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The Forgotten Chancellor

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The Forgotten Chancellor

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at
Syracuse University

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Honors Capstone Project in Broadcast Journalism

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Date: May 7, 2013

Abstract

Every past chancellor of Syracuse University has had something named for him. Every chancellor except for one.

The Forgotten Chancellor examines the administration of John Corbally, the only past chancellor without a campus namesake. Does SU's eighth headman actually create a lasting legacy in his 18 months on campus? And most importantly, does he deserve anonymity?

The project took on the form of a documentary, using pictures and sounds to truly transport the viewer back to Syracuse in 1968-1971.

The story relied on the people who were there to retell it and bring it to life. The search for eyewitnesses began by reading old newspapers and other materials from the time and scanning for names. And once latching on to one individual, the process became a sort of exercise in networking—asking who else might have been a good source. Who else remembers something from more than 40 years ago?

The interviewees consist of six current professors who were on campus in the late 60s and early 70s, either as students or instructors; a woman who worked closely with Corbally and was a friend of his family; and a Cazenovia College professor and author, who had penned two volumes of Syracuse University history. Several other friends, relatives, and colleagues provided valuable background information but could not appear on camera due to distance or unwillingness.

Having gathered interviews, the next step became finding other visuals to support the story. The Syracuse University Library and Archives provided an enormous wealth of photos, newspaper articles, and other visuals, and the Onondaga Historical Association filled in the gaps. Not much video exists from the Corbally years and his photo files are thin when compared with the men who came before and after him, but what was provided was more than sufficient to tell the story.

As the project progressed, the importance of studying the Corbally administration grew as did the project's context. As current chancellor Nancy Cantor readies for her departure from campus, Corbally's accomplishments raise questions as to the best method for evaluation. I can only hope my project sparks thoughts of what makes a "good" chancellor or a "successful" chancellor—particularly whether a well-remembered chancellor relies on the length of his or her tenure for remembrance or tangible results.

Corbally's story was meant to be portrayed journalistically, without taking a strong stance on one position. But after researching and hearing the perspectives of those familiar with his administration, I came to conclude that Corbally certainly deserves more recognition than he currently receives. During his chancellorship, Corbally navigated his ship through stormy waters. The sailing was anything but smooth, but his vessel emerged unscathed. Only the most patient and skilled of captains could pilot his craft and preserve it for future voyages. Corbally did that. He saved Syracuse University from its past and put it in solid position for years to come.

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	1
Reflective Essay	2
Sources Cited and Consulted	17
Summary of Capstone Project.....	22
Enclosure: The Forgotten Chancellor.....	DVD

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Reflective Essay

The idea was really a no-brainer. But of course, I didn't think that at the time. I struggled mightily to find a topic for my Capstone Project for months; I just didn't know where to begin. But now, reflecting back, it's obvious this project was a perfect fit for my personality and my interests.

There's something about history that has always fascinated me. It isn't necessarily that I loved the subject in school, but I have never been able to get enough of old things. I can remember, as a child, the simple pleasures of going to visit my grandparents and poking around in their attic—a treasure trove for things that we no longer use. I can remember how records and a phonograph would light up my eyes or how I would beam every time I came across an old set of Polaroids or a photo album.

It should come as no surprise then, the unmatched pleasure I received from my first visit to the University Archives. There were so many possibilities to explore, so many stories to be uncovered. Leafing through old newspapers (another of my loves) was like turning back the pages of time as I saw what it was like to be me, a Syracuse University student, 40 years earlier.

The subject matter came to me in a roundabout way. I truly had no idea of what I wanted to dedicate my time to for the next year. I looked at the world

around me and saw people called to action. The Occupy Movement was just hitting its stride as people across the country and across the world banded together to protest social and economic inequality. I watched news reports from everywhere from Oakland to New York City as regular people joined to bring streets to a standstill.

I was surprised to find that something similar had happened on Syracuse University's campus long before the Occupy Movement was even a thought. It was sitting in the University Archives that I learned that students had brought SU to a standstill for more than a week at the end of the 1970 school year.

The parallels intrigued me. History repeats itself, my father is fond of saying, so I thought I would explore what made conditions right for a protest, then and now.

