

Editorial

THE BATTALION

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THE DECISION

Bowen decision unfortunate consequence of too much compromise; bonfire modifications extreme

"The challenge really, to [students] is to protect this tradition, to cause this tradition to be here as a safe, positive element of our University."

— Ray M. Bowen
Texas A&M University president

On Friday, Texas A&M President Dr. Ray M. Bowen ended the six months of anticipation and conjecture about the future of Aggie Bonfire. Bowen tried to appeal to the contingent that wanted bonfire to continue if an improved, safe version could be built. In looking for that compromise, Bowen unavoidably upset people on both sides of the debate. However, to ensure the future of a safe bonfire, a number of dramatic changes must be implemented, and unpopular choices have to be made.

The postponement of bonfire until the fall of 2002 was a sound decision. Bonfire certainly could not be carried out this fall and still incorporate the necessary changes for a safe structure.

The final report by the Commission

on the 1999 Aggie Bonfire pointed out a number of mistakes and problems with bonfire that accumulated over the structure's 90-year history. Future bonfires need to be safe bonfires, and there is simply not enough time to introduce the necessary improvements to the structure by this fall.

While canceling bonfire for 2001 and taking a full two years to transition into the restructured bonfire seems excessive, when addressing safety concerns, it is best to take more time than necessary. Putting bonfire on hiatus until 2002 will give University and student leaders more than adequate time to plan and take steps toward building a safe bonfire.

While putting bonfire on hold was one of those difficult, but cor-

rect, decisions, ending student-involved cut was an error. Doing away with student participation in cutting the trees for bonfire eliminates the bulk of student involvement. In a tradition founded by, and historically built by, students, their involvement is critical, even if it must be accompanied by paid engineers.

This decision cuts out the heart of student activity and involvement. Instead of ending student-run cut, Bowen should have made a compromise similar to the one he made with student participation in stack. A combination of students and professionals would improve the safety and the negative elements of the bonfire culture without sacrificing student involvement.

Further, Bowen's decision to replace bonfire's wedding-cake de-

sign with the tepee form represents an overreaction and unnecessary change in the evolution of a safe bonfire. The introduction of professional engineering supervision at stack is a positive step, but with the increased supervision, planning and safety oversight, a wedding-cake bonfire could be safely built.

The bonfire commission outlined various errors and weak points of the wedding-cake design, and the students and engineers should work on correcting those problems rather than ignoring them and reverting to a bonfire style that has not been used since the late '50s. Structural modifications to the wiring, height and number of layers should be introduced without scrapping the entire design.

The majority of students wanted bonfire to burn again if it could be built safely, and a safe wedding-cake bonfire can be built.

In the end, however, bonfire is not about the size or style of the final structure, but the unity students experience while working on it. Bonfire participants do not simply build a stack of logs, but bonds of friendship. Therefore, how bonfire is restructured is only a secondary element of the tradition's future — carrying on the legacy of camaraderie associated with it is the prime concern of all Aggies.

This is the challenge facing students. How they respond to this challenge will show the true character of the student body and the important role bonfire has at Texas A&M.

Mail Call

Aggies react to Bowen's official decision on Aggie Bonfire

worth living entails risk. Ridiculous sums were spent determining why bonfire fell, but I'll tell you for free: it fell because we are human and we make mistakes. This time, we paid dearly for them. Obviously, we should protect people, but we have allowed our obsession with preserving life to smother our aspirations. When did we become so timid? Man does not exist to be safe, he exists to go out and do, even at the cost of life. People will tell us we need to accept the decision and move on. Bull! I am angry and I have every right to stay angry.

Mark Smith
Class of '00

It has always amazed me that so many people at A&M do not understand bonfire. Even some of bonfire's strongest proponents have only a slim grasp on what bonfire is all about.

There is this notion among the general Aggie population that there is a series of necessary, but relatively unimportant tasks, that lead up to the pinnacle of Aggie spirit, the burning of logs.

The evidence of this can be found in the fact

about getting there. Bonfire is not about the burning, it is about the building.

Charles Berend
Class of '96

At the start of the 21st century, the bonfire tradition needs to evolve to recognize the challenges of the future. The giant feats of engineering and construction that typified past generations of Aggies are no longer exceptional, and are even questionable. Consider the complexities of the problems facing mankind. Global warming is a good example. Of course, the old bonfire caused many trees to be chopped down and burned, releasing a lot of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere.

The time has come for a new bonfire ethic. Something "greener" seems appropriate, like a hay bale bonfire. The advantages are numerous. A hay bale construction would be safer. It would be quicker to construct, allowing students to return to their studies.

It would allow for more creativity, than a stack of logs. Most important, the carbon dioxide would be

2X4s is a mockery of what bonfire stands for, what it means to the student body and what it meant to our 12 fallen brothers and sisters.

I do know that President Dr. Ray Bowen would not make a decision that would harm our great institution, nor do I envy him for having to make this decision. No Aggie wants this tradition to continue if any more students were to get hurt, but I do feel that they administration is taking this to an extreme!

