

JEAN MAYER:



HE FOUGHT THE NAZIS.
HE FOUGHT NIXON.
BUT WILL HE
WIN THE FIGHT
TO MAKE TUFTS WORK?

By John Sedgwick

Harry Zane, the public information director of Tufts University, is feeling a little queasy. The university's new president, Jean Mayer, is taking up residence on the Medford campus today, the first of July, 1976. Zane has arranged to give his new boss a reception in the faculty room at Ballow Hall. Although he carefully instructed the university chef in his

Photographs by Neal Menschel

In the summer of 1976, Tufts lacked a lot of things, but what it lacked most was money.

guest's nutritional background, how he campaigned against sugar and fat in the American diet, the man has gone and laid on the sweetest, most fattening array of goodies Zane has ever seen on a single table—baked Alaska, Bavarian cream, napoleons, tarts, the works. (The chef would later explain that he wanted to use up some leftovers.) Now it's too late to do anything about it; Mayer is expected at any moment.

Various members of the Tufts community have gathered to catch their first glimpse of the man who has just moved his gilded Louis XIV chairs, his father's sword from the Académie des Sciences, his Greek bust, and his volumes of Diderot and Voltaire into the colonial brick president's house on campus. Knowing Mayer only by his reputation as a nutritional adviser to Presidents, director of the Biafran relief campaign, officer of UNICEF and the World Health Organization, and as a fourteen-times decorated war hero, the assembled throng may have expected a handsome, gallant Frenchman, a post-middle-aged, lean-and-hungry Belmondo. If so, they must be disappointed to find this short, almost squat fellow with black Woody Allen-type glasses resting on a slightly flared nose. He is genial-looking, but not impressive.

Mayer, who never knows what to say to strangers, immediately searches out Zane to direct him to the food. Zane shows him, glumly. Mayer's face falls as he surveys the table. Zane asks if he can get him anything. "Yes," says Mayer. "A glass of water."

It is hardly an auspicious beginning.

John Sedgwick is a regular contributor to Boston Magazine.

The Howard Johnson's of higher education

"I'm precluded from running for President of the United States by a misinterpretation of the Constitution," Jean Mayer once proclaimed. "Which leaves me energy to do other things I want to do," he added cheerily. But what he wound up doing in Medford, where Tufts is situated, was a far cry from the exploits of Capitol Hill. Why, one wonders, would a man with a sense of entitlement so sure that he believed he might be President but for a fluke, a man who had achieved celebrity in a field not known for producing superstars—why would a man like Jean Mayer want to devote his energy to being president of a place like Tufts University? When Mayer came on the scene in the summer of '76, Tufts was practically unheard of. When it was thought of at all, it was considered a place to go if you couldn't get into Harvard. Harvard was Tufts's biggest problem—the university's admissions director has said that if he had one wish, he'd move Harvard to Baltimore. But in reality, Harvard wasn't even half the problem. Tufts was the place to go if you couldn't get into Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Brown, Penn, Dartmouth, Amherst, Williams, Wesleyan, Johns Hopkins, and several dozen other schools. It had to accept twelve thousand students to net its undergraduate population of four thousand. Perhaps the best indication of Tufts's standing was that the man who was probably its most famous living graduate, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who had earned no less than five degrees from Tufts, preferred to be known as a Harvard man, although he wasn't. He'd only taught there. Primarily a teaching college,



Tufts actually discouraged faculty research. The curriculum, consequently, was going stale. As one professor described it, Tufts was the Howard Johnson's of higher education.

In the summer of 1976, Tufts lacked a lot of things, but the thing it lacked most was money. Its \$29 million endowment was a small fraction of that of its competitors. The school's alumni were notoriously impecunious, and hopes of raising the endowment any higher were few. University fund-raising officials figured it would cost a million for every million and a half they got. Tufts's poverty showed. What would have been a single room at another school was a double or even a triple at Tufts. One student, whose

double "looked like a closet, only it had windows," had to put her desk out in the hall. The college was short on classroom space. Not only was the main library, built only a decade before, overcrowded, but it had sprung a \$2 million leak that there was no money to fix. Faculty salaries lagged behind those at comparable schools. And fires had ravaged the campus in the last five years, many of them set by Medford gangs. The latest, which gutted Barnum Museum, named after the showman P. T. Barnum, who was one of the school's original benefactors, claimed the hide of Tufts's mascot, Jumbo. All that was left of P. T.'s biggest elephant was one glass eye and a few blackened shreds of genitalia.

