

REMEMBERING DAVID SAXON

President Emeritus Richard C. Atkinson
UCLA Royce Hall March 14, 2006

I am honored to join you in this celebration of David's life. It is especially appropriate that we are gathered in this magnificent building, which has become a symbol throughout the world of the beauty and dynamism of UCLA.

David Stephen Saxon was a remarkable man of many dimensions. I want to focus on two: David as president and as faculty member. I came to UC San Diego in 1980, one of seven chancellors David appointed during his tenure as president. And I was the last of his appointees to leave active service to the University. So today I am taking the liberty of speaking on behalf of all my fellow chancellors from the Saxon era.

The first thing David did after my appointment was to send Karl Pister (who was then the chair of the Statewide Academic Senate) to talk to me about shared governance. I think it was David's view that anyone who had spent so many years at Stanford could use a tutorial in how real faculty governance works. Karl and I had a great conversation (and I learned a lot). I am pleased to see Karl here today. David and Karl were close friends and shared a total commitment to the University of California.

My fellow chancellors and I met with the president once a month. Newcomers quickly learned there were two things David did not tolerate: foolish

remarks and fuzzy thinking. He valued precision and clarity. It was one of life's ironies that he served as president during a time that he himself described as, and I quote, "an era of pervasive uncertainty." It was the era of Proposition 13 and the tax revolt, and UC's budgets were hard hit.

Fortunately, David's experience at UCLA taught him what it takes to build and protect a great university. In fact he played a key role in UCLA's transition from a good to a world-class institution during his many years on this campus. As president of the UC System, he refused to accept the conventional wisdom—namely, that the 1980s would be a decade of decline for the University. He told The Regents of the University that he endorsed the sentiment (expressed by the famous philosopher, Pogo): "We are surrounded by insurmountable opportunities." It was wonderfully direct and optimistic statement.

David was not afraid to speak truth to power. Jerry Brown was governor of California, and there was a period in his governorship when he spent a great deal of time out of state pursuing his presidential ambitions. David once publicly lectured the governor for flitting around the country instead of staying home and tending to the state's business—including, of course, the University's business.

This incident did not prevent the two of them from having a very positive relationship. David once told me the following story. He and Shirley awoke one Sunday morning, looking forward to a quiet day. Then around eight o'clock the phone rang. It was the State police, calling to tell him that the governor was on

his way and wanted to drop by for a chat about the University. Before long, Governor Brown appeared, accompanied by Linda Ronstadt. They stayed for something like six hours. I told David that he showed remarkable forbearance—indeed more forbearance than I could have managed in the same circumstances.

David not only spoke truth to power; he spoke truth to the faculty, which can be much tougher. He liked to quote Robert Gordon Sproul's definition of the faculty: a collection of men and women who think otherwise. He was always attuned to the faculty, and he always listened. But ultimately he did what he had to do to preserve the best of the University's programs, whether or not everyone agreed. He was convinced this was the only way UC could control its destiny in hard times. Although he was identified with UCLA (because of his long history here) he cared about every UC campus and was scrupulously fair and even-handed. I found him to be realistic about people and pragmatic about problems. But he was always idealistic about the University and its great missions of teaching, research, and public service.

One of David's most impressive traits as president was the strong intellectual leadership he brought to the University. He took ideas seriously and expected others to do the same. He was a forceful and thoughtful spokesman on liberal education, on the importance of understanding science in our technological society, on the ideal of public service.

Based on long experience, David had a sophisticated knowledge of how research universities work. He knew there was a certain cogency to Clark

Kerr's concept of the multiversity—the idea that the modern university is a collection of loosely connected disciplinary communities, with no single animating principle to hold it together. But it was an idea that made David uneasy. He always emphasized the underlying unity of the university, the way it transcends social and cultural differences to bring us together in service to the life of the mind. The American research university, he once said, was today's secular equivalent of the soaring cathedrals of the Middle Ages. Both were imperfect but indispensable institutions. Both inspired a profound faith in the human potential. David's faith in the research university gave him the courageous resolve that was the hallmark of his presidency.

But of all the roles he played during his long career, the one he valued most was his role as a member of the faculty. Near the end of his tenure as president, he was asked what he thought about at three o'clock in the morning. "Not much," he replied with characteristic humor. And then he took the opportunity to talk about the kind of president he aspired to be. That was, and I quote, "a university president who is still a member of the faculty and is accepted as such, not as a foreigner but as a native of academe."

More than anyone I have ever known, David Saxon was a native of academe. I would even say that he was a great president precisely because he was a committed member of the faculty. He represented, quite simply, the best that academic life has to offer.

Let me conclude with a word about Shirley. If there is anything that could rival David's devotion to the University, it would be his devotion to Shirley. They had a wonderful life together, made even richer by the presence of their six daughters. I hope it comforts the entire Saxon family (as it comforts me) to remember David's remarkable presence in our lives. We will miss him, and so will the University of California.