

Alleged Death Threats, a Hunger Strike, and a Department at Risk Over a Tenure Decision

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The Chronicle of Higher Education

August 4, 2000, Section: The Faculty, Page: A12

If you thought you knew all there was to know about nasty tenure disputes, think again, and consider recent events surrounding the battle of John Walbridge in the tiny department of Near Eastern languages and cultures at Indiana University.

Sure, there were the internecine backstabblings and poison-pen missives we've come to expect of this process. And the usual personality conflicts, professional jealousy, and generational divides again held sway as this contentious rite of passage played itself out in Bloomington.

But then things got weird.

Last fall, Mr. Walbridge, a 50-year-old associate professor, was accused of making death threats against the faculty members who opposed his bid for tenure. Campus police found no basis for the accusation, but nonetheless posted an officer outside the department's office, in Goodbody Hall, during a tenure vote. Mr. Walbridge, in turn, accused his chairman of tampering with his dossier to make his case look bad. Then, this spring, with Mr. Walbridge's tenure still in question, his wife staged a hunger strike in front of an administration building.

When the conflict spilled out across the campus in July, allies and critics weighed in. Some called for investigations, others demanded firings of the department's chairman and even set up a World Wide Web site devoted to that cause.

An outside panel had recommended last year that the department disband. "I thought they were going to be soldiering on across a minefield, and there were going to be some people badly hurt in the process," says Richard W. Bulliet, a historian and former director of the Middle East Institute at Columbia University, and a panel member. By the time Mr. Walbridge's tenure battle peaked this spring, the department was on the verge of imploding. Or was it?

When the dust settled, Mr. Walbridge was in, the department chair was out, and the department, astonishingly, had received another chance. In July, the new dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, Kumble R. Subbaswamy, called for civility among faculty members and for meetings to discuss the department's future.

But Mr. Subbaswamy's morning-after prescription hardly seems calculated to prevent a recurrence of what devolved into one of the ugliest tenure battles in the country. And it raises anew questions that all universities making tenure decisions would do well to address *before* things get out of hand. At what point does the questionable judgment

of faculty members running departments and making tenure decisions begin to become a serious liability to a university, so much so that it becomes incumbent upon the institution to step in and take charge?

It's clear that, in Indiana's case, that point was reached months, if not years ago. The department lost five scholars in five years, and three chairs in three years; the most recent one now faces the threat of a lawsuit for his actions. Graduate-student admission was curtailed a few years ago after internal strife forced the rejiggering of 11 dissertation committees. Now, with only four scholars remaining, and one of them close to retirement, many of the bright young stars hired in the early 90's are gone, and a gamble to revive Near East studies has not paid off.

Perhaps the only combatant who comes close to being satisfied is Mr. Walbridge. "The people who caused most of the department's problems are gone," he says. "The rest are productive. We don't necessarily all like each other — but within the realm of normal academic grumpiness."

In 1992, Morton Lowengrub, then the dean of arts and sciences at Indiana, hired a new chairwoman — Fedwa Malti-Douglas — to revive the department of Near Eastern languages and cultures. Ms. Malti-Douglas, who got her Ph.D. from the University of California at Los Angeles, and taught at the University of Virginia and the University of Texas at Austin, was a young, feminist literary critic. Her work in Middle Eastern and North African studies had "attracted a group of admirers who thought that, in a kind of moribund field, she was a bright new light," says Mr. Bulliet.

In 1993, Ms. Malti-Douglas hired a rising star, Jamsheed K. Choksy, a Guggenheim fellow who held a Ph.D. from Harvard University and who specialized in Iranian and Islamic studies.

That same year, she hired John Walbridge, an expert on Islamic philosophy. Also a Harvard Ph.D., Mr. Walbridge had taken a more indirect route, working outside academe for seven years. When Indiana hired him as a tenure-track associate professor, he had already turned his dissertation into a book — one in a series published by Harvard's Center for Middle Eastern Studies — and had just spent two years at Columbia University editing *The Encyclopaedia Iranica*.

