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# McPherson announcement turns protest into party

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McPherson announcement turns protest into party

□Nicest graduation gift ever'

By DANIEL STURM

During the May 7 demonstration against MSU commencement speaker Condoleezza Rice, Sayrah Namaste said she couldn't pinpoint a single motivation behind the decision to protest. There were so many, after all.

Rice was MSU's third commencement speaker in two years with direct ties to the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Was the students' graduation just a forum for President Peter McPherson's political agenda? When asked what positive outcome the rally might bring, the protest organizer said: "I wish President Peter McPherson would be forced to resign."

A genie must have been at the Breslin Center that day. For within the hour, remarkably, Namaste's wish came true. News traveled from inside the Breslin Center that McPherson had just announced his resignation. As the protesters were moving to the alternative graduation ceremony down the road, Namaste and others began dancing and cheering.

"This is the nicest graduation gift ever," said Neil Sardana, who, like Namaste, is a member of Students for Economic Justice. "Everything came together perfectly," Sardana said, still wearing his green graduation gown. "Hopefully, we will have a president who is more respectful of students next year. There's a lot of great hope now, with him no longer being here."

McPherson, 63, who had been in office for 11 years, said that he had not intended to reveal his retirement plans at commencement but told the audience at the Breslin Center that traveling rumors prompted him to make his announcement sooner. "I felt that every decade or so, you should change major leadership. There should be new ideas, new opportunities," he said following the commencement address by Bush's national security adviser. McPherson did not elaborate on his career plans but said he was interested in public service, and specifically in aiding development in Africa, a pet cause of his.

Just last January, the MSU Board of Trustees awarded McPherson a raise. The vote of confidence had served to

dispel rumblings that the relationship between the board and McPherson was frayed.

Student organizer Rana Chang said McPherson's resignation turned a day of protest into a "day of blessing" for her. The medicine student, who has been at MSU six years, sees it as a victory for the protest movement. "A lot of our protests centered around McPherson, his policies and his conservative ties," Chang said. During her undergraduate education and afterwards, in medical school, she's been involved in at least four major campaigns against the university president, whom she sees as personifying "money and power."

Chang pointed out that four years ago McPherson approved an undercover police operation of a campus activist group, and that under his presidency MSU offered a full scholarship to high school football star Eric Knott, despite rape charges brought against him of which the university was aware.

She also believed McPherson, who took a six-month leave in 2003 to serve as the Bush administration's financial coordinator in Iraq, used his choice of commencement speakers to further his own political agenda of endorsing wars and corporate globalization. After all, hadn't he invited Bernard B. Kerik (his roommate in Baghdad, and a police officer who served as the Iraq interim minister of interior) to speak at commencement last winter? His selection of Vice President Richard Cheney as commencement speaker in 2002 was another partisan choice, as was the invitation of World Bank President James Wolfensohn four years ago, only a few months after the anti-globalization protests in Seattle. [Other commencement speakers during McPherson's tenure have included Gov. Jennifer Granholm and President Bill Clinton, both Democrats.]

"The fact that McPherson promoted all these things has made us stronger activists," said Chang. "McPherson wants a major university that's focused only on business, engineering and whatever makes money," she argued. "He's just not the university type, and he doesn't belong here."

Chang said she was proud to have participated in a student and faculty protest movement that demonstrated MSU's more progressive side. She made reference to the April 22 Academic Senate, which drew 700 professors, most of whom were critical of the administration's plans to restructure the university. She said she looks forward to a more open-minded atmosphere for learning, under a new president. "I think there is no reason why we couldn't be a progressive college. It's just the 1 percent at the top that's setting the [conservative] tone."

Mike Price, a 1960s leader of Students for a Democratic Society who went to MSU with McPherson, attended the alternative graduation ceremony Friday. He was delighted by the news of the president's departure. "The man is not an educator," Price said. "He is a businessman. Hopefully we can get a good president who's dedicated to education."

Was McPherson forced out?

Disapproval of McPherson's policies may have hastened his decision to move on. According to a May 7 Detroit Free Press report, Republican Trustee Scott Romney said that McPherson's departure had been discussed as a possibility since he returned from Iraq.

Rumors swirled around McPherson's announcement. According to one rumor, the board told McPherson that if he did not resign by Friday, he would be fired at the next meeting. According to another rumor, McPherson was offered a job in Grand Rapids, at one of the philanthropic foundations associated with the planned relocation of MSU's College of Human Medicine, from East Lansing to Grand Rapids.

According to another rumor, McPherson, a proud Republican, was forced out as a result of a political power game. Sources pointed to Lansing developer Joel Ferguson, vice chairman of the MSU board and the person most responsible for hiring McPherson. Ferguson is a member of the Democratic National Committee and opposes the war in Iraq. But Ferguson said Monday that no rift existed between McPherson and the board, and that the president had not resigned under pressure.

