Behind the scenes...the conversations

Blatt wavers

GAMECOCK—Mr. Blatt, we are working on a story concerning the resignation of former President Thomas Jones.

BLATT—On what?

GAMECOCK—The resignation of former President Tom Jones.

BLATT—Why is this story being written? Don't you think when a man resigns that should be enough? Why are you asking me? I'm not connected with the University. I have nothing to say. I'm not going to get into anything now on the Jones resignation.

I think you ought to let it alone. He's not asking for an investigation, is he? What good would it do except stir up some strife.

McNair—We have a source for you, Blatt Jr., Marchant and Patterson are responsible.

BLATT—They can say anything they want about me.

GAMECOCK—Were you personal friends with the Joneses?

BLATT—'I'm a good friend of everybody in the world. I like everybody. I don't dislike anybody.

GAMECOCK—Did you back Mr. Bowen?

BLATT—I voted for Mr. Bowen, yes.

GAMECOCK—Did you vote for Mr. Bowen because he was opposed to Dr. Jones?

BLATT—I voted for the man I thought was the best man. Don't you?

GAMECOCK—Do you wish to deny or confirm my previous statement saying you were involved?

BLATT—I neither deny nor confirm it, but both.

GAMECOCK—Did you have prior knowledge of the resignation?

BLATT—You can put down that I either knew it or I didn't.

Marchant—'no comment'

GAMECOCK—Mr. Marchant, we're doing a story on the Tom Jones resignation. How did you learn of the resignation?

MARCHANT—(Silence.) Uh, I really wouldn't know without going back and looking through my records and letters. My recollection is that I had a conversation prior to the time I received the letter. A day I think. I know the letter was coming.

GAMECOCK—Was Patterson your personal choice for president?

MARCHANT—I don't have any personal choice. I acted as a member of the Board.

GAMECOCK—Was Patterson the only one considered for the job?

MARCHANT—Yes, I love to realize there was a right short time between the announced resignation and the Board meeting.

GAMECOCK—Did you have any prior knowledge that in the Board meeting Jones' contract would not be renewed?

MARCHANT—No, none that I recall.

GAMECOCK—We have a source that says that in January you called Tom Jones and told him the Board was stacked against him. Would you like to deny that or confirm that? MARCHANT—(Silence.) I don't have any comment on that at all.

Jones—'pressure'

GAMECOCK—Dr. Jones, we're working on a follow-up story on your resignation. We're going back and talking to politicians and University deans, as well as friends of yours and students who were here at the time. Is there anything you'd like to say about the story?

JONES—I think I have a wonderful time up here learning new things and how organizations learn, how people learn. I have no comment on the resignation. I want to make the University work as well as it can.

GAMECOCK—Was there any political pressure on you, or pressure in any form for you to resign?

JONES—Let me tell you as I see it. There was pressure against me in the State House and on the Board. This makes it difficult to perform one's best. Rather than continue, it was time for me to do 12 years is about long enough. I look forward to my return to work as a faculty member.

McNair, like West, was also viewed as a candidate for president when his term as governor ended. One university source claims he was interested in the job as early as 1969-70. "It's a beautiful power position," the source said.

McNair denied any interest in the presidency.

But concerning the Jones resignation, McNair said, "I don't think it's anything the Board should be indicted for. The Board handled it well. I don't know of any other way it could have been handled."

"I don't know that it was purely voluntary on his part to leave. Nor do I know it was strong pressure. But I do think the hour for decision had arrived and whether he wanted to leave or not the time was right. I would surmise that there was a general feeling on the part of everybody that the time had arrived."

McNair downplayed the role of the politicians, saying, "No particular group in the Legislature was responsible. There was a lack of strong support. Dr. Jones never had good relations with the Legislature...you couldn't put it on Sol Blatt solely."

Blatt, Sr., reached at his law office in Barnwell, demanded to know why a story was being written on the Jones resignation. "Don't you think when a man resigns that should be enough? I think you ought to let it alone. He's not asking for an investigation is he? What good would it do except stir up some strife?"

He would neither confirm nor deny sources who say he was instrumental in the resignation.

Blatt would not deny he had prior knowledge of the Jones resignation. "You can put down that I either knew it or I didn't," he said. "I neither deny nor confirm but both," he said.

Blatt's son, who holds political views similar to his father's, called for Jones' resignation in 1970 when he was both a Board member and a federal judge.

However, Blatt Jr. declined any comment on the Jones resignation. "I don't think it would be appropriate. Well, you know, in the position I'm in, I don't believe I'd better comment on anything like that."

But an underlying factor mentioned frequently was the social aspect of the Jones' life. McNair said, "People expected more. They expected them (the Jones') to fit their mold."

And although everyone from University deans to political rivals have said Jones was a dynamic leader, their opinion of Mary Jones has been critical. Many say she is an outspoken, independent woman, though rumors of an overactive drinking social life persisted. People allude to "afternoons at the Pamlet Club," and "embarrassment" at social functions. But a close friend of hers said, "She didn't drink any more than anyone else." The former Jones' staffers said, "Her drinking problem was no worse than the Spaniels, or the Jones' House's or anybody else's...What the hell does a drinking problem have to do with the day to day operations of a University? She really didn't enter into it. If they wanted to get rid of a University President on his wife, then he should bring pretty hard to get somebody."

All politicians refused to be quoted on this issue, although they agreed "people have private lives anymore." Mary Jones said this summer that moving out of the President's House at the Horsehead was like leaving prison.

"I knew Dr. Jones was getting tired," Mrs. Jones said. "He was getting tired.

And McNair and Johnston agree Jones himself would feel more freedom as a teacher."

He "just didn't like the day to day work," McNair said. "Dr. Jones was a very fellow...not real organized...not a businessman type."

Paranoia and confusion still exist for many persons job-wise at the University.

"The right hand doesn't know what the left hand is doing," says a close friend of the Jones'. But greater paranoia existed between February and July when the presidency was in a transition period.

"It was a real critical time," says Johnston. "Marchant and I were practically running the University. Patterson was away and Jones left all the major decisions up to Patterson when he came back."

McKinney said Jones "seemed very emotional" during this period. "He has been very hurt by this," (the resignation) adds a University source.

Jones submitted his resignation on Jan. 24, 1974, which was officially accepted on Jan. 30. Three days later 29 Board of Trustees members changed the course of the University in less than three hours. They unanimously accepted the resignation of an innovative educator whose leadership and prestige diminished and led the University for 12 years.

They then unanimously elected a president who pledged a return to more traditional education and "to serve at the will of the Board."