Mr. Walbridge and Ms. Malti-Douglas quickly clashed. Observers say they simply didn't like each other — she could be sharp-tongued and he could be tactless. She ruled by fiat; he had trouble accepting her authority. Mr. Walbridge says Ms. Malti-Douglas was a power-hungry "control freak" who disdained faculty governance. He also claims "she played favorites shamelessly," putting Mr. Choksy's promotion on the fast track. He won tenure before Mr. Walbridge even came up. Ms. Malti-Douglas declined to be interviewed for this story.

The Near Eastern studies department splintered. Stephen Katz, a professor of Hebrew literature and language in the department, says he tried to stay on the sidelines. "I found myself extremely disappointed with people's behavior, and frustrated that the department

could not conduct itself in a humane or decent fashion to see a tenure case through.”

The alliances were not forged through personal fondness or professional respect. Rather, says one professor, they were governed by a general principle — “my enemy’s enemies are my friends.”

By Mr. Walbridge’s third-year review in 1996 it was clear who his enemies were. The department voted 2 to 1 to renew him. Ms. Malti-Douglas, who as chairwoman had no vote, recommended against renewal, based on what she viewed as Mr. Walbridge’s weak teaching record, and both the dean of the college and the vice chancellor for academic affairs agreed, overruling the department’s vote. Mr. Walbridge’s teaching would remain the sticking point in every assessment thereafter.

He appealed the college’s decision not to renew him, and a grievance panel — the Faculty Board of Review — sided with him. In a February 1997 report, that panel called the process “deeply flawed,” and recommended renewing Mr. Walbridge but excluding Ms. Malti-Douglas from his tenure review, because “she has become so openly hostile toward Walbridge that she cannot be permitted to participate.”

The administration renewed Mr. Walbridge’s appointment, but in 1998, when he returned from a Fulbright fellowship in Pakistan, he was up for review again. This time, the chairwoman was Suzanne Stetkevych, a professor of Arabic literature who had been in the department long before Ms. Malti-Douglas joined it.

She had had a falling out with Ms. Malti-Douglas, who had stepped down as chairwoman in June 1997. Some observers say Ms. Malti-Douglas was forced out of the chairmanship after the problems with Mr. Walbridge’s third-year review, but Dean Lowengrub, now a vice president at Yeshiva University, says that wasn’t so. At any rate, things were so tense between Ms. Malti-Douglas and Ms. Stetkevych that nearly a dozen dissertation committees had to be reorganized because the two women would not work together.

Ms. Stetkevych had been the lone vote against Mr. Walbridge at his third-year review. But her allegiances had shifted since then — now she was his biggest supporter.

She says that her opinion of Mr. Walbridge’s work improved because he had sought help with his teaching and his evaluations had improved.

This time, the department voted 2 to 0, with four abstentions, to renew Mr. Walbridge. One professor was out of town, but the other three — Ms. Malti-Douglas, Mr. Choksy, and Kemal Silay, a young professor of Turkish studies who had accepted an endowed chair in 1997 — abstained as a block to register their displeasure with Mr. Walbridge and the review process, Ms. Stetkevych asserts.

In internal e-mail messages, both Mr. Choksy and Mr. Silay contended that the chairwoman excluded from the dossier a few years’ worth of Mr. Walbridge’s teaching evaluations, and so their only option was to abstain. Ms. Stetkevych counters that she conducted the review by the book.

Despite the vote, Ms. Stetkevych strongly recommended that Mr. Walbridge be renewed, and Mr. Lowengrub agreed.

Soon, however, Ms. Stetkevych learned that Dean Lowengrub planned to close the department. She is convinced that Ms. Malti-Douglas, who was viewed by many as a favorite of the dean, was behind his decision. “It sounds like I’ve become totally paranoid,” Ms. Stetkevych says, “but the major person opposed to Walbridge was also the major person trying to undermine the department.”

Outraged, Ms. Stetkevych resigned her post in January 1999, made scathing comments about the dean in the local newspaper — accusing him of fiscal mismanagement and of trying to dissolve the department without consulting faculty members — and drummed up support from Islamic and Arab community groups. She said there was no academic justification to close the department.

