired (see the 1973 Newman Report on Graduate Education). Four years later, in many academic areas, only *one* of four graduating Ph.D.'s would find a job in what he or she was trained for, research and teaching in a university. The situation is no better today.

The problems that Johnson faced during his year as acting president may seem quaint in retrospect; in fact, they were killers. Johnson had to deal in rapid succession with:

- An anemic version of the free-speech movement, which took the form of an outcry about the use of obscenities in the student newspaper.
- A confrontation between two black basketball players who refused to cut their Afros and a new and promising freshman coach who had ordered them to do so, culminating in a demonstration with serious possibilities of violent disruption.
- A dispute concerning the use of California table grapes in the university dining halls.
- Other "brushfires" (Johnson's term) dealing with black students' rights, the bombing and destruction of valuable and expensive ROTC equipment, and similar problems that were then convulsing our fragile institutions of higher learning.

Johnson also inherited a messy fiscal situation from his predecessor, the ebullient former HEW secretary Arthur Flemming, who ran the university for the seven years preceding Johnson's term of office with a "go-go" style of enthusiasm and optimism. Flemming employed a "management by addition" style of leadership, one followed by many public institutions and some private ones in those beamish years in an attempt to compete with the eastern educational establishment.

Johnson comes through as an unpretentious, wry man of dry wit, strong analytical powers, and self-effacing style. He was

healthily skeptical of power but at times wanted it more than his words—especially his letters to the folks back home—can conceal. He was straightforward, awkward, homespun. He enjoyed parlor games and rural jokes, he liked spending time with his family, and, most of all, he enjoyed good fun.

He was almost totally inaccessible to his own feelings and, in turn, to other people's feelings. I doubt that Johnson himself or his family would ever have termed him complex, but complex he was, especially in regard to whatever tragic flaw held him in its vise and then slowly released him.

Whatever issue popped up on or careened off the University of Oregon campus in the 1968-69 academic year, Johnson was usually in the middle of it. In the obscenity issue, he was hit with the fallout of the "moderate liberal" reputation of that "highfalutin and gallivantin' politician" Arthur Flemming and was able to secure the respect of at least some members of the academic community by standing on the venerable principle of free speech. The "hair" issue found him optimistically trying somehow to convince the coach to relax his rules or the players to shave off perhaps not the *whole* Afro but possibly an inch or two. Here he was caught in the middle of a "no win" situation. He took the side of the two black players. The promising young coach was ordered to stay home rather than be at the game, and, to make matters worse, the team lost badly. The sports and editorial writers, alumni, public officials, citizenry, and legislators (these last then in session determining the university's budget) were outraged.

Then there was the grape issue. Cesar Chavez's attempts to unionize the migrant grape pickers in California captivated some students, who demanded that the university boycott non-UFW (United Farm Workers) grapes. When the case first came up, Johnson had to ask his daughter, a UO freshman, who Chavez was and what this was all about. Later in the year, he publicly called a halt to the purchasing of grapes for reasons that had little to do with the boycott. In so doing, he infuriated some legislators who were directly involved in marketing grapes.

Johnson sought valiantly to uphold the classic concept of the American university as a citadel of contemplation sheltering

all refugees from a "sick society," defending the bastions of ideas against Philistine outrages. In fact, such confrontations make the vaunted bastion appear like little more than the flimsiest scrim, pitifully vulnerable to potshots from the neighboring community. The alumni, the press, the legislators, the general public, the parents, and all those involved in the financial support of the university, through either alumni giving or taxes, escalated their attacks against it. One could wish to report that there was appreciation and generosity within the university regarding Johnson's courageous stands, but more often than not, apart from an infrequent pat on the back or an occasional faculty letter commending his principles, the internal "community" was mute or even "annoyed." The expressions of dissatisfaction from the enraged citizenry were far more strident, shrill, and incessant than could ever be counterbalanced by whatever satisfactions Johnson's decisions had meant for the academic community.

There is no institution more vulnerable to and hence more dependent on external forces than the American university. One reason is the proliferation of sponsored research. I am not suggesting that universities cancel contracts with external sponsors. But conflicts with the mission of the university will inevitably arise. Another reason is that the universities are not self-supporting. Tuition pays only a small percentage of the costs of running a university; most of the rest comes from alumni or, in the case of public universities, the state. The falsely lulling self-image of the university that it is remote and distant and somewhat "above" the outside society that nourishes and feeds it not only is outdated but, if believed and acted on, will bring about the university's destruction.

The "outside" clobbered Johnson. What happened to this thoughtful, high-principled, liberal, and, above all, decent human being? He was so perceptive, so aware of those forces that could destroy him, yet something prevented him from exercising his intellectual mastery before a wise, practical judgment could be made.

