

# The Lion in Winter // The cranky, irrepressible, pug-nacious John Silber still has a few things to get off his chest. // Interview by John Sedgwick // Photographs by John Goodman

**John Silber is retired now.** Finally. After 26 years running Boston University, and three attempts at handing the institution over to a successor—the second time, to former NASA administrator Daniel Goldin, so disastrous it was difficult to imagine a third. But one-time MIT provost Robert Brown is now in the president's office. And, at long last, John Silber is out. // At 79, in mourning for the death of his wife, Kathryn, in the spring, Silber would have reason to be down, too. By an act of the trustees, he was removed from the administration offices in the aftermath of the Goldin fiasco. But ensconced now in a spacious, if somewhat lonely, book-lined office overlooking the Charles River on Bay State Road, he seems as brisk and energetic as ever, with three book projects in various stages of completion all around him. He still leads with his jaw, the familiar belligerent tone softened only occasionally by a new note of wry bemusement. His thick hair is slightly graying, and there are just a few lines to a face—owlsh behind his oversize glasses—that still seems nearly impervious to strain. Fit and natty in a blue sweater vest, he's wearing a shirt tailored, as always, to expose his right "stub," as he calls it, which ends in a fleshy nub just below his right elbow owing to a congenital deformity. He often clasps it as he speaks. Silber develops a nosebleed just before the interview begins, and, unable to stanch the flow, stuffs a rolled-up Kleenex into his right nostril, giving him half of a walrus mustache for the entire encounter. He is, as ever, utterly unfazed.

**Settling Up //** At 79, retired now, John Silber talks about his missteps—and everyone else's.

**Let's start by taking you back to fall 2003, when former NASA administrator Daniel Goldin was paid \$1.8 million to walk away from the job of being your successor. There are many ways to look at that incident. But I wonder—did you have trouble letting go?** No, I didn't have trouble letting go. I had let go in 1996, when the board elected Jon Westling as president. The board elected Jon Westling with instructions that they wanted continuity in the direction in which the university was going. And Jon Westling, I think, did a very good job. I regret his dismissal—I don't know that it's a dismissal, or his resignation—because I think that any and all of the complaints I heard about him came under the heading of the trivial. He made some snappy reply to one trustee, and he failed to return telephone calls to a couple of other trustees, and some trustees thought he was a little late in selecting or coming up with proposals for commencement speakers. But those are matters that can be so easily corrected. But in any event, the idea that I was reluctant to let go had been more than aptly refuted by the fact that I let go.

**Right, but then continued on as chancellor. Westling, of course, was your provost. There was a kind of natural succession there, and by some accounts you had a heavy hand in selecting him.** Well, I think the board had a heavy hand in selecting him, because they saw what a brilliant job he had done as my successor. Remember, he had served as acting president on two occasions: one when I ran for president—I mean, not president...

**Governor?** One when I ran for governor, in 1990, and another time when I took a sabbatical. And both times, they appointed him as president, and the university functioned beautifully.

**But you returned as acting president when Westling resigned. Then you served on the search committee and wielded heavy influence on the board while it looked for your successor.** I don't think that's unusual at all. There are a lot of people who do. You think that Jack Welch, for example, didn't have any hand in who was his successor?

**But General Electric is a corporation.** Well, Boston University is a corporation, whether you like it or not. You see, I think that a person who's devoted his, say, 25 years to an institution and is indifferent to who's the successor must be mad. Now, if the trustees hadn't wanted me on that committee, I wouldn't have been on that committee. But that committee voted for Goldin, and let's make it clear: [Then president] Charles Vest of MIT was one of the strongest endorsers of Goldin. Goldin's name surfaced from Sam Ting, a Nobel Prize winner in physics, also from MIT. [Ting says he doesn't remember recommending Goldin.]

**And what about the King Lear aspects of this? This is an institution you built virtually from scratch. As you said, it would have been a strange person to just sit back and let that pass freely**

**from his hands, but I wonder whether you identify with Lear.** Why would I? Lear divested himself of his kingdom and wanted no influence on anything.

