

A Walk Through the History of Southern Miss

Part 9

usmnews.net continues a new series revisiting nationally embarrassing events in the history of Southern Miss. This morning we continue with "[Faulkner Scholar Lands on His Feet](#)" which stands as a reminder of a long history of "vindictive" and "pusillanimous" behavior directed at faculty who dare disagree.

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[Faulkner Scholar Lands on His Feet](#)

By PIPER FOGG

LETTER RIP: First, Noel Polk quit. Then, a few days later, he was fired.

It was a strange coda to the English professor's 27-year career at the University of Southern Mississippi. Mr. Polk, a 61-year-old native of Mississippi who is known for his scholarly work on William Faulkner, resigned at the end of August. It was a heart-wrenching decision, he says, but the acrimonious atmosphere at the university was such that it became "impossible for me to work there."

After turning in his resignation letter, Mr. Polk received a letter from Elliott A. Pood, dean of the College of Arts and Letters, informing him that he would be terminated for failing to file his employment contract. He then received a second letter from Mr. Pood, apologizing for the first letter. Mr. Polk responded with a letter of his own, calling the dean "vindictive" and "pusillanimous" for attempting to fire him over a minor clerical matter.

Mr. Pood could not be reached and a university spokeswoman declined to comment.

The professor has long been a harsh critic of the university's president, Shelby F. Thames. He is far from alone: Last March an overwhelming majority of faculty members voted no-confidence in the president after he moved to dismiss two tenured professors. Mr. Polk called the president "a clown" and said he should resign.

Shortly thereafter, Mr. Polk started looking for other jobs. After several months of negotiation, he accepted an offer from the English department at Mississippi State University, where he will continue to teach and will also edit the Mississippi Quarterly, a task he is looking forward to with "absolute joy."

■ Thomas Bartlett

A novel, *Choking Dead Chickens*, was is based in part on 25 years of experience as a professor at the University of Southern Mississippi. Noel Polk offered his take on an early version of *Choking Dead Chickens*:

“Marc, I retrieved your manuscript from the office about 2 today, brought it home and sat down to skim a few pages to see what was up. 3 hours later, I turned the last page. Damn, Marc, it's a fine piece of writing—sharp, funny, interesting, infuriating, extremely well-written and crafted—the best read I've had from a colleague in a long time. As fiction, it's the beginning of as sharp and clear a satire on university life as any I know; as non-fiction, it's devastating and entirely believable (I can only assume I would have heard if there had been a car bomb and arrests [i.e., DID I MISS THE CAR BOMB REPORT ON TV?], though I do remember the dog attack.

So, I enjoyed reading it a lot. Since there was no note attached to it, I'm not sure what exactly you wanted of me, other than to read it. Let me know. (I'm sending this on my aol account, as you can see, not the university email, which I usually use!) Cheers. Noel”

I didn't know Noel Polk except by reputation.

The novel was recently revised and will go on sale soon. If usmnews.net readers would like to review an advance copy, please send me an email (marcdepree@gmail.com).

Marc DePree