

4-1-2006

Living Monuments: The public service conundrum

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Recommended Citation

Spitler, Eric '81 (2006) "Living Monuments: The public service conundrum," *Furman Magazine*: Vol. 49 : Iss. 1 , Article 8.
Available at: <https://scholarexchange.furman.edu/furman-magazine/vol49/iss1/8>

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‘He held to the old guidelines, work hard, do your best, speak the truth, assume no airs, trust in God, have no fear.’

The public service conundrum

When Dr. Jay Walters, then chair of Furman’s political science department, suggested that I apply for the Truman Scholarship at the beginning of my sophomore year, there was none of the careful screening and preparation that Furman applicants undergo today. I viewed the application primarily as practice for my ultimate goal of winning a Rhodes Scholarship (which sadly was not to be).

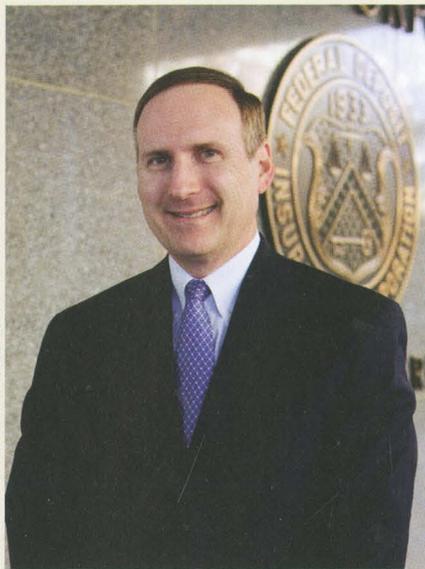
In my defense, the Truman program was in only its third year, and there were no prior Furman recipients to explain the significance of the award or the importance of the commitment I would enter into in the event that I was chosen. When I won the scholarship, I had not given much thought to how significant it would be for my future.

The Truman program was designed by Congress for students preparing for a “career in public service.” Those four little words require a major commitment if you win and accept the scholarship, but one that is not always easy to fulfill. Indeed, the definition of what constitutes a career in public service has been the subject of conversation at every Truman Scholar event I have attended.

I recall sitting at a dinner several years ago when one of my Truman colleagues pressed a dough-like substance into my hand. He identified it as raw Gore-Tex that his company manufactured into weatherproof apparel.

During his description of his company’s numerous military contracts, I recognized the classic signs of a Truman Scholar whose career had taken an unexpected turn but whose continuing appreciation for the goals of the scholarship required some rationalization. While some might not view the production of waterproof clothing for the Army as the kind of career in public service that was contemplated by the Truman Foundation, I had considerable sympathy for my colleague because most of our careers are at least partially the result of chance, timing and other factors we cannot entirely control.

For example, I graduated from the University of North Carolina law school during the Reagan administration, which, with its emphasis on reducing government, did not provide a particularly welcoming environment for aspiring public servants. One perhaps apocryphal story making the rounds at the time was that an administration budget analyst



COURTESY WILLIAM STEWART PHOTOGRAPHY

had recommended the elimination of funding for the Truman program because it served only as a “training ground for government bureaucrats.” With few public service employment prospects, I accepted a position with a law firm in Atlanta.

Like my Gore-Tex friend, I probably was on my way to a career in the private sector until a chance encounter at a Furman Homecoming event a year into my legal career put me on the path to a Congressional staff position in Washington — and ultimately to the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation. The decision to give up my legal career, while difficult at the time, proved to be one of the best decisions I ever made.

Working for a government agency with a storied past and a mission to maintain public confidence in the financial system while protecting individuals against financial ruin has been a fascinating and rewarding experience. To have the opportunity to sit at the nexus between the nation’s often competing financial and political power centers has been a dream job.

President Truman’s biographer, David McCullough, described him by saying, “He stood for common sense, common decency . . . He held to the old guidelines, work hard, do your best, speak the truth, assume no airs, trust in God, have no fear.” Having completed 20 years of federal employment, I have often observed how challenging it can be in government to serve with the same kind of common sense, plain speaking and clarity as President Truman.

Perhaps not every Truman Scholar has fulfilled his or her commitment in exactly the way that was originally contemplated. But if the Truman program has meant that even a few more of today’s public servants have been guided by President Truman’s example and encouraged by his success, the country has benefited far more from this living memorial to a great president than from one made of stone.

— Eric Spitler '81

A summa cum laude graduate of Furman in political science, the author is deputy director for legislative affairs for the FDIC.