Mayer was formally inaugurated as Tufts's tenth president two years ago in September, before an adoring crowd of four thousand, including emissaries from Harvard, the White House, and Mayer's alma mater, the Sorbonne (this last decked out in a white bow tie, several medals, a sword, and a gold-brocaded coat). At the high point of the ceremony, Mayer, resplendent in a bright crimson Harvard academic gown, had himself presented with a magnificent sterling silver medal, nearly three inches across, hanging from a shiny silver chain, and embossed with the Tufts seal. It's a new tradition, Mayer explained. It wasn't until later that people found out how much more that silver medal portended.

Everyone expected the new president to hold Tufts steady, to continue strengthening the school for the upcoming lean years by working off its institutional fat. That's what the previous president, a professional economist, had done. In his zest for economizing, he had gone so far as to remove the lights from the office telephone buttons. That's what the trustees had wanted their first choice for the presidency, a Johns Hopkins provost who had turned down the offer, to do. And that's what everyone expected Jean Mayer to do.

They didn't know Jean Mayer.

"This may sound vain"

Mayer is just not the type to sit tight. In a chair he fidgets constantly. It's the same way with his life—always squirming to do more things better. His ambition compels

him to greatness whether he's fighting Nazism, as he did in the war, world hunger, or the poverty of a university.

In 1950, just after he had received his Ph.D. in physiology from Yale, Mayer made the biggest decision of his life. The University of Utah Medical School had offered him a position as assistant profes-

sor of anatomy at the same time that the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization asked him to come on as a nutrition officer in Washington. One option offered the West, with what Mayer calls "that wonderful don't-fence-me-in feeling," and a chance to continue his medical studies. The move would have continued the westward migration he had begun when he came to America, much to the consternation of his parents, as soon as he was decommissioned after

True, Jean Mayer is vain. But it's his vanity that made him regard what most people would consider a hopeless case—Tufts—as a challenge.

World War II. France had been too stuffy, and moreover, he had an American wife, the former Elizabeth Van Huisan. "I like the kind of human relations we have here in the United States," he says. "I like the space."

He saw the other choice as an opportunity to carry on the work of his father, André Mayer, who had helped found the Food and Agriculture Organization. After considerable indecision, Mayer went to work for the FAO. "I'm generally a quick man with write-offs," he says, "but I've mulled this over a long time. I still don't know if I made the right choice." Turning down Utah's medical school meant turning down an M.D., and Mayer still regrets not having become a doctor. (And one of his recent disappointments has been that none of his five children, all Harvard-educated, went into medicine.)

Mayer claims that he became a nutritionist "because I love to feed people." Yet it seems that what attracted him to the FAO job, finally, was a desire to be in the public spotlight, at center stage. In this he seems to be trying to keep up with his father. One of France's most distinguished scientists, André Mayer almost single-handedly kept France in the First World War after the Germans came out with poison gas, by inventing and mass-producing the gas mask. A portrait of his father working at his desk in military uni-

form, with a gas mask in the background, hangs over the desk in Mayer's own study.

"I delighted in feeling I was the student of André Mayer," Jean Mayer has written. As a boy, he often visited his father's laboratory. Under his father's influence, the young Mayer was a precocious stu-

dent, winning several academic prizes, earning two B.A.s and an M.A. by the age of nineteen, and being one of only twenty students admitted to the prestigious Ecole Normale Supérieure in his year.

Although he broke with his father by emigrating to the United States, he was, symbolically, very much part of the fold. Comparing his career to his father's, Mayer notes "a curious convergence." Indeed, André was a physiologist by profession. So was Jean. André did his major work in the etiology of hunger. So did Jean. André publicly decried chemical warfare. In a now-famous 1967 article, Jean was one of the first scientists to come out against the Army's herbicide campaign in Vietnam. André wrote popular articles on scientific subjects. So did Jean. André was involved in academic administration. So is Jean. André loved mountaineering. So does Jean.

In Mayer's eyes, his father was practically the greatest man who ever lived. And Mayer clearly believes that he is great too. He feels he deserves everyone's attention. How else to account for that grand inaugural ceremony in which he presented himself with a sterling silver medal three inches across? He mugs gleefully for photographers. He always has time for interviews, because it gives him a chance to talk about all his accomplishments. He ticks them off quickly—the White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, and Health, the foreign missions, the pioneering research in nutrition—trailing off finally with an "and so on" as if to imply that the list is endless and he doesn't want to bore you with it. He prefaces all his boasts with "this may sound vain." And it does. Mayer is vain. Quietly vain, charmingly vain, but vain. There's no getting around it.

