

“Live” with TAE

As a leader in higher education, it's hard to match his record. He's a dedicated Democrat and self-described liberal who fights for high standards, creates controversy, and clashes with the Left. Meet...

John Silber

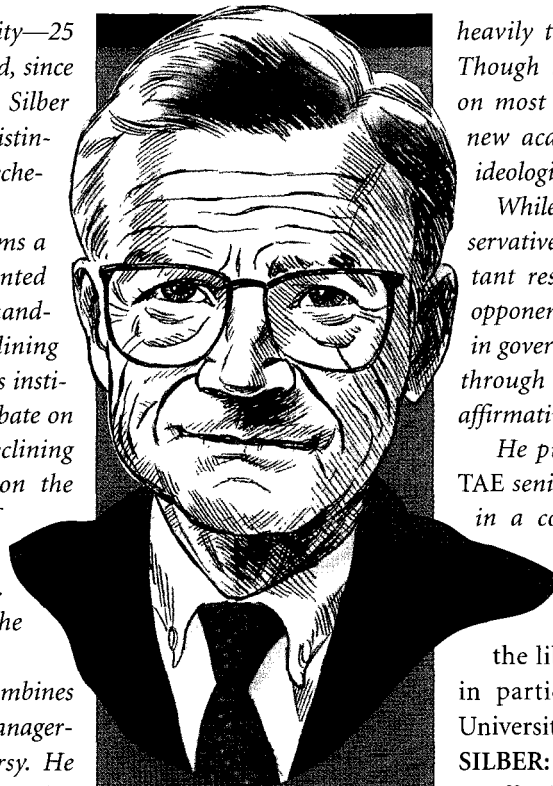
In over 30 years of leading Boston University—25 as president, the last six as chancellor, and, since early July, also as acting president—John Silber has boosted what had been a big but undistinguished commuter school into the upper echelon of American higher education.

At a glance, his managerial style seems a mass of contradictions: He is detail-oriented enough to write letters to students reprimanding them for stealing silverware from dining halls, yet visionary enough to re-create his institution in ways that shape the national debate on issues ranging from core curricula to declining educational standards. In 1990, he won the Democratic nomination for governor of Massachusetts and narrowly lost the general election to Republican William Weld. (Weld later appointed Silber to head the state's Board of Education.)

A scholar of Immanuel Kant, Silber combines prodigious scholarly output with steely managerial skills and a penchant for controversy. He helped create Operation Head Start—arguably the Great Society's most successful legacy—and served as dean of the University of Texas's College of Arts and Sciences before assuming BU's presidency in 1971.

At BU he has frequently quarreled with the University's faculty and clashed with just about every radical leftist on campus. Silber has also raised enormous amounts of money (the University's endowment, \$18 million when he arrived, now stands at over \$600 million), recruited a bevy of distinguished scholars, and improved just about every one of the University's programs.

A die-hard Democrat, he voted for George W. Bush in the last election (“I don't like robots,” he says of Al Gore) and Ronald Reagan in 1980. But he also supported Bill Clinton—twice (holding his nose the second time)—and contributed



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heavily to Jimmy Carter's campaign in 1976. Though he is pro-life, staunchly conservative on most foreign policy issues, and scornful of new academic trends and fads, Silber defies ideological labels.

While he's probably done more to please conservatives than the president of any other important research university, Silber is an ardent opponent of the death penalty, a strong believer in government's ability to improve citizens' lives through social spending, and a supporter of affirmative action.

He pulled no punches when he spoke with TAE senior editor Eli Lehrer at his stately office in a converted mansion on the campus of Boston University.

TAE: How does your background in the liberal arts in general and philosophy in particular affect the way you lead the University?

SILBER: Well, it doesn't explain my ability to be an effective college president, because that takes street smarts. For me, street smarts came from growing up during the Depression. I had to know how to balance a budget. When I was in graduate school, making \$140 a month, I kept a journal of every expenditure: 49 cents for a pound of hamburger meat; 12 cents for a loaf of bread. We saved money every month. That is what got me used to the notion that budgets, and economics, are important.

