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1

Prologue

“I Have Very Serious Doubts” about the Princeton Presidency

On Friday, June 30, 1972, William Gordon Bowen, thirty-eight-year-old provost and professor of economics at Princeton University, took the oath of office as Princeton’s seventeenth president. The ceremony, “simple” and “pompless,” as a local newspaper put it, took place in the faculty room in Nassau Hall, the oldest building on the university campus.¹ The chair of the executive committee of the board of trustees, R. Manning Brown, chief executive of New York Life Insurance Company, presided; the oath was administered by Bowen’s predecessor, Robert F. Goheen, still youthful at fifty-two, who was stepping down from the presidency after fifteen years of service. Some 250 invited guests packed the faculty room: trustees; senior officers of the university; representatives of the faculty, students, and alumni; local elected officials; and Bowen’s family, staff members, and personal guests.² Goheen’s immediate predecessor, Harold W. Dodds, was also in attendance; the two men together accounted for four decades of Princeton leadership. Portraits of Princeton’s sixteen previous presidents looked down

1 “Princeton Gets 17th President . . . Pomplessly,” *Trentonian* (Trenton, NJ), July 1, 1972, Bowen president, box 403, folder 7.

2 Dan D. Coyle, memorandum, “Installation of Princeton’s William G. Bowen,” June 27, 1972, Bowen president, box 403, folder 8.

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from the wood-paneled walls, with, as Bowen noted in his remarks, “an occasional hint of skepticism in the eye.”³

Bowen had been selected by the trustees in a relatively brief search process, since he was in so many ways such an obvious choice. It was a different search from the one that had produced Goheen fifteen years earlier. Then—as now—there had been a trustee search committee, which consulted closely with an elected faculty advisory committee. What was different then was the absence of an obvious choice. Looking back on the process a little more than a dozen years later, the members of the faculty committee told a slightly different story about how they came to their conclusion.⁴ For the historian Joseph R. Strayer, the process was straightforward: Goheen was the faculty committee’s first choice; the trustees interviewed him, liked him, and elected him. “If any university president was ever chosen by faculty action it was Goheen.”⁵ Professor of English Carlos Baker recalled that Goheen’s name had come up early, but “then it disappeared in a welter of other names,” only to resurface at the end of the process.⁶ The physicist Allen Shenstone said that the faculty committee gave the trustees “the names of two men whom we were convinced would make a success as President of Princeton. These two were both very young, being Bob Goheen and McGeorge Bundy.”⁷

The economist Richard A. Lester gave the fullest and most intriguing account (one that meshed most closely with the story as told by the chair of the trustee committee, Harold H. Helm).⁸ After

3 News release, “William G. Bowen Remarks on the Occasion of his Installation as President of Princeton University,” June 30, 1972, Bowen president, box 402, folder 4.

4 Stanley Kelley had asked for their recollections to inform the work of the Special Committee on the Structure of the University, which, he thought, might wish to say something about the process for selecting a new president. See, e.g., Stanley Kelley Jr. to Alan [*sic*] Shenstone, Feb. 20, 1969, Kelley Committee, box 1, folder 21.

5 Joseph R. Strayer, “Procedures of the Faculty Committee on the Choice of a New President, 1956–57,” Bowen president, box 285, folder 3.

6 Carlos Baker to Stanley Kelley Jr., [Feb. 1969], Bowen president, box 285, folder 3.

7 A. G. Shenstone to Stanley Kelley Jr., Feb. 25, 1969, Bowen president, box 285, folder 3.

8 Memorandum, Harold H. Helm to Stanley Kelley, Mar. 27, 1969, Bowen president, box 285, folder 3. Helm recalled that the list of serious contenders came down to five names, of which Goheen was one. Goheen, he said, “had been on the faculty list as well as

some months of deliberation, the faculty committee focused on “about a half dozen” candidates; two men without Princeton connections were at the top of the list. In first place was Clark Kerr, at that time the first chancellor of the University of California, Berkeley; McGeorge Bundy, at that time dean of the faculty of arts and sciences at Harvard University, was second. Some members of the trustee committee met Kerr in Berkeley and asked if he would be interested enough in the Princeton presidency to travel to New York to meet with the full committee. Kerr agreed, and a date for the meeting was set. Shortly before the scheduled meeting, Kerr withdrew for personal reasons; his wife had made plain her resistance to leaving California. (She got her wish; in 1958, Kerr began a nine-year appointment as president of the University of California.)