When Mayer came to Tufts, he was afraid that the perfectionism so happily exercised in his research and his books—where he could control everything—would suffer. There's his vanity again. It's what kept him from going to Utah, in the final analysis. It's what made him regard what most people would consider a hopeless case—Tufts—as a challenge. Mayer won't let his university be anything less than perfect. It would hurt his pride.

Jean Mayer hit Tufts like a tornado. Be-

fore inauguration week was out, he announced plans to add a school of veterinary medicine to the university. The last time Tufts had added a school was in 1933; it had been dropping them ever since, until all that remained now were a medical and dental school, the post-

(Continued on page 151)



Unretouched before & after photos of Jamie Kane



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nant women, infants, and the elderly. He promised to take the first steps toward requiring comprehensive labeling on food packages, unit pricing in supermarkets, and new FDA checks on additives. Haldeman and Erlichman must have been surprised.

The experience impressed Mayer with just how much government could do. Subsequent visits to Congress to testify about various nutrition bills taught him the finer points of the legislative process, and brought him the friendship of such key senators as Kennedy, McGovern, Dole, and the late Hubert Humphrey. Consequently, when Tufts's new president needed money for his university, he knew just where to look.

Mayer also had the sense to know what to look for. He knew, for example, *not* to look for money for undergraduate programs. This was a real pity because despite Tufts's supposed emphasis on undergraduate education, the college was actually the university's weakest part. Mayer managed to prop up the undergraduate side somewhat by supporting it wherever possible with the stronger graduate schools. For instance, Mayer started an undergraduate major that made use of the Fletcher School, which, as students used to joke, was separated from the rest of the college by a "Chinese Wall." Now, the international relations major is the fourth most popular on campus. And, by the same token, Mayer is instigating a seven-year combined B.A./M.D. program with the medical school.

But to get funding, and facilities, for these programs, Mayer had to rely on his legislative savvy. Even though Congress frowns on federal funds for undergraduates, Mayer realized, by simply labeling undergraduate facilities as graduate facilities in a package that was too attractive for Congress to turn down, he could get his way. When Congress expressed interest in funding a graduate Intercultural Center, Mayer saw his chance. He sensed that the Fletcher School's long history in international affairs would well recommend Tufts for the money. The plans he submitted to the Congress called for seven 20- to 30-seat classrooms and a 350-seat auditorium with special features for staging musical concerts. Why? Not because the Intercultural Center concept required them, although that's what he told Congress. But because the college needed them. Sneaky. Mayer got his money.

Recognizing that to secure federal funds in the magnitude that Mayer had in mind would be a tricky business, Mayer retained the services of a legislative consulting firm. It was supposed to figure out which grants Tufts had a shot at and to help Tufts get them. This is called grantsmanship. While Tufts had never before even *thought* of applying for money, to say nothing of hiring D.C. consultants, Mayer has now secured, in a scant two

the hearts of other university presidents around Massachusetts either. MIT's Jerome Wiesner, UMass's former president Robert Wood, even Derek Bok of Harvard, were all known to be perturbed. They knew that, federal funds for education being limited, more money for Tufts meant less money for them. "They were a little bit miffed," Mayer admits.

It seems inevitable that Mayer should have run afoul of Silber, in particular. Both have relied on the power of their personalities to command the public's attention and win for their neglected universities a place in the sun. Yet two more different styles are hard to imagine. While the long, tall, one-armed Texan, Silber, regularly shoots his mouth off to get attention, the tubby little Frenchman, Mayer, has only to be his charming, amiable self—and the publicity pours in. Silber must find that exasperating.

For Mayer is not just president of Tufts. He is the world's most famous nutritionist, who now happens to be also president of Tufts. While Tufts is known only in the Northeast, Mayer is practically a household word across the nation—and around the world. He can't get on an airplane without being asked for his autograph. Just in the last few months he's been on "60 Minutes" and the "Today" show. The Boston newspapers write about him regularly. He's been profiled in *People* magazine (and photographed therein throwing a Frisbee). He continues to write his twice-weekly nutrition column, "Food for Thought," for 110 newspapers in the U.S. and abroad, although with increasing assistance from his co-columnist Johanna Dwyer. He gives several dozen speeches a year. He still holds three federal research grants in nutrition, and whenever he releases any findings, they command headlines across the country. Mayer is news.

Looking after tomorrow

"The man's an existential dervish," says John Roche, dean of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. And it's true; Jean Mayer cuts an immediately attention-getting figure, in Medford as in the country at large. Mayer's duck-footed gait is a familiar sight on campus, and his constant companion, a quasi-German shepherd named Dudley, has, despite occasional lapses of etiquette, almost replaced Jumbo in the affections of the Tufts community. (Mayer's other dog, which is about the size of a football, is equally famous, for its diet of raw carrots.)