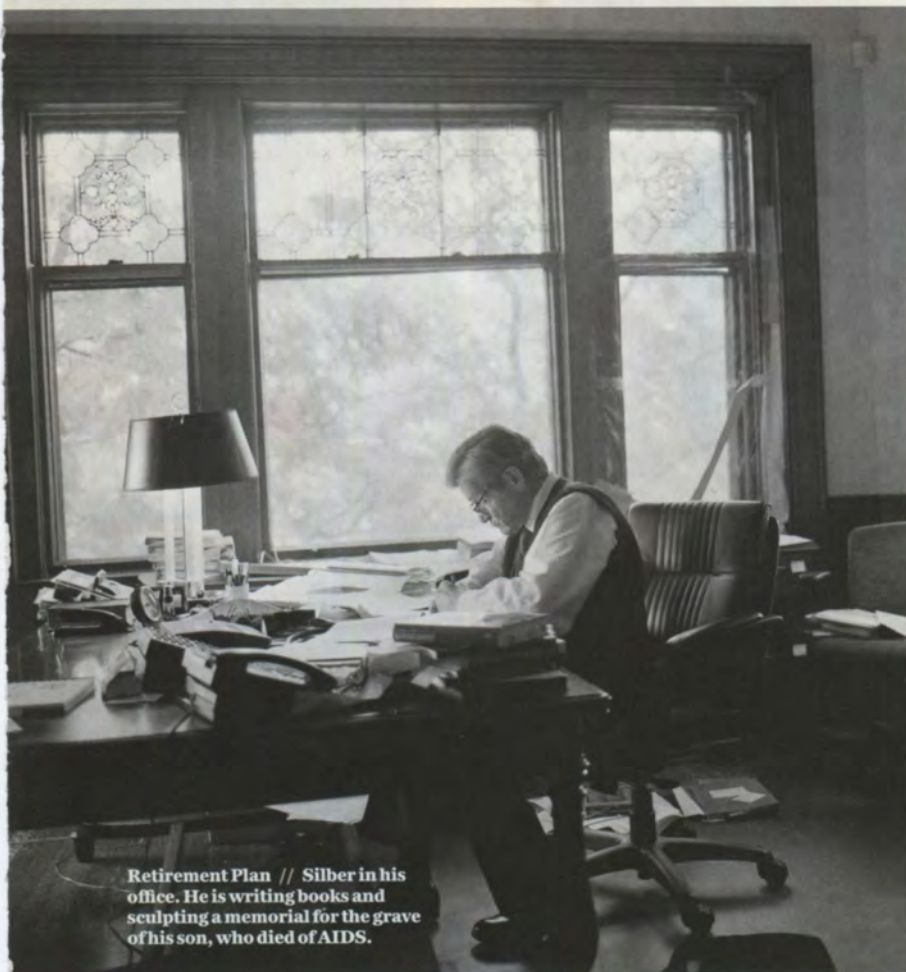
**And regretted it.** Yeah, but that's not my position. I did serve on the search committee. I did participate in the meetings of the board of trustees in which we discussed Goldin. And I certainly took a part in that decision. So, far from being like Lear, I was involved. But I was not the one who decided that Boston University should elect Goldin. I was *one* of those who did. And I will grant you this: Perhaps the relationship I've had with trustees for over 30 years is such that perhaps my opinion carried more weight than just a vote of one.

**But it's also true of Lear that he didn't know who to trust in the end, and placed his faith in the wrong people. Was that your case with Goldin?** I made a mistake in the assessment of Goldin, certainly. Everybody did. And I believe Charles Vest did, and I know damned well that Sam Ting did.

**What was the moment like for you when the offer to Goldin had to be rescinded and the payout had to be made?** Don't exaggerate the payout. He had planned a coronation that would have cost a great deal more than \$1.8 million. In the context of a budget of \$1.6 billion, \$1.8 million is not that significant.

**But the publicity fallout?** The fallout wasn't terrible at all. That has been manufactured by the press. There was no crisis; there was a blip.