The faculty committee focused next on Bundy, “but before any inquiry was made to him directly, the question was raised as to why Bundy was preferred over Bob Goheen, whose name was high on the remaining list.” Bundy was the same age as Goheen—both were born in 1919. At first the sense had been that both men were too young for the presidency, but if the committee was prepared to be serious about Bundy, why not take a more careful look at Goheen?⁹

Fifteen years later, the search process bore some similarities to what had occurred in the Goheen search, but there were important differences, principally the fact that when the search began, the trustees already had the leading candidate in their sights. A trustee search committee, chaired by Manning Brown, began work in April 1971. The trustee committee consulted closely with elected faculty and student committees (the latter an innovation since the previous search). Beyond Bowen, the other most serious candidate was the dean of the graduate school, physics professor Aaron Lemonick, an undergraduate alumnus of the University of Pennsylvania

the trustees’ list from the beginning but his junior position on the faculty and his age were responsible for his not having been given serious consideration at an earlier stage.”

9 Richard A. Lester, “Informal Notes on the Operations of Faculty Committee on the Choice of a New President, 1956–57,” Feb. 24, 1969, Bowen president, box 285, folder 3.

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and a Princeton PhD in physics, who had taught at Haverford College before joining the Princeton faculty in 1961.¹⁰

But Bowen was the compelling favorite. He was an accomplished labor economist with special expertise in the economics of higher education. In five years as provost, he had provided essential leadership in modernizing the governance of the university and keeping the institution on an even keel as it grappled with such challenging issues as coeducation, racial integration, and the tumult surrounding controversies concerning apartheid in South Africa and the Vietnam War. Faculty colleagues told him that he was the obvious heir-apparent to Goheen and urged him to accept appointment to the presidency when it was offered.¹¹

Bowen had—or chose to present—a different view. He repeatedly spelled out his reluctance in correspondence with those who regarded him as the obvious choice: “As I’ve said quietly to Bob Goheen and one or two other people, I have real doubts that whatever contribution I have to make to higher education can be made most effectively as president, with all that that job now entails. Accordingly, I’ve urged that the various search committees try hard to find someone whose comparative advantage matches the job requirements.”¹² As well, “I have told Bob [Goheen] and others that I much prefer that someone other than me be found—I have real reservations about the match between the job and my own sense of what I want to do and what I can do best.”¹³ Bowen gave a detailed explanation for his resistance in a long letter to his faculty colleague, the distinguished philosopher Gregory Vlastos:

10 Telephone interview with Andrew P. Napolitano (one of the members of the student committee), Sept. 1, 2020; Dave Elkind, “Search for Next President Said to Focus on Bowen, Lemonick; Insider Expected,” *Daily Princetonian*, Oct. 27, 1971, 1; David Elkind, “Seven-Month Screening,” *Daily Princetonian*, Nov. 30, 1971, 1.

11 See, e.g., Sheldon [Hackney] to Bill [Bowen], Mar. 30, 1971; Gregory Vlastos to W. G. Bowen, Apr. 27, 1971, both in Bowen president, box 181, folder 10.

12 William G. Bowen to Joe [Joseph Kershaw], Apr. 5, 1971, Bowen president, box 181, folder 10. He made little dent in his friend’s views. Kershaw wrote back: “In a nutshell, you will be dead wrong not to take it, and Princeton will be dead wrong not to offer it.” Kershaw to Bowen, Apr. 8, 1971, Bowen president, box 181, folder 10.

13 William G. Bowen to Walt [Slocombe], Apr. 5, [1971], Bowen president, box 181, folder 10. See also Bowen to Jon Clark, Apr. 13, 1971; Bowen to Thomas H. Nimick Jr., Apr. 14, 1971, both in Bowen president, box 181, folder 10.

I have very serious doubts that whatever contribution I have to make to higher education can be made most effectively from the President's office. . . . I have urged all of my friends to think hard about other candidates. Perhaps I should add that my views on this subject are not recently developed but of long-standing. They are based, I think, not in any unwillingness to accept burdens, but in a fairly careful assessment of the nature of that job and of my own strengths and limitations. Thus, I hope a vigorous effort will be made to find someone who really fits the needs of the office, in terms of both abilities and predilections.¹⁴

When Bowen's close friend and colleague Stanley Kelley Jr., professor of politics and chair of the faculty search committee, talked with him about his candidacy, Bowen again appeared to push back. He made plain that the presidency was not a job he sought; he suggested that he was not ready to give up teaching and scholarship; he said that the search committee should look carefully at some talented outsiders, whom Bowen named. Bowen's own favorite candidate was Richard Lyman, provost (1967–70) and president (1970–80) of Stanford University, despite the fact that there was no reason to imagine that someone just named president of another university would contemplate a move to Princeton.¹⁵

