2. The Brits are Coming

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Changing of the Guard
The Brits are Coming

On December 20, 1997, members of the Ohio State Board of Trustees gathered at the Bexley home of George Skestos. What better way to discreetly host their high-profile guest, Skestos had suggested, than with a luncheon prepared and served by his wife, Tina. Thus, the trustees welcomed a tall and gracious southerner whom some of them were meeting for the first time. They became acquainted over veal stew, the questions probing but friendly.

“I sat four seats to his left,” Michael Colley recounted later, “and asked about his commitment to Ohio State. As he answered, I could see all the heads nodding and observed that, ‘I think you’re hired.’” Later, when Development Vice President Jerry May took Kirwan on a tour of the campus, board members unanimously agreed that there was no need to talk again; he was their man.

Two weeks later, on January 5, 1998, it was announced that William English (“Brit”) Kirwan would become the twelfth president of The Ohio State University. The Search Committee’s bold strategy had worked. Ohio State had attracted one of America’s leading university presidents, a man who had transformed the University of Maryland–College Park into precisely the kind of institution they wanted Ohio State to become. “You’re lucky,” an administrator at Maryland said. “You’re going to love him.”

The trustees were particularly pleased because Kirwan was considered to be unobtainable. He had turned down the presidency of the University of Washington and twice had declined to compete for high-level positions in the University of California system. One was the chancellorship at Berkeley in which the other finalists were reported to have been Condoleezza Rice, then provost at Stanford and later national security advisor and U.S. secretary of state; Laura Tyson, an economics professor at Berkeley who later chaired the Council
of Economic Advisors; and Bob Berdahl, president of the University of Texas at Austin, who got the job. Word about the search had leaked, Kirwan says, and he inquired about his chances. When told he was among the top two, but was not necessarily the first choice, he withdrew.

Years before, while Kirwan was provost at College Park, Ohio State had approached him about becoming provost. He had dined in Washington with Ed Jennings and visited the campus, but was not ready to leave Maryland. Instead, Ohio State hired Myles Brand, who went on to become president of the University of Oregon and later the University of Indiana and the NCAA.

**Big Shoes to Fill**

Gordon Gee, the outgoing president at Ohio State, was considered a tough—some said impossible—act to follow. For seven and a half years, Gee had personified Ohio State in a larger-than-life way. Thus, the greater Columbus community was eager to meet its new leader. After all, next to the governor, the president of Ohio State may be Ohio’s leading citizen.

In late June 1997, Gee had accepted the presidency of Brown University, a much smaller institution but a member of the elite Ivy League. He would remain at Ohio State until mid-December and assume his new position on January 1, 1998. On September 5, the Board of Trustees named a search committee headed by Alex Shumate, a respected Columbus attorney and chair of the Board of Trustees. The search committee also included three other trustees, five faculty, one vice president, two students, two deans, one alumni representative and two nonteaching staff. Assisting the committee was William Funk from the search firm of Korn/Ferry.

The committee worked hard to develop the kind of presidential profile that Malcolm Baroway described in *The Gee Years* as “messianic.” Meanwhile, the search committee collected names and met with potential candidates in six cities during three days in November. Actual interviews were conducted in Columbus during the first half of December.

But other activity was taking place concurrently on an even less public track, with a process tailored to the needs of a reluctant candidate. Noting that few people were qualified to take on this complex job, Gee had offered a short list that included Kirwan, who, when approached by the search consultant, declined to participate.

“We consulted with many people regarding the nation’s top presidents,” said former board chair David Brennan. “Brit was on all the lists, with a
notation saying you would never get him. But he was the consensus best choice, so I said to Alex, ‘Let’s not fool around. [Let’s] go after him.’”

