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Bad Moon Rising

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Bad Moon Rising

photos by Anna Holland story by Dave Rosglo
Gregory Geoffrey.

Iowa State's next president will take over in July, but it seems like he's already received more bad news than former President Martin Jischke had to stomach in a whole decade.

The Iowa Legislature and Gov. Tom Vilsack are planning to cut the university's budget $16 million next year, more than any of the drastic cuts made in the late '80s and early '90s, when whole departments were threatened.

The reason for the cuts—a weakened economy that accounted for lowered revenues at the statehouse—will no doubt hamper Geoffrey's fund-raising efforts. Rich donors who were willing to pony up millions in gifts while the bull market was charging ahead will surely be more reluctant to cough it up as long as the markets keep "correcting."

Making things worse, Geoffrey, who has some, but not extensive, experience in that all-important world of begging for other people's money, also will lose two of the administrators who were essential to Jischke's inner circle of fundraising. Vice President for External Affairs Murray Blackwelder and budget guru Rab Mukerjea will both be gone by the time Geoffrey gets to town, both to join Jischke at Purdue.

To add insult to injury, Geoffrey won't even be able to fully enjoy the comforts of the newly renovated digs at the Knoll. His wife, Kathy, will be splitting time between Ames and College Park, Md., for a year while Geoffrey's youngest son, Michael, graduates from high school.

So it was with a head full of hustle that the renowned chemistry professor, former college dean, and father of four took the ISU job. He was selected from a pool of individuals who could be described as the university's perfectly typical group. One in-house candidate (Engineering Dean James Melsa), one black candidate (Cora Bagley Marrett from the University of Massachusetts), one white female (Sharon Stephens Brehm from Ohio University), and one uberfund-raiser (Michael Crow from Columbia University).

Many thought Crow was the front-runner, and with his extensive background in raising money and previous experience at ISU, that seemed pretty reasonable. It was a toss-up whether being driven off campus by Jischke for a healthy difference of opinions in the early '90s would make Crow a better or worse candidate in the minds of board members. The argument could be made either way. But anyway, it didn't matter, as Crow inexplicably pulled his name from the running before he could even visit Ames for his scheduled open forum.

So the board moved on to another fine choice, Gregory Geoffrey, the other white guy from out East (it's pronounced Jo-free, with a long "o"). And now, months later, the effects of that decision, made on little sleep and lots of caffeine, are starting to sink in. Geoffrey is getting ready to be the big boss for the first time in his life.

Is he ready to take on Iowa legislators who seem to be less and less interested in supporting the state universities? Is he prepared to deal with the aftershocks of the almost certain steep cuts that will be finalized before he even gets to town in July?

What about other, less pressing business? Does he have any ideas on revitalizing Veishea? Will he be able to oil donors' wallets as well as Jischke, who seemed to have million dollar donations hanging in the bathroom as hand towels? Does he think two coaches should be making almost $2 million combined per year while the university drops non-revenue sports such as baseball and swimming? Does he think the ISU Foundation should open its records?

And just who is this guy, anyway? How much does he value diversity and free speech? With only slightly more than a decade of administrative experience, why is he such a hot commodity that two schools wanted him as president? What does he think about Ames and Iowa? Why does he bear such a startling resemblance to interim president Richard Seagrave, a chemistry professor himself?

Geoffrey sat down with Ethos staff writer Dave Roepke in early April to answer nearly all of those questions. Except for the weird stuff of course.
What made you decide to come to Ames?

Geoffrey Iowa State is a great university, one that I've had a very high regard for now for many years. It's a state that has traditionally supported higher education very well, although there's current challenges there. And I really fell in love with the institution when I started meeting folks there. I was overwhelmed with the warmth and sincerity of the people I met during the interview and then subsequent to that.

What was your impression of the state of Iowa and Iowa State before you began looking at a job here?

