

## The Hesburgh Threat?

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Despite all the hoopla leading up to the November 19, 1966 Notre Dame-Michigan State “Game of the Century”—arguably the first time gridiron play rather than controversial polls would decide a national champion—the contest failed to answer the question on everybody’s mind at the time. Regardless, the unanticipated outcome, a contentious 10-10 tie, assured that the game would remain unforgettable among sports historians.<sup>i</sup>

Michigan State’s season ended on that note. Big Ten rules precluded the Spartans from returning to the Rose Bowl in January. Notre Dame, on the other hand, with one remaining game on its schedule, flew out to Los Angeles the following weekend to settle a score with intersectional rival Southern Cal.<sup>ii</sup>

The gamble by Coach Ara Parseghian—to play for a tie in East Lansing—was brilliant in hindsight. Mindful of the Holy Cross leadership’s aversion to post-season play,<sup>iii</sup> his Fighting Irish concluded their season with a resounding victory in the Coliseum. The more popular AP sports writers’ poll declared Notre Dame its mythical national champions a few days later. A defiant UPI coaches’ poll, immediately following January bowl games, anointed Michigan State its king of college football.

Acknowledging the controversy regarding Parseghian’s decision to run out the clock—a poker game move still hotly debated decades later—the Game of the Century almost didn’t happen. And it all had to do with an alcohol-induced assault two years earlier and how the leadership of both schools responded to the reprehensible behavior.

Notre Dame, like most colleges and universities, was caught up in student activism during the mid-1960s: a general challenge to authority at every level. The war in Vietnam and the civil rights movement were priorities for a few radicals embedded on campus. But for most Notre

Dame students, issues of greater concern were provincial—curfew, parietals, and various other restrictions on liberties away from the classroom. The all-male boarding school, a tradition at the university since its founding, was considered out of step with an ever-evolving society.<sup>iv</sup> Young men old enough to carry a gun in Southeast Asia were being treated like junior high school students back in northern Indiana. Normal adult social engagement with females from nearby St. Mary's College was next to impossible. The Sisters of the Holy Cross might just as well have built a moat around their campus. But should a guy be lucky enough to befriend a young lady at some school-sponsored event, limited ND telephone booths in the dorms and an antiquated SMC switchboard markedly hampered follow-up communication.<sup>v</sup>

With that background in mind, it was understandable why alcohol assumed a major role in dormitory gatherings on the Notre Dame campus over preceding decades. But by the early 1960s, it had reached epidemic proportions. And with no alternative treatment for the contagion, the administration continued to dispense its traditional vile remedy: pointless threats and undue punishment. Needless to say, it was ineffective in changing behavior.

Saturday, November 14, 1964. Eight weeks into the autumn gridiron season, first-year Coach Parseghian's Fighting Irish were undefeated, surprising prominent sports-page pundits while winning with talent inherited from erstwhile Joe Kuharich and 1963 interim Coach Hugh Devore. The visiting Michigan State Spartans, a young, highly talented yet struggling team, arrived in town with a 4-3 record. Notre Dame soundly defeated Duffy Daugherty's crew 34-7. But it was what took place outside the stadium, about 45 minutes later, which made this game memorable—at least for spectators milling about Gate A adjacent to the north end zone. Michigan State Professor Leonard Falcone, director of bands, in a letter to President John Hannah, recounted the incident in detail:

After the game, as the band was marching through the campus from the stadium to its buses in the parking lot, the band was assaulted by a group of Notre Dame students. One of our band members was struck in the mouth. This caused his nose to bleed. Another member was hit in the back of the neck. This member

later fainted and fell to the ground. Part of his band uniform was torn from him. Four band caps were snatched away from the musicians...one of the clarinets was badly damaged. This attack was completely unprovoked.<sup>vi</sup>

Hannah did not attend the game. Falcone described events in the stadium that preceded the assaults:

At the game proper, the student body as a whole was extremely noisy and discourteous. During the Michigan State band's performance at halftime, the students paraded a large number of banners around the stadium. This provoked loud cheers from the crowd and distracted the people's attention from our band's performance. This interference and discourteous conduct of the students was even worse while their own fine Notre Dame Band was performing on field.

