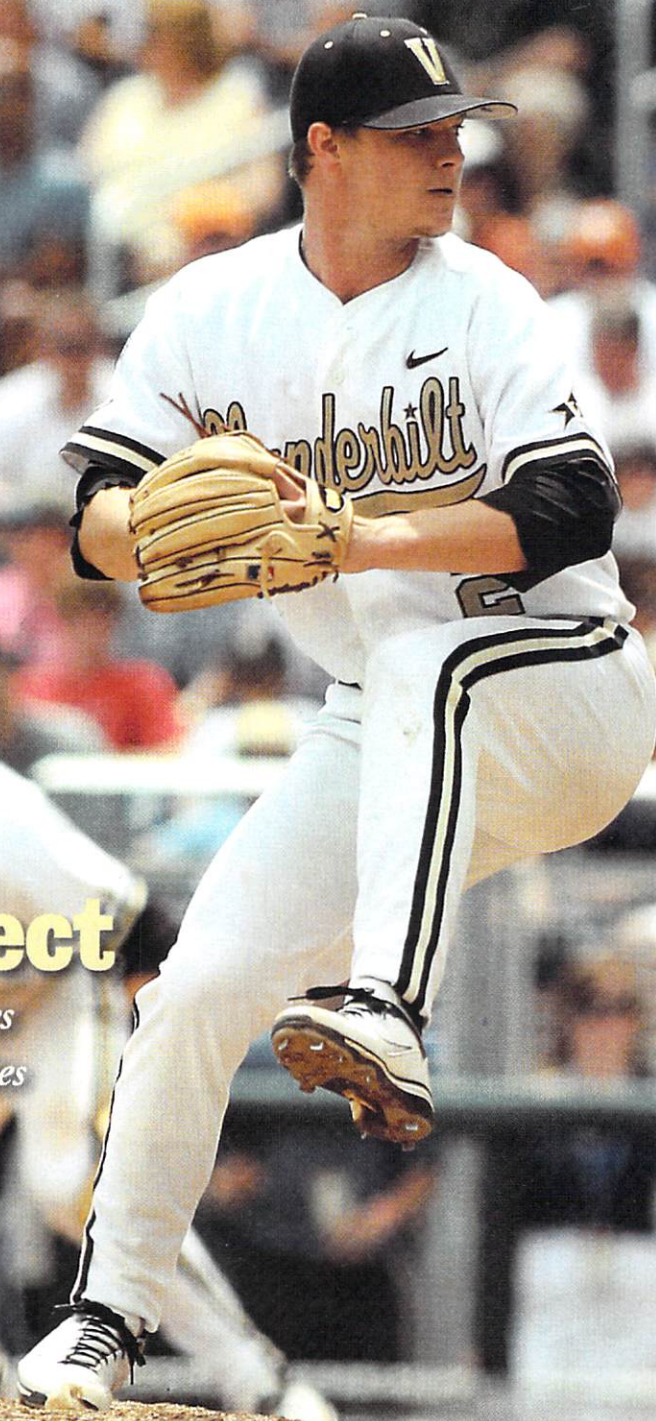


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A.P.O.V.*

*Alumni Point of View

Wayfarer on a Dusty Road

In pondering life after Iraq, recollections turn to Chancellor Heard and a father's example. By BRIAN A. MONTAGUE, BA'81

LOOKING BACK, I WONDER whether we should have been in class that morning. It was just before lunch, and I had already missed a few that semester—classes, never lunch—as, unfortunately, my first midterm grades attested. From our residence in Dyer Hall, the path to food at Sarratt took me and my friend Gaines right by Kirkland Hall. Chancellor Alexander Heard—thankfully, as it turned out—was not in his office when we made the slight detour up the Kirkland steps to “demand” a meeting with him.

With six whole weeks’ undergraduate experience under our belts and hardly a care in the world, our demeanor and complete lack of purpose must have contrasted with those student groups that felt genuine—unlike our feigned—entitlement to an open-forum discussion with the chancellor during the tumultuous 1960s. Many late boomers like I was knew that time of campus unrest mostly through its depiction in *Mad Magazine*.

That day we two “activists” had no agenda, no grievances, no demands. Essentially, we just wanted to say hello. That probably would have been enough to gain entry, had Chancellor Heard been there. But that day it fell upon his skilled secretary to endure the fictitious reason for our stop.

“What would you like to discuss with the chancellor?” she inquired with a disarming smile, after obtaining our names.



We struggled to come up with something befitting the surroundings and stature of our would-be host. “Certain concerns we have,” “the quality of life here,” “first-year questions,” something along those lines, spilled from our lips.

Complimented, nay, thrilled, merely by the fact that this nice lady had actually taken down our names, we ventured on to lunch and then about our business. Soon we’d forgotten about it.

A week or two had passed when engraved invitations arrived from the Office of the Chancellor. “You Are Cordially Invited,” it began beneath the university crest, “to Dine with Chancellor Alexander Heard at Twelve Noon in the Office of the Chancellor on” whatever date it was in the fall of 1976.

As many can attest, accessibility was never an issue with Chancellor Heard. There were the open forum events, an always-open door and, of course, the freshman picnics at the Heards’ home during orientation.

And now there was this wonderful lunch, an almost familial gathering attended by four or five people in the chancellor’s suite: Chancellor Heard, Vice Chancellor Rob Roy Purdy, Gaines, me, and one or two from the English department. Daunting though the occasion was, most of my anxiety sprang from fear that the subject of my grades would come up somehow. (It didn’t, thankfully.)

