Q&A with the author of
A History of Georgetown University

Q: How did this book project come about?
Curran: It goes back to the 1960s when Georgetown was preparing to celebrate the 175th anniversary of its founding. Then president Edward Bunn, SJ asked Father John Daley to write a history of the university for the occasion. Daley had already written a history of Georgetown’s “early years” (1780s-1820s), and agreed to add two more volumes that would bring the history up to the present. Unfortunately, shortly afterwards, Daley was named regional superior of the Maryland Province of the Society of Jesus. Father Joseph Durkin generously agreed to take up Daley’s work and complete a second volume for the 175th. The result was Georgetown University: The Middle Years, which traced the development of the university from the 1840s to the turn of the century, published in 1963.

He began work on the third volume, including taped interviews with various faculty and university officials. By the time I succeeded him in the History Department in 1972, however, he began urging me to do Georgetown’s twentieth century history as his interests had led him elsewhere. I myself had other projects afoot at the time; besides, I thought one ought not undertake a history of this sort without some official mandate. So I did nothing but to take into my possession the tapes Father Durkin had made. Then in 1982 Father Tim Healy approached me about doing a history for the bicentennial. Eventually I determined, for a number of reasons, that it should be one that was comprehensive: from the institution’s beginning to the end of its second century.

Q: How long did this project take?
Curran: Much longer than either Tim Healy or I thought when we first sat down in 1982 to talk about it. Now it’s hard to believe that nearly three decades have passed. I hope that is not a record for the writing of institutional histories. I think not, but that’s small comfort.

Q: How did you gather the information for this book?
Curran: Mostly working the traditional sources for historians: archives, diaries, newspapers, journals and magazines, secondary literature, interviews. A newer approach was the construction of computerized data banks for students and faculty that allowed me to build demographic profiles. Of course, thanks to the generous support of the university, I was able to have research assistants who did much, if not most of the work of compilation.

Q: What surprised you most in your research?
Curran: The diversity in Georgetown’s student population from its beginning and through most of the nineteenth century. From its founding, Georgetown was true to Carroll’s promise that it would be an institution open to students of “every religious profession.” Non-Catholics, for the 18th and most of the 19th century, were a strong minority at Georgetown; during the 1850s they were apparently an occasional majority. That diversity included Jews, Native Americans, even Asians. Georgetown students, from the 1790s on, came not only from across the nation but beyond. In its first decade nearly a fifth were international students. That was a surprise to me.
Q: What three decisions do you think had the largest impact on the university?

Curran: First would be the decision made by President Hunter Guthrie in 1949-51 to consolidate and integrate the various segments of the university, a process that his successor, Edward Bunn, finally managed to accomplish.

Second, would be the decision, in the early 1950s, to pursue in an organized way the federal funding that was becoming the major support of higher education in America. Over the next forty years the federal government became the chief benefactor of Georgetown.

Third, the hiring of John Thompson, which radically changed Georgetown’s image within the Washington community, and enabled the university to pursue an aggressive affirmative action program that was particularly successful at the student level.

Q: What is your favorite story of Georgetown that people might not have heard?

Curran: The manner by which Patrick Healy became president of Georgetown is a good story. In 1870 the Jesuits were struggling to come up with a suitable candidate for the presidency of Georgetown. After Rome rejected the first slate of candidates that the Jesuits in the United States sent them, Jesuit officials in the Maryland Province (then encompassing most of the Eastern United States) sent a new slate which listed Patrick Healy as the preferred candidate. “Clearly Healy is the best qualified,” the regional superior mentioned, “despite the difficulty that perhaps can be brought up about him.” That ambiguous reference concerned either Healy’s illegitimate background (as the son of parents [Irish planter and mixed-race slave] who, by Georgia law, could not marry), or his biracial identity itself.

Rome ended up choosing no one on the list, but reappointed John Early, who had earlier held the office. Healy’s “difficulty” apparently had eliminated him from consideration. When Early’s latest term in office was coming to an end in 1873, the regional superior proposed an interesting deal toward filling the presidency at Georgetown. He suggested to the superior general in Rome that John Bapst, then president of Boston College, be made president of Georgetown and Patrick Healy replace Bapst in Boston. That suggests that the “difficulty” had actually been Healy’s biracial background and so-called slave status. The regional superior was calculating that mixed race would not have the potential for problems in New England (where Patrick Healy’s two brothers had important positions among the clergy in the Archdiocese of Boston) that it might well pose in Washington.

Before Rome could respond, John Early died suddenly in May 1873. The regional superior immediately appointed Healy as acting rector and the following day the directors of the university chose him as president. Rome, obviously unhappy about developments, took more than a year to confirm his appointment as rector.

Q. Was there anything that you found particularly funny in Georgetown’s past?

Curran: One funny topic would have to be the cooption by the Jesuit Prefect of Discipline in the early 1950s of student vigilantism against the students of other colleges revolving around sports rivalries. The prefect formed what he called “The Palace Guard,” with himself as “the Minister of Defense.” The “Guard,” armed with bullhorns on nights preceding key football or basketball games, would hide in bushes around campus or drive off in cars to reconnoiter the surrounding area to intercept any caravan of raiders from other campuses.

In the fall of 1950 the “Guard” detected five students from the University of Maryland trying to penetrate the campus after midnight. The prefect called out two dormitories to seize the invaders and was preparing to have their heads shaved and branded with a “GU” when the dean of the college, Father Brian McGrath (not one to suffer fools gladly) was awakened by the noise and rushed down to put an end to the proceedings.

The prefect also, much to the dismay of the dean, took over the management of hazing on campus. Typically he would have sophomores rout out freshmen to do calisthenics on the athletic field or walk the diving board of the swimming pool, after which they would routinely be locked in
until morning. The dean finally prevailed when he had the prefect of discipline transferred to Philadelphia at the close of the 1950-51 academic year.

Q: What is your favorite Georgetown University anecdote?
Curran: I have a few but certainly one is the story of how Jules Davids, a revered professor of history for nearly forty years at Georgetown, became a coauthor of John Fitzgerald Kennedy’s *Profiles in Courage*. In 1954, Jacqueline Kennedy, as a special student, took an American history course that Davids was giving. One of his lectures was about the political courage that Andrew Johnson had shown in confronting Reconstruction. Mrs. Kennedy apparently discussed the lecture with her husband, for at the next class she asked if Professor Davids could supply for Senator Kennedy a list of those who qualified as examples of outstanding political courage.

Some time afterwards, Davids received a call from Kennedy’s assistant, Theodore Sorenson, who asked if he would look at a rough draft of “Profiles of Courage.” Davids provided a long critique of the draft and as a result Sorenson asked if he would care to write chapters about five individuals. Davids did the chapters; Sorenson apparently wrote the rest. Kennedy reworked the whole book and wrote, so Davids believed, the opening chapter about “Courage and Politics.” In any event, when *Profiles in Courage* was published in 1957, Kennedy alone was listed as the author.

In December of that year Drew Pearson of ABC charged that the book had actually been ghostwritten. Kennedy, who had already won a Pulitzer Prize for the work, felt he could not let the charge go unchallenged, not only for fear that the prize would be withdrawn but that the accusation could ruin his chances of running for president. Kennedy and Sorenson eventually persuaded ABC and Pearson that fundamentally the book was his. The still somewhat skeptical Pearson later wrote in his diary that Kennedy had admitted that Sorenson had done “an awful lot of work.” Lost in all of this was Davids, who received $700 from Kennedy for his work, plus a promise that the Senator was interested in doing a sequel on great duels in American history for which Davids would be a coauthor and share fully in the royalties. That project, alas, never even had a beginning.

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