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REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Political Revenge in Texas

Lawmakers target a UT regent who asked uncomfortable questions.

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What do you do if you're hired to provide accountability at a public university and your effort lands you in the district attorney's office facing possible criminal charges? That's the fate of Wallace Hall, a regent at the University of Texas who asked uncomfortable questions about lawmakers getting special favors at the state-funded school and has become a political target.

On Monday a special committee of the state house will begin debating whether to recommend impeaching Mr. Hall as a UT regent for such grave misdeeds as asking the university to produce too many documents. Mr. Hall's real offense has been to expose a cozy and possibly corrupt relationship between politicians and the university.

The story started in 2011 shortly after Governor [Rick Perry](#) appointed Mr. Hall, a Dallas businessman, to the Board of Regents. At UT the regents are responsible for university governance and have a fiduciary duty to taxpayers. Mr. Hall was learning his responsibilities when he came across information showing that some professors received forgivable loans from a law school foundation fund not affiliated with the school.

The payments from the foundation struck Mr. Hall as problematic because they were off the books and created potential inequities in compensation not subject to transparency and oversight—issues that can quickly become fodder for lawsuits for, say, gender discrimination. But when he sought documents to investigate, he says he faced resistance from University President Bill Powers's staff.



University of Texas Austin campus. *Getty Images*

In October 2012, in pursuit of more information on the law school payments, Mr. Hall asked to see university documents that had already been produced in previous public information requests. Among the documents was correspondence between lawmakers and university admissions officials showing a pattern of preferential admissions treatment for friends and family of politicians in both parties.

Within weeks Mr. Hall became the target of a political campaign to impeach him as a regent. In June 2013 lawmakers directed a "transparency" committee to look into whether Mr. Hall had "abused" his authority.

The committee claimed that Mr. Hall had demanded 800,000 pages of documents and made 1,200 public information requests, a process that it said cost UT \$1 million.

Those numbers have been debunked. In a letter to the committee in February, UT Chancellor Francisco Cigarroa confirmed that Mr. Hall had made only five public information requests that totalled around 3,000 pages. His other information came from seeing documents that others had already requested.

The committee also claimed Mr. Hall illegally disclosed confidential student information in conversations with a lawyer. But this charge was contradicted by the university's own independent counsel, Philip Hilder, who wrote to lawmakers in January that Mr. Hall's possession of confidential student information "had a legitimate educational purpose" and that he could find "no credible evidence of a violation of [the law] or of any other state or federal law."

In April the legislative committee looking into the impeachment charges sent a report of possible criminal violations to Travis County prosecutors. That office is considering whether to proceed with the charges, but it's hard to imagine it will since so many have now been publicly discredited.

Governor Perry is supporting Mr. Hall and calls the impeachment "extraordinary political theater." Mr. Hall would be only the third public official impeached in Texas history. He could have made his life easier by walking away from this volunteer job, but doing so would be a victory for the political and academic elites who don't want public scrutiny of the UT system. We hope lawmakers walk away instead.

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