But through my research, I discovered something that seemed a more intriguing angle. The man at the helm during these Anti-Vietnam War protests, charged with keeping order on campus was someone I had never heard of. I didn't consider myself a great university historian or student of former chancellors, but it struck me that the man's name was unfamiliar to me. When reading the list of SU Chancellors past, it's easy to match each man to his campus building. That was not the case with John Corbally. I recalled news from the previous year, when the University decided it would honor former chancellor Buzz Shaw by naming the Quad for him. I vividly remember reading an article in the Syracuse Post-Standard about the ceremony, which noted that Shaw became the eighth of ten past chancellors to receive a campus namesake. Perhaps it was a

journalistic instinct, but I immediately wanted to know the two who were left out. Research led me to find that there was truly only one chancellor without his name ever being on campus (for one had a building at one time, but it later demolished). That, I decided would be the focus of my project.

I was surprised to find, when I asked around, how few people had heard of Chancellor John Corbally. True, he was only present for a year and a half, but nonetheless, he was one of the leaders of this campus. There have, after all, only been eleven in 143 years—far fewer than the number of presidents in that time. As I researched, I became even more surprised by Corbally's anonymity when I read of what had happened during his 18 months. This man had led the campus through its most volatile of times, yet no one even knows he was here.

His anonymity became an obstacle for me. There were very few faculty members at Syracuse University who had been present for Corbally's tenure. And the number of those present who knew anything about him as a person or what he had done as chancellor was even fewer.

Getting started became an exercise in patience. I tried to comb through old articles looking for a name, any name, of someone still accessible that I could talk to. But the big breakthrough came when I sent a letter to Marguerite Corbally, widow of the late chancellor, for whom I could find no listed phone number, whose address I found in the White Pages. It was a long shot, but I ended up receiving a reply, not from her, but from her daughter, Jan. Speaking to Jan on the phone not only gave me a clearer picture of who John Corbally was, but also gave me a wider network of people to reach out to. Jan was able to

suggest several people who were her father's close friends and colleagues. And through them, I expanded my network even further.

Before long, I was connected with the widow of Corbally's right-hand man and friends and colleagues that had worked closely with the chancellor. But the documentary medium put me at a sort of disadvantage in several ways. Firstly, the camera tends to scare some people away. I found that some of the individuals with deepest reserves of information were sometimes afraid of sharing what they knew with the lens of a camera. Not everyone with significant knowledge of the man and the time period was willing to talk. Secondly, again because of the camera, distance plays a role. I would have loved to include Jan Corbally's perspective on her father or what some cabinet members felt was the chancellor's lasting legacy, but trips to the west coast to record these interviews proved impossible.

It is difficult to consider Corbally a "divisive" figure, per se, but I found there to be a large difference of opinion as to how effective he was when leading the University. I tried my best to capture the entire spectrum of perspectives for my documentary. I tried to balance those who knew Corbally well or worked in his cabinet with people who were more critical of his administration. And I made sure to weed out the opinions that seemed to be uneducated or unfounded. After all, the people that were here on campus at the time were very young, often junior faculty members. Their experiences with the Chancellor were limited and most of what they said they knew about the administration often came through hearsay.

I lament the fact that the thought of interviewing past students themselves didn't occur to me until it was too late. As it was pointed out to me during critiques of my script, though I do present differences of opinion in regards to the Corbally administration, all of the opinions in my documentary come from one demographic: white males who were on the same side of the generational divide. There is no student perspective in the documentary, a perspective that I believe would have been tremendously effective regardless of what that perspective had to say. Opposition to what Corbally did would have served as a nice counterbalance, but support of the chancellor would have all but cemented his legacy as a peacekeeper and diplomat.

The even bigger challenge came in finding pictures to illustrate the time period and specifically, moving pictures. As mentioned, the Syracuse University Library and archives were able to provide a huge number of pictures and newspaper articles to aid in my research and my project, but there was virtually no video available. A visit to the Onondaga Historical Society yielded further photos but again, no video. It was quickly apparent that this documentary video I had set out to create was going to rely on still pictures with video effects. The photographs do add a more historical feel to my finished work, I think, but they slow time down. At times, I feel, the documentary drags on. Moving pictures would have undoubtedly picked up the pace and made for a more exciting piece.