Ken Metzler conducted more than 300 interviews, talking to many of Johnson's close friends and relatives. He was fortu-

nate to have in his subject a man who himself faithfully recorded his ideas and premonitions and described his own behavior and decisions. Thus we have access to the raw experiences of *a man in crisis*. This allows us to employ a variety of analytical prisms in seeking to explain at least some of the man's behavior and the events that occurred. I shall attempt to employ a few.

Perhaps the most obvious fact is that Johnson had "psychological problems." He had suffered a number of serious lapses referred to by his psychiatrist as "dissociative processes" and, specifically, an episode of fugue one night shortly before his death, when he had driven two miles and then wandered dazed in the woods and even into a river without seeming to know what he had done. This seemed to be partly induced by overwork, by weakness from his attack of the flu, and doubtless also by shock and despair over having been passed over for the university presidency—despite his claimed lack of interest in the job.

Johnson's childhood included the early death of his mother and obvious problems of achievement; somehow he often managed to just miss his goal ever so slightly. For example, in military school, his height enabled him to make the basketball team, but he spent most of the season on the bench, dejected, head down, until he finally gave it up. He was very interested in the Boy Scouts and attained the near-top status of Life Scout but stopped just one merit badge short of the top rank, Eagle Scout. Lofty and strong ambition shows through the self-depreciation of his gawkiness (he was six feet, four inches tall) and rural "plain folks" humor. His letters to his parents were painfully revealing: "Oh, I guess I might allow my name to be forwarded to the search committee, although the classroom sure does beckon; teaching is simplicity and I love it. But, still, maybe they'll be 'dumb enough' to accept this old country boy." So his country-boy manner, partly real, partly feigned, allowed him to grope backward and upward without ever looking too bad if he fell in the process. But beneath his humility was a driving, perfectionist ambition, spurred perhaps by a demanding and puritanical father, a kind of "number two" syndrome, and considerable grief and loneliness during his youth.

He was a man who embodied the core values of the acad-

emy and its institutional imperative, cognitive rationality: the life of the mind, inexorable logic, reliance on numbers and verbal symbols as strategies of truth (for a man who was a CPA and a professor of accounting, it was primarily numbers). This was the very basis of reality for Johnson.

His rationality was confounded in the "hair" episode by irrational, strident voices from outside who expressed its issues in such emotional terms as "knuckling under to those 'colored' folks." How could he respond to letters from all of the "concerned citizens" who questioned his patriotism and attacked him for his lack of firmness, backbone, and discipline? How does one use logic, empiricism, and the fact-finding, democratic process—slow, creaky, and painfully banal in its operation—to compete with the aphrodisia of confrontations where the operative slogan of the most destructive student radicals could be summarized as "Act now, think later!" and where the highest level of response to Johnson's lengthy, patient, and painstakingly clear explanations was a terse and reflexive "Bullshit!"?

Perhaps all this "psychologizing" is irrelevant. Metzler says that Johnson was "the wrong man for the wrong job at the wrong time." Perhaps it was the Peter Principle at work—Johnson's former experience as dean of a college not only did not prepare him for the presidency but may have instilled in him certain principles and guidelines to action that were antithetical to the pneumatic beat of the crises that were continually hammered out on the anvil of Johnson's psyche.

Perhaps it was the times. Who in the world at any major university could have successfully coped with the exquisite pains and pressures of that year of 1968-69? There was no way—in any single case—that Johnson could have planted even a small flag of victory. The best he could do in situation after situation was to minimize damage or danger or loss. And these terrible little irrational brushfires continually interfered with what this accounting professor knew to be, long before others suspected it, a terrible financial overextension of the university. Hoping to reverse it, he would retire to his home whenever he could stay away from his demanding social obligations and, taking his budget to the bedroom, work on it, night after night, alone.

Having lived through that period as an administrator, I find it impossible to second-guess anybody's decisions during that chaotic time. In his commencement talk, Johnson concluded with Dickens's "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." For those who were in Johnson's shoes in that final year of a decade that started off so beautifully for higher education and ended up so ravaged, one could only say that it was the worst of times.

Perhaps it was Johnson's leadership style. My guess is that it was the "liberal" administrator who had the roughest time. The liberal presidents who began office then included Kenneth Pitzer of Stanford, Morris Abram of Brandeis, Robert Etherington of Wesleyan; all resigned before their second year. I suspect the trouble is in the liberal style—a style of negotiation, of splitting differences, of bringing people together to iron out differences, of sitting down with the coach and the black players and "talking it out." This style could work during a time of shared values, but not in the charged and polarized situation that developed then. It is one thing to negotiate differences when the stakes are only economic, the kinds of things that once brought labor unions and management to the bargaining table. It is another thing to negotiate between morally antithetical viewpoints.

Wanting to demonstrate how the poor had to live, that spring some students started moving old tarpaper shacks onto the front of the beautiful campus lawn. Daily, more and more shacks appeared. How many, if any, should be allowed? Do you ask the students to remove all the shacks except, say, one (in order to demonstrate and amplify the meaning of poverty) and offer in exchange to provide them more courses in social justice and "peaceful or nonviolent means of social change"?

