

**An Essay delivered at the 137<sup>th</sup> Annual Dinner of  
The Indianapolis Literary Club, May 15, 2013  
“The Blade, The Bricks, The Bluster, and the Blunder”**

I realize that my title is insufficiently murky. It was my working title; it dictated the way I actually worked; and I decided to stick with it.

The “Blade,” of course, is the sobriquet the genial George W Bush bestowed on our former Governor, now President of my former university. Daniels was said to have displayed a Samurai sword in his office at OMB, and for all I know, it now hangs in his new office in Hovde Hall. Recent headlines suggest that he still knows how to swing a blade, and his propensity to do so produced much consternation in my former colleagues whenever I assured them, as I often did, that he would undoubtedly be their next president. I would then add, further to provoke them, that I was sure he would do an excellent job.

Few of my colleagues were sorry to see me retire, and many of them wish I had moved more than 60 miles away, as I still take much delight in provoking them. Even worse. I was often right, and am again, I do not doubt, in this case!

Most of you know Mitch Daniels much better than I do. Some of you have spent time at Purdue--but no more than absolutely necessary in Heavilon Hall. Others may have written checks to enable their offspring to study there. In any case, I thought my peculiar vantage point as a long-time member of the Purdue faculty, now retired, remote, and detached, might produce a few insights

I base my hopes for the Daniels’ presidency on my assessment of him as a smart man and a discerning one, with much valuable experience outside the university. To these qualities, rare enough in themselves, he adds: a sense of humor, a sense of style, and an impatience with ceremony. He will need all of these qualities at Purdue, and some of his faculty will find them refreshing.

While all of them were smart, none of his predecessors whom I knew, all of them now names on buildings, exhibited most of these qualities. (I go back as far as Fred Hovde, who had a reputation for academic courage during the McCarthy era, and presided over graduation ceremonies, which he loved, in the splendid regalia of an Oxford cap, hood, and gown, earned in his days there as a Rhodes Scholar.)

I myself have been in the presence of Mitch Daniels only three times, so my estimation of his qualities and hopes for his success is based on slender materials and quick impressions.

My first glimpse of him was 5 or 6 years ago, when we took our grandchildren to the 500 Parade. Mitch flashed by on his Harley, in the full regalia of that ilk, and leading a mixed throng of bikers and state police. I take this as sufficient evidence of his unique sense of balance, style, and ceremony. I understand that he recently tweeted of having ridden that bike up to Purdue with great pleasure—I trust he took Route 52 instead of the interstate!

A year or so after that, he was the guest of honor at a fund raising luncheon at Tabernacle Presbyterian Church, which he still attends fairly often, and where, many years ago, he was instrumental in strengthening the Endowment Fund, which has helped the Church through some very lean years. (He can't have done this with a sword!) A dozen of those at that luncheon claimed, with both fondness and pride, to have been his Sunday School Teachers. He remembered, and spoke to, every one of them. Perhaps more search committees should seek out such recommendations!

Last February, I asked friends in the Ag Econ Department to get my wife and me tickets to the Ag Alumni Banquet, which I attend every ten years or so, out of curiosity. Now that I am retired, it is out of curiosity that I do most of the things that I do. The President was there, along with Steve Innskeep from NPR's Morning Edition and Darrell Hazell, the new football coach. I understand the Athletic Department rushed to hire him before the Blade would have had to approve his \$2,000,000 salary, plus reserves, incentives, etc. This is something like four times the new President's salary, which says much about current academic priorities at Purdue, and everywhere else.

The President gave a fine speech, short, witty, and reminiscent, perfect for that occasion and that audience. He went back to the days of Earl Butz (a name, I suspect, not previously invoked before *this* audience). He mentioned the notoriously blue jokes that Butz told so often and so well. "I wish I could tell one now," he said, "but I can't." "Well," he continued, with perfect timing and sheepish grin, "maybe just one!" And he told a beauty!