When it comes to the University itself, however, the study of philosophy is absolutely critical because you have to ask, “What are you trying to convey to these students?”

TAE: So what should a university stand for? What should it try to do?

SILBER: People live for the arts, religion, and philosophy. What every human being really

seeks is some sense of the meaning of life. And there ought to be a way in which the university assists these students in finding that meaning.

You can't find the meaning of life without figuring out who you are yourself and how you fit into a universe you did not create. I think that hundredth Psalm is of very great importance. The Scriptures say: "It is He that hath made us, and not we ourselves; we are His people, and the sheep of His pasture."

You don't have to be religious in order to get its importance. A secularist, if he's honest, doesn't act like Carl Sagan and say, "Scientists have the answer to the origin of the universe." I think a university worthy of its salt should imbue the students who attend it with philosophical insight, and help them understand that good and bad are not merely subjective terms for things we like or dislike.

A university should also be a meritocracy. We're looking for what John Adams and Thomas Jefferson talked about: a natural aristocracy of virtue and talent. We're not looking for people of average ability. We're not looking for people who are pretty good. We're looking for people of distinguished intellect and sound character. That is what is essential to the life of a real university.

TAE: The philosopher Leo Strauss wrote that "liberal education is concerned with the souls of men and, therefore, has little or no use for machines." Boston University, like every other major university, has a lot of students that study engineering, communications, and other fields that emphasize machines.

Is this emphasis on technology, which only seems to be growing in higher education, inconsistent with a liberal arts education?

SILBER: I don't think so. Strauss' view is too narrow. Would he consider it all right to include some knowledge of music in a liberal education? Isn't having a heightened sensibility on musical matters part of a liberal education? How are you going to do that without an instrument? A violin is an instrument just as surely as a computer is. There's nothing inhuman or illiberal about scientific research.

The computer can facilitate liberal knowledge. It beats the hell out of a crow quill when it comes to writing. I don't think there's any dichotomy between liberal education and the

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vocational usefulness of one's education. There was a time, say 75 years ago, where a person with a liberal arts education might have had difficulty getting a job, but that's long since ceased to be the case.

There is an economic advantage in knowledge and an economic advantage in intellectual competence. When I was young, a physicist earned about the same amount as a theologian. A mathematician didn't earn any more than a professor of English, because there wasn't any market value for mathematicians and physicists and chemists.

TAE: So, was the British academic C.P. Snow wrong when he said that two different, sometimes antagonistic, cultures—humanities and the sciences—were emerging in the academy?

SILBER: I don't think he was exactly wrong, but I think he was wrong in saying they were of equal value. If you took from a Norseman his sagas and left him with algebra, he'd be worse off. I think that philosophical orientation, which gives you some sense of the meaning of your own life and the nature of the universe in which you live, takes primacy over other issues.

People have to be grounded in something real. I can't tell you how many students have said to me, "I want to be a writer." I ask such students questions like: "What do you write?" "How much do you write?" "Do you keep a notebook?" and "Are you writing every day?"

About seven times out of ten a student who says he wants to be a writer doesn't keep a notebook. Days go by in which he doesn't write. And I say, "The reason I know you're not going to be a writer, is because you're not a writer." Writers write.

TAE: A recent article in the *Boston Globe* gave the impression that you might leave BU in the near future after a new president is named. What sort of projects do you hope to work on?

SILBER: I'll probably never leave BU. I will leave the chancellorship, unless the person who is appointed president pretty well begs me to stay. I do lots of things. I'm a sculptor among other things. I just finished a *bas relief* of Elie Weisel. I also have three books in progress. One is on education reform and the obstacles it faces. Another is a philosophical treatise on freedom and responsibility, which is almost half done. A third is simply the editing of a book on

Kant, which was finished before I came to the University 30 years ago, and then became a casualty of a fire that occurred in my home. It burned it all around the edges and took out all the footnotes. So I had this lovely job of trying to recreate all the footnotes, which is no fun.