**What had the university become by the end of your run? Was it, as you like to say, the third great university on the Charles?** Well, I think the idea that it's anything less than a world-class university shows just the kind of prejudice that Boston University has suffered under since I first indicated to the *Globe* editorial board, back in about 1971, that my ambition for the university was to make it an institution of excellence, on the grounds that I think a university that's not excellent is really not a university. And I was asked by [then *Globe* editor] Tom Winship, "Why would you want to imitate



Retirement Plan // Silberman in his office. He is writing books and sculpting a memorial for the grave of his son, who died of AIDS.

**If the fourth estate has its way, I'll be remembered as a social conservative who fired tenured professors and was heartless and all that nonsense. Do you care whether you're loved? Almost anybody who's not mentally ill would prefer to be loved than to be hated.**

Harvard?" And I said, "Who said anything about Harvard? I said I want Boston University to be a great university in terms of both teaching and research." And I said, "I don't think Harvard has got a good undergraduate educational program. They leave entirely too much teaching in the hands of teaching assistants." And I said, "If you think that I'm imitating Harvard because I want excellent research programs and excellent faculty, that overlooks the fact that that's a requirement of any great uni-

versity. It has nothing to do with Harvard."

I got a call after that meeting from one of the reporters who were there. And that reporter said to me, "You've ruined yourself with the *Globe*." And I said, "Why? I thought it went very well. You know, I thought it was a very cordial meeting." The reporter said, "No, it didn't go well at all. Winship was simply appalled, and he said the Taylors [then owners of the *Globe*] will certainly be appalled. Not that you were critical of Harvard, because they had their criticisms of Harvard, too, but that Harvard doesn't even exist in your thinking about the subject." And he said, "Well, that was a shock to them." And you could tell

that, from that time on. Prior to that, the *Globe* had been very kind to me and very favorable to me. They had published about two-thirds of my inaugural address, and everything changed after that. And this has been a constant drumbeat ever since.

**Calling BU the third great university on the Charles brings to mind the two others, doesn't it?** No, that doesn't follow. Just compare the research component at Boston University with the research component at Northeastern and at Boston College, and you'll find that they're not even in the same league. Here you have around \$400 million a year of grants and contract research at Boston University, which is a function of the quality of the faculty that drives that research. It was at \$12 million when I came here, and approximately \$2.5 million in overhead recovery. Now overhead recovery amounts to—let me give you the exact number—about \$124 million. Now, go check the budget of Boston College and see if they've got any numbers like that.

**So, in effect, it's a kind of profit center for you.** Well, you have a curl in your lip when you ask that question. And that continues the kind of bias that Boston University continually faces every time we deal with the press. And that is, you want to make something nasty out of something that at any other university you would regard as complimentary.

**But let me tell you why I say it. One of the things that is noticeable about BU is that it has a relatively low endowment. You've mentioned BC; it has half of BC's endowment.** No, it has more than half of BC's endowment. It's got about two-thirds of BC's endowment.

**Well...** But it's lower than BC. And one thing we don't have is, we don't have the kind of corporate leadership in Boston for Boston University that the Irish have at Boston College. There's no question about that. BC has a great board and a great chairman. If we had Jack Connors as the chairman of Boston University, it would be an entirely different thing. If we had Tom Flatley on our board—when you have people like Connors and Flatley on your board of trustees, there's where your fundraising leadership comes from. Boston University has had a difficulty in recruiting to [continued on page 154]





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[continued from page 139] our board of trustees the kinds of individuals who can not only give but get major gifts.

**And what about the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings, which place BU 60th right now, whereas Tufts is 27th and Boston College 40th.** Their rankings are based on utter ignorance. I have always hoped that there would be a lawsuit filed against *U.S. News & World Report*. I wouldn't care whether we won or not. But in preparation for the trial, we would depose all the college presidents and all the deans who replied to their questionnaire. And we would ask them, "Now, tell me, who's on the faculty in philosophy at Boston University? Who's on the faculty at Tufts? Who's on the faculty at Boston College? Who's on the faculty at Trinity University in San Antonio? Who's on the faculty at Northeastern?" And they would expose themselves as absolute ignoramuses.

