

The Untold Tale of the Forged Email From President Traina

by
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On April 11, 1997, at 2:38 pm, an email message was allegedly sent from Clark University President Richard Traina to the email account that belongs to Clark's Undergraduate Student Council. The message quickly spread around the University's small campus: originally as a forwarded mailing to all of the members of Student Council, who forwarded it on to their friends, who passed it on to theirs, and so on, until most of the campus had either seen or heard about the message. What very few people realized, however, was that the message was forged. The full story behind this incident, all of it true, will be revealed here for the first time.

The story begins at sunset on a quiet late August day, a week or so before most students would return to Clark from their summer break. Two young men were walking past the Harrington House at 130 Woodland Street, the new home of Clark University President Richard Traina and his wife Polly (the house, by the way, had recently been bought and renovated by the school at a cost of over a million dollars). One of the young men was a Clark student who chooses to remain anonymous (we will refer to him as Sam for the purposes of this story), and the other young man was a friend of Sam's who is a stu-

dent at another college. Sam was walking home from work on the way to his apartment when he had the idea of ringing the doorbell.

In a recent interview that he agreed to under certain conditions ("No talking about my operations or my house guests, adults or children..."), Sam described what happened next.

"We rang the doorbell and someone I can only assume to be Polly answered the door. She was a little gruff at first but she could see that we meant well and we got to chatting. I had a few questions for her... [I asked her] what's on the third floor of the house and she gave me a rundown of the rooms, mostly guest rooms. Then I asked what they were going to do with the expanse of grass behind the house, and she said, joking, that they were going to build a golf course. She said that they really had no plans for the area.

"The third question was what they were going to do with the second floor of Dana Commons. Polly didn't know and then her husband came down... The first thing he said was 'If I wanted to talk to you would I knock on your door?' and it only went down hill from there. He was very condescending. He reminded me of a little league coach in my town, and you know what my town is like [an upper class

suburb]. After five or ten minutes of his telling us how horrible it was that we rang his doorbell, he said, 'Well, there. Now you've had five minutes of the President's time,' and he went back inside. My friend was silent the whole time."

What made you think of ringing his doorbell? "I had heard tons of stories about him and I was not pleased with the little I had seen of him and the way he runs his administration. I wanted to give him the chance to redeem himself. I was expecting to be told to make an appointment, I wasn't expecting him to lecture me and put me down. That was out of line."

When summer break ended roughly a week later, there was an issue of *The Scarlet* waiting for the returning student body. Dated August 23, 1996, it featured a cover story about Traina. The article ("Traina Back at Work and Ready For Year") begins with a description of Traina's recovery from heart bypass surgery in the spring and moves on to a description of the Clark President's exercise program. A little further into the article, Traina tells *The Scarlet* reporter about some problems that he has had since moving closer to campus. As *The Scarlet* reported, "Traina said that if all the students at Clark dropped by every time there was something on their minds, 'Life would be madness.' Traina also noted that he would never think of coming by a student's dorm room. Furthermore, when he worked on college campuses during the height of student activism, students may have had sit-ins at his office, but never once came to his home."

About Traina's *Scarlet* quote, Sam said, "He's our employee and Clark University owns the house. We pay him to live there. If he didn't want to have any interaction with students he shouldn't move closer to campus. If he lives in a

