

Parsing the UO PUPPET SHOW

A NEW BOOK DETAILS HOW
NIKE CONTROLS THE
UNIVERSITY OF OREGON

BY BOB KEEFER

The ancient Greeks called it *peripeteia*, the turning point in a classical tragedy that comes when the hero makes a decision that inevitably seals his fate.

For the University of Oregon, *peripeteia* may have come in 2000, when then-UO President Dave Frohnmayer — a deeply honorable man struggling with the university's funding crisis — sided with Nike's founder, Phil Knight, in an international dispute over workers' rights rather than backing students and faculty members who wanted the UO to support Nike's workers.

In this tragic tale, Knight threatened to cut off millions in funding, both for the university and for a charity founded by Frohnmayer and his wife,

when the university initially supported the Worker Rights Consortium, a group that was publicly attacking Nike for poor conditions in Asian sweatshops that produced its shoes.

And that tragic moment came when Frohnmayer quickly caved and withdrew university support for the rights group.

That is the tale told in a searing new book that comes out this week about corporate corruption at the University of Oregon.

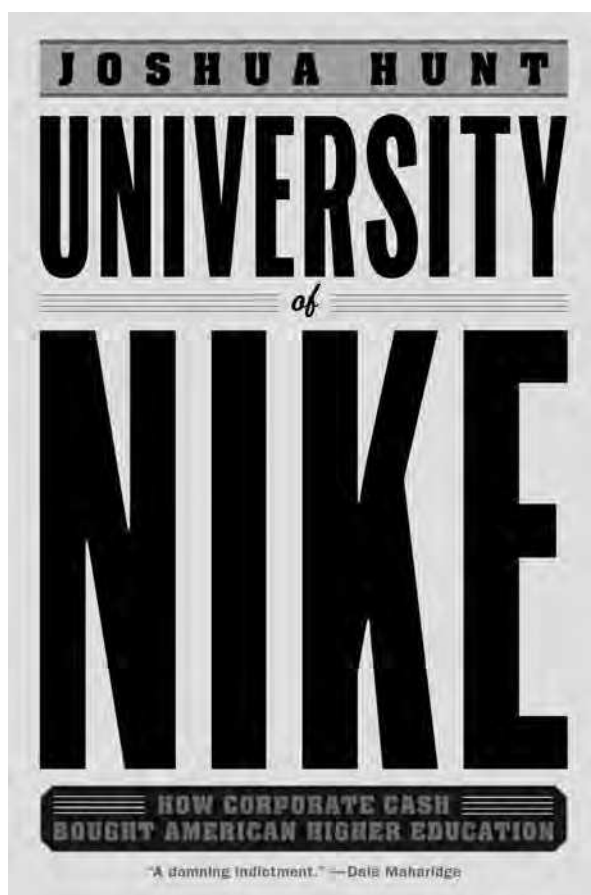
University of Nike: How Corporate Cash Bought American Higher Education was written by Joshua Hunt, a former Oregonian who spent years researching the extent and depth of influence that Nike has gained over the UO through its millions of dollars in donations.

"I agree that 'honorable' is a word I would use to describe him," Hunt says of Frohnmayer, who died in 2015. "He had a strict set of rules he tried his best to live by. He tended to enter into things with very good intentions."

Hunt is talking by telephone from Tokyo, where he has lived since working there as a foreign correspondent for Reuters. "One reason [Frohnmayer's] story is so attractive to a storyteller is it does have a lot of drama. You can see it very clearly, because there is such a track record ... There is this large shadow he casts over Oregon's history."

In the hindsight of history, Frohnmayer, though honorable, may have been naïve.

While Frohnmayer was president of the UO, Knight — a UO graduate and major donor to the university — began giving \$1 million a year to the tiny Fanconi Anemia Research Fund, a charity that Frohnmayer and his wife, Lynn, created to pay for research into the rare genetic



disease that ultimately killed all three of their daughters over a 20-year period.

A donation from Knight was also adding \$40,000 a year toward Frohnmayer's UO salary, Hunt's book says.

And Knight had pledged \$30 million to the UO for the renovation of Autzen Stadium.

Perhaps it should have come as no surprise to anyone that Knight threatened to stop his donations when the university supported the Worker Rights Consortium.

Knight, Hunt writes, made it personal.

As 2000 came to a close, Hunt writes, "Knight made it clear that he would not be making his annual contribution to the Fanconi Anemia Research Fund. A dark, distressed mood fell over the Frohnmayer household, according to [family friend Arthur] Golden."

Frohnmayer, Hunt writes, "suddenly realized he'd been laboring for years under some serious delusions about the nature of the bargain he'd made by taking Knight's money."

In a statement emailed Oct. 16, Lynn Frohnmayer denies any of this happened. She says the book is "replete with a stunning array of errors, distortions,

misrepresentations and outright falsehoods." As an example, though, she challenges an account of a phone call between her and Knight — one that Hunt didn't actually use in the book after hearing her denials.

In Hunt's telling, under incredible financial pressure, Frohnmayer reversed his decision on the Worker Rights Consortium — and the Nike money came back.

That marked a turning point in the corruption of the UO, Hunt says.

Years down the line, he says, Nike's influence would extend to a virtual wall of corporate silence surrounding the university and its doings. That wall is enforced, the book says, by an enormous public relations apparatus, sometimes working hand-in-hand with Nike employees, all striving to keep the public from knowing what the UO is really doing.

BASKETBALL AND RAPE

The book got started because of an athletics scandal at the UO.

Hunt grew up, in part, in Oregon and has degrees in Japanese language and communication studies from Portland State University. His work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic* and *Bloomberg Businessweek*, among other places.

In spring 2014, Hunt came to Eugene on assignment from *The New York Times* to investigate reports that a freshman student told police she'd been gang-raped by three UO basketball players. University administrators knew of the allegations the following day, Hunt writes in the introduction to his book, but kept the matter quiet and allowed the three men to play in that year's NCAA basketball tournament.

Hunt was shocked at the bureaucratic wall of silence he encountered at the university.

"University administrators refused to talk with me, and occasionally locked themselves in their offices until I left the buildings where they worked," he writes in the book's introduction. "The players also refused to talk with me, while their lawyers insisted that the sex had been consensual. The school's office of public records produced mostly useless, heavily redacted records concerning its handling of the incident, and even the school's public relations professionals proved to be tight-lipped."

It was the stunning resistance and obfuscation he met while pursuing the basketball story that inspired Hunt to write *University of Nike*.

"It became very clear early on that the university was doing a lot to prevent scrutiny of things that should be public records — archives and emails between university