When asked about the potential rift between the board and the president, MSU Trustee Dorothy Gonzales, a Democrat, said: "The board is like any body of individuals. A lot of the time, we don't agree with one another. But we're a family." Gonzales praised McPherson's contributions over the last 11 years. "We have never had such a progressive president at Michigan State University," she said. "He doesn't sleep. How many presidents would donate 16 hours a day to make sure that MSU is a great university?"

American history Professor John Coogan said that such positive remarks only underline his theory that a deal was cut, under which trustees agreed to present his resignation as his own decision and avoid the impression of a rift.

Coogan said resignation rumors had been circulating for weeks, but he was surprised about the timing. McPherson announced his resignation only few hours after the trustees unanimously approved the medical school's move. What Coogan wants to know is whether the unanimous vote in favor of the move had only been a political charade. What was the board up to?

"Clearly, there is something that they know, which the rest of us don't know, to have induced them to do so," he said.

Who's next?

At Friday's alternative graduation ceremony, retired MSU history Professor (and City Pulse columnist) Henry Silverman said the flood of complaints surrounding the medical school may have triggered McPherson's decision. "I believe he doesn't like this kind of controversy," Silverman said. "And the board definitely doesn't like it."

McPherson hasn't decided yet whether he will use a clause in his contract that allows him to work as a consultant for the university for the next five years. The president said he will stay until the end of the year in order to work on landing a \$1 billion Rare Isotope Accelerator Project and to plan the medical school's relocation.

Given the controversy surrounding the medical school and the president's surprising resignation, Silverman thinks the relocation could very well fall apart, especially if the financial details don't convince the faculty. "The proof of the pudding is in the eating. It all depends on the details."

When asked who he thinks should become MSU's next president, Silverman said he believes there will be a strong push for someone with an academic background this time, and "no more businessmen."

Silverman and Coogan both said they would like to see the administration set up a search committee that included at least one student and one faculty member.

Epidemiologist Nigel Paneth, who initially contacted the Executive Committee of Academic Council to call for a Senate meeting, agreed that the president and the provost of the next cycle should have a real academic background. "You have to have worked on the shop floor to run the factory."

Paneth expressed optimism that the College of Human Medicine faculty would be in the position to take over plans for its future. "I'm hoping that the next president concentrates on the fund-raising aspects and that the details would be left to the faculty and administration of the medical school."

Melissa Hasbrook, a Ph.D. candidate in rhetoric and a protest co-organizer, suggested that the next MSU president be someone who doesn't have a "shadowy record" in government and business. She was highly critical of McPherson's legacy, pointing out that he became the U.S. financial envoy in Iraq at a time when MSU was facing a huge financial crisis. "And now, just as we're undergoing all of these cuts, he is resigning. I mean he's a businessman, and I guess it makes good business sense," she commented. Reiterating the opinion of other McPherson critics, Hasbrook said the university needs someone committed to the pursuit of education, "and not to corporations."

The Lansing State Journal reported in a May 8 story that the Republican-controlled board may consider several "power players" with strong ties to MSU. Among others, the report listed Grand Rapids businessman Peter Secchia, an MSU alumnus who previously was a finalist for the job; former Michigan Gov John Engler, an MSU graduate; and Lou Anna Simon, MSU's provost since 1993 and also a former finalist.

Sheila Teahan, an English professor on the board of MSU's chapter of the American Association of University Professors and a driving force behind the movement for more faculty input, wrote in an e-mail that none of those candidates possess the academic credentials appropriate for the president of a Big Ten university. "MSU desperately needs a provost, and preferably also a president, who is an academic with some understanding of the teaching and research mission of this university □ not a career administrator who knows how to push papers," Teahan said.

Coogan also advised against Simon. "She has never gone through what most academics go through," Coogan said. "Her whole career has been in administration, not in teaching and scholarship." Coogan noted that Simon's

predecessor, David Scott, who went on to be the chancellor of the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, was a world-famous physicist. "He could be on the phone with any physicist in the world and have a professional conversation," Coogan said. "That is not true with Lou Anna Simon."

Human biology junior David Mitchell, a member of Students for Economic Justice, said he's not "very excited" about the prospect of having Simon as the next president. Mitchell suggested that the next president be picked from inside the university, rather than starting a nationwide "head-hunting" initiative.

He believes that Lee June, vice president for Student Affairs and Services, would make a good president, since he has been a longtime advocate for students. Mitchell said he would ideally like to see someone even more progressive than June but was unsure if that was realistic, given MSU's conservative leadership. He said he appreciated the University of Michigan's president, Sue Coleman, for her involvement in the Affirmative Action Supreme Court case last year. "It is really important to have presidents who are willing to do something like that, even if only occasionally."

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