

31st & Pearl

Are 'Excuses' Back in Fashion?

In this very space, and not more than eight months ago, a USMNEWS.net [columnist penned](#) a *31st & Pearl* column entitled "Is Saunders Paranoid?" In it, bits and pieces of USM president Martha Saunders' Fall 2011 Convocation speech were analyzed, particularly the statements about the perceived "undercurrent of doubt" that persisted on the USM campus vis-à-vis Saunders' ability to take the institution to the elusive next level. During that speech, Saunders vociferously defended her administration by calling out the doubters in the crowd and among the campus community, saying that doubters were *wrong and out of excuses*. The *31st & Pearl* column recounting this situation noted that Saunders appeared paranoid, a state that seemed to be getting more common leading up to her fifth year as general manager the institution.

Fast forward eight months to Friday, April 27, 2012, when the campus community was processing another Saunders speech – this one informing the news media that [she was resigning as president](#) of USM. Yes, the president who fiercely addressed who today's youth refer to as "haters" just eight months ago now says, [at least to](#) *The Clarion Ledger*, "I'm just tired. It's a tired that I've never felt before." What happened between early September of 2011 and late April of 2012? Let's see. The USM community discovered that the Saunders administration misspent more than \$400,000 in taxpayer funds. Then-USM provost Robert Lyman lost his administrative position over that one. Then-USM chief information officer Homer Coffman and then-USM contracts and procurement director Mike Herndon lost their *jobs* over it. That was followed by the mysterious resignation of Russ Willis, the USM vice president of administrative affairs. Willis had held the position for only about half a year. In moving to the USM Foundation, his salary fell from \$185,000 to \$85,000. I could go on.

Clearly the haters were right. Saunders' concern back in September 2011 made real the old comment about paranoia not being paranoia if they're really out to get you. That they did. Almost no one believes Saunders' story that her "resignation" was voluntary. Most understand that a firing occurred in late

April of 2012. Yet as former USM political science professor Joseph Parker [correctly stated](#) to *The Hattiesburg American*, Saunders created many of the problems that plagued her administration over the past five years and made her paranoid about her job performance and her legacy. The Tabletgate scandal to which I refer above is simply a case in point. Because of the situation USM now finds itself in, “excuses” of the type Saunders alluded to during her 2011 convocation speech are back in fashion. This is yet another burden she created, and one that others will be dealing with for years to come.

31st & Pearl is a series housed at usmnews.net that features commentary on aspects of life in the CoB, and at USM, from a variety of columnists.