I just wish there was something we could do.

Chris Massol
Class of '01

"Let us remember the noble, sorrowful moments while we held each others' hands and prayed for those caught inside the collapsed pile."

top of a 15-foot stack. It wouldn't compare much to the bonfire of old, if the outhouse itself represents half the height. I hate to be the one to say it, but I know that thousands of Aggies around the world agree with me: let bonfire die a peaceful death instead of reducing it to this pathetic level. Let us remember the noble, sorrowful moments while we held each others' hands and prayed for those caught inside the collapsed pile. Let us remember our own cuts, our own stacks, our own loads. ... Fifteen, 20 feet? I would call that a campfire. I can call it that because I have burned higher piles than that of cleared trees and branches. I remember not being particularly impressed at the time. Why would you want to remember bonfire that way?

Spencer Williams
graduate student

The new plan calls for no student intervention in the building of bonfire. I understand totally that the design and overseeing of the construction should be by a licensed professional. That makes lots of sense.

What is unfortunate is that there will be no students sweating and working together as Aggies to build the actual bonfire stack. That experience alone teaches you so much about the tradition and togetherness that we all have as Aggies.

The way the "new" bonfire will be will have almost no meaning. It will be like a nice corporate sponsorship instead of the work of hundreds of tireless students who put their hearts and souls into building the best bonfire they could.

I would rather see bonfire go away completely than have it in the state that it will be in the coming years. So ends my bonfire visits.

My memories of Fightin' Texas Aggie Bonfire remain of the camaraderie had with fellow Ags while up on the stack.

Robert Nederhorst
former student

The idea of creating bonfire was that it was a difficult project, involving sweat, energy, trust and dedication by many people. To create a project that is neither difficult nor time consuming for individuals involved, does not create the lasting friendships or memories that make bonfire the great tradition that it has become. I would find it very difficult to see the meaning behind such a scaled-back bonfire. If the bonfire cannot be created in a safer way, it seems painfully obvious to me that it should be canceled.

I personally believe there are ways to make it much safer. However, I see why officials would not want to take the arduous task of finding them. They would be putting their necks out on the line, and that is rarely something politicians or board members would do.

If this idea is to create a safe bonfire at the expense of the hard work, long hours, and pride of so many individuals, I opt for ending it.

Do something else, and remember what made bonfire so vital to the Spirit of Aggieland was the relationships forged in long, hard work with friends and strangers.

Jason E. Trust
Class of '92

As a member of the construction industry, I know Bowen's decision about bonfire is quite unreasonable. The necessary structural and safety issues can be addressed in time for next year's bonfire. Bowen has seriously wounded my trust in my school. Bowen seems to have disregarded the Bonfire Commission report and chosen the easy way to stop bonfire by waiting

"My heart is tearing in two."

two years — breaking the chain and importance of passing down tradition among students. Too often over my time at A&M, our faculty and staff chose only to reprimand rather than repair the problems they saw. Additionally, there is no reason faculty should be a part of any future planning committee. The faculty has never wanted to be part of bonfire and should not be put in the process of defining its future now.

My father told me when I came to A&M to enjoy bonfire because it probably wouldn't last. I did enjoy it. I learned how to appreciate hard work and friendship because of bonfire. I met the woman I will marry on Aug. 19, 2000, because of bonfire. You have broken my heart, Bowen, by letting this decision come from lawyers and committees, not from the family.

Gavin Daniels
Class of '99

Bonfire was an expression not merely of the Aggie spirit, but of the greater human desire to strive for greatness. It has just been gutted in the name of guaranteeing safety. But such a guarantee cannot exist, and if it did, it would mean a life devoid of pride or accomplishment. In the name of safety, shall we all be strapped into our beds for the rest of our lives? That would certainly be very safe! My point is that although life is fragile, any life



A group of students hear the proposed amendments to the building of bonfire in the Flagroom of the Memorial Student Center on Friday.

that less than 2,000 people show up for most cuts, but more than 40,000 people show up to watch bonfire burn. Similar evidence can be found in Dr. Bowen's comments regarding his decision to childproof bonfire. It is this belief that leads people to suggest that a bonfire without the problem of construction is somehow a better product.

To put this to rest, let me state one of the great truths about bonfire: Bonfire is not about the burning of logs! There is little, if any, value created by lighting bonfire for the Thanksgiving spectators.

If we take away from bonfire the challenge of construction, we have destroyed its usefulness as a builder of Aggie spirit and character. Going to the moon was not about walking in low gravity. It was

recycled by the renewable growth of hay each year.

S.S. Howze
Class of '76

My heart is tearing in two. It feels as if the breath was just taken straight out of my lungs with this decision. It now feels that those 12 students who perished at our cost are being disregarded. I imagine every one of those individuals would have supported a normal bonfire this fall instead of a memorial service. For two years, we are not going to have bonfire ... and when we do have it, it will be 'modified.' A one-tiered bonfire made out of

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