I was also shocked to find that neither historical archive had any photos of what I saw as two of the biggest historical events in the University's history. I was told that not only was there no video, but there were neither photos of the

Vietnam War Protests nor the boycott of the football team. The visuals I was able to track down came from back issues of the Daily Orange. I was stunned that the Archives lacked a single photo of an incredibly photogenic event that lasted more than a week.

Research and the quest for visuals proved to be an exercise in problem solving and troubleshooting. Once told the Archives lacked what I was looking for, I was forced to go elsewhere. To support a documentary, I felt there was no other option but to find something eye pleasing that could be used. I turned to old yearbooks for several shots of Chancellor William Tolley and scenes of campus life. The Daily Orange paper archives only stretched back so far, but library microfilm provided some much needed pictures of a black-power salute and campus headlines of more than 70 years old.

The documentary format of the project created other problems too. It was difficult to present a detailed history of Corbally and his administration in the documentary medium. In order to be effective, the language in a documentary has to be simple and streamlined. In a written report, the reader may go back and reread complicated sections. That is not the case in a broadcast medium. There were a lot of complicated, intricate situations that needed to be simplified in order to be told effectively. Detail had to be sacrificed.

The documentary was further streamlined by time restrictions. A 30-minute piece can hardly pack all the information an 80-page research paper can, so choices had to be made as to what would be included and what would be left out.

As I worked and reworked my script, I often felt guilty that I had left out details and specifics. But there was simply too much to tell. A 100-page paper would have done the time period better justice. In fact, I believe each “prong” of my project could have easily been a 30-minute documentary on its own. (As proof, I did actually come across a nearly-100-page Master’s thesis focused squarely on the student strike.) Creating the documentary became an exercise in pruning the loads of information that I had.

Simply, there was a lot that went on during the Corbally chancellorship, not all of which could be mentioned. I focused my efforts on what I determined to be the three biggest happenings during his time at Syracuse University: the student strike, the football race controversy, and the financial difficulties. In my mind, these three things were not only the biggest issues of the time, but they were also the places where Corbally made the biggest impact for the future.

Since Corbally has nothing named for him on campus, the purpose of my project was to find a lasting legacy of his, something that he could be remembered for, and I do believe at the end of it all that I found three such examples. Out of the three, I decided to devote the most time to the 1970 student strike, a fairly simple decision. There were more pictures of the strike than of anything else; more people knew about the strike than about anything else; the sound I received from the interviews was better. Plus, when I asked the people I interviewed to put their finger on a legacy of Corbally’s, more people than not pointed to how peaceful the campus had remained during the strike. This section of the documentary was also the easiest to write, simply because, I didn’t have to do that

much writing. The soundbites seemed to mesh together naturally and weave a better story than any I could write.

The second pillar of my documentary was Corbally's resolution of the racial tensions on the football team. Again, the material available made it fairly easy to present the topic. As with the student strike, the bigger issue came with trying to cut down the vast quantities of information that I had.

Perhaps Corbally's largest legacy was the most difficult to show and explain: his management of the university's finances. It seemed Corbally got the short end of the stick in this regard. The financial problems started with his predecessor but didn't really become visible until his administration. And then when Corbally set things on the right track, the fruits of his efforts didn't show until after he had gone.¹ For that reason, it was tough to do more than speculate his contributions to balancing the University budget. Many people I spoke to however did give Corbally the lion's share of the credit for balancing the books. There was no doubt that Tolley had left the University in a dilapidated state and supporters and historians alike strongly believed Corbally was to credit for turning things around.² And I received little to no other information to the contrary.

The financial decisions that were documented proved difficult to show in a graphic manner. For that reason, though Corbally may have saved the University from financial ruin, that portion of his story had to take a back seat to the more visually appealing Student Strike and Football Boycott.

¹ Greene, "The Eggers Years," p. 18-21

² Interview with John Robert Greene

It was also important to me to tell the story of how Corbally came to his position and how he left it, both of which proved to be quirky, interesting stories.