And go after him they did. On November 4, Shumate traveled to College Park on the ruse of talking to Kirwan about a Kellogg Commission report. He brought along Bernadine Healy, dean of the College of Medicine and Public Health, as well as Funk and board secretary Bill Napier. Healy made a big impression on Kirwan, who also made a big impression on her. After interviewing him, all she could say was “Wow!” She later described the process as “love at first sight.” Ten minutes into the meeting, Shumate changed the subject, popping the question that was on his delegation’s mind: Would Kirwan consider coming to Ohio State?

“I was so impressed by their audacity,” Kirwan remembers, “I couldn’t help but be flattered. And I was absolutely captivated by Alex, who was so eloquent about the Ohio State vision and its future.” He went home and told Patty, “You’re not gonna believe what those folks did.”

Kirwan agreed to meet again in mid-November in Crystal City, Virginia, at a dinner meeting in a room reserved under a false name. This time Shumate brought a larger contingent from the search committee that included trustees Ted Celeste, Jim Patterson, and Tami Longaberger. The search committee members liked what they saw, and Brit’s name kept topping their short list. However, since they didn’t know if Brit would accept, all the finalists received serious attention.

Shumate next informed Kirwan that he was their top candidate and invited him to Columbus. “I was so sure I wasn’t going to accept the job that Patty didn’t come—nor did she want to—but I felt that they had been so nice that I should go,” Kirwan recalls. That became the critical December 20 visit, with lunch at Skestos’s home.

“First, I went by the president’s house, where the search committee was gathered on the porch,” he continued. “Then I talked with Gordon. I did not realize that my lunch with the board was the interview. My head started to swim. Then Jerry May took me on a tour, and we hit it off immediately. I was so impressed with their aspirations, their huge capital campaign. I could feel the affection the community had. We went back to the house. George Skestos and Alex made an offer that got my attention, very generous by the standards of the time. Then they took me to meet Governor Voinovich.

“They could not have done the courtship better,” Kirwan added. “I flew out as a courtesy but got back on the plane thinking, ‘How am I going to explain this to Patty?’ I had not made up my mind, but my thinking had changed radically. Also, I was in my tenth year as president at Maryland . . . and could not
help wonder if it wasn’t time for someone else. I was very disappointed in the level of support the university was getting. Plus I was sixty years old, and this was energizing.”

The more Kirwan learned, the more energized he became. He liked the fact that Ohio State was a complete university with a single campus culture. In contrast, Maryland lacked medical and law schools, without which a research university was limited in the stature it could achieve, and as part of the University System of Maryland, it was not a freestanding institution. And then there was that matter of legislative support. “What concerns me about Maryland as a state,” he told the Baltimore Sun in words he would later repeat in Ohio, “is that there isn’t a spirit, a culture, a constituency that insists on a greater level of funding for higher education.” (At least partially in response to Kirwan’s departure, the legislature increased state support by 33 percent.) His meeting with Voinovich encouraged him to believe the grass might be greener in Ohio.

Patty facetiously suggested another reason for the move. “When people ask me why we’re leaving,” she joked, “I tell them that my husband wanted to go to a bowl game before he dies.”

In fact, the decision was wrenching. The Kirwans are a close family, and all their family and friends live in or around Maryland. The kids did not even go away to college, living at home while attending College Park. Every Sunday they gathered as a family for dinner. They had never been separated.

Daughter Ann Elizabeth by nature is curious and outspoken. She abhors stereotypes, especially about women’s issues and feminism. She has influenced her father on this topic and others, just as he has influenced her. A freshman at Maryland living at home and sharing a car with her father, she once filled up the Honda with gas and was charged $1.50 for what should have been an $11.50 purchase. She told her dad, who, concerned that the error might come out of the attendant’s paycheck, made her drive back to College Park that night and pay the additional $10.00.

“That changed me,” she said.