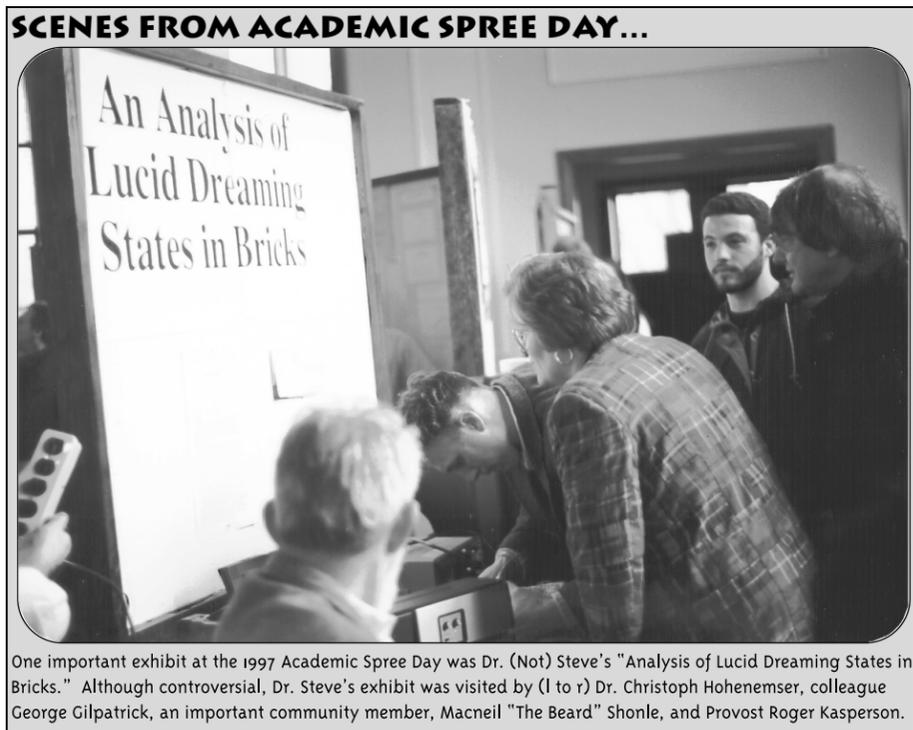
house that we pay for and it's a reasonable hour, it's not unreasonable to chat with him."

Flash forward to a Friday afternoon in mid-April. Sam walks into the computer lab in Carlson Hall to check his email and browse the web to look for a summer job.

"I ended up at the Clark home page, and from there to the Student Council page, just to check it out. It was already set [in the Netscape browser] to send from RTRAINA, but it was done wrong. That gave me the idea. I redid it the right way, mostly as a prank on Casey [Frantz, the newly-elected Student Council President, the one who checks the email account]. I thought he might take it seriously, but I didn't think anyone else would believe it."

The message in question was about Spree Day, which had taken place two days earlier. One of the members of the Spree Day committee, Randy Mack (who is incidentally not Sam, despite rumors to the contrary) discreetly added an item at the end of the schedule of events: "6:30 pm— Dessert at Traina's House." Mack has had his own problems with Traina and the Clark administration; the change in schedule, however, was a joke that he assumed would be recognized as a joke by the Clark community.

It wasn't. Between roughly 6:30 and 7:30 that night, nearly a hundred students showed up for Ice Cream. Most of the confused students stood in a crowd in front of the house, but a few of the braver souls rang the doorbell. Polly, who obviously was not aware of the prank, politely told all of the students that the lecture was at 7:30, not 6:30. As it turned out, there was a lecture scheduled in the house for that same night. None of this helped in any way to alleviate the confusion, and most of the students soon walked back to their dorm rooms mystified and



One important exhibit at the 1997 Academic Spree Day was Dr. (Not) Steve's "Analysis of Lucid Dreaming States in Bricks." Although controversial, Dr. Steve's exhibit was visited by (l to r) Dr. Christoph Hohenemser, colleague George Gilpatrick, an important community member, Macneil "The Beard" Shonle, and Provost Roger Kasperson.

The First Annual WheatBread Academic Spree Day

upset with the whole situation.

Two days later, Sam (who had witnessed the event) sent the following email to the Student Council account with Traina's name attached:

Subject: Spree Day

I was not pleased to see 75 students on my lawn waiting for ice cream on Spree Day.

I would appreciate it if you would look into it for me.

RT

Casey Frantz, as predicted, was the first to read the email. By the second time he read it, he realized it was a joke and forwarded it along to the members of Council and several other Clark students whom he thought might be interested. Most of the students whom Casey forwarded the message to thought it was real, and rumors went quickly flying.

Among the people who Casey forwarded the message to was Alex (not his real name), Sam's roommate. "I saw it, and [I thought] it was the funniest thing. I thought it was real. Later that night I told Sam about it and he told me he did it. I thought it was hilarious, but I wasn't surprised. Sam is a balls-out kind of guy. I'm surprised no one figured out who it was."

Sam was also surprised. Immediately after leaving the computer lab, Sam told two other Clark students what he had done. "Nathan wasn't really listening and Randy was talking to someone else. Nathan just laughed and then asked me for the third time if I had seen a movie called *Lone Star*."