The Notre Dame Student body is notorious for its bad manners, but their conduct Saturday was the worst I have ever seen anywhere.<sup>vii</sup>

Falcone was right on. The rowdy, usually intoxicated occupants of the northwest end zone had a well-deserved reputation among visiting schools.<sup>viii</sup> He concluded remarks to his boss by noting:

In contrast to the bad behavior of the students, we enjoy very cordial and friendly relations with the directors and the members of the fine Notre Dame band. They have always been most helpful in making our visits to their campus as pleasant as possible. However, in view of the incident and until such time as the student body becomes less noisy, more considerate and friendly toward their guests, I recommend that the Michigan State University Marching Band does not accompany the football team to Notre Dame.<sup>ix</sup>

The Spartan band director's comments and recommendations were tame in comparison to what Hannah would receive from alumni and fans from both schools the following week. Anyone within eyeshot of the brawl was livid. Most demanded an end to the rivalry.<sup>x</sup>

Father Theodore Hesburgh, president of Notre Dame and very close friend of John Hannah, was in Rome at the time, attending Second Vatican Council meetings.<sup>xi</sup> In his absence, Father Charles McCarragher, vice president for student affairs, telegraphed James Denison, Hannah's right-hand man. He expressed sincerest apologies for the reprehensible behavior of a few. Preliminary corrective actions were shared with Denison: the administration would continue its police work; perpetrators would be severely punished; justice would prevail. And mindful of an unusual scheduling glitch,<sup>xii</sup> McCarragher closed by stating, "Sincerely hope the Michigan State Band will return to Notre Dame next year for the annual football game and that the relationship between the two schools will always continue to be of the highest caliber."<sup>xiii</sup>

Denison immediately responded to McCarragher's Western Union note:

We, too value the relationship between our two universities, and I am sure your prompt expression of regret has done a great deal to mend the damage done by a few of your students and team followers. Your message was printed in full in our student newspaper on Tuesday, November 17, and did a great deal to mollify our students and faculty. It was read to our Trustees at their meeting yesterday, and they, too, were gratified by the evident sincerity of your apology.

Again, our sincerest thanks for your generous message and your expression of hope that inter-university relationships will not be impaired by this unfortunate incident.<sup>xiv</sup>

McCarragher's preliminary corrective actions were sanctioned upon Hesburgh's return to campus a week later. In a follow-up letter to Hannah, the Notre Dame president offered his confidential thoughts on the offensive behavior:

My secretary, Helen Hosinski, shared with me your wonderful letter which [sic] is typically thoughtful of you. I must say that my blood pressure rises somewhat when I think of the actions of a

few idiots who give sour taste to what has been a wonderful relationship. I hope we are doing everything we can to manifest that this *is* not representative of the general feeling on campus. As a matter of fact, most of the students seem to be ashamed and I am, too. I only hope that the unruly ones have gotten the message. I should add that those who were apprehended are no longer with us.<sup>xv</sup>

One year later, a little over a week before the Spartans would board a train for South Bend, President Hannah dictated a note to Hesburgh. He feared the rivalry was evolving into a “feud-like situation with the psychological buildup in the minds of students...that one might expect if one were approaching a pitched battle with a mortal enemy...”<sup>xvi</sup> The “hate-State” reports emanating from Notre Dame were disturbing. Hannah proposed that student government leaders from both schools meet “immediately and discuss ways and means of keeping *the* football rivalry in proper context.”<sup>xvii</sup> Those representatives gathered two days later at a Bob Evans’ restaurant just off Interstate-94 near Kalamazoo.<sup>xviii</sup> A game plan to ensure “the highly-spirited rivalry remain within the bounds of reason and propriety” was crafted over French fries and Cokes that afternoon.

With his promotion to the presidency of the University of Notre Dame in 1953, Theodore Martin Hesburgh was bent on transitioning the school to a level commensurate with Princeton. He envisioned a great Catholic university, second to none. But to accomplish that grand plan, he knew the Holy Cross order had to relinquish oversight to a secular board. He also felt female undergraduates must occupy half of the seats in classrooms and lecture halls at Our Lady’s university.<sup>xix</sup> That radical proposal, extremely controversial for traditionalist alumni, would serve another purpose too—ending the antiquated boarding school concept and its promotion of dysfunctional male behavior about the campus and adjacent neighborhoods.