Son William E. Kirwan III considers himself a mixture of both parents. Bill spent many hours at home drawing, encouraged by his mother, who was herself artistic and had once aspired to become a fashion designer. Setting out to study engineering, he developed doubts that this field was for him. After many conversations, his father suggested he try architecture, where he later found his life’s work. “He can listen and analyze problems,” Bill says of his father. “He is very fair, presents both sides. He brings a clearness of mind to sort things out.” Today Bill and wife, Chris, are both architects.
On the plus side, the Kirwans’ home on Deep Creek Lake in western Maryland, designed by their architect son, was located midway between Maryland and Ohio. Living in a university-provided residence, Deep Creek was Patty’s hidden retreat, where she could do the cooking that she loved but seldom got to do and decorate the house as she wished. In contrast to the Williamsburg-like decor in the official residence, Deep Creek featured Shaker simplicity and overstuffed chairs looking out at lovely mountain and lake views. Another positive was that Patty’s mother, who was getting along in years, and a sister lived in relatively nearby Lexington, Kentucky.

Nonetheless, Patty did not want to move. Ann was not yet married, and Bill had just gotten married. One night in bed, Kirwan told Patty, “We really have to talk about this.” “Okay,” she replied, “but I’ll only go if they pay me,” figuring that would make it go away. “There was no pay at Maryland,” she explained. “I could not even use Brit’s car. I would have to give up seventeen years’ seniority
in the public school system to go there [Columbus], and my role would constitute a full-time job. That’s why I said what I said to Brit. Brit told Alex, who immediately said that would be no problem. They called my bluff!

And as it turned out, Patty enjoyed Columbus and her full plate of activities. She tutored staff members working on their GED as part of an adult education program. She hosted teas at the residence at which fifth graders practiced their manners. She pursued her interest in the arts, joining boards for Opera Columbus and BalletMet. She tutored in the public schools and participated in the Ohio Hunger Task Force, the “I Know I Can” program, and the Critical Difference for Women program. Patty was an honorary board member of the Seal of Ohio Girl Scout Council and, as a breast cancer survivor, she enthusiastically supported programs to find cures for that disease.

“The people of Columbus are warm and gracious,” she says. “There’s a love affair the community has with the university, almost a reverence.”
An animal lover—she still has a dog named Carmen Ohio—Patty developed a great fondness for the chimpanzees with which psychology professor Sally Boysen worked at the OSU Chimpanzee Center. Among those who eased Patty’s entry into town was Deborah Eschenbacher, who in August 1998 took her on a women’s donor tour that incorporated the veterinary school. There Patty met Sally, falling in love with her and the chimps.

“Had that been available when I was in college, I probably would have majored in it,” Patty Kirwan says today. She often took visitors to see the chimps and helped raise money for Sally, who named one chimp Harper, Patty’s maiden name.

Throughout the search, Kirwan remained under the media radar. Had the offer leaked earlier, he says, the pressure at Maryland might have kept him from leaving. Negotiations continued through the Christmas holidays and were sealed during Sugar Bowl week.

“Alex called me every day from New Orleans,” Kirwan recalls. Then on Saturday, January 3, a story by editor Mike Curtin appeared in *The Columbus Dispatch* that for the first time named Kirwan as the leading candidate to replace Gordon Gee. “That night I attended a basketball game with Duke at Cole Field House,” he remembers. “It was a strange feeling. Governor [Parris N.] Glendening asked me at halftime, ‘What can we do?’ ‘Nothing,’ I said. ‘It’s too late. I’ve decided.’”

On Sunday, Maryland officials confirmed that Kirwan was leaving, and the deal was announced on Monday. Kirwan would earn an annual base salary of $275,000, well above his $217,000 salary at Maryland and larger than Gee’s salary of $231,000. He deferred increases of $16,000 in 1999, $11,640 in 2000, and $396 in 2001, and his actual salary when he left in 2002 totaled just over $303,000. He also served on paying corporate boards such as Wendy’s and Les Wexner’s Intimate Brands. Patty would receive an annual honorarium of $25,000, paid from unrestricted gift funds.