TAE: There have been a handful of politicians who have recently run for office after a stint leading a university; but no one besides you comes to mind who has run for political office after an extended career as a university president.

University presidents used to be much more engaged in politics. Is it a problem that university presidents no longer care much for politics?

SILBER: No, I don't think it's a problem. I don't think there's anything about being a college president that necessarily qualifies you to be a good public servant. I just don't see why there should be many more running for office. I don't regard that as the obligation, nor as the proper role of college presidents.

There's nothing wrong with it, but I don't think there's anything mandatory about it either. Let's face the facts: Most college presidents are interested in the perks of the job, not in its substance.

TAE: What about university presidents' disengagement from public life? There are rather few who try to remain public intellectuals while serving as presidents.

SILBER: To begin with, how do you define an intellectual? The best definition I've ever heard of an intellectual is one by Professor Donald Carnie-Ross at Boston University. He has said, "An intellectual is a person who has a commanding knowledge of a field that's really none of his business as a professional."

If a doctor understands medicine, that does not make him an intellectual. If a lawyer knows something about law, that just makes him a lawyer, it doesn't make him an intellectual.

But if a lawyer knows a great deal about literature, or if an insurance man like Wallace Stevens knows a great deal about poetry, that's a ticket to being an intellectual.

There are a lot of college presidents who simply are not intellectuals.

TAE: Are you still a member of the Democratic Party?

SILBER: Yes I am. If you ask why, it's because I do believe there's a positive role for the govern-

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ment to play. I think that after September 11 even a large number of Republicans discovered that there's a positive role for government. Deregulation has done some terrible things in this country.

I feel about the Democratic Party the way Churchill felt about democracy: I'd say the party's no good except when you consider the alternatives. I'm not happy with the leadership of the Democratic Party.

TAE: Since Bill Clinton's first campaign for President, the Democratic Party has dropped its opposition to the death penalty and, in fact, has worked to expand it. You've long been a staunch opponent of the death penalty. Why do you continue to oppose it?

SILBER: I don't think the enactment of the death penalty is immoral *per se*. I believe some people have committed crimes for which they deserve to die. The problem is this: Can you make a system that calls for capital punishment work reasonably, fairly, and justly?

First of all, you don't want to execute the innocent, and we know that that happens with considerable frequency. There are about 75,000 capital crimes committed every year in the United States. If we're prepared to execute 75,000 people every year, then you might say, "Well, maybe capital punishment is feasible." It certainly would reduce prison costs. It would be a great economic advantage to simply dispatch murderers.

But if we did, we would have something like 150 percent of the American deaths of the Vietnam War every single year just by practicing capital punishment. Nobody's going to do that. Only a handful of people will be picked out to execute. That handful are going to be predominantly blacks, Hispanics, and the poor.

When I was at the University of Texas, I visited Huntsville Prison and examined the records of people on death row there. I found that every single person on death row had had inadequate legal counsel. Most of the lawyers had said nothing more in the final summation than: "We presented our evidence and it would be most regrettable if you were to kill this man because it's just wrong to kill a human being."

There are lots of ways of improving the situation. You don't need the death penalty in order to be safe. Just look at the difference

between the Army and the Navy. The Army has used the death penalty. The Navy hasn't used it since 1848, and the discipline in the Navy is quite adequate.

TAE: Would you ever consider running for elective office again?

SILBER: I'm getting a little long in the tooth for that.

TAE: What are your thoughts on affirmative action in college admissions?

SILBER: That is one reason why I'm a Democrat. I really believe in affirmative action. I don't believe in quotas. You ask individual questions about individual applicants.