Acknowledging John Hannah’s suggestion of student leader collaboration as a wise move, Father Ted was apparently still in a paternalistic mindset in the fall of 1965, especially when it came to disciplining rowdy undergraduates. Immediately after reading Hannah’s

note, he dictated a letter to his student body. Copies were inserted in dormitory mailboxes the following day.<sup>xx</sup>

Dear Notre Dame Students:

It is probably the understatement of the year that almost everyone here would like to win a victory in the Michigan State game, not to mention the others.

Some of us believe that this is possible without turning the campus into a jungle or embarking on an emotional binge that is contrary to the rational behavior that should characterize a university campus.

Notre Dame is famous for its spirit, but spirit is more than noise. It should not be confused with rowdiness, buffoonery, or inhospitality to opponents either.

He cut to the chase:

I would like to appeal to the great majority of our students who appreciate the great tradition of Notre Dame Spirit to see that from now on the few who are perverting this great spirit are made to feel unwelcome here, and out of place.<sup>xxi</sup>

With more than a decade in office, Hesburgh was now fully ensconced in his role as president. His closing comments reflected a leader confident in his position, despite ongoing challenges from a restless student body yearning for radical change, on the one hand, and a conservative alumni network vehemently opposed to any said change, on the other.

It is quite possible to ruin a very good thing called Notre Dame Spirit. The net result will be not only a bad name for you and your University, but the end of intercollegiate competition here—because there is no reason for other universities to become involved with such nonsense, and those responsible here, students, faculty, and administration, are increasingly unwilling to continue on this course, even if it means eliminating what can be a very good and wholesome activity....<sup>xxii</sup>

As anticipated, the November 20, 1965 football game was a bitter struggle. The Spartans, on the verge of greatness comparable to Parseghian's Fighting Irish, claimed more points on the scoreboard when time ran out. Despite the loss in Notre Dame Stadium, the student section behaved extremely well before, during, and following the contest.<sup>xxiii</sup> <sup>xxiv</sup> <sup>xxv</sup> Acknowledging the role ND student government leaders might have played in influencing their constituency, there was no doubt that Hesburgh's audacious threat hung over the undergraduates in the northwest end zone that Saturday afternoon.

Three days later, President Hannah wrote to Notre Dame Student Body President Minchin Lewis. On behalf of Michigan State, he commended Lewis and his fellow student leaders in ensuring that off-field behavior was more in line for two schools sharing a tradition. "I am sure that our students will be anxious to repay your hospitality when Notre Dame next plays at East Lansing, and that the two universities have entered a new era of friendly rivalry in their long history of athletic competition."<sup>xxvi</sup>

That "new era," assured by two presidents intent on preserving a special intercollegiate relationship,<sup>xxvii</sup> became manifest one year later when a man named Ara led his team through the tunnel and onto the playing field in East Lansing. In hindsight, perhaps it is only fitting that the game ended in a tie.

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<sup>i</sup> *The Biggest Game of Them All: Notre Dame, Michigan State, and the Fall of '66*. Celzic, Mike; New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992. pp. 309-21.

<sup>ii</sup> One year earlier, the undefeated Irish, in the final game of the autumn campaign, lost to the Trojans ending a storybook inaugural season for Parseghian.

<sup>iii</sup> *The Biggest Game of Them All: Notre Dame, Michigan State, and the Fall of '66*. Celzic, Mike; New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992. p. 319. By the late 1960s it became apparent that post-season bowl games would play a major role in determining a national champion. With restructuring of its academic calendar, the ND administration no longer felt it necessary to decline offers from lucrative bowl committees.

<sup>iv</sup> *Hesburgh's Notre Dame: Triumph in Transition*. Connelly, Joel R. and Dooley, Howard J. New York: Hawthorn Books Inc., 1972. pp. 73-76.

<sup>v</sup> *Ibid.* p. 75.