Dean Lowengrub appointed Mr. Choksy chairman of the department in February 1999. “He was a very gifted and capable young man,” explains Mr. Lowengrub. Still, Dean Lowengrub in April 1999 appointed a committee to consider a restructuring plan for the department, and faculty members were given some time to come up with their own ideas for an institute.

With Ms. Malti-Douglas now out of the picture — she left the department for an endowed chair in gender studies at Indiana in June 1999 — Mr. Walbridge and Ms. Stetkevych say that they tried to work with Mr. Choksy. But they say he was a weak chairman who refused to advocate for the department at a time when it was being threatened with closure. Mr. Choksy’s aim was to please administrators, even if it meant sacrificing the department and sabotaging colleagues. “The department is in ruins now particularly because of Choksy’s handling of it in the last year,” says Mr. Walbridge.

Mr. Choksy, in a statement issued through his lawyers, says that he concurred with the results of the outside panel’s review, and believed that dismantling the department and creating an institute was the only viable way of preserving Near Eastern studies. One member of the outside review said Mr. Choksy acted like a “gentleman” during his chairmanship. Nonetheless, “Choksy didn’t have a chance,” says a professor close to the department. “He got on a horse that he couldn’t ride. I don’t know that anyone could have ridden it.”

By July 1999, the review panel had recommended disbanding the department. In the following months, most of its professors sought transfers. Then, nine months into Mr. Choksy’s chairmanship, Mr. Walbridge’s tenure bid came up for review.

On September 6, 1999, about a week before his case was to go before the faculty, Mr. Walbridge was reviewing his dossier in the department’s office, when a secretary asked him whether he was nervous. He recalls making “a crack like, ‘You have to treat a faculty member who is coming up for tenure a little like a disgruntled postal worker.’ ” Mr. Walbridge says he delivered the joke in his “usual deadpan style,” but it was, to him, an obvious joke.

Neither the secretary, Nancy L. Kidwell, nor Mr. Choksy, who was also in the office, was amused. In an e-mail message recounting the incident for Mr. Choksy, she said, “I would like to believe that there was nothing intended in his statement, though I honestly do

not know.” Ms. Kidwell would not comment for this story.

Mr. Choksy had asked for her account of the event, which he forwarded along with his own to the acting dean at the time, Russell Hanson. Mr. Choksy, through his lawyer, issued a statement saying that he had no choice but to report staff and faculty concerns about Mr. Walbridge’s “emotional composure.” If he had done nothing, and Mr. Walbridge had later “gone postal,” Mr. Choksy could have been liable, his supporters say. Besides, that wasn’t the only suspicious remark from Mr. Walbridge. Mr. Choksy told the dean about a faculty meeting in which Mr. Walbridge was said to have made comments about using force against the chairman.

Mr. Walbridge denies making such remarks, but admits that he once shouted at Mr. Choksy privately, because Mr. Choksy had forwarded his private e-mail message about the plans to reorganize the department to a dean.

What did Mr. Walbridge say? “I said, ‘If you try a stunt like this again I’ll have your head on a platter.’ ” He adds: “Metaphor. I didn’t threaten anybody.” When he learned about the accusations months later, he says, “It struck me as a desperate attempt to keep me from getting tenure.”

A few weeks later, on September 17, the department voted 4 to 0, with one abstention (Mr. Silay, again), to recommend tenure. Unbeknownst to Mr. Walbridge, a plainclothes campus-police officer had been posted in the hall during the vote as a precaution that Mr. Choksy had asked for, in case Mr. Walbridge’s bid went sour and he became violent. There was no violence, but a few weeks later, another professor in the department contacted the chairman with more concerns about Mr. Walbridge.

Salman Al-Ani told the chairman that Mr. Walbridge was “agitated.” In an e-mail message on September 30 to Mr. Hanson, the acting dean, Mr. Choksy wrote that Mr. Al-Ani “has begun to fear for the safety of Kemal Silay and others” and that “although John does not appear to be the violent type, he was beginning to be concerned that John may be unable to maintain his composure and might become a danger to others and/or to himself.”

