COMMENT

GUEST COLUMN

Forward Rebels, or a big step back?

We should all be grateful to Pete Boone, Dan Jones and Robert Khayat for creating a welcoming culture, inviting talent to Ole Miss and the state.

By Eric Thomas Weber
Special to Viewpoint

RECENTLY, "FORWARD Rebels" published full-page advertisements about the University of Mississippi's sports losses.

Strangely, its members call not for the removal of coaches, but for change in university administration. The group is not responding well to criticisms of its ads.

Chancellor Dan Jones has explained that their tactics are uncivil. They then published advertisements calling Jones uncivil in response, an "I know you are, but what am I?" that childishly confirms Jones' point.

The University of Mississippi is right to take the moral high ground, demanding civility in public discourse, but there is more to the story.

Our athletics division works hard to attract talent. The attitude that "we don't want you around anyhow," a message communicated in outdated symbols of division, leads talented athletes to wonder whether they should come to Ole Miss.

Fortunately, many symbols of unwelcome and division are not as prominent today as they have been, but this in turn upsets some longtime fans.

In 2003, athletics director Pete Boone and others decided it was time to retire the university's mascot, Colonel Reb. In 2009, the song "From Dixie with Love," a clever medley of "Dixie" and the "Battle Hymn of the Republic," was co-opted by people to spur a chant that yelled "The South will rise again!"

I discussed this matter with students from time to time over the course of a semester, explaining how this language makes people feel unwelcome.

The Ku Klux Klan often used the phrase as a tag line.

This meaning is not the students' intention, they explained. The words we choose often have connections we cannot avoid, they learned. The lesson sank in when 11 members of the klan came to campus to protest the chancellor's removal of the song from the band's song list in 2009.

Those students who enjoyed our academic debates on either side of the issue of the song suddenly stood united with hundreds of other students, and I joined them, as we read aloud our university creed in a protest rally critical of the klan's message. Our T-shirts read "Turn your back on hate. I believe in the UM creed."

With all this in the background plus some football game losses, the group Forward Rebels gathered support to criticize Boone and the chancellor, demanding Boone's removal.

I have not seen them ask for the removal of popular football coach Houston Nutt, even though salary was raised as an issue, and Nutt's pay is larger than Boone's and Jones's combined. Plus, Nutt actually coaches the team.

"It's going to get ugly" if Boone is not removed, critics have threatened the chancellor.

Surely advertisements are a form of speech and the group is entitled to make use of that channel. People are quite free to be rude, aggressive or vicious in public speech. That does not mean these are good things, however, nor that the university should bend to ugly threats.

Moments like these are great opportunities to demonstrate our values, but speech can be harmful. After all, the university does more than educate people. It conveys credibility and an identity upon students, which are under attack. On the job market, our graduates will be asked "What is going on with all this stuff in the paper?"

Time and again, I have been reassured that our university leaders are nobler and stronger than critics expect. Each student who graduates from the university will earn a degree made more valuable by Jones' integrity, and former chancellor Robert Khayat's before him.

In this regard, we should all be grateful to Boone, Jones and Khayat for creating a welcoming culture, inviting talent to the university and the state.

Those who yell "Boo!" at a young man in a bear outfit, our new mascot, will eventually feel ridiculous. Those who stir hatred and anger and relate it to football games, however, are more injurious, forgetting the value of having sports teams at a university.

That value comes through the unity we feel, both in wins and in losses, and in the public image we project to the world. Attacking these values, the ads Forward Rebels created are divisive, childish, and uncivil.

It is time we advance a culture of welcome to all those who might bring their talents to join us in Mississippi. The idea is already embedded in our culture, which often says "Welcome to Oxford! I'm glad you're here."

Those movements that fight against the warmth of Mississippi hospitality undercut the greatest charms that lead people to love this state and to come here.

Dr. Eric Thomas Weber is assistant professor of public policy leadership at the University of Mississippi. Here he is expressing only his own point of view.