The documentary begins with a somewhat lengthy introduction, but I believe it is justified because I think to understand Corbally's story in full, you have to understand the situation he was entering. Chancellor Tolley's importance to this university and how he transformed SU during his tenure are, I believe, critical to knowing why Corbally had a somewhat tough go of it. I also felt it was important to call the viewer's attention to the changing political attitudes of the time. They help illustrate how difficult it was to lead a college campus at this time. And what's more, the fact that Corbally was not even the first choice of chancellor was, to me, the ultimate irony, cementing the idea in my mind that this guy really had all of the chips stacked against him.

I took it upon myself to explain why Corbally left too. Considering all that happened during his 18 months, there were rumors that Corbally was pushed out or that he left because he simply couldn't take the heat. I tried to put that rumor to rest. Through interviews with several people close to Corbally and in interviews Corbally himself had been a part of, it was clear that he received a job he simply couldn't refuse.³ I wanted to make it clear that this man did not run from the University when the going got tough. For that reason, I found it necessary to devote time to why he was leaving.

For all that I was able to include, there was much more that was not even mentioned—many things were just too specific for me to go into detail. They

³ As Corbally said in his press conference February 16, 1971

would have made a very nice scenic route, but ultimately would have detracted from reaching the final destination in a timely, succinct manner.

The biggest issue I left out was the controversy over the University's ROTC program. There was a sizeable debate—looming particularly large during the Vietnam War—over the place of the ROTC on campus and specifically, whether students deserved university credit for participating in the program.⁴ This was a debate that consumed Corbally during his tenure and ultimately served as the issue that separated him from the rest of the University. When Corbally created the Division of General University Programs, he “rammed” a vote through the University Senate, according to many accounts.⁵ Not only was this issue significant because of Corbally's stance on the issue, but it is frequently cited as a turning point in his administration—a moment when his popularity stopped waxing and began to seriously wane.⁶ Unfortunately, there was not enough time to mention it. For mentioning it would have required delving into details, which would have required more time than I had.

Similarly, there was simply too much to mention on the topic of Student Body President (and foil to Corbally) David Ifshin. Ifshin was a tremendously powerful figure on campus, one that commanded respect from students and administrators alike. He led much of the resistance to the Corbally administration and spearheaded the student strike.⁷ But again, as with the ROTC issue, a mere

⁴ Greene, “The Eggers Years,” p. 30-31

⁵ Greene, “The Eggers Years,” p. 30-31

⁶ Interview with John Robert Greene

⁷ Interview with Roosevelt Wright

mention wouldn't have done him justice. It was all or nothing, And in this case, it had to be nothing.

Though this is a project that focuses on Corbally's life at Syracuse, I tried to avoid delving into the man's personal life. Naturally, some background is necessary to understand who this man was and where he came from, but I did not feel it was necessary to provide much more than the basics. What was important to understand was that he matured in a large, public university system—a direct contrast to Syracuse University. Other biographical information, such as his familial life and his personality, was of less importance to me. All I wanted to include were things that had some sort of impact on his performance at Syracuse University. All other biographical information I deemed superfluous.

I often struggled to remove details from my script. I felt I was cheating the chancellor in a way, truncating his story to the extreme. But as my advisor repeatedly reassured me, and as I came to believe myself, my project's purpose was to bring Corbally's name back to the surface. My point was not to meticulously detail every single thing that happened during his 18-month tenure, but rather to reintroduce a man I felt had been forgotten. This project is an overview of the Corbally administration; it serves as an introduction.

Perhaps my favorite part of the documentary I created is the ending. What Molly Broad says, I feel ties everything together. A lot of people I interviewed said a lot of great things, but in choosing my last line, I wanted to leave an impression in peoples' minds. But what message did I want to end with?

I wanted to portray the Corbally administration as neutrally as possible. I sought out multiple perspectives, but ultimately found an imbalance, slanted toward Corbally supporters. After all the research I did, I came to my own personal conclusion that yes, Corbally deserves to be better remembered. He came to Syracuse University, through no fault of his own, at a volatile time in American higher education. And many people I spoke to said they felt, given the challenges of the time, no man could have had complete control over a campus.⁸ As I read more about Corbally's diplomatic style and calm demeanor, I was more and more impressed by his performance at SU. Plus, as one interviewee said regarding the student strike, "Facts are facts. Unlike other universities, we lost no people."⁹ There was no doubt in my mind that Corbally had certainly not harmed Syracuse University, and he likely played a significant role in keeping it safe and improving it for the future. That was the message I wanted to send: in my opinion, Corbally left this University better than he found it and he deserves to be remembered as such. He deserves the credit for steering SU through a tough time. He deserves to have something named for him.