In handwritten notes recorded in mid-September, Bowen spelled out at length the reasons why he thought that he and the presidency were not a good match. Given the job description for president, and given his own "abilities and interests," it was "highly unlikely that [he] could make as big a contribution in the long run as President as [he] could make as Provost." The key problem was the "growing 'public figure' aspect of the presidency." Moreover, there was another problem in terms of replacing himself as provost—"he could not name the same 'type' as Provost and thus both the president and

14 William G. Bowen to Gregory Vlastos, Apr. 30, [1971], Bowen president, box 181, folder 10.

15 Bowen oral history, June 25, 2009, 12–14; interview with Carol and Dennis Thompson, July 26, 2018, Cambridge, MA. Dennis Thompson was a member of the faculty committee.

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the university would get much less help from that office than [they were] getting now.” That meant that the university “could end up weaker in both president and provost than should be.”¹⁶

And then there were Bowen’s own proclivities: “There is real risk that WGB would try to do *all* parts of [the] presidency too thoroughly, with [the] result that he would wear out fast, become irascible, and not good at [the] job,” which was “not viable for [the] long run.” It was “especially not viable” because he would not enjoy the “‘public figure’ work.” He liked teaching and research and having influence on policy. He was “not [a] natural public person.”¹⁷

Moreover, there were personal costs. He would likely have to give up teaching Economics 101, which he did not want to do. The timing was not right for the family; his children were growing up; they were comfortable with the current patterns and rhythms of family life, and they liked living in the family home at 10 Maclean Circle, which the Bowens had designed and built.

He could continue as provost with a new president, “at least for [a] bit,” but he was willing to consider the presidency if the trustees created a new position of chancellor to share some of the president’s duties. The chancellor would chair the board of trustees, live in Lowrie House, the official university president’s residence, and do “part of [the] public figure work.”¹⁸

As unrealistic as this proposed division of duties may sound in retrospect, the idea was not original with Bowen. Such an arrangement—with a president running the internal affairs of the university and a chancellor running external relations and fund-raising—had been tried out more than once at some of Princeton’s peer institutions. At the University of Chicago, Robert Maynard Hutchins served as president from 1929 to 1945, whereupon the office was divided, with Hutchins assuming the role of chancellor, which he held from 1945 to 1951, and the president, Ernest C. Colwell, clearly assuming a subsidiary role. Hutchins’s successor, who served as chancellor from 1951 to 1960 without appointing a president, was

16 [William G. Bowen], untitled handwritten notes, Sept. 15, 1971, Bowen president, box 181, folder 10.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

Lawrence A. Kimpton, who had served previously in several administrative roles. In January 1961, George Beadle, a geneticist at the California Institute of Technology, was elected chancellor at Chicago; that fall, he was elected president of the university, and the separate chancellor's position disappeared. At Northwestern, in 1970, the long-serving and very popular president J. Roscoe "Rocky" Miller became chancellor when the economist Robert Strotz, dean of the school of arts and sciences, was named president. When Strotz was succeeded by Arnold R. Weber in 1984, Strotz became chancellor, serving until 1990.¹⁹

How much Bowen knew about, or might have been thinking about, these models is not known. He clearly had his own ideas about Princeton, however. His friend and provost's office colleague, philosophy professor Paul Benacerraf, who seems to have listened to him talking all of this through, recorded his own notes on Bowen's thinking. A large percentage of the president's job would be "frustrating," with "results hard to assess"; much of the work would simply not be "enjoyable" for Bowen. Moreover, he would have to "surrender" a large part of what he really did enjoy about the provost's job: "significant oversight of institutional affairs at a detailed level." To whom would he entrust that work? A new provost? But such a person would need to be "strong and *independent*." The other senior academic officers? There were significant concerns no matter where one looked: The dean of the faculty, for example, "*need[ed] constant supervision*"; the dean of the college was "a problem." "If the structure developed in recent years is not to collapse (it seems heavily dependent upon the provost), adequate provision must be made—and *can* it be made? WGB's own tendency to be tortured at the sight of incompetence—particularly in his old bailiwick—would make him try to do the Provost's job as well, *with disastrous results*."²⁰

19 I am indebted to Hanna Holborn Gray for much of this information. See also John W. Boyer, *The University of Chicago: A History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 310–56.

