Unsettled Conditions

The tuesday of Commencement week, June 6, was radiant—perfect weather for the seniors to march from the Old Yard to Memorial Church, tipping their caps to the statue of John Harvard, for their Baccalaureate service, where Lawrence H. Summers, whose five years as president would conclude June 30, spoke of the power of reason.

Wednesday was sudden. A chill wind from the northeast gusted to 25 miles per hour, and 2.89 inches of rain fell. The picnic lunch for seniors and their families scheduled for the Old Yard was a washout. But certain parts of the show must go on, and the class of ’06 did resolutely celebrate their Class Day with two hours of speechifying from the tent on the church steps in Tercentenary Theatre. A few diehard parents and friends huddled under umbrellas on seats in the Theatre, but most fled the deluge to watch the televised proceedings on large screens in Science Center auditoria. Seth MacFarlane, creator of the television show Family Guy and the guest Class Day speaker, wisecracked, “There’s nowhere I’d rather be on a day like this than around all this electrical equipment.” On that same spot, earlier in the day, nine undergraduates re-
ceived their first salute at the Reserve Officers’ Training Corps commissioning ceremony. In his address to that small gathering, crowded under the tent, Summers said, “I hope and I believe that the ROTC program and the University have drawn more closely into connection these last years. That certainly has been what I have been trying to do, but I believe that we still have some ways to go.”

On Commencement morning, light rain was falling, but decently, vertically, as degree candidates, alumni, faculty, and dignitaries lined up for procession into Tercentenary Theatre. “Rain? What rain?” demanded Mark S. Holland ’71, of New York City. “But there was someone building an ark, and even the water beetles came inside” at Kirkland House, where thirty-fifth reunioners were lodged. Susan Fales-Hill ’84, of New York City, an elected director of the Harvard Alumni Association and a member of the Committee for the Happy Observance of Commencement, was busy welcoming professional-school degree candidates to their seats by Sever Hall. “Congratulations, congratulations,” she said repeatedly. “We arranged the weather for you. Perfect for hair, perfect for shoes.”

The Reverend Professor Peter J. Gomes, in his chapel talk to seniors at 8 a.m., explained about the weather. “Now, there may be some people outside who will be wet,” said Gomes. “But that will not be you…. It will not be raining. Others will be annoyed, but not you, because it never rains on a Harvard Commencement. This is surely a Harvard Commencement, and thus that cannot, and will not, be rain.”

For want of faith, the Harvard Alumni Association quit the outdoors in the afternoon. The alumni parade was canceled, and the HAA’s annual meeting was held in Sanders Theatre, which seats 1,200. Others watched on television in Annenberg Hall, the Science Center, and various other shelters as Summers and honorand Jim Lehrer made their remarks (for excerpts, see page 51). Historical note: In 1968, morning exercises were held indoors for the first time since 1904, in Sanders (where fewer than a hundred seniors were on hand when the degrees were conferred), but the skies cleared and the afternoon festivities came off outdoors. Unquestionable rain has fallen on Commencement day in four of the five years of Summers’s presidency.

Unsettled conditions this Commencement week were not only meteorological, but arose from matters known or suspected but unsaid. Not only was the presidency of Lawrence Summers near its end, but William C. Kirby would conclude his service as dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at the end of June, too. Disagreements between the two prompted Kirby to resign, and pressure from the Harvard Corporation, or at least some members of it, reportedly had helped lead to Summers’s departure. Yet these people...
were obliged to appear together at various festival events, which cannot have been altogether happy observances for them.

Only scant reference was made publicly to these conditions. In his Baccalaureate remarks to seniors, Summers said, “I count myself as one of you. We all graduate from Harvard this week! And we’ve got some things in common.…We think some professors, some members of the faculty, did very well by us—and others were, well—less well disposed.…It is really too soon, really too soon for any of us, to know how much, or just what, we have accomplished at Harvard.”

At a farewell dinner for Summers and retiring members of the Board of Overseers given that evening at the Fogg Art Museum, the dessert plates had written on them in chocolate, “Thank you, Larry.” He was given tennis balls with his name on them. Corporation member Robert Rubin remarked that Summers’s aspiration had been to set the agenda for Harvard’s next 100 years. Outgoing president of the Overseers Patti B. Saris made lighthearted reference to Summers’s speech in January 2005 about women in science. When he leaves Elmwood, the president’s residence, noted a couple of speakers, he will be her neighbor in Brookline, Massachusetts.

At a dinner for the honorands Wednesday, Lehrer offered a toast. Speaking about “my friend Larry Summers,” he said that the president had “wanted to cause things to change” in the curriculum, by opening the University to students of lesser means, by increasing its international reach, and in the new Allston campus. “He’s done all that and more, and he has the accomplishments to look back on and savor, and he has some of the scars to show for it.”

The local press gave unsettled depictions of conditions. The official Gazette ran a section on the president’s accomplishments; its timeline of events began those of 2005, for instance, with the creation of task forces to reduce barriers faced by female faculty members, but did not mention the preceding women-in-science speech by Summers or the faculty debates and vote of lack of confidence in him. The Crimson’s gloves-off “Year in Review” began an account-in-statistics of 2006 this way: “$26.5 million: Amount that Harvard has agreed to pay the U.S. government to settle a lawsuit alleging that economics professor Andrei Shleifer ’82 defrauded a federal agency” (see “HIID Dénouement,” March-April, page 67)—and equated that sum to 825 full-tuition scholarships. The section had a full-page photograph of Summers on its back and a drawing on its front of the Corporation’s Senior Fellow, “James R. Houghton: Newsmaker of the Year,” with the words: “He supported Summers through the tumult of 2005. But this past February, Houghton made up his mind: Larry had to leave.”