Boston University has, as far as the press is concerned, been given the shaft over and over again. It's like the way in which I've been characterized, as some kind of social conservative. This comes from the laziness of reporters who don't bother to check what they've seen in print, or whether it's accurate or not.

For example, when I ran for governor, [*Globe* writer] Curtis Wilkie continually said, "Silber has no sense of humor." I would be up in the hustings, and an audience would start to laugh at something funny I had said. And I said, "What are you doing?" And they would look puzzled. And I would say, "Are you laughing?" And they'd say yes. And they'd start being confused again. And I said, "Well, stop it! Curtis Wilkie is in this audience, and Wilkie writes every day that I have no sense of humor. Now stop that!" And now they're laughing almost at a hysterical level. And then, after they calmed down, I said, "Curtis, what are you going to say tomorrow, that I still have no sense of humor?" Yep, that's exactly what he did. I've never had a sense of humor.

Now, this social conservative business—where do they get that? First of all, I can give you stuff that I've done. There's an article that I wrote on capital punishment when I became the chairman of the Texas Society to Abolish Capital Punishment.

**You're against it, I gather.** I was a founder of that organization. And in 1957, I was an untenured assistant professor at the University of Texas when I

intervened to challenge the chancellor of the university on the removal of a black woman, Barbara Smith, from a taxpayer-supported opera at the University of Texas. I came close to being fired for that. And I probably would have been fired, except at the next opportunity to fire me, when that contract was to come up, I had five articles published and had won a Fulbright, and it was more pressure than the chancellor was prepared to take. But it came close.

And I helped with integration. I wrote an article on breaking the cycle of poverty, and I sent it to [Texas] Senator [Ralph] Yarborough. Yarborough passed it on to [Sargent] Shriver, and Shriver asked me to come on the planning committee for Operation Head Start. Now, none of those things are, I would say, particularly what you'd expect of a social conservative, but they don't count around here.

**Perhaps it's because you've come across as tough. And, I might add, seemingly unfeeling. I think that's what gives you your reputation.** Well, you know, "seeming," you can do anything you want to with "seeming." Why is it that the childhood literacy program that was established by the legislature at \$2 million is named the John Silber Early Literacy Program? Because I'm so unfeeling? No, it's because I was the guy who was pushing to get that money passed. When [BU] took over [the public schools in] Chelsea, was that so unfeeling? We were asked to do so by the mayor and by the editor of the newspaper in Chelsea, because they were in such a desperate position. So we responded to that.

**So you're a social liberal, actually, all these years?** So far as I can tell. Except I don't buy a lot of crap. And if you don't become politically correct, then you're written off as some kind of a social conservative.

**You sound as if you're trying to defend your record. Are you afraid of being thought a conservative?** I'm not trying to defend my record, because I didn't ask for this interview. You asked me to have the interview.

**I know, and I'm grateful...** So, okay, I'm having the interview with you because you asked for it. Not because I feel that there's some terrible need to justify myself. I'm just fed up with the endless misinformation.

[continued on page 156]

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**(JOHN SILBER)**

*[continued from page 154]*

**But suddenly you've raised this topic of social conservatism.** When you're dealing with the press, and you have been mischaracterized by the press year after year, sometimes it seems that the press ought to be interested in the facts instead of in the lazy habit of simply repeating any falsehood that they can find in a previous issue of the newspaper.

**I'd guess that some of that reputation for conservatism also stems from your record here at the university, where you've upheld certain classical traditions. You have been very distrustful of the theorists, the Frankfurt School, things like that, which have a sharply left-wing tinge.** We've got plenty of left-wingers. We've had plenty of left-wing professors at Boston University. And contrary to the statement that has been repeated in the newspapers ad nauseam, I never fired a tenured professor. Not one.

**Well, you can't.** No, it's not because you can't. You can fire a professor for serious misconduct or incompetence. For example, when [BU history professor] Howard Zinn was passing the hat in his class to let people draw their grades, and he told them in advance that there were only A's and B's in the hat, that's grounds for firing somebody. [Zinn contests this version of events.] You could certainly fire a person for that and make it stick. I wasn't about to make a martyr out of Howard Zinn, and he taught here until he finally decided to resign.