Once I had conceived of my conclusion, Molly Broad's quotation was the only logical way to end the documentary. I like the way it ties the past to the present. For if my "thesis" is that Corbally preserved this University, what better way to show that than with a permanent part of the school that still stands? I think it nails home the idea that without a man that few students know, an iconic part of the University that many students know may not be here today.

⁸ Interview with Mark Brown

⁹ Interview with Robert McClure

The project proved to be one of the most grueling and demanding research exercises of my academic career. I had to have combed through hundreds and hundreds of newspaper articles and glanced at at least as many photographs. The hours I had to spend tested my patience, but I am happy I prevailed. The end, as my advisors were fond of saying, is gratifying and makes you feel all the work was worth it. Looking back on months of research and digging, I can say it feels fantastic to have done the work and to have created such a product.

Throughout the course of this project, I enjoyed gaining a better understanding of who John Corbally I was. I do feel like, even without having the pleasure of interviewing him, I got to know the man—who he was and what he stood for. I enjoyed every time I stepped into the archives, taking a step back in time.

I can only hope that this documentary can serve as a historical resource for those interested in the era. If anything though, I see it as an overview—something that can spark curiosity and serve as a starting point for further research.

The documentary, I think, brings up some important things for the SU community to consider as Chancellor Nancy Cantor's tenure begins to wind down. I would like my project to provoke discussion as to what makes a "good" chancellor or a "successful" chancellor. The odd case of John Corbally's brief but busy tenure can serve as a reminder, I believe, that quality often overrules quantity. I hope that when examining Chancellor Cantor's time as the leader of Syracuse University, her legacy is determined based on her accomplishments and not her mere presence.

There were many people who were nothing short of instrumental to making this project a reality. First and foremost I must thank Eric Holzwarth of the Renee Crown Honors Program, without whom I would be without a topic and without a polished finished project. His motivation and instruction proved critical to accomplishing what, at many times, seemed to be an impossible task. My advisor Randy Wenner deserves immense recognition for his support and his stamina, looking over draft after draft of my documentary script and providing the encouragement necessary to keep me going. Thank you to my Reader Don Torrance and my Broadcast Journalism advisor Barbara Fought for being there when I needed them.

This project would have been nothing without the help of the people I interviewed. Without Jan Corbally, I doubt this project would have gotten off the ground and without Professor John Robert Greene and his books *The Tolley Years* and *The Eggers Years*, background and details would be seriously lacking. I appreciate all the time that the interviewees took out of their days to spare for me. Truly, it was their recollections and soundbites that made the documentary what it was.

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Summary of Capstone Project

Syracuse University has had eleven chancellors and virtually every one of them is a household name on campus. That's not because everyone remembers them for their work at SU, but simply because their names are everywhere. Students may live in Haven, Flint, or Day halls. Those on Mount Olympus eat at Graham Dining Hall. Geography and history students call the Eggers Building their home, right next door to the Tolley Building and down the road from Sims Hall. Even Chancellor Kenneth Shaw has the quadrangle named for him.

John Corbally is somewhat of the forgotten chancellor at Syracuse University. Sandwiched between two of the school's most successful leaders—William Tolley and Melvin Eggers—Corbally only served the briefest of terms, a mere 18 months. But with his tenure began one of the most exciting and emotionally-charged eras in the history of the campus. Not only was Corbally chancellor for SU's 100th birthday, but his administration oversaw the University during the famous 1970 anti-Vietnam War protests that shut the campus down for more than a week. That wasn't even his first crisis. Barely a month earlier, eight African-American football players boycotted the team to protest what they saw as racism. And to make matters worse, and perhaps through no fault of his own,

Syracuse University began to enter its most troubled of financial times.¹ All of this in the shortest term for any SU chancellor.