I am certainly not going to stand before this audience thus attired and tell that joke. But, as I am under instructions from Gene Lausch to be witty, as well as brief, I will tell you a nice clean academic joke instead:

Two Purdue Pharmacy students, fraternity brothers with straight A's, took a break from studying for an X-Ray Powder diffraction exam to go to a party in Bloomington where, you will scarcely believe, alcohol was both served and consumed. They got home too late, and in no shape for, the exam. The next day they told the Professor that they had had a flat tire on Route 37, and asked to take a make-up exam. He agreed.

The first question, worth ten points, was an easy one about polymorphs, and they began to relax.

The next one, worth 90 points, was: "Which tire?"

I tell that joke to suggest that the faculty is usually a step or two ahead of the students, and that intellectual honesty and alcohol will be two issues the new President will have to deal with.

This brings us to the bricks, those weighty, rectangular solids, lined up and piled in long layers to form relentlessly rectangular buildings, which are the most salient feature of the Purdue landscape. They set an aesthetic and intellectual tone of the utilitarianism (of which we heard something last week), befitting a Land Grant university.

Every university, whatever its architecture, encourages and endures bluster, and President Daniels has already been subjected to and the subject of a great deal. (As far as I can tell, the man, who apparently writes his own speeches, letters, emails, and memos, seldom avails himself of the bluster, cliché, or administrative platitudes that pollute the air on every campus). Samuel Johnson, who thought language a gift from God which obligated one to use it carefully, condemned bluster as follows: "To bully; to puff; to swagger; to be tumultuous."

Here are a few sentences, puffed up and swaggering, and lacking in detachment and civility into the bargain. This was written and published by a former colleague of mine in the English Department, still there:

Daniels' secretive appointment is an abuse of power and the public trust. As importantly, his disparaging views of research scholars and social groups so important to Purdue will only alienate many of them.

People at Purdue and across Indiana committed to academic excellence, public integrity and social equality should demand that the Purdue Board of Trustees rethink their decision. The president of Purdue should reflect the broad, diverse and global nature of the university, not the political biases, entitlements and privileges of a narrow group.

I detect “bluster” in the words “secretive,” “abuse,” “alienation,” “demand,” and “privileges.” And I deplore the feeble modifiers “importantly” and “important” in the second sentence and the modish academic clichés “diverse” and “global” in the last one. I wouldn’t give it a C+.

Which brings us to the blunder. Sometime in his first term the then Governor was quoted in the *Star* as having replied to a critic “It was worse than a crime, it was a blunder.” I’m not sure what the blunder was—he made several, and Google, the retired academic’s due diligence, has let me down. Nonetheless, it is a rare public figure, elected or appointed, who has the background and discernment to quote Talleyrand, and to such good effect. Purdue is lucky to have someone so well read, well spoken, and witty.

I do not have time for my final quotation from Samuel Johnson, the writer who taught me to use all those polysyllables and periodic sentences you have just sat through. But the opportunity to quote this wise man to this distinguished audience was the only reason I accepted this daunting assignment, so Listen Up!. This is from *Rambler # 180, 7 December 1751*:

It is somewhere related by Le Clerc, that a wealthy trader of good understanding, having the common ambition to breed his son a scholar, carried him to an university, resolving to use his own judgment in the choice of a tutor. He had been taught, by whatever intelligence, the nearest way to the heart of an academic, and at his arrival entertained all who came about him with such profusion, that the professors were lured by the smell of his table from their books, and flocked round him with all the cringes of awkward complaisance. This eagerness answered the merchant’s purpose; he glutted them with delicacies, and softened them with caresses, till he prevailed upon one after another to open his bosom, and make a discovery of his competitions, jealousies, and resentments. Having thus learned each man’s character, partly from himself, and partly from his acquaintances, he resolved to find some other education for his son, and went away convinced, that a scholastic life has no other tendency than to vitiate the morals and contract the understanding.