So I relished the moment while consuming our soup and sandwiches and ice cream with great purpose. Would that I had thought to ask questions that occurred to me later: What were the ’60s like here? Is that Fels guy teaching me economics really the same one who wrote the casebook? Did you ever talk politics with Robert Penn Warren? Or grades with my instructors? No, not that! But perhaps this question: What problems loom ahead for my generation, do you suppose?

That question was never asked, but Chancellor Heard asked and answered it rhetorically years later when, in delivering his next-to-last commencement address, he entreated our class to mind the world’s shortage of water. A commencement address about lack of water? What about the importance of setting goals in life, about leaving the world better for those who follow you, erudition for its own sake, living a virtuous life, Excelsior, and all the other tried-and-true commencement themes? But a lack of water in the world? Although

doubtlessly researched, indeed, prescient, it was not the expected call to arms. Nor would I have remembered it, frankly, but for having to confront that very issue in Quayarah Province, Iraq, almost 30 years later.

“Just think of this as an adventure,” my friend Maj. Charles Clark had recommended as we loaded gear and soldiers onto buses at Camp Shelby on a hot South Mississippi day in June 2009, on our way to an airport.

An adventure it was! The summer of 2009 witnessed entry of our brigade into Northern Iraq and a dust storm that *The New York Times* described as being “of biblical proportions.” The heat, already overwhelming, was blanketed by an immense cloud the size, they say, of Turkey.

The cloud passed after several days, but not without adding to the stultifying heat and, with that, greater evaporation of precious water. Our lifeline there at Q-West Contingency Operating Base was an unelevated pipeline from the Tigris stretching over many miles. Soon the two open basins where we stored our water became just one, and then that one became quite low.

The climate was not the only culprit. Iraqi tribesmen, no less in need of water, hacked into the pipeline repeatedly. We’d fix it; they’d hack somewhere else. On it went, until a deal emerged one day, without bloodshed. We’d give them some water; they’d leave our pipeline alone and help us protect it from others.

I wrote home, recalling in an email to my family Chancellor Heard’s words to us that day back in 1981 on Curry Field, how among the Great Challenges for our generation would be to determine how to distribute and allocate an increasingly scarce supply of water, disappearing in some places and abundant in others.

Fast forward. While we negotiated with those tribesmen, two hours north in Mosul—my other home in Iraq—water was abundant. Trucks drove the roads there at Diamondback and Marez daily, spraying water on the roads to suppress the dust! As I traveled back and forth between those two places fulfilling duties as a JAG officer for

two maneuver battalions, the story about the water-spraying truck was one I kept to myself.

There are other stories from Iraq—celebratory, tragic, banal—all either beyond the telling here or best kept off these pages. It’s been more than a year since my more recent adventure, the one in Northern Iraq. If conditions there were sometimes challenging, the return was no less so.

My law practice, which had closed twice in five years amid two military active-duty interruptions, would not spring back this time with the elasticity it had five years earlier. It was something to do with the economy and the understandable disaffection of some clients for my comings and goings, I believe.

Then I received a call from my chain of command after being back a couple of months, their first contact with me. They asked me to relinquish the one O6 JAG position in the Mississippi National Guard so that another could have a turn, resulting for me in loss of commission, health insurance, and the part-time pay.

Whining to a local attorney about such challenges, maybe in search of perspec-



Father and son, attorneys Frank and Brian Montague, at the elder Montague’s law office. Frank Montague has relied on crutches since contracting polio at age 28. “He is succumbing orthopedically—but in no other sense,” Brian says.

tive, yielded instant and unexpected clarity. “How’s your father?” he asked.

To understand the intended effect, you need to know about my father. He ran cross country, was a stellar athlete, and was working as a field engineer for Phillips Petroleum

in Texas when, at age 28 and just months before the Salk vaccine became commercially available, he contracted polio. With loss of all leg muscles, he has walked on crutches since. He will be 86 soon. From using his arms for mobility during a lifetime, he is succumbing orthopedically—but in no other sense.

Lawyers, not a group of people hailed for their quickness to compliment, will tell you how he is a giant in the legal profession—tenacious and knowledgeable. He is revered for traits not unlike those John Poindexter described in speaking of Chancellor Heard: “He always spoke in his dignified Southern way. He was courteous, considerate, formal ... courageous under attack, steely in resolution ... calm under pressure, and demanding but not overbearing.”

There is this image I have of my father: passing the football to his three sons from a hill in our side yard, crutches laying by his side, sitting on a canvas-over-metal-frame folding seat he would use for hunting.

So when my colleague asked me how my father was, all complaints about the difficulty of acclimating and adapting to change evaporated like the summer waters of the Tigris.

I am building a law office now, and I soldier on, empowered by the example of men like Chancellor Heard and my father, and inspired by William Alexander Percy’s closing words in *Lanterns on the Levee*:

“Here among the graves in the twilight I see one thing only, but I see that thing clear. I see the long wall of a rampart sombre with sunset, a dusty road at its base. On the tower of the rampart stand the glorious high gods, Death and the rest, insolent and watching. Below on the road stream the tribes of men, tired, bent, hurt, and stumbling, and each man alone. As one comes beneath the tower, the High God descends and faces the wayfarer. He speaks three slow words: ‘Who are you?’ The pilgrim I know should be able to straighten his shoulders, to stand his tallest, and to answer defiantly, ‘I am your son.’” ▼