The Kirwans’ Monday began with a press conference in College Park. Later, the couple flew to Columbus, where at 5:30 PM the Board of Trustees elected him president. At 7 PM, Shumate publicly introduced the Kirwans at a reception at the Fawcett Center for Tomorrow. “Once or twice every century,” Kirwan said, “a university has an opportunity to move to a higher level of excellence. I believe, because of the base of strength here at this university, the excellence of the people, and the commitment of the community, this is such a time at Ohio State.”

At the reception, Kirwan ran across Athletic Director Andy Geiger, who had left Maryland for Ohio State in 1994. After feigning mutual disbelief, the two embraced. “I am the person that ripped him away from Stanford,” Kirwan told...
the audience. “Then I held onto his leg as Ohio State took him away.” They were together again, this time with the nation’s largest intercollegiate athletic operation. Interviewed incessantly because of his Kirwan ties, Geiger predicted that Kirwan would want to be known as an academic leader and would “want us to win with values.”

“This is the most enthusiastic presentation of a public figure I have seen in years,” TV 10’s Penny Moore told her viewers. “One can only wonder how long the honeymoon can last.”

“We have created a vision and a strategy for Ohio State—a vision of what a complex public university can be, and of how it can contribute to the larger community,” Shumate said. “Dr. William Kirwan is the individual who can take us to the next level.”

A Presidential Couple

Who was this man in whom a unanimous search committee and Board of Trustees had entrusted the university’s future? Born in Lexington, Kentucky,
Kirwan was the son of a football coach and history teacher who briefly served as president of the University of Kentucky, where two high-rise residence halls are known as Kirwan Towers. Calling UK his “playground,” Kirwan accompanied his father to football practice and donned his own miniature Wildcat uniform. He played football and basketball and ran track in high school, then attended the university on a football scholarship as a tight end. Years later, his children would also attend a university where their own father was a major presence.

In his seventh-grade homeroom, Brit sat behind Patricia Harper, learning to admire her independence and later noting that “[s]he didn’t necessarily go with the flow. She did things her way.” When the class embarked on its senior trip to Washington, DC, Brit arranged to sit with her on the bus. Later, Patty also enrolled in the University of Kentucky, where she majored in nutrition. Her grandfather was a doctor whom Patty and Brit adored, and she hoped that her husband would be a doctor also. In fact, Brit was a pre-med student until he faced organic chemistry. “I realized,” he said later, “that as a doctor, I would make a great mathematician.”

And a mathematician he became, as well as Patty’s husband, the couple marrying after their graduation in 1960. At the time, the United States and
Soviet Union were competing in a race for space, and Kirwan landed a National Defense Education Act fellowship. He enrolled at Rutgers, where he earned master’s and Ph.D. degrees in math, and in 1964 was hired by the University of Maryland as an assistant professor. The Math Department was good then; it later became one of the top ten among public universities and in the top twenty overall. He excelled as a teacher and researcher and in 1977 was named chair of the Math Department, an appointment he saw as a temporary detour from his academic duties and which his faculty colleagues jokingly called his “fall from grace.”

“I never dreamed I was embarked on a permanent career change,” he says of that move. Daughter Ann believes that he would have been perfectly content as a faculty member, interacting with students, but had been “propelled onward.” He went on to become vice president of Academic Affairs and provost, acting president, and president of the university. In total, he spent thirty-four years at College Park, one of the thirteen institutions that comprise the University System of Maryland.

While Brit was at Rutgers, Patty worked in the Chemistry Department at nearby Douglas College before taking a teaching position in the New Brunswick Public Schools. Following the birth of their children, she volunteered until the children were in school, then returned to education as a teaching assistant in the public schools, working with learning-disabled middle school students.

A Passion for Excellence

In nine years as president of the University of Maryland–College Park, Kirwan compiled a noteworthy record. Support from research grants increased two and a half times, while the number of faculty elected to the prestigious National Academies of Science and Engineering and the Institute of Medicine rose from one to fifteen. The number of departments the National Research Council considered “distinguished and strong” went from six to sixteen. While in 1993 U.S. News & World Report found no Maryland departments worth including in its top twenty-five, five years later it found forty-five.

