

The 100-Year Decision: Texas A&M and the SEC

By R. Bowen Loftin. Published 2014 by Texas A&M Press, College Station, Texas. (224 pages).

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It hails from a variety of sources harboring a variety of perspectives. These include academics, economists, and journalists, among others. There are indictments of an institution gone haywire, historical accounts of this American pastime, and fiscal tales of woe and excess. That's on top of the myriad of books on particular teams, conferences, fan bases, and stadiums. To be clear, those who want to read about the social institution of college football have no shortage of choices.

Yet the perspective in *The 100 Year Decision: Texas A&M and the SEC* is unique. Unlike many views from the gridiron or sidelines, this book comes from the front office – which in the case of major college sports, is the office of the university president. R. Bowen Loftin, the former president of Texas A&M University who later served as chancellor of the University of Missouri, takes readers through the well-publicized and highly political move of A&M from the Big 12 athletic conference to the SEC, leaving its fellow Texas universities behind and creating rifts that could endure for years to come. Loftin, who led the university from 2009 until January of 2014, oversaw the university's courtship and eventual decision, a process that at times feels as much like a television drama as it does an arm of higher education. In other words, this book will not dispel any beliefs by critics of the seemingly professionalized world of major college sports. Loftin begins the text by essentially highlighting the oddity of his very situation. A well respected scientist and academic administrator, he points out that he is an odd fit for this authorship, noting that neither he nor his past acquaintances would have believed he might someday author a first-person book on college sports. Yet within that same opening chapter, Loftin writes in vivid detail the events that led him early in his presidency to fire then head football coach Mike Sherman, much of which focused on Sherman's inability to take greater risks in play-calling on fourth downs. Loftin makes it very clear that the president of Texas A&M better quickly understand the operations of his or her football program, even if that president came to the position by way of technical sciences. In other words, to be president of Texas A&M, one better understand sports.

Loftin does give readers a brief historical perspective on the volatility of big time college athletics conference alignments in Texas, particularly the long defunct Southwest Conference, of

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which Texas A&M was a member and which collapsed through a confluence of hubris, penalties, and teams seeking greener pastures. This provides both context but also seemingly a cautionary tale from the person charged with insuring his university doesn't end up on the wrong side of another athletic implosion. In other words, Loftin full acknowledged that what happened before certainly could happen again, all providing justification for what many in the college football landscape -- and certainly within the Big 12 Athletic Conference -- consider to be self-serving, if not treasonous.

What becomes most clear throughout the book is the true competitiveness between Loftin and his counterparts -- presidents of other research universities with large athletic programs, particularly former conference foes and others in the state of Texas. One such example was Baylor University and its president Ken Starr, whom Loftin seemed to regard as both an ally and an adversary in concurrent moments. For example, Loftin didn't appreciate Baylor's lobby to join the Pac-10 instead of eventual conference addition Colorado, despite the irony (or some might suggest hypocrisy) of that belief. Loftin also took clear joy in A&M's football defeat of Baylor in 2011 and A&M students mocking Baylor during the game. From the reader's outside perspective, Loftin's joy in that moment may feel petty, and perhaps even unpresidential. Yet at other times in the text, Loftin empathizes and coalesces with Baylor and Starr, particularly as it might be advantageous to A&M.

Regardless of the gamesmanship with other schools, the most obvious conflict comes with the University of Texas, who throughout the text is juxtaposed as A&M's most bitter rival, an animus that's prominently manifest through athletics. This rivalry, which extends seemingly through every fiber of university life, has played an instrumental role in the trajectory of Texas A&M's athletic program, as Loftin indicates through the course of the book. It's stated clearly as the title of chapter eight – *The Devil Wears Burnt Orange*, which positioned UT as a heartless power broker straight from central casting. Perhaps the most troubling divide between the schools, which evolves into a true line in the sand between the two universities, is UT's clear intention to create its own television network – the Longhorn Network – which Loftin both fears and opposes, insisting it would cause chaos and imbalance in the somewhat egalitarian landscape of college conferences, where each member shares in considerable media revenues. The network not only plays a key role in A&M's departure for the SEC, but also in UT not joining the Pac-10 – at least according to Loftin's account.

Loftin often speaks of UT in paternalistic tones, inferring that the University of Texas doesn't view A&M as an equal, but rather a little brother in the family of Texas state research universities. To provide context, Loftin dedicates an entire chapter to the growth of his university, where he emphasized the transition from a school once synonymous with Aggie jokes to a university that no longer need be seen as a branch campus to the school up in Austin. In fact, Loftin concludes that very chapter by reminding readers that times – and universities – change. Texas A&M's move to the SEC seems rooted as much in the need and desire to escape the shadow of UT as it does anything else, a construct hardly veiled through the text. Certainly, the readers are experiencing only one perspective on this great divide and departure, one which feels laden with obvious and perhaps understandable bias. Even if this reflects a common refrain about UT in the athletic world, the reader is likely left wanting to hear the other side.

Throughout the book, Loftin paints a rosy outlook towards his school's entry in the SEC. For example, he notes the simple value of the SEC logo in selling team jerseys. He also praises the equal revenue distribution in the league, which is both robust and different than the model in place in his former conference. He even notes both A&M and the University of Missouri's role

in helping the SEC to sign a landmark network deal with ESPN. In sum, Loftin seems confident in his decision and A&M's move, one that clearly shook the college sports landscape (although to be fair, perhaps not as much as he suggested it would, as the Big 12 remains currently intact). But despite public outcry against the Aggies from former conference affiliates, as well as critics of the arms race in college sports, Loftin expresses little if any regret.

While the book is laden with strong content, what is strikingly absent is a discussion of the place of student labor in big time college sports. Loftin writes considerably about the importance of Johnny Manziel, who propelled Texas A&M to athletic and fundraising heights. While Loftin appreciates Manziel's efforts and laments his public troubles, he doesn't contemplate the importance of unpaid college athletes in the overall complex of major, Division I sports. The text isn't specifically about college athletes nor the arguments for or against compensation – nor does it claim to be – but it does seem absent from the larger narrative. It's simply conjecture, but perhaps this omission is most telling from the perspective of a college president. The issue of paying athletes simply isn't at the forefront of their thought process. Also missing from the text is a thorough analysis of the place and potential misprioritization of major athletics in American universities. Even as critics have bemoaned the many issues and scandals that have befallen major university athletics, Loftin presents college sports, and particularly major Division I college football, as an unmistakably positive part of the university mix. Intentional or not, this omission sends a particular message about college sports and its regard, at least from the view of a major university president that resides over one of the largest athletic budgets in all of America. While the reader shouldn't expect a condemnation of college sports, a more nuanced reading of its evolution could have added a layer of complexity to the text.

Undoubtedly, Loftin offers a unique perspective on the shifting landscape of major college sports and the ongoing process of conference realignment. Not only did he lead Texas A&M to the SEC, but he then became chancellor of the University of Missouri, another university that left the Big 12 for the SEC. He is, by his own admission, a true supporter of both his athletic conference and the power of college sports to advance a university. Perhaps that is the final lesson to readers, who are privileged to an inside look at a secret world. College presidents, and certainly the author of this text, understand and accept the prominent place of university athletics. Which suggests that this 100 year decision, and others like it, will truly endure for the foreseeable future.