

Baylor's choice of Starr was a surprise to many: The former Whitewater special prosecutor

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The initial Baptist reaction to the choice of a controversial national political figure to serve as president of Baylor University has ranged from enthusiastic to skeptical.

The mid-February news that Kenneth Starr, 63, former Whitewater special prosecutor and current dean of Pepperdine University Law School, would head the world's largest Baptist educational institution took virtually all observers by surprise. Leaders officially connected to the school, its independent alumni association and the Baptist General Convention of Texas generally expressed support.

BGCT president David Lowrie acknowledged that when he first heard the news, "it caught me off guard." But after meeting Starr at a gathering of Texas Baptist leaders, Lowrie said, "He impressed me as a genuine Christian gentleman, a scholar, very articulate and very committed to applying Christian values to the challenges faced in Christian higher education."

Starr was raised in the Churches of Christ, the church of his pastor-father. While in Washington, Starr and his wife were active members of a nondenominational Bible church in Virginia and remained supporters of the church while he taught at Churches of Christ-linked Pepperdine in Malibu, California.

When his new appointment was announced February 15, Starr vowed to join a Baptist congregation before his Baylor presidency begins June 1.

Lowrie, pastor of First Baptist Church in Canyon, Texas, acknowledged Starr's religious background as a non-Baptist could mean he has "two strikes against him" in the eyes of some Baptists. "But I believe him to be a genuine follower of our Lord and Savior, and in regard to principles, he seems to espouse the Baptist beliefs we hold onto," Lowrie said.

At the same time, he acknowledged that Starr's role as the independent counsel whose investigation led to the impeachment of President Bill Clinton could be an obstacle to unity. Based on first impressions, Lowrie insisted that he was surprised by Starr's lack of overt political partisanship.

[From 1994 to 1999, Starr was independent counsel for five investigations, including the death of White House counsel Vince Foster, the Whitewater real-estate dealings of Bill and Hillary Clinton, and the president's affair with White House intern Monica Lewinsky. His report on the latter said Clinton lied about his affair in a sworn deposition. Clinton was acquitted on February 12, 1999, when the U.S. Senate failed to reach a two-thirds majority to convict Clinton on two charges.]

Lowrie noted Starr's personal involvement in ministries to the disadvantaged and his advocacy for death-row prisoners as evidence of principles that transcend politics. "He didn't strike me as wanting to position Baylor as a Republican school," he said.

The search committee shared with the media an endorsement by former president George H. W. Bush, who characterized Starr as "one of the very finest public servants with whom I had the privilege to work as president of the United States." Nadine Strossen, former president of the American Civil Liberties Union, described Starr

as “not only a zealous, brilliant advocate on the biggest issues of the day, but also someone who is deeply concerned about and kind to every individual he encounters.”

Baylor regent Duane Brooks, pastor of Tal lowood Baptist Church in Hous ton, praised Starr as “a brilliant thinker” who “listens carefully to others and deliberates before making decisions.” Brooks added: “Starr is Baptistic in his theology.”

But some Baylor supporters were more skeptical of Starr’s nonpartisanship, his commitment to Baptist principles and his ability to unite the school’s fractured constituency.

In recent years, Baylor alumni and friends have divided over several issues, such as the school’s direction under previous presidents, its embrace of standard science rather than creationism and its devotion to a strong view of church-state separation.

During the last two years of Robert Sloan’s ten-year presidency, the Baylor Faculty Senate twice gave him “no confidence” votes, and the board of regents voted three times on Sloan’s continuing employment. Sloan stepped down as president in 2005.

About nine months later, the board unanimously elected John Lilley as president. Lilley had earned two degrees from Baylor and had been a licensed Baptist minister. The board of regents fired him in July 2008, halfway through his contract, for failing to “bring the Baylor family together.”

Chris Seay, pastor of Ecclesia, a Bap tist church in Houston, posted an open letter to the regents voicing his concerns online shortly after the announcement of Starr’s appointment. He pointed to “in tense bickering, verbal assaults and en trenched separation” that have divided the Baylor community since the late 1990s.

“It seemed clear to all that the next president of our great university must be more Billy Graham than Karl Rove,” wrote Seay. “Instead of seeking a peacemaker, the board of regents has selected one of the most polarizing public figures in recent history, and in doing so, has injected partisan politics as one more reason to seek division rather than unity in the Baylor family.”

Matt Cook, pastor of Second Baptist Church in Little Rock, Arkansas, said in an open letter that while Starr might not be the hard-bitten conservative ideologue that his popular “caricature” would suggest, the onus is on him and Baylor regents to prove that is the case.

He said Starr should be transparent about his political intentions because this moment in Baylor’s history requires a president who will concentrate on “building consensus first and foremost.”

Cook advised that Starr be committed to having a diversity of political and theological viewpoints in Baylor’s leadership. He said that effort required more than inviting campus speakers representing a broad array of viewpoints—something Starr has been praised for doing at Pepperdine. —*Robert Marus, Ken Camp, Associated Baptist Press*