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Book Review

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BOOK REVIEW

DEAF PRESIDENT NOW! by John B. Christiansen
and Sharon M. Barnartt (Gallaudet University
Press, Washington, DC; 1995)

Peter J. Seiler¹

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The "Gallaudet Revolt" galvanized the Deaf community and provided a catharsis to those individuals who are either deaf or hard of hearing. That very action by the students at Gallaudet University shocked the world into a recognition of individuals' rights and into a recognition of a sub-culture that does not rely on hearing to function. Yet, when people talk about the "Gallaudet Revolt," they do so in terms unclear as to what actually happened and how it happened. John Christiansen and Sharon Barnartt attempted to capture the smoldering anger and then the eruption into a full-scale protest by a segment of the American population that had been up to that point relatively unseen and unheard.

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The reader will finish the book with a sense of history and yet a realization that the history took place without even being aware it was an historical event. The book delves into a variety of seemingly disjointed topics such as the players who prompted the Deaf President Now movement, the players and actors who fueled the protest movement, the sociological concepts behind group behavior and group revolts, the description of the Gallaudet University Board of Trustees' attitudes, and the chronological events leading to the resignation by Dr. Zinser and Mrs. Spillman. Even more amazing will be the changes in the people's attitudes prior to, during, and after the protest activities. Many of the people changed their attitudes from having just a deaf person become a finalist to the new president being a deaf person. However, in the final chapter, the authors have put together all of these concepts with the discussion on the consequences and impact of the Deaf President Now revolt. The reader will appreciate the significance of this singular action by the students and will further appreciate how much control was exercised to keep this particular revolution from becoming a frenzied mob action. The influence of the civil rights marches by the African-American community can be seen and felt.

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The description of events leading first, to the selection of Elizabeth Zinser as the new president of Gallaudet, and then to her resignation, was unique for the readers in that so many people were there and so many people observed the proceedings on the national television news which serves to validate the narrative. It is rare to be able to describe events in the smallest detail and so close to the event. That is akin to getting a first-person account of the Gallaudet University Revolution. The pictures lend credence to the authors' interpretation of the events.

The commentaries on those individuals who were thrust into the spotlight will interest the readers. One example will be Dr. I. King Jordan. His role shifted dramatically and drastically four times: as a candidate that was unacceptable to the hard core Deaf community; as a person who disappointed many people with his acceptance of Dr. Zinser's appointment as president; as a person who reversed his acceptance of Dr. Zinser; and as a person who became the first Deaf president of Gallaudet University. Likewise, the depiction of Dr. Harvey Goodstein, a Gallaudet faculty member, as a guiding and courageous individual is of interest to many people because of his willingness to risk his position at Gallaudet University. The various influential groups will fascinate the readers in the use of the political arena and the mass media to generate support for the Deaf President Now movement. Finally, the reader will be able to note the development of political maturity by Greg Hlibok, the Student Body Government president, along with the other three student leaders (Bridgetta Bourne, Jerry Covell, and Tim Rarus).

The footnotes that described the minute aspects of the events add to a better understanding of why this was a peaceful revolt and a classic example of the civil disobedience advocated by Thoreau. Also, the analysis of why the revolt occurred helps the reader to put everything into a historical perspective. In fact, on page 176 the authors went so far as to clearly state "...it was primarily a protest about symbols." And, that symbol was not about college related issues, but about an end to oppression. That issue was the bind that united the students, and eventually the world, into a collective group that agreed on the issue of a Deaf president for Gallaudet University.

The reader will be entranced by the sidebars in the book on various individuals' recollections of the events or of the player(s)' part in the revolution. These sidebars do lend a personal view which we can use to draw our own conclusion as to the causes and effects of the Deaf President Now protest.

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Overall, as a deaf reader, I found the book very stimulating and thought-provoking. This book gave me a sense of personal empowerment that is exhilarating and yet humbling. Those of us who were bystanders during the week that "signs" were heard around the world can now participate vicariously in the emotions of that particular and special week, and revel in the enthusiasm that came about with the announcement of the first Deaf president of Gallaudet University. Finally, *Deaf President Now!* should prove to be of high interest, not only for students of the Deaf culture and history, but also for sociologists and social scientists because of the intensity of the emotions and the diversity of the student population and supports that were directly involved in the successful Deaf President Now protest campaign.