Mr. Walbridge says that message was tantamount to accusing him of witchcraft. “This is a very easy thing to tar an academic rival with,” he says. “You don’t need anything serious in the way of evidence, you just say, ‘His demeanor seems unstable.’ ” He adds, “It’s very damaging, like those nutty child-abuse cases they had in the 80’s that all collapsed.” Mr. Al-Ani did not respond to several e-mail and telephone messages from *The Chronicle*.

In a June 2000 report to the vice chancellor for academic affairs, Dean Hanson said that more than one person complained that Mr. Walbridge “made remarks that were construed as threatening violence in the event of a negative tenure decision.” Mr. Hanson notified administrators and the campus police, and called his response “prudent and measured.”

If there was more than one incident, that was news to the campus police, says Jerry L. Minger, their spokesman. He said his office received only one complaint, filed by Mr. Choksy in October 1999, and that it had to do with the “postal” comment. “We asked, ‘Do

you have concerns about Walbridge being violent, or was it just this comment?’ He said, ‘No, It was just that comment.’ ” Mr. Minger said the police contacted everyone else in the department who Mr. Choksy said was worried, “and no one really felt in danger.” The campus police never contacted Mr. Walbridge and considered the matter closed.

Meanwhile, not surprisingly, Mr. Walbridge’s tenure case stalled.

Despite the department’s positive recommendation, Mr. Choksy raised reservations about the vote with then-Dean Hanson. Again, the main issue was Mr. Walbridge’s teaching, particularly at the undergraduate level. Mr. Walbridge concedes he’s not an entertaining teacher, and that he’s demanding, and students don’t like that. Some say that the same “deadpan” humor that got him in trouble with colleagues played poorly with students.

Three members of the department sent letters to Dean Hanson to be included in the dossier, criticizing Mr. Choksy’s account and defending the vote. Mr. Silay wrote an e-mail message to the dean defending the chairman; calling the committee vote “slanted”; and attacking Mr. Walbridge’s teaching dossier, saying it “exhibits an alarming consensus of discontent on the part of his students.”

Mr. Silay retracted that message rather than have it included in the tenure file. But Mr. Walbridge collected it along with many others involving his case, by filing an open-records request with the university.

In December, Mr. Walbridge says, he asked the administration to transfer him to the philosophy department, where he already held an adjunct appointment: “I figured I couldn’t work effectively in a department where the chair thought I was a homicidal maniac.”

That same month, a college-wide committee voted 9 to 0 against tenure, on the grounds of poor teaching evaluations and a high proportion of student withdrawals from Mr. Walbridge’s courses. Dean Hanson upheld the vote, and Mr. Walbridge appealed. At that point, as he was reviewing his dossier to prepare his appeal, Mr. Walbridge says he discovered that many of his teaching evaluations had been tampered with to make his record look much worse than it was. Mr. Walbridge complained, and presented two sets of the evaluations, one that he says was the original and one that he says had been changed.

In March, Mr. Walbridge filed a formal complaint against Mr. Choksy, accusing the chairman of erasing positive comments from Mr. Walbridge’s student evaluations, adding negative ones, and then adding new tabulations to his dossier.

“I did not tamper with Walbridge’s evaluations,” says Mr. Choksy, “if tampering occurred at all. The accusers have proffered nothing more than conspiracy theories, supposition, and unsupported conclusory statements in an effort to achieve their end.”

Dean Hanson agreed to investigate, but before he concluded his investigation, the vice chancellor for academic affairs, Moya L. Andrews, removed the questionable evaluations from Mr. Walbridge’s dossier and sent it on to the university-wide promotion-and-tenure committee. That committee unanimously recommended tenure, but when the file made it to the president, Myles Brand, he balked. He initially sent the file back to the college committee that had voted 9 to 0 against tenure. Even with the questionable evaluations

removed, the committee again voted unanimously against tenure, and Dean Hanson again concurred. By the time that negative recommendation again landed on the president's desk, Mr. Walbridge's allegations of evaluations' tampering had become public, and the case languished for weeks.

By May 2, Linda Walbridge had had enough. An independent scholar, she had just finished a book about a Catholic bishop in Pakistan who had used hunger strikes to protest blasphemy laws there. So she parked herself on a bench outside the administration building with a sign that read: "Hunger Strike Protesting Academic Corruption at Indiana University."