20 P[aul] B[enacerraf], handwritten notes, Sept. 15, 1971, Bowen president, box 181, folder 10.

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These themes carried over into Bowen's negotiations with the trustees. When he was first approached by Manning Brown on behalf of the search committee, he expressed concern about the "great diminution of his teaching activities as well as the impact upon his family life that the Presidency would entail." He told Brown that sharing the job with someone else struck him as "desirable," particularly with respect to "the ceremonial and other non-administrative responsibilities of the Presidency."²¹ He proposed dividing the responsibilities of the president, such that someone else—Goheen, he hoped, might remain as chancellor—would take on the key external aspects of the job, chiefly alumni relations and fund-raising. But the presidency was not a job to be divided; Princeton had no precedent for a chancellor who would be, in effect, a co-chief executive; and Goheen had no interest in staying on. The trustees heard Bowen out, after which Brown finally persuaded him to embrace the presidency in full. The board announced Bowen's appointment on November 29, 1971.²² "The choice . . .," said the chair of the student newspaper, the *Daily Princetonian*, "was so obvious that approving it is like approving the sunrise."²³

The national press covered all the expected points about Bowen's qualifications and preparation for the job but fixed on a special twist. Attending a meeting the previous spring on Hilton Head Island in South Carolina, Bowen saw a woman fall accidentally into a pond full of alligators, landing on top of one of them. Bowen hurried over and pulled her out of the water. The alligator, Bowen said, "was probably as scared as she was, but that seemed something you didn't want to leave to the alligator." The alligator rescue—a story Bowen may have embellished to his own advantage—

21 "Minutes of a Special Meeting of the Trustees of Princeton University," Nov. 29, 1971, Goheen, box 67, folder 8. See also [William G. Bowen], typescript, "Chairman or Chancellor," n.d., and [Bowen], handwritten notes, "RFG and MIT Model," n.d., Bowen president, box 463, unlabeled folder.

22 R. M. Brown Jr. to Members of the Princeton Family, Nov. 29, 1971; Princeton University news release, Nov. 29, 1971, both in Bowen president, box 402, folder 3. Dennis Thompson said that once the search committee started converging on Bowen, Bowen's tone "changed dramatically"; "sincere reluctance quickly turned into resolute ambition." Thompson interview.

23 Quoted in M. A. Farber, "Princeton Provost Named President," *New York Times*, Nov. 30, 1971, 49, Bowen president, box 402, folder 3.

featured prominently in news coverage of his appointment.²⁴ And it had staying power. In 1976, when a Princeton student, James Barron, a stringer for the *New York Times*, wrote a piece about Bowen for the newspaper, the alligator story made its way into the profile, where Barron asked if Bowen had encountered any more alligators since the Hilton Head rescue. Bowen assured him that he had not encountered any of the reptilian variety but left open the interpretation of the metaphorical alligators he had to deal with as he wrestled with the many challenges facing Princeton's president.²⁵

There was great optimism about Bowen. No one doubted that he would provide strong leadership for Princeton. But there was no sense in June 1972 that the man who had just taken the oath as Princeton's seventeenth president would, in the decades to come, assume such a consequential role as a leader in American higher education in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Making sense of his significance depends, of course, on understanding his long presidency of Princeton (1972–88) and his even longer presidency of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation (1988–2006). It depends also on assessing the impact of the books he authored about American higher education and the educational innovations he drove, first through the Mellon Foundation, and subsequently through ITHAKA, the educational institution he founded to explore ways of using technology to improve productivity in higher education. I will turn to all of that in due course. First, however, we need to understand Bill Bowen: who he was and how he became the individual who was elected the seventeenth president of Princeton University.

24 William K. Stevens, "Energetic Educator: William Gordon Bowen," "Man in the News," *New York Times*, Nov. 30, 1971, Bowen president, box 402, folder 3. See also Jonathan Daniels, "Sojourner's Scrapbook," *Island Packet* (Hilton Head, SC), Jan. 6, 1972, Bowen president, box 181, folder 1. The warning flag about possible embellishment comes from e-mail, Mary Ellen Bowen to Nancy Weiss Malkiel, Feb. 1, 2022.

25 James Barron, "A Student Eyes Princeton's Chief," *New York Times*, Jan. 25, 1976, <https://www.nytimes.com/1976/01/25/archives/new-jersey-weekly-a-student-eyes-princetons-chief.html>, accessed Apr. 18, 2022.

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