Given Mayer's considerable extracurricular activities, it isn't surprising that he often works a sixteen-hour day. A typical one might begin with an eight o'clock meeting with his editorial assistant. Shortly after the hour, a slow, heavy tread can be heard on the stairway to the president's second-floor office. Halfway up there is a pause. Then the tread con-

tinues, slower and heavier than before. It is Mayer. His waistline, which is expanding at nearly the same rate as the university, has been a source of growing embarrassment to the man who has spent his life researching the causes and consequences of obesity. Now, presumably, he is learning firsthand, since he hasn't had a chance to get much exercise. Besides, he gets so bored at many of his presidential banquets that all he can do is eat. "It's hard to control your appetite at those functions," he says. He has changed since that first reception with Harry Zane.

His editorial assistant, Dorothy Campbell, a tall, slender woman with a perpetually cheery expression, arrives minutes later with explanations about a tardy bus. Mayer's secretary brings some coffee, some nondairy creamer ("nutritionally terrible," Mayer comments), and some napkins emblazoned with the Tufts seal.

Mayer's waistline, which is expanding nearly as fast as the university, is a source of embarrassment to the man who has spent his life researching the causes and consequences of obesity. He gets so bored at some official banquets that all he can do is eat.

Mayer and Campbell get down to work. She hands him his written testimony concerning the nutrition center, to be presented to the Senate Appropriations Committee the next day. (This is the final loose end to be tucked in before Congress will give Tufts the full \$22 million.) Mayer ruffles through the pages quickly, puffing out his cheeks. He wonders, idly, how much it costs the national economy for a worker to have a stroke. Campbell says she'll look into it. Mayer wants to reword the opening, so he sets to rewriting between the lines in a tiny hand, with flourishes on his *b*'s and *d*'s.

Campbell says that Senator Eagleton has written to say he wants to give a speech at Tufts. Mayer answers that he'll talk to him about it in Washington tomorrow. A Congressman Foley wants to make a food and nutrition policy statement at Tufts, too. "Let's do it," says Mayer. Then Mayer's thoughts turn to the White House. "I wish I had something on that commission I'm supposed to be vice-chairman of," he mutters, referring to Carter's Presidential Commission on World Hunger. He is worried that Carter is just using the Mayer name, and resolves to drop the White House a stern note on the subject. Someone else has written Mayer asking him to produce a paper on the social consequences of hunger. His time, however, is all booked

up. "Regretfully let that cup pass away from us," he says. The Department of Energy has called to ask where Mayer's testimony on the energy consumption of the fishing industry is. Mayer looks flustered. Why hasn't that been sent? (Later, when the Energy Department again calls him about it, Mayer assures them that the material is in the mail, which it isn't, then he rushes out to his three secretaries in the adjoining room to tell them that if they don't get the testimony out that day, they'll all be fired. He closes the door and comes back grinning. "That should shake them up," he says.)

Such high flying sometimes puts the existential dervish in a bind. For all his vision, Mayer is not much at administration. On his seven-page résumé, the only administrative experience he could claim was his year's stint as director of Harvard's Institute for Population Studies and four years' service as master of Harvard's Dudley House, a center for students living off campus. In his twenty-six years of teaching at the Harvard School of Public Health, he had done more educating than administrating.

His shortcomings in that department have showed at Tufts. As one university official put it, "Mayer looks after tomorrow; we look after today." Another is much blunter: "Mayer is the world's worst administrator." Dean Roche says he can be something of an "unguided missile." A sample conversation with the president, says Roche, might go like this: Mayer calls Roche about some brilliant idea.

Roche: Yeah, that's a great idea.

Mayer: Now, can we send Professor X to Madagascar?

Roche: I'm sorry, he's got two classes this week, he *can't* go to Madagascar.

Mayer: Oh yes, of course, right.

This inattention to details has caused one crisis already. Unknown to Mayer, a \$1.5 million grant was accepted in his name from the repressive Filipino president Ferdinand Marcos to endow a "Philippine-United States Friendship Chair." As part of the arrangement, Mayer was to commend the Filipino First Lady for her "deep humane concern." Eager for the money, without appreciating its full cost, Mayer went through with the deal.

It was a disaster. The *New York Times* editorialized against the grant. Protesters besieged the campus. Faculty members petitioned the president to withdraw it.

Mayer was aghast. His legal assistant, William Wells, remembers that in the course of a meeting to discuss the public reaction, Mayer pulled his knees up, covered his face with his hands, and shouted, "Aagh!"

Impossible dreams?

