

Just Plane Ridiculous

by Duane Cobb

"Maybe if . . . they knew better than to blow millions of dollars on a pointless wall in front of campus . . . maybe if they don't own a jet, maybe then I would have an inkling of respect for the administrative bullshit that we call the leadership of USM." – USM student Floyd Maseda, [TSP interview](#), 31-August-2010

Many of the followers of the trials surrounding the recent round of budget cuts at USM are as sharp as tacks. The online readers of *The Hattiesburg American* are noticing that USM seems to be alone, at least among Mississippi's eight public universities, in *terminating* tenured and tenure-track faculty. A poster over at the *USM AAUP Message Board* is on point in suggesting that if Delta State University and Jackson State University can protect tenured and tenure-track folks while slashing their budgets, so could USM . . . if it wanted to do so. Finally, all of those in the crowd of followers pointing to USM president Martha Saunders' ill-advised decision to lease a Beechcraft King Air – in the midst of a financial crisis complete with a recession – couldn't be more astute. As the days turn into weeks with this latest scandal, more and more "good points" will be delivered by both the named and the anonymous.

Still, much of the current and past focus on the plane, or "the jet" as it's referred to by many, will remain. One can't help but focus on it given recent USMNEWS.net analyses indicating that the cost per round-trip flight on "Air Farce One" has exceeded \$19,000 over the first 17 months of what seems to be a never-ending lease. Looked at differently, the USMNEWS.net analyses also put the cost per round-trip passenger flown at over \$5,000. These numbers are astounding, and they don't even tell the whole story. As the new series adds, many of Saunders' flights have been to places like Jackson and West Point, and not the ones in New Hampshire and New York. These measly in-state trips don't last long enough to even open a pack of peanuts, much less eat them as an in-flight snack.

Now many are wondering if Saunders will survive this latest mishandling of the budget crisis. There is reason to entertain that notion, especially given the cloud created by the decision to lease the plane that is hanging over the Hattiesburg-based campus every day. However, though what is often

referred to as "planegate" might be enough to get the typical university president fired, it isn't likely to bring down the Saunders regime. Why? It will take an action by the Mississippi IHL – the state's higher education governing board – to deliver a termination notice to Saunders. That governing body both recommended and signed off on the lease agreement. So, firing Saunders at this point would mean having to answer questions about its complicity in "planegate." As a sidebar, it's interesting to think that if you visit the IHL's website to view recordings of past monthly board meetings, you'll likely find video of the meeting wherein the plane deal was approved. What you may see is a woman from the IHL staff reporting the details of the then-proposed plan, and saying something like – "Board staff recommends approval of this agenda item." That woman would likely be Linda McFall, a former central administrator at the University of Southern Mississippi.

The whole affair is one hot mess – a unified board governing eight different public institutions; former USM administrators in high-ranking positions on that board; board members, including the commissioner, and their spouses flying around the state in the USM airplane, both *with* and *without* the USM president; annual cash flows (supporting the plane) coming in at over twice the amount represented to USM faculty by Robert Lyman, the USM provost; payment of fees to have the whereabouts of the USM plane blocked from Internet tracking services. Of course, none of this is good for the institution or the state. It has almost gotten to the point where every day is a bad day at USM. You know you've reached a new low when your university's leaders mismanage things so badly that they validate a rival school's t-shirt slogan.