

**A Memorial Tribute to
John Turner
By Charles Backstrom
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(*excerpts*)**

John Turner was the greatest institutional builder I have ever known.

By that I mean he focused relentlessly on how the structure and operation of the organism within which we all work should have the excellence of a Big Time university. His course lectures were superb, as the people in the room recognized, but I heard him say he went beyond that in polishing them in preparation and delivery so they would reflect the University as doing what it can do best in the world.

An institution is not a thing, but the interlacing of many small patterns of behavior. It seems strong like a web of burlap under an old-fashioned chair. But if it becomes frayed and frazzled, it rapidly becomes very weak. Interest groups concerned with how they affected with the University usually end up clawing at parts they don't like – tenure, for example, or research subjects. The University resists, sometimes loses, sometimes wins. The institution most of us are concerned with is the University of Minnesota. But you have to have a broader scope if you want to see how an institution comes to be. Yankton College was a good little place. John Turner became a student and a faculty member and a Trustee, and now it is a great little place. You have to be around as I was sharing space in a West Bank church to see him build the International Studies Association and Journal from nothing.

Then there is the city of Minneapolis.

Art Naftalin, a professor in the Political Science Department, decided he would run for mayor. No one, including Art, thought he would win. But John Turner devised unique strategies for identifying voters that would go for Art, one for the primary, and then a different one for the general election. John recruited me to program a computer to classify the precincts. We never included Naftalin in the planning, so he read about his victory in the newspaper.

John Turner had successfully created another institution that dominated the largest city in Minnesota for a long time. I was there, and in awe of his practical strategy and prodigious effort to deliver a different level of civic politics. Turner's judgment of Art Naftalin paid off, and the city had a devoted public administration office holder who could lead a city in dangerous times. When thousands of angry Blacks and Whites marched on City Hall, Art Naftalin stood in the intersection, and with his great oratorical skills, genuine personality, and successful record with minority groups talked the crowd into going home to prepare for a bigger working conference the next day on increasing public consciousness of minority need. It was Naftalin's finest hour, but with another mayor, the city and its University could have been disaster sites. And John Turner made the difference.

Not all decisions are big-time. You have to know how to stop from naming a building after someone's buddy. You have to say "no" when someone offers you're their library if only you'd appoint them to a professorship. You have to know how to convince a court that the Bill of

Rights is worth spreading so that it covers a college as well as a government. You have to have the courage to not give anyone a degree from your school that does not perform acceptable work, and instead be willing to give the low grades that show what students deserve.

John Turner made a believer out of me. I didn't think that any of these battles could be won, but they were, and John Turner did them.

Now our Horatio is guarding the Bridge. Frankly, I am afraid that nobody will replace him. Most of us don't want to risk our blood nor take time from our intellectual pursuits to work and plan for the best. But if nobody does it, this sometimes great University will have passed its peak.

What a performance and show John Turner gave us!