Geoffrey Well, I knew Iowa State very well because of its excellent chemistry department and science programs, which I had followed over the years. It was a university I had a high regard for. I had been in Ames a couple of times visiting the chemistry department, so I knew the university pretty well. I didn't know much about the state of Iowa, except for the few times I'd driven cross-country and passed through Iowa. My son, several years ago, participated in RAGBRAI with some neighbors from Iowa down the street.

What will you miss about your four years at Maryland?

Geoffrey I'll miss a very large number of very good friends I've made. I'll miss seeing all the things we started coming to fruition. We have been very active here in getting a lot of things going. I'll miss seeing the end results of those things, but I hope people will keep me informed.

Do you think you've still got generally the same outlook on life you did when you started as an assistant professor of chemistry at Penn State in 1974?

Geoffrey There's been a natural evolution. I've gained some wisdom over the years. I say many of the characteristics are still the same. I still believe very strongly that an important role for me, whether I'm advising graduate students; whether I'm a dean, provost or president, is to inspire those who work with me to achieve at a higher level and for me to lead with a strong sense of enthusiasm, energy, and excitement.

Do you ever miss being a professor?

Geoffrey I miss interacting with students. Both students I used to teach in freshman chemistry and all of my many graduate students. I'm sort of reliving the freshman chemistry experience because my son is taking AP chemistry.

Is being a president today different than it was when you started as a professor?

Geoffrey I think it is. When I started as a professor, I didn't have a clue what presidents did, and I probably didn't care. But I know that the position has changed. The major responsibility now is private fundraising. Universities have necessarily become very dependent on private giving because of the general decrease in the fraction of the budget that comes from the state. Presidents have to be very engaged in private fund raising, and I don't think that used to be the case at public universities.

Why do you think your star rose so quickly, with two universities lobbying to get you as their next president? What made you such an attractive candidate for a university presidency?

Geoffrey I think I've done a very good job here at Maryland. Maryland is a university that is rapidly expanding. It has had great state support over the last few years. I think that is probably catching the attention of people all over the country.

Are there any aspects of being president that you haven't had any experience with yet? Will you need to do any learning on the job?

Geoffrey Not really. I've had extensive exposure to all the inner workings of a public university. In Maryland, I've spent a lot of time working with political leaders. As a dean, I spent a lot of time on private fund raising. I don't anticipate big areas where I'll need to spend a lot of time learning.

I've read that you've already begun sending out fund-raising letters for ISU. Have you done much fund raising in the past?

Geoffrey As a dean, each college has constituents and alumni. At the university level, the president does most of the fund raising. I occasionally participate, and I certainly do a lot of schmoozing.

But the provost doesn't usually get involved in fundraising.

Former president Martin Jischke was famous for his skill at bringing in rich donations, and it was a skill that brought him both praise and scorn. How important should fund raising be for a university president?

Geoffrey The bottom line is in order for a university to advance it needs resources. In these days, not all of those resources can come from the state and from tuition, so an important role of the president is to raise those resources through private gifts, partnerships with federal agencies and, where appropriate, private corporations. I think private giving is vitally important because it can make the difference between a truly excellent university, and one that is not. One of the things that private fund raising allows you to do if done right is to invest in people. You can raise funds for undergraduate scholarships, which Iowa State has done well, and for endowed faculty positions.

What should a university president's top concerns be? What should they spend the most time thinking, talking, and meeting about?

Geoffrey My highest priority will be to work the faculty and other university leaders to raise the level of academic excellence at the university. So much will flow from that. That's been a hallmark of every leadership position I've been involved in, and it's just part of me. That will definitely be a cornerstone of my agenda. From that flows a lot of things. That means having excellent faculty, excellent students, and excellent programs. That's what allows you to be effective in raising private funds and etc.

What will be your biggest immediate concerns when you take over the office this summer?

Geoffrey The current budget challenge. I have you ever been at a university that had to deal with budget cuts this steep before?
Not this steep. At Penn State when I was a dean we went through some budget reductions, but nothing of that magnitude.

Then what do you do to respond? What's the plan of attack in Des Moines to convince legislators that funding for the regent universities is important?

