

The Death of Context

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

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It all goes back to tattoos. The idiotic "scandal" that started with immature football players trading off their transitory status as big men on campus in order to score some ink they'll regret getting someday has now claimed its biggest prize: Ohio State president Gordon Gee.

Gee announced his retirement effective July 1 and its timing coincides with some goofy and at best mildly offensive comments about Notre Dame, the SEC, the University of Louisville, the University of Kentucky and the University of Cincinnati.

But make no mistake, this all goes back to tattoos. When that story broke and another good man, head football coach Jim Tressel was in the crosshairs, Gee stood there at the press conference like it was open mic night at the Chucklehut, awkwardly eking out a joke without realizing perhaps the full gravity of the situation. Gee was trying to acknowledge the popularity of Tressel and be self deprecating at the same time. It had all the humor of a plane crash joke made at the funeral of a 9/11 victim.

But of course the tattoo scandal was a national scandal because it happened at the biggest university in the country and involved a head coach with a squeaky clean image that others, particularly a sports media that seems to hate success, felt couldn't be true. Tressel lied to the NCAA about the matter and paid the price. That incident may define him to others that don't know better, but it hardly defines him at all. Tressel was a good man then and is a good man

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today, still doing what he does best: helping young people find the right path forward.

When Gee made his awkward joke he probably didn't realize that the same drive-by jackals with no concern for context that skewered Tressel were doing the same to him. Gee's joke began to define him in a way he ultimately could never escape. So when Gee went off script once again, which was always his wont, and made innocuous but hardly anything more than mildly offensive jokes at the expense of Notre Dame and the SEC, well that was more than the jackals could abide. The ginned up outrage that was first spewed at Tressel and had since been brewing bubbled over one again and at Gee in a way that would tarnish his ability to lead Ohio State forever more.

Let's not have a debate about what was said. There's no hard line that he crossed. It may seem a bit undignified for any university president to make jokes at the expense of others but let's also acknowledge that what some saw as offensive, others saw as humorous and both seemingly conflicting points of view can coexist without the globe spinning off its axis.

The jackals that went after Gee as if he had murdered a ward full of babies with his bare hands should be ashamed of themselves. In the pursuit of another scalp sacrificed at the altar of political correctness the world of higher education in this country is now worse off than it was just a few days before. Exactly why anyone would celebrate that is beyond my limited abilities to mentally grasp.

Gee embarrassed Ohio State and by all accounts the board of trustees there took appropriate actions, just as they should have. But apparently it wasn't good enough for the pristine among us that apparently are without sin, venial or mortal. They had to surmise for us all that somehow Ohio State couldn't stand for what's right and good and still stand behind Gee. They were wrong.

Gee's retirement, forced or otherwise, is but the latest example of a society that has completely lost its ability to contextualize an issue. It won't be the last. Scandal and what passes for scandal are now exactly the same thing. Joe Paterno knowingly shielding a pedophile is not greater than Gordon Gee mocking the shortsighted nitwits at Notre Dame or the ethically challenged in the SEC. In a society fixated on destroying one another to make ourselves feel better, all things are equal.

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Meanwhile, does anyone even care what Gee actually stands for or what he's accomplished? Does that somehow get negated because he's lousy at making jokes? Had he been better at it the jackals would be applauding his wicked sense of humor and his willingness to gently jab at the dual sacred athletic cows of Notre Dame and the SEC. There are plenty of perfectly appropriate jokes to be made at either's expense and when done with, I suppose, more sensitivity no one will raise an eyebrow. Right now someone somewhere is making those jokes. But because Gee is a better administrator than joke writer, the subtext becomes the subject and the messenger gets shot.

Gee is saying publicly that he wasn't asked to resign and I suppose there's reason to believe that's true. The actual jokes were made last December and the board dealt with it before the Associated Press ever got wind of the issue in the first place. But I also suppose that there are those who recently whispered in Gee's ear that this incident, when combined with his equally poor joke during the tattoo scandal, put Ohio State back in an unfavorable light. If there was one thing Gee couldn't abide, and it's exactly what made Gee a great president in the first place, was putting the institution he loved in an unfavorable light.

So now is this finally the end of the tattoo scandal? Is it? Can it finally be put to rest now that Gee has been put out to pasture or must it be the ink stain that can never be removed? Do I really need to ask because we already know the answers, don't we?