ROBERT K. FAULKNER

Interviewed by
Dalmar Fisher

There was a very interesting development in the Political Science department with David Lowenthal’s launching of a great books program, which was very congenial to my interests. I was looking for a job and had already interviewed at places like the University of Texas. I was turned off by the social science kind of quantitative, hard-nosed doctrines in several places. I spoke with David Lowenthal, who told me that a potential candidate had turned down a job offer and that I could be interviewed for the position. I arrived in the late ‘60s.

I had taught at Princeton for a half-dozen years, but I much appreciated Lowenthal’s kind of department and there were some interesting people here like Don Carlisle in Soviet studies and David Manwaring, a sharp constitutional lawyer, and, of course, Lowenthal in political philosophy, which was my field. Bluntly put, I thought the general quality of the faculty and the faculty discussions were not nearly as good as those at Princeton; I did not notice much difference in intellectual ability between the undergrads at Princeton and those here on campus. Boston College was rather parochial and Catholic. Its students were very intelligent and more serious about their studies than those at Princeton where students were professional, but cool in their outlook. They were on their way to something else and they knew it, but didn’t care all that much. When I came to Boston College, I sensed the spirit of some place that really wanted to improve itself. It was changing from a small Catholic college to a more typical American university. It was quite striking.

A most memorable meeting with Fr. Donovan, the academic vice president, is one I shall never forget. He was the most impressive academic official that I had met in my young career. I knew some very fine professors at Chicago and other places, but Fr. Donovan stood out. The only rival that I had hitherto met, but did not really get to know as I came to know Donovan, was the president of Princeton, who recently passed away. He was a distinguished classicist and a sober man devoted to serious learning.

I have always had a nice office in McGuinn Hall. It has been kept up extremely well with good maintenance people at the helm. In fact, the whole University has been kept up beautifully. I have stuck pretty close to my colleagues, although I have many friends in other departments. I am not as active in politics as I was years ago. I have served on numerous committees, but never on the educational policy committee or the promotions committee. I was certainly active with the faculty commission during our troubled years in the late ‘60s.

My career here proceeded in a rather conventional direction. I mean I published books and articles and they’re pretty good, and some are still authorities. I have a book on the jurisprudence of the old chief justice, John Marshall, and a book on the founder of Anglicanism, Richard Hooker, the theologian, and it is called Richard Hooker and the Politics of a Christian England.
That came out just at the time the Episcopal Church went altogether modern in its theology and gave up any respect for the judicious Hooker. Later on, I did books that were much more interesting and valuable to me. One was a study of that great Enlightenment figure, Francis Bacon. That took many years to complete. Bacon is extremely hard to understand. I taught a variety of his works while writing the book diligently chapter by chapter. I believe the book will stand the test of time. Recently, I finished a much more ambitious book called *The Case for Greatness: Honorable Ambitions and Its Critics*. The chapters are analyses of great ambition and their good and bad forms. There’s an account of Plato’s diagnosis of the remarkable Alexander the Great, which was difficult to write. Dialogues are always hard to unravel. I have a long chapter on Aristotle’s understanding the virtue, as he calls it, of greatness of soul, and another chapter which is truly delightful in the book on Xenophon’s picture of Cyrus the Great, a world conqueror. The authors about whom I wrote respected those great remarkable qualities and grave limitations of deep passion.

And there was a book written by, as we say in the AARP newsletter, a mature man and one who didn’t know how much time he would have left and therefore wanted to do things that he thought were the most interesting to him. I mean there are many articles scattered along the way, but that is where I have gone, and my problem now is having just finished that which was nicely reviewed by people at Boston College, I’m sort of catching up with things I had let slide. As yet, I have not figured out the big thing I want to accomplish.

Let me go back to the subject of teaching for a bit. Those of us in political philosophy tend not to teach the same thing each year. As we read books, we think about the idea of perhaps including new material in a course or even drawing up a new course. The faculty in political science decide to create new courses. At Princeton, one could not introduce a new course without having a dean’s committee approve it. I like the idea of poaching on one another’s specialty. My colleagues and I understand that people in a specialty must be careful of becoming too narrow in their thinking. Expansion is a point of view in learning and teaching which I believe is a sensible one. It goes against the grain of our conventional disciplines, specialties, and historical scholarships in which one is considered an expert in a particular area. On the whole, experts can be very narrow people. Being an expert in a particular area makes it difficult to understand human life or even politics. One could be divorced from economics or a serious study of religion if one is too narrow.

The great Fr. Donovan admitted happily to a guy like me, who wasn’t even Catholic, that it was in the spirit of Vatican II to endorse a variety of points of view which supplemented the Catholic and Jesuit outlook. I have never found a difficulty here with the generosity and spirit on the part of Catholics or on the part of the hierarchy of the institution. I have never felt suppressed or repressed in my teaching. In fact, I often say this is a freer place for teaching than, say, Harvard. I have friends at Harvard who touched unwittingly on some issue or some aspect of minority rights and there were big campaigns against them.

