

# Q Silberado

In a new book of John Silber's speeches, Tom Wolfe remembers the man who could not assent to what he knows is wrong

BRILLIANT, relentless, abrasive, a fervent intellectual known for his searing public candor and private gestures of charity, John Silber was a man who had a lot to say. Now, two and a half years after Silber's death at 86, a collection of his speeches and writings showcases what Tom Wolfe (Hon.'00) refers to in his foreword as his longtime friend's "IQ-onic intelligence." *Seeking the North Star* (David R. Godine, 2014) includes 27 entries, all selected by Silber, that span the period from his installation as Boston University president in 1971 to 2012. Silber retired as president emeritus in 2003.

Silber's ruminations on subjects from the threat to the humanities to multiculturalism to corporate responsibility reflect his prescience about shifting educational priorities and the "diminished identity" resulting from what he called, early in his BU tenure, the "age of bewilderment." Citing a remarkable, severely physically disabled BU professor who "was little more than pure spirit," Silber, who with a deformed right arm went forth in life without an ounce of self-pity, remarked in a Colorado College centennial speech that "The propensity to feel crushed or broken by trivial disappointment is to be expected from a generation whose priest and nanny is a television set."

Silber never passed up a chance at provocation, even at events as habitually tepid as the University's annual Baccalaureate, which he addressed in 1981. Drawing his theme from Psalm 137 ("By the Rivers of Babylon"), Silber asserted "the University has so thoroughly ac-

commodated itself to life in Babylon that it has now renamed it Jerusalem and does not even know it is captive." As the University's Commencement speaker in 1995, he once again issued an urgent call for morality and what he called "obedience to the unenforceable," citing the toll of "indecently premature and promiscuous exposure to sex" and the role of the entertainment industry in sowing insensitivity and hedonism among America's youth.

Abroad or close to home, Silber pulled no punches. At a 1995 conference in Hiroshima, Japan, titled *The Future of Hope*, Silber was the only speaker to dispense with polite euphemism and speak bluntly about the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings, which claimed at least 200,000 lives, and the Japanese carnage leading up to them. It's hard to imagine anyone other than Silber positioning himself at a former ground zero and addressing a peace conference with the words "If the consequences of using the atomic bomb were devastating, the consequences of not using it would have been still worse."

The collection concludes with Silber's thoughts on what he called "a growing recidivism" eroding our moral sense, in what was to be a speech at the Algonquin Club and the Boston Consular Corps. (Failing health prevented Silber from delivering it.) "Today," he wrote, "we need a war on greed more than a war on drugs or poverty. We do not need a new ideology; we need a return to common sense, responsible politics, and the search for truth."—SUSAN SELIGSON

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by Tom Wolfe

**I** PLEDGE YOU MY WORD, it came popping out of my mouth just like that, as if The Force had commandeered my voice box to make an announcement. This was the evening of October 16, 2008, nineteen days before the presidential election, Barack Obama vs. John McCain, a matter of minus-ten interest to me at that moment. I was here in Chicago for a Chicago Public Library book program...holding forth, as requested, upon a book about the original *Mercury* astronauts and their adventures half a century ago, *The Right Stuff*.

No sooner had I left the rostrum than an ace broadcaster for the online



*Illustration by ANTHONY RUSSO*

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**O**N THE ISSUES, Silber never gave an inch. He refused to avoid collisions. He made the shade of Epictetus gulp with admiration. From beginning to end, as the pressure mounted, he refused to assent to a single thing that struck him as false in light of his master plan for turning a moribund streetcar college into a major teaching and research institution in head-to-head competition with the two giants across the river, Harvard and MIT.

During that period, the 1970s, Silber was in the press continually...and came across as one hard case, unyielding when he wasn't in a straight-out *want-to-step-outside?* mode. At home and with friends, however, he was something else entirely, precisely the boy his parents had prescribed forty-five years earlier in San Antonio...a gentleman, courtly, congenial, the very picture of bonhomie...thoughtful of Kathryn and their children and generous to a fault....In the morning the hard case, preparing for his return to the war front, liked to turn on the radio as he shaved, and one of his little girls, Rachel, loved to watch him. One morning the popular song "Hot Diggity (Dog Ziggity Boom)" came on, and he swept her up into his arms—his one and a half arms—he knew how to use his right arm to do such things—lifted her up until her head was level with his, put her little right hand into his left hand, and waltzed her around and around with ballroom whirls, singing, "Hot diggity, dog ziggity." When his children were with him, he was theirs. Then...back to the wars.

*Huffington Post*, Greg Boose, appeared: "Do you think that either of these candidates in 2008 have 'the right stuff'?"

Without a moment of reflection, without even a *Well...* or an *Ummm...*...my voice box said, "I'm voting for John Silber, a write-in vote. He was president of Boston University—not College—and he almost won the governorship of Massachusetts in 1990. He's a Democrat, but no matter what, he's like Epictetus the Stoic. He cannot assent to what he knows is wrong. He cannot disagree with what he knows is right."

"Tom!"

I turn about and it's a man whose face I recognize...but I can't think of his name. So I adroitly come up with "Hey, Big Guy!" and we exchange pleasantries while mainly I'm wracking my brain to figure out who he is...Then I turn back to the broadcaster, Greg Boose—and he's not here. Where's he gone? *Bango*—it hits me. He must have thought I had room to let upstairs...telling him that in this election for president of the United States I'm going to write in by hand on a paper ballot the name of some loser who had last lost eighteen years ago...and how much this loser was like Epictetus the Stoic, some maxim-mouthing Greek slave-turned-philosopher in Rome at the time of Nero, the first century AD—out to lunch, playing with half a deck, falling out of my tree, slipping off the platter or not, I was factually correct. Throughout forty-five years of a very public life in politics and academia, Silber might as well have been a sworn and tattooed Stoic. He refused to compromise, temporize, flatter, double-talk, or bleach the facts in order to make things go smoothly. He didn't merely anger vast majorities of his own constituents from time to time—students, faculty, administrators, alumni, librarians, service workers, not to mention the Commonwealth of Massachusetts's electorate...no, he charged into them headfirst, like a bull....