Since the 1970s, the Corbally name has somewhat disappeared. Few know him around campus. Only one other past chancellor is without a namesake on the hill—and SU’s first dormitory bore his name for 84 years before becoming the Schine Student Center.²

The year 1969 was not a good time to be a chancellor at any university in the United States. Campuses were uneasy as the Vietnam War escalated overseas. Corbally arrived in the middle of things. Student rebellion came with the changing times. A school that had once required a curfew, single-gender residence floors, and even formalwear in the dining halls on Sundays was changing too. No longer would there be a Dean of Men and a Dean of Women when Corbally took power.³ No longer would dormitories be gender-segregated by floor. Unpopular would be the idea of “in loco parentis”—a University taking the place of a parent and looking after its students as its children.

That’s not to mention the act Corbally had to follow. Chancellor William Tolley was a Syracuse man. He was a Methodist minister and an alumnus who had served as leader of the University for the previous 26 years, expanding the campus and transforming the hill from the small community college to the powerful private school it is today. Corbally was an outsider. He came from

¹ Greene, “The Eggers Years,” p. 18

² “Winchell Hall, Dormitory for Women”

³ Interview with Mark Brown

Ohio State University—a large, public, Midwestern school.⁴ He was quiet and often perceived as cold. He was by no means out and about on campus.

Yet a dose of cool, calm, and collected may have been just what Syracuse University needed at that time. Anything else could have been disastrous. (That includes an aging, temperamental William Tolley who was known for keeping a short leash, once even going so far as to take a cane to a student who protested the ROTC program by cutting through its parade on campus, an incident photographed in *The Daily Orange*.)⁵

In fact, most people credit Corbally's actions under pressure for saving the school from the sort of incident that had shocked campuses around the country: the shootings at Kent State University. When students went on strike and shut down the campus, Corbally allowed it.⁶ He let the frustration run its course, keeping a low profile. Corbally never called in the police. Together with Syracuse Police Chief Frank Sardino, the Chancellor kept things under control. He let the protests continue. The result: zero deaths, zero injuries, and minimal property damage.⁷

How Corbally handled the student uprisings was nearly an instant replay of how he handled racial tensions just months earlier. Eight African-American football players went on strike to protest what they viewed to be discrimination. The white players received more playing time, they argued, when the black

⁴ Syracuse University News Bureau, "Dr. John E. Corbally"

⁵ A photo memorialized on the cover of the May 13, 1964 edition of *The Daily Orange*

⁶ Interview with David Bennett

⁷ Interview with Robert McClure

players clearly deserved it.⁸ The Boycott Eight demanded the depth chart be determined based on ability and that a black assistant coach be hired. Corbally served as the level-headed administrator, reaching out to the boycotting students and ensuring a resolution, although an uneasy one, to the conflict.

But perhaps Corbally's biggest, albeit most overlooked, accomplishment is the way he handled the University's finances. By all accounts, Syracuse was in poor financial shape by the end of the Tolley administration. He had grown the campus, sure, but he had done so with borrowed money and without keeping his books in order.⁹ Syracuse University was unkempt and dilapidated when Corbally arrived, but with the help of his financial wizard, Ron Brady, things began to turn around. Corbally's administration streamlined the financial system and reconciled the records. The budget he crafted featured some tough cuts but preserved the institution's health for the future.¹⁰

Corbally left Syracuse University almost as quickly as he arrived, simply 18 months after taking the position. His mark on the University is better measured in dollars earned, property preserved, and lives saved than in years served. During one of academia's most trying times, John Corbally and his administration were the glue that held the campus together.

"The Forgotten Chancellor" is a documentary that features on-camera interviews with eight professors and scholars who were either on campus at the time or have significant knowledge of Syracuse University and the Corbally

⁸ Greene, "The Eggers Years," p. 49

⁹ Greene, "The Eggers Years," p. 18-20

¹⁰ Greene, "The Eggers Years," p. 20

administration. Together with several more phone interviews with Corbally's family and friends and with the immense help of the Syracuse University Archives, the documentary comes alive with first-hand accounts, from memory and from photographs, as to what happened during John Corbally's 18 months on campus.

The purpose is to present the anomaly of John Corbally: the man who succeeded at every juncture before and after Syracuse but is looked down on by the campus community. He is the man who presided over SU during one of its most tumultuous times, whose problems grew from administrations previous and whose solutions surfaced in future administrations. He is the man who set Syracuse on the right path and perhaps it is time that he is remembered as such.