**You come across as pugnacious. How do you characterize yourself?** It depends on the situation. I think that there are times in which I am in a situation that calls for being resolute. When there were students setting fire to buildings on the campus of Boston University, and when there were riots, and students preventing students from going into buildings, then I think being resolute was absolutely required.

**And what about BU now? How's it doing without you?** It's too early to say. I think the new president, Robert Brown, is off to a very smooth start. I have had one conversation with him, for about two and a half hours, back in August, and I haven't spoken to him since.

**He doesn't call? He doesn't write?** Well, I think he's been very, very busy.

**Do you miss the action?** I've got plenty of action. I've just finished a short book *[continued on page 162]*

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[continued from page 156] on architecture. There's a book on Kant that I had finished before I came here. But all my footnotes were burned up when our house was set on fire shortly after I came, in 1972.

**Set on fire by...?** I don't know. I don't know who set it on fire. I know that the student newspaper editorialized that, when I made some mention of what I'd lost, they said, well, since property is theft, whatever he's lost is something he's stolen, you know. This is that good Marxist crap.

**And you're doing sculpture?** Yes. I finished that bas-relief of Elie Wiesel. I really very much enjoy sculpture. The thing I like about art is it's the most nearly ecstatic thing that I can do. When I'm working on that, time passes and I'm just not aware of it at all.

**I understand you are sculpting a memorial for your son, David, who died in 1994.** That's the next project. It's for his gravestone.

**That must be a difficult subject. I don't think that too many people know he died of AIDS.** Well, they would be if they read the obituary and if they went to the memorial service, because there was no effort to hide that. I not only mentioned it, but I also commented on the young man who he was associated with. Who also died of AIDS about six months later.

**Were you accepting of David's homosexuality?** I've never failed to accept him. I was sorry that that happened to be the case, because I believe that homosexuals have a very hard time. And one of the last things that David said to me before he died was that he had two regrets. One was that he had no children. Well, being a homosexual is not the way to arrange that. And, two, he said he wished he'd been more careful. And that was very sad.

One newspaper claimed I had disowned my son. And I called for a retraction. I got no retraction. But David died in our home, and there was never a time when David and I ever had broken our relationship. That was just totally false.

**Looking back at your career, are there mistakes that you made that you regret?** Well, sure. Everybody does.

**Like what?** See, I'm not the pope. I'm not infallible. Even the pope doesn't say he's infallible on everything. He just says he's infallible when he's sitting in his chair [continued on page 166]

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[continued from page 162] to speak on faith and morals. And I think I've made relatively few mistakes when I'm just sitting here working on philosophy and speaking about faith and morals. I think that's a pretty safe area.

### But when you venture out of that?

Well, sure. I made mistakes in judgment about people. I think Goldin is an example of a mistake I made, and a damned good one. I don't buy that old-fashioned statement that if I'm going to make a mistake, I might as well make a good one. I'd rather not make the good one. But, sure, that was a mistake, and I've made plenty of other mistakes.

**When Harvard president Larry Summers started making waves, first by calling Cornel West on the carpet, and then by making comments about women in science, I couldn't help thinking that these were the sorts of things that John Silber might have said. Did you identify?** No. John Silber would have outlined what Cornel West's scholarly record really amounted to, and said, quite clearly, "I'm not impressed by it." And he would have looked at some of the publications made by Bill Gates—who's brilliant, by the way—of his lousy encyclopedia.

**Henry Louis Gates Jr., you mean, not Bill.** Yeah, Henry Louis Gates, sure. Yeah. He's not in Microsoft. No. But he's really brilliant. But he did a shoddy piece of work on that encyclopedia, and I would have reviewed just all the mistakes, obvious factual mistakes, errors that were made in that book and say, "I expect members of the Harvard faculty to do better than that." And there's no excuse for it, because I don't take the view that our black scholars should be held to a lower standard than our white scholars. I think scholarship is scholarship, truth is truth, and in the world of learning, ignorance is no excuse.