**J**UST BEFORE another commencement—1976, five and a half years into his presidency—his battle with BU-and-beyond's fractious factions reached the live-or-die point. For five and a half stormy years, Silber had been protected by a single but impregnable force, the board of trustees. For five and a half years, the board's 100 percent support had kept him untouchable. But barely a month before the 1976 commencement that solid bloc began to fall apart. Three board members made it well known that they were going over to the other side to join the insurgents and call for his ouster. Silber's imminent defeat and departure were now the talk of the BU gripevine. Two weeks before commencement he had a touchy and possibly ugly confrontation coming up... an innovation of his own devising, the Senior Breakfast, a breakfast the president was to put on for the gradu-



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ating class, his last chance to speak to them privately before commencement, which was of course a ceremony-ridden and motley-crowded event. Of all the anti-Silber factions, the students themselves were the most volatile, unpredictable, short-fused, riot-ready cherry bombs on the campus. Silber wasn't afraid of having a head-butting contest with them. He would have happily head-butted it out with them or anybody else. Just name the game, and he'd play it—and he'd win it. But having an ugly scene with the seniors two weeks before commencement, on top of everything else, would be an unwinnable imbroglio. It would make it seem as if the whole University had erupted into Silber war and there would be only one quick cure for that.

**S** O HE THOUGHT HE'D take a different tack. The seniors gathered in the dining hall, and Silber made sure they had a nice warm breakfast before he rose to speak:

"It is my pleasure to welcome you to this Senior Breakfast of 1976, and to have this occasion to speak to you.

"Ordinarily we anticipate that only the graduating class will be leaving the University. This morning, however, there is some anticipation that we may all be leaving. Your parents will be very disappointed if you do not depart, and my mother will be very disappointed if I do. It may have surprised some of you that I have a mother. Those of you who majored in biology know that all mammals have mothers."

He said he wanted them, the seniors, to get to know him better, even though recently the press had made his life "something of an open book, and in that way I think you have come to know me perhaps in a reasonably satisfactory fashion. I am abrasive, acerbic, ambitious, angry, arrogant, and autocratic. And that is just the a's."

He had no idea why he was perceived that way, he said, until he was listening to the car radio one day and heard the country music star Mac Davis singing "a song that fit my situation perfectly and would give you some understanding of the problem that I face, and I hope, though I have no license to practice singing, that you will let me try."

With that, he broke into song with all the gusto and quite a few of the same notes as Mac Davis himself:

"Oh, Lord, it's hard to be humble,  
When you're perfect in every way.  
I can't wait to look in the mirror,  
'Cause I get better looking each day.  
To know me is to love me.  
I must be a hell of a man.  
Oh, Lord, it's hard to be humble.  
But I'm doin' the best that I can."

With that, Silber cracked laughter out of three quarters of the seniors and actual applause, serious hand-clapping, out of at least half. There's no saying how many hearts he



won, if any, but he sure softened up a lot of them.

When he then turned to "what is really on my mind this morning"—namely, those among them who were so obtuse they didn't realize that "real life" doesn't begin the day you leave college but the day you begin—they were like cattle. They didn't raise a peep. They just sat there staring at him and digesting their Senior Breakfasts and chewing their senior cuds.

By the time the board came to a vote, the rebellious Gang of Three were left out in the cold. For by then Silber had on his side the most powerful single ally a man could ask for at Boston University: the board's new chairman, Arthur G. B. Metcalf [SED'35, Hon.'74], a charismatic BU alumnus who had started off his career as an aeronautical engineer, inventor, and pilot. He had joined the BU faculty in 1935 for two years. That was all it took him to found two organizations, the Boston University College of Engineering...and the enormously profitable Electronics Corporation of America. He was a mega-millionaire when he became BU's chairman of the board and champion of John Silber in that crucial year, 1976. The board's vote backed Silber 100 percent—minus the Gang. Within the next five years the magnitude of his success began to be so overwhelming, not even his worst enemies could avoid seeing it.

His new faculty "stars" turned out to be precisely that, professors who stood out brilliantly in the firmament of academia. Two, Elie Wiesel [Hon.'74] and Derek Walcott [Hon.'93], won Nobel Prizes not long after he recruited them. Two others, Saul Bellow [Hon.'04] and the mathematician Sheldon Glashow, won Nobel Prizes and then joined Silber's faculty elite.

As chancellor of the endowment, Silber increased the University assets fivefold, tenfold, twentyfold, so gloriously manifold, people were astounded. In the four decades of the Silber era, the endowment rose from \$18.8 million to \$430 million. He had overseen the construction of 13 million square feet of university space, including the Arthur G. B. Metcalf Center for Science and Engineering, the Rafik B. Hariri Building for the School of Management, the BU Photonics Center, and the Tsai Performance Center. He had turned the streetcar college into an outstanding research university, one of the very best in the country. Recruiting was no longer a desperate matter. Faculty and students from all over the world now rushed to what awaited them where the Boston trolley line went around the bend near the Charles River...across the water from the competition, Harvard and MIT. ■