State of the Senate Speech
Speaker John L. Fike
2005-2006

Speaker-Elect Slack, Secretary-Treasurer Price, fellow Senators, Newly-Elected Senators, Colleagues, and Friends of the Faculty Senate.

Or, should I say, fellow know-nothings and laggards . . .

That characterization of the Faculty Senate, contained in an e-mail from a now-retired senator, defined what was probably the low point of what was, personally, an enjoyable and very interesting year as your Speaker. From an organizational view, I can report that

The State of the Faculty Senate at Texas A&M University is very good, and by almost any measure, getting better. We have a strong Faculty Senate, with growing influence not only with our own administration, but increasingly with the Board of Regents and the Texas A&M System as well.

Our success on this campus is due in large measure to the strong support for Shared Governance on the part of President Gates, Provost Prior, and Vice Provosts Bill Perry, Karan Watson, Mark Weichold, and others. This support has been embraced (in a few cases grudgingly) by most of the Vice-Presidents of the University. President Gates and Provost Prior are determined to make it work, and it does.
The Faculty Senate’s excellent relationship with the administration didn’t just happen; it is the result of the efforts of many Senates and Speakers over the years, in particular Bob Strawser (who was the first Speaker that Bob Gates encountered when he arrived at Texas A&M), Marty Louder (who famously said to a reporter “I’d walk barefoot over hot coals for that man”), and Marty Gunn. With that kind of momentum, this year’s officers didn’t have many challenges in terms of our relationship with the administration, and thus we were able to concentrate on the issues.

The revision to the Senate Construction and Bylaws that created the office of Speaker-Elect has been an unqualified success. I was the first person to hold that position, and as Samuel Johnson is supposed to have said, "The prospect of being hung in the morning concentrates the mind wonderfully." Certainly that was my experience in my year as Speaker-Elect.

Let me say at this point that that I don’t think that there has ever been an incoming Speaker that is better prepared than Doug Slack. He has experience on key university committees that goes back many years, he understands the issues, and he knows where the bodies are buried. Doug will be a great Speaker of the Faculty Senate. I may have occasion to regret those words in a few minutes.

The success of Shared Governance at Texas A&M has been noted elsewhere, and that is largely because you, the faculty, are also determined to make it work. President Gates is fond of reciting stories
about how he tells the other AAU presidents that he trusts his Faculty Senate, and that he gets good advice from us. He says that he enjoys their amazement. Our Chancellor and Board of Regents have experienced problems in other parts of the System, and certainly have read reports of serious disagreements between the faculty and the administration at Baylor, Harvard, and elsewhere.

For our part, we act responsibly, working with the administration wherever possible for the good of the university, but standing firm when we must. The result is that our disagreements with the administration are resolved in private, to the benefit of all.

Let me list some of the more noteworthy faculty “victories” over the past year or so, remembering that issues don’t always adhere to the academic calendar or the senate election cycle, and also remembering that the term “victory” implies winners and losers, which is not the case in these issues – the University won.

- Following passage of a resolution by the Faculty Senate, President Gates appointed a task force to examine the wages and benefits of our lowest-paid hourly employees. The result was a substantial increase in pay for those employees, and a promise to continue to examine and report to the Senate on the status of those employees. I believe that the first of those reports is scheduled for the next senate meeting.
• The administration put forward a proposal to bring research in house, effectively ending our relationship with the Texas A&M Research Foundation. Following extensive discussions between the administration and several faculty groups, including the Faculty Senate, it was decided to restructure the interface with the Foundation rather than to eliminate it.

• Recently, the Texas A&M System has put forward a far-reaching policy on Intellectual Property, Patents, and Technology Commercialization. While discussions are continuing, the System has already modified their proposal several times in response to the concerns expressed by several faculty groups.

• Similarly, the System has proposed revisions to their policy on Tenure. We have had discussions with the Chancellor and the Regents, and we are hopeful the issue will be resolved in a way that preserves the integrity of the tenure process.

• And last but certainly not least, Parking. By my count, President Gates has now reversed Parking and Transit, or Transportation Services, no less than four times since he has been here, the latest being the withdrawal, at least for now, of the proposal to eliminate reserved numbered parking spaces. Let me say a word here on behalf of the Transportation Services staff. They are very good at what they do, which is the technology and mechanics of running a parking operation. What they are not as good at is assessing the impact of changes, which no doubt would result in
greater efficiency, on the faculty and staff. The latter is what we here in the Faculty Senate are good at. Hopefully we can work together with Transportation Services to make the necessary changes to the parking plan, while respecting faculty concerns.

With regard to the Senate itself, this is the first year in my memory that we have had all positions filled for the Senate elections. Now, we should have many more contested races, but at least we did not have vacancies on the ballot. The support of President Gates and the Deans in encouraging people to file for the Senate has certainly helped. If we can just get University Service to count for something in the annual review process, we will be where we need to be.

Let me end this talk by discussing some of the areas in which we need to get better, and a couple where we need to get real.

- The Senate needs to respond more quickly when substantive issues surface. The process of discussion in the Committee of the Whole, Executive Committee and referral to a standing committee, a report back to the EC and then to the Senate floor works for longer-term issues, but it is too slow when the administration needs a response within a week. Doug has said that is an area he wants to work on.

- The Committee structure needs to be reviewed. Some committees do not function; while others, such as Academic Affairs, have more work than they can do.
• The communication channel between the committees and the EC needs improvement. Sometimes a committee is doing exactly what they should be doing on an issue, but the EC doesn’t know about it. Doug has some new approaches on that, as well.

• We need to return to the close ties between the caucuses and the EC. In some colleges, such as my own, the caucus needs to be revitalized.

• There are, in my opinion, some additional changes to the Constitution and Bylaws that should be considered. The election and vacancy process needs to be clarified in some instances, and the term limit rule needs to be removed. It has cost us the services of several knowledgeable and dedicated senators over just the last year.

• The EC needs to be much more active in seeking opportunities to interact with the Chancellor and the Regents. We made some progress this year, but much more needs to be done.

And that brings me to my final point. Some of us need to get real about what the faculty, the Faculty Senate, or even the Administration can and can’t do with the Board of Regents and the Legislature. Colleagues, forgive me for pointing out the obvious, as I am about to do. We are employees of the State of Texas. The State holds the title to all of our
grounds, buildings, and equipment. The legislature makes the laws that govern the University, and the authority for that governance is vested in the Governor and the Board of Regents, the members of which are appointed by the Governor.

So to say that we must “Lay down the law” to the Legislature or to the Regents is nonsense; they create and administer the laws. To say that we will “Refuse to Cooperate” with policies or directives is folly, and could precipitate a confrontation which we would surely lose.

We are supposed to be educators. We need to do a better job of educating the Regents and the Legislature about the things that we consider holy, but at the same time the things that we assume everyone recognizes. Things like our commitment to teaching, the value of new knowledge, and above all the importance of open discussion and academic freedom.

We need to educate our fellow citizens about the economic importance of Higher Education and the value of an educated citizenry. Again, we’ve got to get real. The voters don’t automatically know those things; we’ve got to educate them.

Above all, we need to find ways to institutionalize shared governance, so that the next President, Provost, and/or Dean of Faculties cannot easily undo the improvements that have been made.
The State of the Senate is very good. If we can institutionalize shared governance, then the State of the Senate, and of Texas A&M University, will be excellent.

Thank you and I will now hastily leave the room...