Neither the students nor the administration backed up the faculty members. It was appalling, and one person I have in mind, a historian, was terribly turned off by this treatment.
Nothing like that has happened here because of our supportive deans like the wonderful Don White, Joe Quinn, and many other figures like Fr. Monan at a later date.

I am sorry to have moved away from the questions you wanted answered, but being able to do what I want to do with the blessings of the University means a great deal to me, even though I'm an old fogey and they haven't kicked me out.

Like faculty in other departments, we had our fights and disagreements over points of view, especially some not taking advantage of the great advances that Max Weber led or what modern social sciences provided with many quantitative techniques and theories. We wanted first-rate people in the Department and we have moved consistently in that direction. A few people who did not get tenure moved on, which is always a difficult situation. Terrific people whom I have already mentioned come to mind like Gary Brazier, David Manwaring, who was chairman for many years, and of course, David Lowenthal, who had a will of iron and built up the Department. He was the patron of many of us.

I respect the efforts that went into the core curriculum, but it is difficult to see a separation of economics and politics. In general, friends of mine or acquaintances like Fr. Flanagan in Philosophy and Fr. Ernest Fortin in Theology were instrumental in putting together the Perspectives Program, a very fine core which joins philosophy and theology with emphasis on the great books. The program reflects the outlook I have. Our own introductory course was always composed in good part of great books. It was truly a liberal arts, philosophy, politics, economics, theology kind of program. It stands for what I think is the core of education, if I may say so.

When I arrived in the late '60s, I had the impression that I joined a ship going down. I had come aboard a ship that took a new tack, to keep with the metaphor; a very grave new tack that almost destroyed it and that was a tack launched largely by the upper administration. In other words, at the same time the famous '60s movements of liberation, of minority rights, of contempt for the old curriculum were spreading through the country, they were spreading fast through Boston College. The executive vice president, Fr. F.X. Shea, encouraged and sponsored the movements. He was often referred to as the Welch Witch by some faculty. He and the new dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, Richard Hughes, were appointed by the new president, Seavey Joyce, SJ. All three were moved by the spirit of disdain for the old rational curriculum. It was as if a new dynasty were being created and the faculty was not happy. A grant of $1 million was available to attract minority students. That sounds fine, except incumbent minority students were to pick the new minority recruits, who often were not young people who would have passed a normal admission procedure. I was not too involved in this, but watched with most of the faculty.

There seemed to be strikes going on at other universities. We had our strike at BC, mostly over a tuition increase, prior to the great Cambodia strike which was nationwide. This strike was over Nixon's incursions into Cambodia. Strikes, especially at Catholic universities, resulted in a turnoff of two very important constituencies: alumni who gave and Catholic schools who
sent students there. There was a sudden scarcity of money and new expenditures. At that time, the University had a $15 million endowment and $15 million in short-term debt.

I remember a motion made by Fr. Shea which was to fire about 35 young faculty members. Faculty rose up against this effort to restore some balance in the finances. A faculty commission was created headed by Mike Mann of Economics and David Lowenthal of my department. I was asked to head a group which drew up a kind of indictment of the administration for bringing the place, as we thought, down, and therefore I presented this report to a very big, raucous meeting of faculty. The meeting was in McGuinn Hall. After we presented the faculty’s report, there were objections from Fr. Shea and others. A great faculty advocate, John Heineman, a historian and a great figure on campus for many years, spoke on behalf of the faculty. We wanted the report to go to the University trustees. I recall Fr. Shea’s saying, in a moment of disapproval, that maybe the report should be sent to the University of Massachusetts. The report passed and was forwarded to the trustees.

There was a line drawn between some Jesuits and lay faculty who were very troubled by the firing of so many faculty and other disturbing issues. The line was probably never effaced, and with some emotional cost. Without going into details, the whole regime led by Fr. Joyce was replaced. No doubt, we had some enemies who believed we were rebelling against the Jesuits who in fact gave this university to us and such, but in time, resentments were muffled, and we began to come together and move forward under the leadership of Fr. Monan, SJ.

Take it for all it is worth. For the last 35 years Boston College has been an unusually fine institution in which to teach and to study. The University has never been carried away by fads or fashions that are anti-intellectual. It takes pride in its role of educating. There is a joy among the students in being here. Not many Jesuits dress all in black. Boston College has afforded a harbor for many interesting scholars and many spirited people in all departments. I want to say thanks to Joe Quinn, Pat DeLeuuw, and other administrators for their generous and quiet ways in making my life here so warm and so much at ease. To sum up my feelings about Boston College, I would have to say I am very fortunate to be in a harbor of like-minded scholars bent on trying to understand the truth about things intently.

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