

The Rise and Fall of Donald Kennedy

The qualities that made him a heroic figure in academia also brought his presidency to an early end

WHEN STANFORD PRESIDENT DONALD Kennedy resigned last week, felled by the indirect cost scandal that has ravaged Stanford for nearly a year, many scientists saw it as a loss not only for Stanford, but for U.S. academia. The charismatic Kennedy had spoken out on many issues facing universities, among them the prickly topic of research overhead. "It's a tragedy in the dramatic sense," says Stanford biology chairman Robert Simoni. "He was too outspoken an advocate for something that was extremely unpopular, and it got him into trouble."

Indeed, what Kennedy did was not merely unpopular, but unwise: He challenged a powerful congressman, Representative John Dingell (D-MI), over how deeply Stanford should dip into public funds, and he lost. To Kennedy it was a matter of principle: Universities have been promised "full-cost recovery" for government research expenses. Stanford followed that credo to the extreme (see *Science*, 15 February 1991, p. 734), and to Dingell and much of the press, it looked like self-interest run amok. But what made Kennedy stubbornly stand his ground? "You can call it a tragic flaw," says Stanford dean of earth sciences Gary Ernst—or just a habit of standing up for one's principles.

For better or worse, Kennedy has had this habit a long time. Never reluctant to speak his mind, he has crusaded tirelessly on behalf of such personal passions as public service and undergraduate education. His recent call for better undergraduate teaching at Stanford lost him favor among faculty who resented the implication that they had been neglecting their duties. But even critics credit him for improving Stanford's academic standing, especially in the humanities, and updating its research facilities. His superb fund-raising talents helped bring in \$1.1 billion during a recent centennial campaign.

Kennedy has used his persuasive manner to shape not only Stanford, but American academia. "I ask myself who has focused on broad policy issues and helped the rest of us achieve things for higher education, and Don is one of the three or four that come to mind," says Princeton University president Harold Shapiro. "He may be the best known university president in Washington," adds University of Washington president William

Gerberding. "He will be missed for that."

Kennedy became a national figure during his successful 2-year stint as commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration, where he weathered a storm over the agency's banning of saccharin and sparked rumors that he would someday return to Washington, perhaps as a senator from California. Instead, he will finish his career as a Stanford professor, developing programs in environmental policy.

Kennedy first arrived at Stanford in 1960, at the age of 29. A Harvard-trained neurophysiologist, he gave up tenure at Syracuse University to join Stanford's biology faculty as an assistant professor. He was hired for his teaching talent, recalls his biology colleague Charles Yanofsky, but he distinguished himself in research as well by pioneering the use of invertebrate animals to understand how the nervous system controls behavior. Using crayfish, he developed techniques that allowed him to map out the first neural circuit shown to be responsible for a specific behavior—work that got him elected to the National Academy of Sciences before he was 40. His success was not confined to research and teaching: Within 5 years of arriving at Stanford he had become department chairman.

From the start, Kennedy's passions were controversial and deeply felt. In the mid-'70s he was instrumental in founding the highly successful human biology program, the first of many multidisciplinary programs he would crusade for at Stanford. Now the second-largest major on campus, the program mixes sociology and policymaking with biology courses. It has been criticized by many biologists as watered-down science, a view Kennedy impatiently dismisses as "the oldest complaint in the world" about such programs. "His vision was that people working on biological problems...had to ask about the social implications of their [work]," says sociology professor Sanford Dornbusch. "Don honestly felt there was a clear shortage of good minds interested in policy," adds Yanofsky. In that regard, Kennedy practiced what he preached when he took the FDA job in 1977. "Scientists should come to regard

[service] as a routine part of their career patterns," he said at the time.

After becoming president in 1980, Kennedy pursued this theme by helping to found Campus Compact, a national organization that promotes volunteerism among college students, and by setting up a public service center at Stanford, in which 70% of undergraduates participate. But even these efforts, while praised by many faculty, have been roundly criticized by others. "He was doing things he had no business doing," says one professor who requested anonymity. "Our mission should be research and teaching. Things peripheral to that, regardless of how worthy, should be someone else's job."

Despite opposition to some of his views, Kennedy enjoyed general popularity at Stanford until the high overhead rate began to foment faculty unrest nearly 2 years ago



Salad days. Kennedy helped raise \$1.1 billion for Stanford's ambitious centennial campaign.

(see *Science*, 20 April 1990, p. 292). "His administration had a very ambitious, expansionist [agenda] that seemed to lack financial controls," says engineering professor William Spicer, a vocal critic.

Indeed, some say Kennedy's ambition was to make Stanford the best university in the world, in every area. He had the vision—all he seemed to need was money. His force of will may have put too much pressure on those under him to squeeze more money out of indirect costs. "He is a tough person to say no to," said a faculty member who asked not to be named. "You have to have a very strong character to say 'Don, you're all wet.'"

Few at Stanford believe Kennedy guilty of illegal activity; most fault him for bad judgment in clinging to the position that Stanford was right to collect every penny allowable. And Kennedy agrees that he "could have adopted a better strategy in Dingell's hearings."

But will Kennedy's fall make him change his outspoken ways? Unlikely. "The principle [of full cost recovery] is still perfectly robust," he says. "There is no reason in the world that I should be embarrassed into silence about it." ■ **MARCIA BARINAGA**