By the Monday after the email was sent out, everyone was talking about the message. A second wave of rumors were beginning to circulate that the email was a fake. "Anyone who took a close look at the header could tell," says Tom Gibson, a Computer Science major at Clark (who is also incidently not Sam).

The header says that the message was sent from `clab03.clarku.edu`. As any computer geek might know, this code means that the message was sent from one of the computers in the Carlson Hall lab. As if that wasn't enough evidence, the clincher is another little bit of information printed in the header: X-Mailer: Mozilla 3.0Gold (Macintosh; I; PPC)

Mozilla 3.0Gold is a version of the internet browser Netscape Navigator. Not only does this mean that it was not mailed from Traina's Vax account, but it also means that it was sent from Netscape, which asks the sender of the email to type in a return address. This is the easiest and most well-known way to send an email

that appears to be coming from someone else. Essentially, this is no different than writing a letter to someone with a fake signature on the bottom. The only reason why this is different at all is that this was done over email, and people seem to think that emails are impossible to forge.

"Anyone can do it. Someone sent a death threat to the President [Clinton, not Traina, and incidently also not Sam] this way recently," Gibson adds, helpfully, "[It was a] student at a high school. They tracked it down to the computer, talked to the lab monitor, and caught him." Is Sam in the clear? "If they would have caught on right away, it might have been possible. It's too late now."

"I was a little worried about getting caught at first, but now I'm not," Sam bravely comments, "I didn't do anything illegal. What could they do? It wasn't threatening, the worst thing they could justifiably do is take away my Vax [email] account."

"This isn't even the strangest thing that's happened to me [involving Email]. My damn roommate [Alex] once sent out a message from his account but with my name written on the bottom, and my [email] address in the message asking people to tell everyone they know to send me email as part of a class project to see how many messages I would get. I got about three hundred emails, from all over the world," says Sam.

What does Sam think about the fact that there is a class writing a final paper about something he did? "I think it's funny that, in one sense, people are that gullible, and, in another, that desperate to hear anything from Traina. I'm honored [that a class is writing about me] but like, why aren't they writing about the doorbell thing?"

Richard Traina has apparently been less than amused by the situation, believing it to be a part of an ongoing campaign by Randy Mack to destroy his credibility. Rumor has it that Traina recently called a Clark student and introduced himself as, "...President Traina. No, this isn't a Randy Mack joke, this really is President Traina."

I asked Sam if he feels guilty about driving Traina to paranoia. "I think it's funny. He's so disconnected. And an asshole."

Everything in this story relates to the idea of miscommunication. The fact that a student rang a University President's door-

SCENES FROM ACADEMIC SPREE DAY...



Provost Roger Kasperon, professor Christoph Hohenemser, and some hot-looking woman look on as Dr. Gilpatrick adjusts some knobs.

bell with a question, and was lectured about how inappropriate it was for a student to visit the expensive house that the student's money helped to pay for with a question that related to the President's responsibilities in relation to that student, the fact that an email message was intentionally sent from a student in that President's name, the fact that the message was believed to be real, the fact that the 'ice cream' comment was believed, and the fact that Traina's identity has been so compromised that he expects students to think that he is someone else have all either caused or been the result of problems with communication; all of these contributed to the weeks of confusion. If Traina completely understood his role as University President, especially as it related to moving to the neighborhood, he would not have acted in the way that he did. If email were impossible to forge, Sam would not have been able to impersonate Traina. If the community realized that emails were easily forged, Sam's forgery wouldn't have worked. If people always meant what they wrote in Spree Day programs, 100 people wouldn't have waited pointlessly for ice cream. And finally, if everyone could always tell who was on the other end of the phone, Traina would have nothing to worry about when he calls students.

Each of these situations are only possible because of misinterpretations based on cultural cues. These cues are not explained by the Standard Model of communications. The Standard Model is that a message is encoded by A into a language that is understood, and then B receives the code and deciphers the message.

The problem with the Standard Model, as brought to light through this story, is that deciphering of messages is not automatic. Interpreting messages relies on cultural cues that are unique to each person. In other words, different people will interpret messages in different ways. Just ask the hundreds of people that didn't show up for ice cream on Spree Day. •