

Obama's University Visit Was Not Simple

Would it be all right if the Leader of the Free World stopped by your campus for a little while?

He wants to surround himself with hordes of enthusiastic young people, toss out a few oratorical gems — as you know, he's got the gift — and reinvigorate his anxious political party. The Secret Service has the usual security concerns, of course, but we'll pay for any inconvenience. Interested?

The offer by the [Democratic National Committee](#) to the [University of Wisconsin-Madison](#) would seem like a no-brainer, conjuring images of university officials ostentatiously checking their calendars before saying: It just so happens that the Badgers of Wisconsin are free that day.

The offer, though, forced the university's chancellor, Biddy Martin, to weigh the many benefits of a visit by a sitting president against the naked political purpose of that visit. After all, the event would be a kickoff rally for Democrats as they approach the midterm elections, and [Barack Obama](#) would be appearing as a party leader more than as a president.

In the end, the university said: Yes!

Tuesday afternoon, thousands of students crammed cheek-by-jowl into the university's Library Mall, both to see a world leader up close and to provide that same world leader with a photo-op backdrop exuberant enough to offset reports of his flagging popularity.

But his visit wasn't an easy call. Before the Board of Regents of the [University of Wisconsin](#) System and the Democratic National Committee signed a contract last week, in which the committee agreed to pay \$10,500 to cover expenses, Ms. Martin had to satisfy herself that it was the right thing to do.

"There was never a question whether we wanted [President Obama](#) to come to our campus," Ms. Martin said. "That was clear. But the question was how to do this in a way that was fair to everyone in the community."

Over the decades, two other sitting presidents have visited the campus of this famously liberal, progressive university in this famously liberal, progressive city. They, too, had their reasons.

In the fall of 1932, President [Herbert Hoover](#), a Republican, spoke at an event that a university fact sheet says was “somewhat marred by the president’s tired voice and a faulty amplifier.” The Depression would tire any president, especially one who probably sensed that in days he would be soundly voted out of office.

And in May 1950, President [Harry S. Truman](#) delivered a “peace” address in which he said that only together can nations build a strong defense against aggression. A few weeks later, the Korean War broke out.

Now, 60 years later, a third president was offering to visit, not to deliver a policy speech on the weak economy or the quicksand war, but to begin a four-city effort to rally Democrats in key states. Why Madison?

Derrick Plummer, a spokesman for the Democratic National Committee, provided this answer by e-mail: “President Obama has always had a special place in his heart for the city of Madison. And, as you know, President Obama visited the city in 2008 and is glad to be a part of the enthusiasm and activism that has been a strong tradition of the University of Wisconsin.”

True, President Obama may well remember that night in February 2008, when a series of wins in state primaries all but ensured that he would be the Democratic candidate for president, and thousands wildly cheered during his victory speech in Madison.

He may also have heard how, on election night, throngs of University of Wisconsin students spontaneously gathered in the streets to celebrate. Ariel Shapiro, a junior who works for one of the student newspapers, The Daily Cardinal, remembers how hundreds of students climbed Bascom Hill to serenade the statue of [Abraham Lincoln](#) with “God Bless America.”

“It was ridiculous,” she says, still smiling at the sweet memory.

Finally, the president may also have taken note of the relatively low unemployment rate in Madison, which stands at 5.5 percent. In Racine, a little more than 100 miles to the east, unemployment is at 14.1 percent, while in Beloit, 55 miles to the south, it’s at 15.3 percent.

So, Badgers, how about it?

Ms. Martin, who has been chancellor since September 2008, was thrilled by the chance. You couldn’t buy this kind of educational experience, or, quite frankly, this kind of

publicity; it's an honor. But she worried about the fairness of having campus life disrupted by a political event. A day or so of fretting followed.

Then, amid the many documents and manuals that provide guidance in the administration of a campus of 42,000 students and 21,000 faculty and staff members, someone uncovered a written policy called "The Use of University Facilities for Political Purposes." Among other things, it said that each major political party can hold one event on campus during an election period.

And don't forget: Library Mall, where the Democrats wanted to hold their rally, is a vibrant nerve center for the university and the city, with a rich tradition of political events and free speech.

Ms. Martin and the Board of Regents signed on, then received validation of that decision in the plans of students and faculty members to gather after the political rally to debate everything from the economy and the wars to the political process itself. The only dissent has come by e-mail from a couple of alumni, objecting to the use of the campus for the rally.

"This is a campus that values political speech," Ms. Martin said.

But political speech comes at a cost. It meant the complete or partial closing of several buildings, from the University Bookstore to the spectacular State Historical Society building. It meant a day off for all the food vendors in Library Mall. It meant the cancellation of the 5 p.m. Mass at the St. Paul's University Catholic Center.

It also meant enough logistical challenges to spawn a doctoral dissertation on time management, or homeland security, or Kafka. Setting up magnetometers. Removing all bikes. Establishing a plan for protesters. Banning laptop computers, drink bottles, sharp objects, and bags or purses larger than a sheet of paper.

Oh, and portable lavatories. "Specifically, about the number of porta-potties," Ms. Martin said. "There's a potential difference of opinion of how many will be needed."

This and other matters were ultimately resolved. By 3 p.m., a line a mile long and three and four people deep was disappearing into the distant horizon of University Avenue, an assertion that at least here in Madison, the president still rocks. Campus police estimated an overflowing crowd of 26,500.

As the crowd waited, political ideas and conspiracy theories bounced among them like so many beach balls.

Suddenly, the signal was given and the crowd rushed, thwarting many who had waited patiently in line. They passed through the banks of magnetometers and poured onto the Library Mall, where the leaves on the trees were turning and the sharpshooters on the roofs were watching.

They played music. They recited the Pledge of Allegiance. They cheered earnest student speakers. Then, shortly after 6, President Obama appeared in shirtsleeves and no tie, taking his place in front of a collection of students adorned in Badger red. A sustained roar, or release, followed.

“Hello, Wisconsin!” the Leader of the Free World said.