<sup>vi</sup> Falcone to Hannah. 16 Nov. 1964. Michigan State University Archives and Special Collections. John A. Hannah Papers, UA2.1.12; Box 56, folder: 59

<sup>vii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>viii</sup> *Hesburgh's Notre Dame: Triumph in Transition*. Connelly, Joel R. and Dooley, Howard J. New York: Hawthorn Books Inc., 1972. p. 74

<sup>ix</sup> Falcone to Hannah. 16 Nov. 1964. Michigan State University Archives and Special Collections. John A. Hannah Papers, UA2.1.12; Box 56, folder: 59

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- x Malone to Hannah. 3 Dec. 1964. Michigan State University Archives and Special Collections. John A. Hannah Papers, UA2.1.12; Box 56, folder: 59
- xi Hesburgh to Hannah. 23 Nov. 1964. Michigan State University Archives and Special Collections. John A. Hannah Papers, UA2.1.12; Box 56, folder: 59
- xiii *The Biggest Game of Them All: Notre Dame, Michigan State, and the Fall of '66*. Celzic, Mike; New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992. p. 214. It was this serendipitous scheduling glitch that laid the groundwork for the '66 Game of the Century. The State University of Iowa had arranged biennial home and home contracts with ND to close out its Big Ten season dating back to the late 1940s. Following completion of its 1960 campaign, however, the Hawkeye athletic director decided to take advantage of a Miami Hurricane offer to have Iowans spend a late November weekend in southern Florida rather than in Iowa City in 1966. Mindful of Michigan State's desire to have a prominent opponent close out its Big Ten season, ND's Edward Krause immediately contacted the Clarence Munn. The Spartan AD jumped at the opportunity. Neither man had any idea how significant that agreement would prove to be six years later when, for the first time in college football history, a de facto national title game would take place to solve the question of who was truly #1 in the country.
- xiii McCarragher to Denison. 16 Nov. 1964. Michigan State University Archives and Special Collections. John A. Hannah Papers, UA2.1.12; Box 56, folder: 59
- xiv Denison to McCarragher. 20 Nov. 1964. Michigan State University Archives and Special Collections. John A. Hannah Papers, UA2.1.12; Box 56, folder: 59
- xv Hesburgh to Hannah. 23 Nov. 1964. Michigan State University Archives and Special Collections. John A. Hannah Papers, UA2.1.12; Box 56, folder: 59
- xvi Hannah to Hesburgh. 10 Nov. 1965. Michigan State University Archives and Special Collections. John A. Hannah Papers, UA2.1.12; Box 61, folder: 57
- xvii Ibid.
- xviii Lewis, Minch. "Re. ND-MSU Band Incident." Email to John Twohey and David Young. 13 Sept. 2015.
- xix *God, Country, Notre Dame: The Autobiography of Theodore M. Hesburgh*. Hesburgh, Theodore M. and Reedy, Jerry. Doubleday: New York, 1990; pp. 170-80.
- xx Twohey, John. "Re. ND-MSU Band Incident." Email to Minch Lewis and David Young. 15 Sept. 2015.
- xxi Hesburgh to Notre Dame Students. 11 Nov. 1965. Michigan State University Archives and Special Collections. John A. Hannah Papers, UA2.1.12; Box 61, folder: 57
- xxii Ibid.
- xxiii Hannah to Hesburgh. 23 Nov. 1965. Michigan State University Archives and Special Collections. John A. Hannah Papers, UA2.1.12; Box 56, folder: 59
- xxiv Hesburgh to Hannah. 24 Nov. 1965. Michigan State University Archives and Special Collections. John A. Hannah Papers, UA2.1.12; Box 56, folder: 59
- xxv Hannah to Lewis. 23 Nov. 1965. Michigan State University Archives and Special Collections. John A. Hannah Papers, UA2.1.12; Box 56, folder: 59
- xxvi Ibid.
- xxvii Hannah and Hesburgh's friendship dated back to the early 1950s shortly following Fr. Ted's promotion to the presidency at ND. The relationship matured due to their both serving on Eisenhower's Civil Rights Commission—a committee that played a major role in the historic 1964 Civil Rights legislation.

For more information about David Young's two books, *Arrogance and Scheming in the Big Ten: Michigan State's Quest for Membership and Michigan's Powerful Opposition* and *The Student and His Professor: John Hannah, Ralph Aigler and the Origin of the Michigan State-Michigan Rivalry*, visit his web site **[www.msu-umbig10.com](http://www.msu-umbig10.com)**.