

I take particular pleasure in endorsing Brian Jordan, already a Truman Fellow, as a candidate for a Rhodes Scholarship. Brian is an extremely strong candidate in my view, stronger, in fact, I think in most ways than any candidate I have endorsed during my tenure in this office (since 1992). Brian is deeply and generally altruistic; he is a strong leader; during the last three semesters he has earned the best academic record I have seen for that period during my twenty-seven years as a college teacher and a dean.

I met Brian in the spring of 1996 when I interviewed him for a position in our Writing Workshop program, a peer-tutoring program I direct. This program is fueled by nominations from the faculty, over a hundred each year, and each year I interview the best of these nominees. The criteria I look for are a generosity of spirit, personality, and superb analytical skills. Brian impressed me in all three areas, but not, really at the same time. What I noticed first was an unusual gentleness, a quality so often needed in helping other students who are having academic troubles. He also seemed to be completely without egotism; it was clear to me from the beginning that he places values above personal rewards (even though in order to do this, he will, on occasions like this one, apply for a national fellowship).

These were my impressions before I examined his grades. Even then, before the results of the spring semester, I had to be impressed. After an anomalous stumble during his first year (a "B-" that pulled his grades all the way down to 3.59, an average many ambitious students would love to attain), he had compiled a superb series of "As, resulting in two consecutive semesters of 3.92. But that was only the beginning.

When I checked his record that fall I was still surprised to see that his grades for the spring were 4.17 (where 4.0 equals "A"). I remember congratulating him on this achievement, and warning him, half-jokingly, never to expect to achieve such an average again. I told him that chance was too much of a factor in these things. The next semester, however, fall of 1996, Brian again compiled a 4.17. In the spring of 1997 he again compiled a 4.17.

Before I tell you why I am emphasizing grades here, let me place Brian's grades in a clarifying context. First of all, standards remain high at this college, and grades of "A+" are a rarity in all departments and something of a curiosity in some. In the English Department for instance (my former academic abode) this grade is much more rare than it is in Math, for instance, where the grades are based on quantitative measurements. Therefore, averages like Brian's, although sometimes approached (but never, to my knowledge, equaled) by students in the sciences are much more rare among students majoring in humanities or social sciences. Brian majors in English and Political Science.

But, in the end, these are simply grades, indicators I sometimes explain in a letter like this but rarely discuss at such lengths. So why am I doing so here? The answer is, simply, that I have never seen a sustained performance like this. In all my experience, I have worked with Truman fellows (Maren Aukerman, Karin Vélez) and Rhodes and Marshall scholars (Brian Ackerley, Maura Tumulty), I have never never seen anything approaching Brian's achievement, and rarely anything even approaching it.

I know the college well, and thus I feel I am in a position to translate this phenomenon into a more general language. No student could have attained these grades through pure intelligence; nor could any have done so through pure industry. Not only must industry and talent be combined to achieve as Brian has, each must be spectacular.

Brian's commitment to public service is as clear and as demonstrable as any such commitment I have seen in my time as a dean. It is there in his résumé. It is there as I talk to him about his experiences as a tutor or as a coach or as a helper at the local Youth Center. It is there, in fact, in Brian's very gentleness of manner, in the understatement of his personality and its productive subordination to his eloquence and to his actions.

This "understatement" of ego is what brings me to this candidate's weaker aspects, namely his leadership and his ability to succeed in the kind of interview I know The Rhodes Foundation tends to run. Let me say here that he is weak in neither; but I do have some qualifications on his abilities in these areas and I should share these qualifications with you.

I do not see Brian as an inspirational leader. No Lombardi here, no Kennedy. He is not charismatic, nor does he have the glamour or the air that such leadership involves. Rather, he reminds me of a Jacob Javits, maybe a Mario Cuomo. He leads first of all through impeccable organization. He does his job (and this has been dramatically illustrated by the careful considerate ways in which he has prepared his Rhodes application) perfectly. Furthermore, he is a creative thinker, and the generation of productive ideas must be seen as an important form of leadership--if not the most important. (Wasn't Einstein a leader in this sense, or Newton, or Montequieu?) Finally, the authenticity and depth of his feelings, of his compassion, must shame the less sensitive into re-examining their own commitment to helping others. I think that my own contact with this young man has, already, reminded me of obligations I have neglected. Anyone who can lead a hardened old administrator like me can lead indeed.

The second weaker aspect of Brian might be his performance in an interview I hear is impressively challenging. I do not think that he will freeze or even that he will be nervous. He is modest, even a bit diffident, but he does not lack confidence. Rather, I think that the gentleness of his manner, his soft-spokenness could be confused with a lack of energy or a lack of drive. I do know students, with half Brian's intellect and commitment, who have better interviewing "skills". The energy and the drive are everywhere implicit in his record. I am hopeful that his style of interviewing will not obscure that fact.

Finally, let me range outside the bounds of my own knowledge of Brian Jordan to include the views of colleagues here. James MacGregor Burns, one of the most distinguished scholars ever to teach at Williams, has written to me about Brian and says: ". . . I was impressed with the way he planned and carried out the arrangement for her [Fox Piven, the speaker Brian brought to campus] visit here. He impressed me as a most mature, even sophisticated young man, with a good sense of values. In talking with him before and after the talk I was again impressed by his sensitivity to some of the major problems facing us in this country." Gary Jacobsohn, Professor of Political Science says, ". . . the sort of genuine enthusiasm and zest for learning he displayed in class suggest to me that he will do well wherever he ends up. I must say, too, that he is one of the few students I can remember who impressed me IN class as being a real *mensch*. That is to say, from all he did in class (mainly through his participation) he comes across as a genuinely decent fellow in addition, of course, to being very smart." Alex Willingham, Professor of Political Science adds: " I can say that he [Brian Jordan] shows a consistent interest in public policy issues and a genuine concern about the role of local government institutions.."

Since Brian Ackerly '97 won a Rhodes last year, I feel I have a recent basis for comparison in talking about Jordan. Ackerly is a wonderful man, highly varied in his talents. I feel, however, that of the two, Jordan is the stronger student. He also shows a stronger, dramatic, and venerable leaning towards public service. I have watched him play basketball (and his JV coach tells me he was a characteristically unselfish player) and would have to give the nod to Ackerly's tennis.

To me Jordan represents enormous talent tightly focused. Everywhere I look in his application I see the same message: a brilliant mind, a generous spirit, a disciplined and inexorable momentum towards the public good.

Sincerely,

