

Are You in Good Hands With These Regents?

Victor Kulkosky, News Editor, *The Leader-Tribune*, "Out of My Mind" column, May 27, 2009

Rich Whitt's new book is titled, *Behind the Hedges: Big Money and Power Politics at the University of Georgia*, (NewSouth Books, www.newsouthbooks.com). This isn't a sports story; it's a money, power and politics story (are the three ever apart?)

As any reporter knows, lesson one is "follow the money." Where does it lead us?

The trail isn't hard to sniff out. Adams' chief backer is Donald Leebern, a Columbus liquor distributor and Regent. Leebern is a major player in UGA and state affairs, who played football at UGA but who, ironically, never graduated. According to sources interviewed for *Behind the Hedges*, Leebern, a member of the search committee to replace former President Charles B. Knapp, "hand-picked Adams from the beginning." Sonny Seiler, the famous Savannah lawyer and owner of the Uga mascots, is quoted thus in the book: "I don't think anybody would have been hired without Don's blessing." Sources interviewed for the book told Whitt that somebody—although who isn't specified—apparently fed Adams the list of candidate questions before his interview.

Swooping in on the wings of a powerful backer was already a pattern in Adams's life. He got the job as President of tiny Centre College in Kentucky due to the patronage of local banker who "liked Adams's down-to-earth style and the fact that he wasn't an academic." Of course, there are academics who are also down to earth, but they apparently aren't good at befriending influential businessmen.

Let's look the Dooley fiasco for a moment. Don Leebern and his wife Betsy were long-time, close friends with Vince and Barbara Dooley. That's no longer the case. Whit traces Dooley's dismissal to his refusal to promote Suzanne Yoculan, UGA's gymnastics coach, to assistant athletic director. Yoculan just happens to be Leebern's live-in girlfriend. They share a house together, even though Leebern is still married to Betsy. Barbara Dooley told Whitt—although Vince isn't convinced—that the refusal led Leebern to "make a pact with the devil—Adams.

"Because Vince told him no, and I'm not sure anybody had ever told Don Leebern no," Barbara Dooley told Whitt. Vince Dooley recalled Adams making frequent references to unnamed "key people" during their dragged out negotiations over the AD's contract. As Whitt put it, "As events have subsequently shown, Adams's 'key people' certainly included Governor Perdue and Dooley's old friend, Regent Don Leebern." With friends like that, Adams had an edge over even as venerable a man as Vince Dooley.

As for Governor Perdue, Whitt reports he was involved in the Regents' unprecedented decision to dissociate the UGA Foundation from UGA. He summarizes an exchange of emails between the Governor's office and the office of then Chancellor Tom Meredith, just before the May 25, 2004 meeting in which the Regents took that historic vote, including Meredith's line, "The Governor knew what the board was going to do."

So here we see signs of a troubling development that will continue to worry thoughtful people no matter who is President of the University of Georgia. The independence of the Board of Regents originates from the days of Gov. Eugene Talmadge, who forced the resignations of board members to prevent the possible racial integration of UGA. The move led to temporary accreditation loss. Talmadge's successor Ellis Arnall signed legislation creating a constitutionally independent Board of Regents.

Now fast forward to the present day. Sonny Perdue reappointed Leebern to another 7-year term on the Board of Regents, despite his open adultery and making a living from liquor sales (Perdue doesn't drink and opposes Sunday liquor sales). Even long-time friend Roy Barnes told Whitt he wouldn't have re-appointed the "radioactive" Leebern. See "Behind the Hedges," for more details. Leebern, a long-time supporter of Democrats, made a \$200,000 contribution in 2006 to the Georgia Republic Party. Money apparently really does talk.

We also know that Perdue took the unprecedented step of personally interviewing all three finalists for the Chancellor's job, which doesn't exactly fit with the board's constitutional independence from the Governor's office.

Read *Behind the Hedges* for a full account. Our state's higher education system is inseparable from its future. Based on information in last week's related column, North Carolina and Florida appear to have brighter futures. I know there are many UGA alumni among my readers, but everybody associated with the University System of Georgia should ask the question All State likes to ask, "Are you in good hands?"

I have my doubts.