If a young black or Hispanic student has scored well on the SAT, despite the fact that he's attended a third-rate high school, and despite the fact that he comes from a very modest socioeconomic background, I give him bonus points on the SAT. If he scores say 1,000 on the SAT, I figure he is probably the equivalent of somebody who scored 1,200 and has a fortunate background.

TAE: There's significant evidence that college faculties in general tilt very much to the left. Why do you think this is so?

SILBER: Well, Marxism had a great appeal to intellectuals. It appeals to one's sense of justice. And as long as that is seen to be working and successful, people who didn't look at all of the evidence could ignore the human price that was paid for the so-called "successes" of Stalin and Lenin. It was easy to be romantic about it.

As fine an observer as Lincoln Steffens visited Russia in the '30s and said, "I saw the future and it works." He was no fool. He was captured by the romance of an effort to give everybody equality of opportunity.

The romance of that ideal had a lot of appeal, and people who go into universities are highly idealistic people.

TAE: Do you think that anything can be done to improve the ideological balance of college faculties?

SILBER: I think the balance will correct itself. September 11 corrected a lot of things. There were intellectuals at Yale and elsewhere who were trying to make it appear that somehow September 11 can be explained by the inequities of the United States. But they got made into mincemeat. I think it's a natural corrective

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process. I don't think there's a great tilt in the schools of medicine or in the schools of dentistry or in the schools of business.

I would think that there are more Democrats on the faculty of Boston University than Republicans, but there's no huge tilt here.

If you go the way of a school that says "conservatives are advised not to register for this course," then you've ceased to be a university in any meaningful sense of the word. You've bought ideology hook, line, and sinker.



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The Shame of America's One-Party Campuses

In most sectors of American life—corporations, non-profits, government agencies, churches, unions, voluntary organizations, the military, you name it—you will find ample numbers of both conservatives and liberals, Republicans and Democrats, people of the Right and people of the Left.

There is one important place, however, where this basic parity doesn't hold, where the Right/Left balance is grossly skewed: among the ranks of faculty at colleges and universities.

Today's colleges and universities are *not*, to use the current buzzword, "diverse" places. Quite the opposite: They are virtual one-party states, ideological monopolies, badly unbalanced ecosystems. They are utterly flightless birds with only one wing to flap. They do not, when it comes to political and cultural ideas, look like America.

The graphs that follow document the harsh ideological imbalances that exist on virtually all college campuses today. These results were painstakingly tabulated for us (in several cases with help from the Center for the Study of Popular Culture) by student volunteers who visited the Board of Elections in the local jurisdiction where each college or university is located. Public voter registration records were cross-referenced with faculty rosters, and the findings were compiled.

Some professors could not be located in voter registers, a certain number were not registered in any party, and a few were registered to a party that could not be classified ideologically.

But a great many had signed themselves up as members of an ideologically identifiable political faction.

Those who registered themselves in either the Democratic, Green, or Working Families Party we classified as members of a party of the Left—they are coded "L" in red in the results below.

Those registered in either the Republican or Libertarian Party we classified as members of a party of the Right—they are coded "R" in blue in the results below.

Lest critics accuse us of cherry-picking only fringe disciplines, we have stuck mostly to major, uncontroversial, and socially significant fields of study. And we have carefully arrayed the data by department. (Exact titles of departments vary by school; we have standardized to the most common terminology.)

Colleges like to characterize themselves as wide-open places where every thought can be thought, where any opinion can be held, where all ideals and principles may be pursued freely. The demonstrable reality, however, is that you will find a much wider—and freer—cross-section of human reasoning and conviction in the aisles of any grocery store or city bus.

In truth, colleges are now hostile environments for economic and cultural conservatives. Only a comparatively narrow spectrum of views is really welcome on campus. If you stray from the liberal consensus you will soon find yourself without allies, without tenure, and eventually without a position.

Don't take our word for it; consult the data on the following pages—they speak for themselves.

—KZ