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USM Faculty Senate

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# A Faculty Senate View of the Legacy of the Thames Administration

## *An Abbreviated Review of a Five Year Presidency*

**Overview.** Much has been and will be written about the five-year presidency of Dr. Shelby F. Thames. Members of the Faculty Senate are concerned that the written history may feature only events and successes as they are portrayed by the Thames Administration. To ensure that important aspects of the Thames years that directly impacted faculty are not lost to selective omissions or “creative” reconstructions, members of the Faculty Senate feel compelled to present brief commentary on a number of prominent events and outcomes resulting from decisions and actions by the Thames Administration. Our selection of topics has been influenced by input from many USM colleagues. We acknowledge that the list of negative actions that follows could have been longer. However, we have restricted ourselves to topics that have been mentioned frequently in the print and broadcast media and that seem to loom largest in the minds of our colleagues. More detailed information can be found within the Faculty Senate Meeting Minutes of the past five years found on the Faculty Senate website (<http://edudev.usm.edu/fsenate/>).

There are two actions on the part of the Thames Administration that many faculty feel warrant positive comments. First, no USM Gulf Coast faculty members were terminated as a result of Hurricane Katrina-generated enrollment declines. In contrast, hundreds of faculty members were furloughed at New Orleans universities. Second, physical improvements at the Hattiesburg Campus are quite noticeable.

At the other end of the spectrum are a set of negative impacts of the Thames Administration. In the minds of so many faculty and other university constituencies, these negatives are representative of the real Thames legacy. The list is basically in chronological order from earliest to most recent. Again, the list is not intended to be all-inclusive.

### **A THAMES LEGACY**

1. After three presidential candidates, including Dr. Thames, interviewed on the Hattiesburg Campus in spring 2002, the USM Chapter of AAUP conducted a preference poll among faculty. A total of 85% (157 out of 184) faculty who participated in the poll found Dr. Thames to be unacceptable for the presidency. This vote was apparently ignored by those who selected Dr. Thames as president, even though it was his fellow faculty members who so emphatically stated their choice. Both of the other candidates were found to be acceptable.

2. When it comes to filling top leadership positions, national searches are the norm at most universities. The beginning of the Thames years (summer and fall 2002) saw many appointments to senior administrative positions, but there were virtually no national searches. Nor was campus input sought on the selection of senior officers for the University. Had there been a national search or even more campus involvement in the selection of Administrative officials, perhaps questions on credentials and competency might have been addressed then rather than later.
3. A talented set of deans and associate deans was in place at the start of the Thames years. This cadre of deans was terminated en masse at a sudden breakfast meeting in January 2003. Superb leadership and history were lost in an instant. These deans earned and deserved more respect than they were accorded. Virtually all of them were excellent USM leaders and citizens.
4. The restructuring of all academic colleges was announced in January 2003 along with the termination of the deans. This restructuring occurred without input from faculty and with virtually no thought about the impact on curriculum and assessment. The claim that approximately \$2 million in administrative costs were saved and reallocated has not been documented and is at best questionable, whereas the turmoil caused by the sudden joining of previously-separate academic units, along with searches for new deans and new administrative staff, caused months and years of lost time.
5. A Graduate School enrollment scandal occurred in fall 2003. At first there was a denial by the Thames Administration that there was any inflating of enrollments. However, it was admitted later that there was a significant over count and that over 700 graduate students were enrolled in one class without their knowledge; some of them were no longer connected with the university at all. The director of graduate studies resigned because of the miscount. Ironically, she was back as director of graduate studies within just a few years of the enrollment scandal.
6. In spring 2004, the Thames Administration attempted to fire two distinguished senior faculty members, Dr. Frank Glamser (Sociology, and president of the USM Chapter of the AAUP) and Dr. Gary Stringer (English) for conducting an inquiry about the credentials of the vice president for research and economic development (Dr. Angie Dvorak) that the Thames administration should have conducted itself. Locking the professors out of their offices, seizing their computers, and attempting to terminate them transformed an already skeptical campus into complete turmoil. The Thames Administration used the USM Media and Public Relations Unit to assert that Drs. Glamser and Stringer had been engaged in criminal activities. Eventually there was a settlement (April 2004), and all three of the Kentucky trio President Thames had hired without searches (Mr. Jack Hanbury, Mr. Mark Dvorak, and Dr. Dvorak) left USM along with Drs. Glamser and Stringer. Over the next year, so did scores of excellent faculty who were completely disillusioned with the Thames Administration. The whole unnecessary incident cost the taxpayers nearly half a million dollars, as reported in the *Hattiesburg American*. The Thames Administration

failed to publicly clarify the confusing/misleading information on Dr. Dvorak's vita/resume. Such explanation would have been far preferable to locking distinguished professors out of their offices and attempting to fire them.