Often Johnson seemed to walk into situations with the belief that he personally could get the opposing sides to reason together to achieve some viable consensus. But how could one bring about reason—much less consensus—among an outraged citizenry, black students striving for their own group identity and consciousness, the sons and daughters of mechanics and farmers who were spending their last dollar to send their children to school, alumni acutely concerned with the slippage of

Oregon's athletic programs, and a faculty devoted to making the University of Oregon competitive with elite universities? Another President Johnson, at the same time, was discovering that Isaiah's wisdom could reach neither Hanoi, Saigon, nor the SDS.

From the analytical prism of a student of organizational behavior, I would say that the university's social organization doesn't provide the adjustive mechanisms of protection and cushioning for the president. (From the empirical prism of a former university president, I would nod in agreement.) It is simply ridiculous to think that the president of a major American corporation would be involved in some of the situations that Johnson found himself in (or that, occasionally, I found myself in). Yet corporation presidents and chairs, like the chief executives of all our institutions, have equivalent nightmares.

An industrial case in point—if, indeed, one is needed—is the story of Eli M. Black, who at 8 A.M. on February 3, 1975, at the age of fifty-three, plunged to his death from the forty-fourth floor of New York's Pan Am Building. Both doors to his office were found bolted from the inside, according to detectives, and a sealed quarter-inch tempered plate glass window had been smashed open—apparently with Black's attache case.

Black had been chair of the United Brands Company, a conglomerate that he had personally built from a small firm making milk-bottle caps to an organization that could take over, first, one of the country's largest meat packers, John Morrell & Company, and, second, the United Fruit Company. United Brands, said the *New York Times*, had incurred heavy losses in Central American banana plantations as a result of Hurricane Fifi, had undergone new burdens with export taxes on bananas imposed by Central American republics, and had sustained losses in its meat-packing division as a result of increased costs of feeding cattle. Family members and business associates of Black suggested that additional business pressures—mainly those connected with the sale of Foster Grant—were responsible for his state of mind, which was “low.”

A subsequent investigation by the Securities and Exchange Commission, routinely conducted after the suicide of any top corporate executive, turned up another possible reason for

Black's decision to take his life. According to *Newsweek* (April 21, 1975), the SEC inquiry disclosed that Black had authorized the payment of more than \$2 million to government officials in Honduras to obtain a tax reduction on the export of bananas. Moreover, the facts seem to indicate that he must have known of other instances of bribery on the part of the big multinational company during his tenure. Black's closest associates, who knew him as a man who put in mercilessly long hours and spent his limited free time working for various Jewish philanthropies, said that he had been determined to end United's image as a Yankee exploiter. If Black had approved the bribes, they insisted, he must have been under heavy pressure to do so.

What happens to top men and women—and I think that men and women who are new to the burdens of high position are especially vulnerable, because they are trying to prove themselves—is that they end up with a kind of battle fatigue, overworked, acting as police and/or ombudsmen and, what's worse, seriously undermining the legitimacy and effectiveness of the other executives reporting to them. They tend to intervene compulsively, arrogating from loyal and competent subordinates what rightly belongs to them. (As one corporate CEO put it, "If I'm walking on the shop floor, and I see a leak in the dike, I have to stick my finger in it.") Presidents can become burnt-out victims of the Peter Principle while denying the best potential leaders below them the responsibility needed for their own learning and development.

Finally, and most of all, we have to question seriously how much caring all of us can develop for our institutions when they have become the anvil and test of all our society's crises and problems. The universities were perhaps the first to feel the real crunch. Metzler (1973) says that the problem with Johnson was that "he cared too much for the institution." Though it may have seemed that way, I don't think it is "caring too much" when one identifies his own self-esteem with the success of the institution. This in fact causes people to identify so much with their institution that they become indivisible from it, so that the damage done by a rock thrown through a window by an angry student is morally and psychologically identical with the

physical hurt of the president, so that the success of the football team against its chief rival is related to how one feels about one's own success. To care about an institution means to create a self-activating life, a life of its own, where there is a possibility for others to understand it and care for it in the face of difficult odds, to make their work have meaning in a humane and democratic manner.

The problem is this: How do we develop a sufficient climate of understanding so that the various publics on whom every present-day institution depends for its support, both financial and moral, as well as the people who take its classes or work in its plants and offices, care about the institution and identify with its destiny? Only when we have done this will the "best and the brightest" manage to succeed. Without caring, the institution wouldn't be a place that any of us would like to be responsible for or preside over anyway.

The threads of legitimacy and responsible authority fray too easily and far too rapidly. American universities underwent an unusual year in 1968, but it would be wrong to think that the lessons they learned the hard way apply only to the academy and to a receding period of past history. They apply to all time and all people and institutions and echo with the fury of the fates that determine their destiny.