Further, freshman SAT scores at College Park increased 200 points to 1,200. Kirwan also strengthened undergraduate honors programs and created additional related programs, and by 1998, approximately four in ten incoming freshmen were admitted to one of these selective endeavors.
Kirwan also became widely known for his commitment to diversity and his effectiveness in raising minority participation, and under his presidency Maryland became a national model. Minority faculty increased from 10 to 15 percent of total faculty, minority students rose from 19 to 29 percent of the overall student body, and degrees awarded to minority students went from 15 to 28 percent of all degrees. “More blacks graduated from College Park under Kirwan than from any other university, not including historically black colleges,” the Washington Post wrote when he left. And while the U.S. Supreme Court invalidated Maryland’s minority scholarship program, Kirwan’s impassioned advocacy of the initiative gained him loyalty and support from the minority community.

In addition, Kirwan expanded the land-grant agenda to make it relevant for the twenty-first century, while Maryland’s endowment rose from $23 to $208 million and its private gifts increased from $14 to $88 million. He also launched a $350 million Campaign for Maryland, which was more than halfway complete when he left.

“It is absolutely the case that when the history of the University of Maryland is written, his name will be written in capital letters,” said Dan Fallon, one of Kirwan’s provosts.

Kirwan’s energy and passion were widely recognized and applauded, and one example became legendary. Winning a nationwide competition, Kirwan had lured the prestigious American Center for Physics to College Park—or he thought he had, until the local city council threatened to quash the coup in a midnight vote. Kirwan, who had been watching the proceedings on cable television in his pajamas, soon appeared in the hearing room, still dressing himself as he arrived. His plea electrified the audience, and the center was saved.

When Kirwan elected to leave Maryland after thirty-four years, the reaction on campus was one of shock and sadness. Praise for his work at Maryland was widespread. National education leaders also chimed in. “He is passionately committed. He really cares about the academic enterprise. He believes in it, he values it, and he demonstrates it,” said Peter Magrath, president of the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges.

“We got the guy nobody could get,” Shumate said later. “He had a proven track record and the perfect personality. He was the right person to follow Gordon Gee.” “I didn’t think we would ever find anyone to succeed Gordon,” adds trustee George Skestos. “It was perfect timing because he was just perfectly right for Ohio State at the time. They’re entirely different. Gordon is more a man of ideas, ‘We’re going to do this and that,’ and Brit makes it happen. It was the kind of continuity we were seeking but never expected.”
Karen Hendricks, who joined the Board of Trustees after Kirwan became president, also views Kirwan as a complement to Gee. “It is sort of like the conductor of a symphony,” she says. “At times you need the flutes and at times you need the drums. Brit brought excellence and discipline. Gordon was a visionary, a PR guy par excellence.”

Kirwan had transformed Maryland into a much higher quality university. Could he do the same for Ohio State?

**Interregnum**

To smooth the transition at Maryland, Kirwan offered to remain there through June 30, 1998, while visiting Columbus as often as he could. In February, for example, he sat next to Governor Voinovich’s wife at the State of the State message to the General Assembly, during which the governor introduced him as the new Ohio State president. In the lobby afterward, television crews lined up seeking his reaction to the speech.

“I can’t imagine such a thing happening in Maryland,” Kirwan later told the *Baltimore Sun*. “Nobody here [sic] would ask me what I thought of a State of the State speech. It’s not a matter of respect for me as a person. It’s a matter of respect for this institution.”

Through such early experiences, Kirwan learned that his new position made him a celebrity. The sudden visibility took some getting used to, and at times it cost the Kirwans privacy that they would have preferred to retain. When his candidacy first hit the papers, he answered the door in Maryland one Sunday morning in his bathrobe and was greeted by a *Dispatch* reporter who had traveled to Maryland to track him down.