I think it's a two-pronged approach. One is to do exactly as you said. We'll need to work with the regents and other regent universities to convince political leaders in Des Moines that universities are vital to the future of the State of Iowa, and in order for them to help the state achieve its aspirations it's important that the universities are supported. But, of course, it looks like there is going to be a significant budget reduction that will occur before I get there and that's going to be... That's going to present a number of challenges.

Diversity is a word used very often but rarely defined. What does it mean to you?

You have to realize, I now work in an extremely diverse environment. I'm on a campus that has very high diversity among the students and the staff and relatively high diversity among the faculty. [Maryland] is a very diverse area of the country. I have really gained a much deeper appreciation of the real value of living and working in a diverse situation. Diversity is a really rich term. It applies to a lot of things, but certainly experiencing the joys of different cultures and different viewpoints. A diversity of experiences, cultures, viewpoints, and background can really enrich a discussion and the quality of decisions that are made. And it can enrich the joy of life, which I've seen here.

How do you transfer that appreciation for diversity to Ames, where diversity and the appreciation for diversity is not as great?

[Alexander] That's kind of difficult. Just as you said, the population in Iowa and at Iowa State is certainly not as diverse as it is here. But I deeply believe in the importance of educating students on a campus that is diverse and in an environment that is diverse. I'll do everything I can to promote that.

You said in your open forum that you were against free-speech zones and limits on chalkering sidewalks. Is that still true?

I guess I've had some discussion with folks at Iowa State about the free-speech zones and how they work. I'll tell you what I am against. I'm against having a narrow range of places in which people can protest and exhibit free speech. I think you always have to make sure that such activities don't unduly disrupt the functioning of the university. There are going to be some restrictions that would be logically placed on demonstrations and protests, etc. I think free speech is really part of what makes a university vibrant and exciting. I think we should encourage people to speak out about issues they feel strongly about. Free-speech zones have to be looked at very, very carefully. In general, I would much rather have a completely open environment.

You've said you feel actual interaction with the students is very important. It was often said that Jischke seemed detached and distant from average students. Will you be able to keep from appearing that way?

I plan to work on that. I do enjoy interacting with students. I really enjoyed that when I was an actual faculty member. I think it's important for a president to both be in touch with student concerns and to be president for the students, as well as for the faculty and the alumni. I plan to look for ways in which I can meet students and engage in conversations with them.

In what sorts of ways do you want to be visible to students?

There are all sorts of activities. I saw that [Vice President for Student Affairs] Tom Hill recently took part in a swim in Lake Laverne. That's something I would be interested in. I would be quite willing to work with my schedule to attend dinners and parties at fraternity and sorority houses, houses that have invited me. I'd like to come to events at residence halls. And I'd like to sort of appear spontaneously in places, such as the Union and the dining areas. I just basically want to be around and about on campus.

The campus judicial records of individuals who are found by the Dean of Students Office to be responsible for violent or non-forcible sex offenses have not been made available to the public. University legal officials claim they are private educational records.

Do you consider them to be open or private records?

I am not a legal expert. But my first reaction would be to think that those are private records. Again, I don't know the legal issues and the rules.

The ISU Foundation, the university's non-profit fund raising arm, contends that its records are not public. Should the ISU foundation open its records?

Its financial expenditure records should be open. I don't think there is any reason they shouldn't be open to public scrutiny as long as they don't reveal anything about the fund raising component. There's a difference here. I think the expenditure records can be effectively segregated from fund raising.

You've already said Veishea will almost surely remain dry. What can be done to make Veishea enjoyable again for a majority of students?

Veishea is a wonderful opportunity to bring people across the state of Iowa to campus and show off this wonderful campus. I think it's very important for that. It's a wonderful occasion to celebrate the excellence of this university. If it's very well done it can be very effective. I think we do have to guard against inappropriate behavior and things going wrong. But it's a wonderful occasion and something that should be treasured.