Having correctly reprimanded Cornel West on his rap career and the way in which he's left serious scholarship behind, I would never have apologized. And when West left Harvard, I would have said that it was an example of creative emigration. One person leaves, and he improves two institutions. He improved Harvard by leaving, and he improved Princeton, perhaps, by going there. And I'd let it go at that.

**Similarly, when Summers made his remarks about women and science, did he, in your mind, just**

**get himself into further trouble by apologizing?** There was nothing there to apologize for. He was raising the question: Do we have a taboo subject in the academy? I don't believe there is a subject that is taboo within a university. I think you have a right to investigate anything and find out what the truth is.

**Are people in authority running scared these days?** Many are. But ask why. They're not going to be shot at or put in prison. They're probably not going to be fined. They're not going to lose their jobs. Why does it take courage when there is no risk?

**How have you coped with your wife's death?** Well, I just think that's deeply personal. I don't mean to be rude, but I don't think that's anything that belongs in this interview. I cope. I wouldn't have done that piece that Joan Didion did in the *New York Times Magazine*, where she wallows in all the aspects of grief for her late husband, the writer John Gregory Dunne. I could recognize what she's going through very clearly from my own experience, but I regarded that as indecent exposure.

**I'm also curious about your handicap, that...** What handicap?

**Your right arm.** Oh, oh, that. Yeah. But see, the fact that you call it a handicap sort of begs the question, doesn't it? If you'd said, "How is that a handicap?" that would be different. Now, it is a handicap in certain things. It's very hard for me to climb a rope. I have to climb a rope with one hand, and I used to be able to climb a rope and lock it with my legs, and pull it again, and lock it with my legs, and pull it again. But I cannot shoot a bow and arrow. I couldn't figure it out when I was a little kid. I was about five years old, somebody gave me a little bow and arrow, and I would hold that arrow to my side and I'd pull the bow and let the arrow fly, and it would take the skin off my right side. And I'd say, "There's something wrong here."

But in my mind's eye, I thought I was perfectly symmetrical. And it always shocked me when I would see myself in the mirror with that one short arm.

**Armchair psychologists may attribute your pugnacious behavior to some sort of overcompensation for your arm. What do you say to them?** Well, the president of Northeastern, Richard Freeland, claimed in a book that the reason that I wore short sleeves was because I was [continued on page 168]



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## (JOHN SILBER)

[continued from page 166] trying to intimidate people with my short arm. He didn't bother to talk to me about it. If he had, I would have shown him that I have fingerprints all over the end of my stub. It's very sensitive, just as sensitive as a hand, and as a friend of mine said, "Silber can fix ladies' wristwatches with his stub." I use it all the time. I button my sleeves with it. I tie my shoes with it. And my mother saw how much I used it when I was a very small child, and she is the one who started cutting the sleeves off my coat, my shirts, my sweaters, and she would do all the adjustments herself, so that I could have access to use this stub. Freeland says I've worn it around here to try to intimidate somebody. It's just a vicious, mistaken fact.

**Let's talk politics. When you ran for governor in 1990—first against Frank Bellotti for the Democratic nomination, and then against Bill Weld in the general election—you ran as an outsider and you nearly won. The conventional wisdom is that you were done in by that infamous interview with Natalie Jacobson in which you seemed to lose your temper. Was that why you lost?** Well,

that interview certainly didn't do me any good. I thought it was dishonest on her part, because Jacobson went after my children very hard in about the first 20 minutes of that interview, and that made me angry and put me off. I challenged her to show the entire tape on television to let an audience judge it, but she obviously didn't do it. I didn't think it was a fair interview. On the other hand, I took the bait. When she asked me, "What are your faults?" I should have said, "Oh, Natalie, you know, old Abraham said that God told him he would have children like the stars of heaven. Well, I have faults like the stars of heaven, so you're going to have to review these things and see which of the faults are really serious, because I just don't know." That would have been fine. But I didn't play it that way. I played it straight, and was angry, and it was a mistake. And I suppose that probably cost me 50,000 votes. But I should have won by 250,000 votes.