She was demanding action on her husband's charge of dossier-tampering, and "fair and normal" treatment of his case.

"I was not there to make a spectacle, but to quietly remind people that they have an obligation to follow rules and to deal justly with people," she says. "That was my message — not, 'Give my husband tenure.' It was, 'Abide by your rules.' "

She returned the next morning, having drunk only juice the day before, and, within hours, her husband was informed that President Brand had granted him tenure. "I would hope that the hunger strike had nothing whatever to do with his decision," said Mr. Walbridge.

That, of course, was hardly the end of it.

Now it was Mr. Choksy's supporters who saw collusion. The scholar had already decided to transfer to another department (as did three other professors), but his supporters outside the department decided to do more. In June, they declared that Mr. Choksy had been cleared of Mr. Walbridge's tampering allegations by Mr. Hanson, who issued a report calling his results "inconclusive." He couldn't tell who had made the erasures. He couldn't tell whether any positive evaluations had been removed — but he said that, even if they had been, the impact would have been slight, "given the preponderance of negative evaluations."

But Mr. Choksy's supporters also started discussing what they believed had become a pattern of ignoring death threats on the campus. Around the same time, Murray Sperber, an English professor, had been the victim of anonymous death threats after he publicly criticized the university's basketball coach, Bob Knight, and President Brand's decision to keep him on despite evidence he had physically attacked one of his players. Some of Mr. Choksy's supporters suggested that the president was willing to ignore death threats and to cave to hunger strikes.

Through a spokesman, Mr. Brand denied both allegations. But Willis Barnstone, an emeritus professor of comparative literature at Indiana and a friend to Mr. Walbridge's departmental critics, revived the charges in the July 3 e-mail message he sent to the Board of Trustees, the dean of arts and sciences, and the campus police, and which has been widely circulated on the campus. "Rather than act on the many documented and witnessed death threats, the university has apparently chosen to award Professor Walbridge with tenure," railed Mr. Barnstone.

Mr. Walbridge, wrote Mr. Barnstone, threatened to have Mr. Choksy “hanged” and “to roll bombs down the corridor of Goodbody Hall.” Mr. Barnstone says that both Mr. Choksy and Mr. Silay “told me of murder threats.”

In fact, Mr. Barnstone had no firsthand knowledge of the events in the department. Says Perry Metz, an Indiana spokesman: “For Professor Barnstone to suggest that no administrator had taken these allegations seriously is to ignore a whole police investigation, and one could conclude that he did not like the results of the investigation, rather than that there wasn’t one.”

The head of the campus chapter of the American Association of University Professors, Robert Eno, says of Mr. Barnstone’s letter, “It’s dispiriting to have a colleague make an effort to defame another with such an ill-informed set of charges.” He adds, “I think a broad base of faculty here think it’s pretty deplorable.”

Mr. Barnstone remains defiant: “According to what I was told, my letter to the university was stating what the university already received, in greater detail.”

Mr. Walbridge’s response came through his lawyer: a letter notifying Mr. Barnstone and Mr. Choksy of a forthcoming lawsuit for slander, which Mr. Choksy’s lawyer dismissed as “an attempt to intimidate our client.” Not to be outdone, Mr. Choksy last week threatened to sue Mr. Walbridge and his wife.

Where does all this leave the department of Near Eastern languages and cultures? Following the advice of yet another review committee, the new dean, Mr. Subbaswamy, has for now put on hold any plans to turn it into an institute, and has instead called for meetings of the faculty — current and former — to talk about its future. He has urged them to reread the section of the faculty code of conduct on civility.

“This opportunity could be a wonderful thing for the unit,” says Ms. Andrews, the vice chancellor for academic affairs. “We would hope so. It’s really sad to see such accomplished faculty members have irreconcilable differences.”

Opinions are mixed, of course, about whether this latest strategy is the right approach. Some, like Mr. Walbridge, are hopeful, given that all of his opponents have left the department.

Others, like Mr. Bulliett of Columbia, view the dean’s decision as simply “kicking the can down the road.”