When you talk about opening the campus up to everyone in this state during Veishea, does that mean under your presidency you might take a look at opening up the policies that restrict access to the evening shows to Ames residents and ISU students and faculty?

I think you should be taxed about issues they feel strongly about. Free-speech zones have to be looked at very, very carefully. In general, I would much rather have a completely open environment.

One of the criteria in selecting ISU's next president was that the president understand the importance of an Athletic Department at a land-grant university. In your opinion, what is the role of an athletic department at a successful land-grant university?

It has multiple roles, but one of them is to develop a sense of school spirit and a loyalty to the institution. For student athletes, it's a way to attract good students to the university and to enrich their total educational experience. It's just like students engaged in theater or all sorts of events on campus. It's also important for keeping friends of the university.
and alumni closely tied to the institution. It definitely helps with fund raising and alumni support.

**What do you think of the salary increases given in the past six months to both men’s basketball coach Larry Eustachy and football coach Dan McCarney? Will coaches’ salaries, especially in revenue sports, continue to increase?**

Gregory Geoffery: I think this is a national problem. I think there are a lot of institutions calling for a moratorium on increasing coaches’ salaries, kind of holding the line. At the same time, South Carolina is trying to recruit Tubby Smith of Kentucky with an astronomical package. So you really are driving things way out of balance to have salaries really off scale. On the other hand, when you have successful coaches, like Iowa State has had, it’s important that you try to keep them because they are important to the program. So the bottom line is there’s a balance for paying successful coaches appropriately, but yet not letting the salaries ruin other activities.

**Do you think that balance is beginning to tip too far in one way when ISU is being forced to cut programs, such as baseball and swimming?**

Gregory Geoffery: I think it’s definitely on the edge of tipping over.

**Are you technologically adept? Do you use the Web, e-mail, the whole nine yards?**

Gregory Geoffery: I’m there. I carry a Palm Pilot with me at all times. My life revolves around my laptop, which I take with me everywhere I go. It’s the only computer I have, and I take it home and back to the office. I’ve got my life on it.

**Does this help you know what Iowa State needs to do to keep abreast in the newest technological developments?**

Gregory Geoffery: That’s one of my high priority areas to learn more about. In fact, I want to have a meeting on that next time I am on campus. I think IT (information technology) issues, in general, are extremely important to a university these days. It’s important for an institution to have the kind of infrastructure that will really allow students, faculty, and staff to really excel at what they are doing. It’s something you have to constantly be on top of so you don’t get behind.

**How do teaching and research interact? Are they sometimes mutually exclusive?**

Gregory Geoffery: I really don’t think they can be. Myself personally, I was a very successful teacher and I had a very successful research program, and I always had undergraduates in my research labs working along with my colleagues. It was a constant blend, teaching and research. When I taught classes, I tried to bring in real-world examples that I knew about from my research experience to enrich those courses. So I really think they’re strongly coupled. That’s one of the benefits of attending a research institution; students have a chance to be taught by faculty members that are making advances and pushing the frontier in their fields.

Former President Martin Jischke had a vocal band of critics who were constantly at him for one thing or another. As much as anything, those critics were speaking more about how the position of ISU president had evolved into something they didn’t like than they were attacking Jischke personally. Have you ever been subject to that sort of intense criticism and are you ready for it if it should arise?

Gregory Geoffery: I personally would say I have not been subject to such criticism, in part because I have worked hard to try to make sure people understood the reasons why I have done what I’ve done. You need to really effectively communicate with people. I think that from what I’ve heard about the previous president, there were some negative reactions to style as much as activity. I think he accomplished a great deal for the university. I think in the long run the university will be appreciative.

**Finally, what scares and excites you the most about taking over this summer?**

Gregory Geoffery: Well, I’m not really scared. I feel like I’m excited to get there and start doing things. I’m ready for it. What really excites me is to work with the great people of Iowa State to raise up the institution to the next level. Even though we have what are hopefully some short-term budget challenges, I think Iowa State just has an enormous potential to achieve at a very high level.