7. During the April 2004 Board of Trustees mandated hearings on efforts by the Thames Administration to terminate Drs. Glamser and Stringer, the Thames Administration admitted that it had been secretly monitoring faculty and student email messages. Secret monitoring of email messages has no place in the academy without proper oversight by a committee that includes faculty as well as members of the administration. This revelation contributed significantly to feelings of fear, intimidation, and low morale on campus.
8. In spring 2004 no-confidence votes against President Thames and his administration were taken by the Faculty Senate (40-0) and by the whole faculty (430-32 or 93%) in a special convocation of March 10, 2004. Such unanimity among faculty is nearly unprecedented and revealed the deep gulf between the university's officers and the faculty.
9. Very large and periodic stealth raises for a select group of administrators, faculty and staff during the Thames years have been the rule. Comparatively speaking, most continuing faculty and staff on average have received small raises, including several years in a row of no raises, over the five years of the Thames Administration. Apparent favoritism in the awarding of raises further eroded morale at the university.
10. The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) instituted accreditation probation against USM in the fall of 2004. The initial response from the Thames Administration was to say they found no evidence that the previous administration had communicated with SACS officials on important matters. However, SACS officials publicly stated that all reporting requirements had been met by the previous administration. The accreditation probation resulted in the creation of entirely new administrative offices and administrators and the hiring of consultants. The cost to address the issue of probation was in the hundreds of thousands of dollars.
11. Just before the December 2005 holiday season, it was learned that the Thames Administration was proposing that comprehensive Physical Plant services be outsourced to a private company. Many faculty and staff believe this initiative was begun with the full intent of awarding outsourcing operations to a favored vendor. The outsourcing effort was initiated after the tremendous services provided night and day by Physical Plant employees to help the University recover after Hurricane Katrina. Outsourcing was also begun without an analysis that would suggest such a move might be warranted. After significant opposition and questions surfaced, the outsourcing initiative was derailed by the Board of Trustees.
12. The Thames Administration has periodically and publicly criticized the College of Business and the Department of Psychology in spite of data suggesting good

productivity from these academic units. This public criticism was neither professional nor helpful to the units or the University.

13. The Thames administration actively encouraged Dean Willie Pierce from the College of Education and Psychology to resign in early 2007, just months before a new president was to assume leadership of the University. The effort to force the resignation of Dean Pierce was unwarranted and unwise. Replacements (the dean and associate dean) were from the same specialization within the same department, and neither individual had notable experience in higher education. The interim department chair of the unit from which the associate dean came was not even in a tenure-track position (but was a candidate for a USM tenure track position). Little or no input was sought by the Thames Administration on who the interim chair or associate dean should be.

There was a pervasive feeling among faculty and staff that the Thames Administration did not lead by example nor feel a need to account for its actions. It chose not to seek meaningful input from those who would be affected by its decisions. Faculty and staff (e.g., Physical Plant staff) left in droves (for other positions and to retirements they might not normally have pursued as early as they did). Some have said that the quotes attributed to Dr. Thames in the March 3, 2007 issue of the *Hattiesburg American* captured a lot of what the legacy of the Thames Administration should be. "You've got to step on some cheeks to get things done. If (*the new president*) isn't stepping on some cheeks and making people feel uncomfortable, something is wrong." Dr. Thames was subsequently quoted as having stated that "Anybody who controls the gold controls the place." Indeed, secrecy and favoritism in resource allocations was a trademark of the Thames administration.

Many if not most faculty and staff believe "stepping on some cheeks and making people feel uncomfortable" are words spoken by those who do not lead by example. Instead, these words characterized an administration bent on forcing its will by using threats and intimidation. This list of significant events will be vividly remembered by the hundreds of faculty members whose personal and professional lives were adversely affected during the five-year Thames reign. So will the unprecedented spring 2004 no-confidence votes against the Thames administration by the Faculty Senate (40-0) and faculty at large (430-32 or 93%).

- Adopted by Faculty Senate, May 4, 2007