I'll tell you why I lost. I made three mistakes. First mistake: Bob Squier handled my media, and he failed to put on the radio the 30-second tapes I had recorded in Spanish, Portuguese, and Italian. [continued on page 170]



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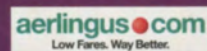
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### (JOHN SILBER)

[continued from page 168] I would have picked up more than 50,000 votes from those tapes. He didn't put them on because there's not much money to be made by radio. There's more to be made by television, and so he just ignored it.

Mistake number two: I told Squier that I did not want a negative campaign. I got home from Washington one night and I found that there was a negative ad out there suggesting that Bellotti is a crook. I told him to cancel that thing immediately. But how was I supposed to repair that with Bellotti? Bellotti never believed that I didn't have a hand in that. And that explains why Bellotti never supported me, why Bellotti turned his fundraiser over to Weld, and why he worked for Weld.

The third mistake was a real howler. After the primary was over, we had a unity breakfast. Bellotti was there, and other people were there—Flynn, Dukakis, DeNucci, all kinds of politicians. And here's old Silber, dumb as hell. I get up there and I say, "That primary victory was a great victory for the new Democratic Party." Well, who's standing behind me? It's the old Democratic Party. Now these guys think to themselves, "Well, that means we're out." I organized my Democratic opposition right there at that unity breakfast.

**There was talk you might have run for president if you'd become governor. Did that cross your mind?**

I don't think anybody runs for governor where that doesn't cross their minds. It certainly crossed Dukakis's mind, it's crossed Romney's mind—in fact Romney can't get that thought out of his mind. Sure, I think that crossed my mind.

**And when Scott Harshbarger, then the Democratic attorney general, went after you and the BU board, did you get the feeling that he was trying to undercut you?** Yes, he

was trying to keep me from running for governor in 1994, and he succeeded. He was dishonest and that's why he didn't get elected governor, because Citizens for Silber really did a job on him because of that job that he did on me. He quite clearly knew, when he accused me of having filed a false income-tax return, he knew within five days, when he went out to Andover to look at it, that my returns were perfectly in order.

**The latest Massachusetts politician to try to make the jump to the Oval Office was John Kerry. Why did**

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## (JOHN SILBER)

**he fail, do you think?** He was trying to make too many alliances with people who are appallingly offensive to the average Mr. and Mrs. America. When he had on the platform of the Democratic convention Al Sharpton and Michael Moore, he kissed goodbye maybe 20 percent of the electorate right there. Because who the hell wants a president who takes his advice from Al Sharpton or Michael Moore?

**And George W. Bush? A lot of people in academic circles think of him as the biggest idiot ever to sit in the big chair.** Well, it's interesting that this idiot managed to win the presidency, because it's pretty hard for idiots, by and large, to qualify. And his record at Yale compared quite favorably with Mr. Kerry's.

**You've expressed concern about the effect of all these mergers on the future of Boston. Gillette has been picked off by Procter & Gamble, Filene's is being gobbled up by Macy's, and even the Globe is now owned by the New York Times. Are we just going to be a franchise operation here?**

We're going to have to try to create some new leading-edge industries.

**Does BU have a role to play there?** No, but the Boston school system does. I volunteered to run the Boston schools on three occasions, between various superintendents, and I think Boston would have been very wise to hire me on that. We'd have gone through one hell of a revolution, but gotten the job done.

**Are you available now?** I'd have to have a contract in which they could not remove me for at least five years before I'd look at it. I wouldn't do it unless I could stay there long enough for people to say, "Well, looky there, you know, he's breaking eggs again."

**How do you expect to be remembered?** Well, if the members of the fourth estate have their way, I'll be remembered as a social conservative who fired tenured professors and was heartless and all that nonsense. That caricature will probably endure.

**Do you care whether you're loved?** Almost anybody who's not mentally ill would prefer to be loved than to be hated.

**And that would include you?** Absolutely. I'm about as neurotic as a Labrador retriever. **B**

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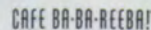
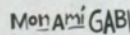
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