Among the new president’s first priorities was to work with Jerry May on the university’s “Affirm Thy Friendship” campaign. He also began introducing the campus community to the four major goals that would form the foundation of his presidency. Together they would build Ohio State’s national reputation by selectively investing in its most promising academic programs, enhancing the educational quality of the undergraduate experience, realizing a commitment to diversity, and better serving the needs of Ohio communities.

Off campus, he offered another, companion message. Ohio, he said over and over again, was falling behind economically. The state that had enjoyed so much success with agriculture and manufacturing had to make the transition to a knowledge economy, and the key to that transformation was education.
Bottom line: Ohio had to better support its colleges and universities, especially research institutions such as Ohio State.

Wherever he went, the new president’s enthusiastic, easygoing style was well received. While he did not “work a crowd” like Gee, who made sure to shake hands and say a word to everyone, Kirwan’s sincerity was obvious, and those who spoke with him agreed with a comment by Maryland education professor Willis Hawley. “What he brings is a real openness,” Hawley said. “There are no hidden agendas. When you sit and talk to him, you think you’re the most important thing on his agenda.” Someone described it as Kirwan’s “front-porch” style. Kirwan took pains to put people at ease. “I don’t think of myself as [wanting to] remake Ohio State,” Kirwan told a reporter for The Lantern, the campus newspaper. “I want the school to attain its own aspirations.” He also heaped praise on his popular predecessor. “I admire Gordon tremendously,” he said. “In many ways, having the opportunity to follow him . . . is the best opportunity that can happen to a person. People will find that we are both different,” Kirwan predicted, “but we share many values in common.”

The relatively long transition period from January through June allowed the new president to absorb a new culture, get up to speed on issues, and become acquainted with his leadership team. At an Alumni Association dinner in the Washington, DC, suburbs, he was amazed by the turnout, passion, and enthusiasm for Ohio’s only statewide university. It also allowed his teammates to get to know him, and most found this “mathematician with charisma,” as a Baltimore Sun columnist described him, up to the job. To trustee Alex Shumate, these six months provided a very important opportunity for the new leader to mentally and programmatically assume the new job. As a result, Shumate said, “We didn’t miss a beat.”

At the same time, the year between Gee’s departure announcement in June 1997 and Kirwan’s arrival in July 1998 encouraged some confusion about who was in charge. There was Provost Dick Sisson, who served as interim president for six and a half months. There was Kirwan, who spent what time he could in Columbus. There was Shumate, determined that the university’s momentum be maintained. And there was Gordon Gee, who reportedly was finding it difficult to leave. The challenge, Sisson says, was to maintain stability, maintain the momentum behind the university’s major academic and development initiatives, and keep all balls in the air while paving the way for Kirwan’s arrival.

Meanwhile, when the Board of Trustees created a search committee in September 1997, it also created a transition team headed by Sisson. In December, Sisson became interim president, withdrawing as a candidate for president at the University of Texas at Austin, where he had been a finalist. Simultaneously,
the trustees named Ed Ray, then senior vice provost and chief information officer, as acting senior vice president and provost.

Sisson had come to Ohio State in 1993 from UCLA, where he had been a faculty member and administrator for twenty-five years, serving as senior vice chancellor for Academic Affairs in his last two years. A native of Gallia County, Ohio, with a bachelor's degree in international studies, a master's degree in political science from Ohio State, and a Ph.D. degree in political science from the University of California–Berkeley, Sisson was a nationally distinguished scholar and held leadership positions in numerous national organizations.

Ray, a member of Ohio State’s faculty since 1970, chaired the Department of Economics before joining the Office of Academic Affairs in 1992 as an associate provost. His research interests included foreign investment, trade barriers, protectionism, income tax, and social security, and as part of the state’s trade delegations, he had served as counselor to Governor Voinovich on trade missions to China and the Pacific Rim. At the time of his appointment as provost, Ray had primary responsibility for budgets and resource issues. He is now president of Oregon State University.