"Jean Mayer wants to make Tufts the best damn school in the country," says Fletcher dean John Roche. Then, as an



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afterthought: "In its league, of course. The small university league. Right up at the top." Mayer himself is not so prudent. And if he gets involved in dubious schemes like the Marcos endowment, it's only as a result of his zeal to lift the university "from excellence to greatness." (Others might say from mediocrity to something a little better, but never mind.)

Mayer has big plans for his university. He sees it as a regional leader, looking after the needs of the New England community. Nobody else is, he says. "Everybody's so busy working for Harvard, working for MIT, working for the Mass. General, that nobody looks at the picture of Boston or New England." The new vet school, says Mayer, is just the sort of thing Tufts should be starting. New England needs it, since Cornell and the University of Pennsylvania have the only vet schools nearby. By special arrangement with the six New England governors (the first time, Mayer notes proudly, such co-operation between the governors has been achieved), each state would pay nearly half of its students' \$13,500 tuition. In exchange, the vet school will cater to the veterinary needs of the region—to Vermont's cows and the coastal states' fish, for instance. And while, according to Mayer, most vet schools train students to do little besides look after dogs and cats, Mayer's school will be truly innovative, a school for the future, teaching such things as immunology, marine biology, aquaculture, and toxicology.

Mayer doesn't confine his do-goodism to academics. Since the university owns much of the land near its downtown campus off Washington Street, Mayer is contemplating ways to run the Combat Zone out of Boston. He is considering turning the unseemly Bradford Hotel into a center for the elderly. He has plans to convert the Wilbur Theatre, also Tufts-owned, into a showcase of classical theater for Boston schoolchildren.

But hold on. Tufts clean up the Combat Zone? Tufts is, after all, Tufts. Until Mayer posted little blue signs all around Cambridge and Somerville pointing the way there, most people didn't even know where the school was. Unlike Mayer, Tufts is unused to being the center of attention. It is small, low-key, folksy, and, of course, poor. It has little experience in community affairs. It can't get along with Medford. Tufts, for instance, has been unable to spend that lovely \$6 million federal grant for a new dorm because the Medford community is dead set against further Tufts encroachment into their territory. The whole matter is now tied up in three lawsuits it should take the courts at least a year to untangle. (Mayer awarded the Medford mayor a "Presidential Medal," a bronze version of his silver one, but it hasn't helped.) Now, if Tufts can't get along with Medford, how will it get along with New England? If Mayer knows, he isn't saying.

There are more immediate problems. Because of the declining birth rate, it has long been apparent that in the next two decades the number of potential college students will drop by as much as a third. That's bad news for all colleges, but particularly for Tufts, which has always had trouble attracting students. After a sharp rise the year Mayer came, which caused great excitement around campus, the percentage of students choosing to come to Tufts after they had been accepted is stuck at the gloomy old 38 percent figure.

Combine this fact with Mayer's new expansion and you see why Tufts's financial vice-president John Mitchell for one, finds the future "scary." He remembers the 1974 energy crisis when the school announced it would close for two months to conserve fuel. Word got out that Tufts was in financial trouble, although it wasn't, and applications plummeted 20 percent. What, he wonders, would happen if Tufts ever really was in financial trouble? Scary.

Gravy

Mayer is fond of saying that a university is like a turtle: it never gets anywhere unless it sticks its neck out. Mayer can't be shaken by any talk of doom. He's not that type. During World War II the French platoon the twenty-year-old Mayer commanded was captured by the Germans near Dunkirk. Most of his men were so shaken by the swift collapse of the French army that they resolved to wait for the inevitable Axis victory in prison. "There was a lot of inertia," Mayer recalls.

But Jean Mayer was not about to give in. After a night's rest in prison, Mayer led four men to freedom. "The guards asked me for my gun," he explains. "They never guessed I had two." Catching the guards unawares, Mayer shot one of them with the gun he had concealed in his pants while the soldiers rushed out. "One of our men was killed, at least I think he was," says Mayer. "I didn't stay long enough to find out." While the rest of the platoon languished in prison—as they would for the next five years, until the Armistice—Mayer sneaked through German lines and walked most of the way to Bordeaux, nearly five hundred miles away, to resume his fight against fascism.

The story shows the classic Mayer—ingenious, resourceful, determined, a loner to the end. To this day, he often recalls his war years, and he wears the tiny multicolored cloth band of the Légion d'Honneur, his most prestigious medal, almost every time he goes out. Of all his efforts, he is proudest of his war effort. It puts the rest of his life in perspective. Having fought the Big Battle, Mayer can view a struggle like the current one to raise Tufts University to "greatness" as practically a matter of details. As he says, "Everything else is gravy." □