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The Atkinson Presidency

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Robert Gordon Sproul graduated from the University of California, Berkeley, in the same class as his friend Earl Warren and, like Warren, was destined to become a shaper of events in twentieth-century California. But unlike Warren, the future governor and Supreme Court justice, Sproul chose to devote his prodigious energies to a single institution—the University of California.

In 1914, after a year working for the city of Oakland as an efficiency engineer following his college graduation, Sproul joined the U.C. comptroller's office in Berkeley. He would spend the next forty-four years with the University, twenty-eight of them as its president.

He began his career under the great university builder Benjamin Ide Wheeler, whose leadership had made U.C. Berkeley the largest and one of the best research universities in the country. With the opening in 1919 of the Southern Branch—later known as UCLA—California also became home to the nation's first multicampus system.

Sproul was influenced by Wheeler's grand vision of a public university that would not only educate California's leaders but involve itself productively in the economic and social life of the state. Sproul was a political realist, however, who tempered his aspirations for U.C. with a keen sense of the possible. As comptroller, he learned the political ropes firsthand, defending the University's budget requests before the legislature. His commanding voice, photographic memory, and political deftness made him an immediate success in the halls of Sacramento and far beyond.

Sproul needed these skills and more when the U.C. Regents chose him to head the system in 1930. The nation was plunging into the Depression, and California was hard hit. Sproul traveled constantly to garner the financial and political support of alumni, farmers, community groups, and business interests.

In 1933, after agreeing to draconian budget cuts, the University was threatened with a further two-million-dollar reduction proposed by the Assembly Ways and Means Committee. Sproul broadcast a radio plea that the University be exempted from this additional cut. His eloquence stimulated an outpouring of letters and telegrams to the legislature, many of them prompted by students who wrote home to their parents. The University was spared.

Despite the hard times, demand for higher education was growing, and many legislators were inclined to establish more four-year colleges, or to expand existing community colleges into four-year institutions. Sproul's position was both sensible and self-interested. He persuaded the legislature to mandate a study of California higher education that had two important outcomes—a check on the regional college movement and the

establishment of the State Council for Educational Planning and Coordination, one of the first attempts in California history to develop strategies for the orderly growth of the state's colleges and universities.

Even before becoming president, Sproul recognized that the center of the state's political gravity would ultimately shift to the south, and that the Southern Branch must grow into a full-fledged U.C. campus to meet the needs of the burgeoning Los Angeles region. He enthusiastically supported the development of UCLA.

By the time he left office in 1958, UCLA was a distinguished university recognized worldwide for the excellence of its programs. And the University of California, with six campuses from Davis to Los Angeles, was poised for the amazing expansion of the 1960s, when U.C. added three more campuses and educated the Baby Boom generation.

Sproul was not trained as an academic and in that sense differed from most university presidents. But he believed absolutely in the ideal of the land-grant university involved in service to society, and he articulated it brilliantly. He inherited a university that, even in 1930, was unmatched in the variety of its academic programs, the quality and relevance of its research to California's economy, and its commitment to serve the needs of a state in the throes of major economic transition. But it took his enormous gifts as a leader to rally Californians to secure the financial and political support that U.C. needed to become a world-renowned multicampus system.

He was courted by politicians and businesspeople, offered distinguished academic positions and lucrative nonacademic jobs, urged to run for governor, senator, and even president of

the United States. He would have none of it. He was president of the University of California, and that was all he wanted.

In a tribute honoring Sproul's twenty-fifth anniversary in office, a faculty member summed it up: "Doubtless God could have made a better president, but doubtless God never did."

NOTES

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