

## Michael Clayton, Meet Catherine Watt.

By [Knight\\_of\\_the\\_Mind](#) - Posted on June 5th, 2009

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Like most troglodytes who would even contemplate a vote against the wonderful Democratic Party and the vastly futile minds that produce its ideas, I'm normally not a really big George Clooney Fan. I will, however, take a mulligan on partisan principal and go see something he does if it sounds interesting. I'm remarkably glad I did so with [his recent movie \*Michael Clayton\*](#).

Clooney acts well. He works in the correct line professionally, as well as politically. George Clooney should have gone to Hollywood and starred in the movies. In *Michael Clayton*, he takes the role of a sad and failing professional to an all new height. Eleanor O' Sullivan describes the role below.

*Michael is gorgeous, 45, and smart as a whip, but he's seen better days. He's sunk his money in a bar that fails; his love life and family relationships are rocky at best; and he's begun to feel dirty about being the firm's "fixer," the man who can take care of any embarrassing situation or tricky legal development.*

This particular movie speaks to a type of person that walks among us without being noticeable. There may well be a small battalion of Michael Claytons who look externally invulnerable, but who have sold their souls to make it and are dying inside.

Catherine Watt, a key staff member at Clemson University, may well fit that category to a tee. [Insidehighered.com](#) described [the mayhem she let lose](#) when she had finally had enough and decided to unburden her sickened and agonizing conscience. To the stunned outrage of many academic professionals, Mrs Watt described a systematic project, under her watch, to defraud the rankings system on behalf of Clemson University.

*A presentation by Catherine Watt, the former institutional researcher and now a staff member at Clemson University, laid bare in a way that is usually left to the imagination the steps that*

*Clemson has (rather brazenly) taken since 2001 to move from 38th to 22nd in U.S. News's ranking of public research universities.*

It seems Catherine Watt found herself in the same ethical Gahanna as Clooney's hired-gun attorney character. Clemson University President, James F. Barker, ordered Mrs. Watt to "take care of" those US News and World Report college and university rankings. He didn't tell her to make Clemson a better educational institution, he ordered her to make Clemson *look* like a better educational institution.

I work as an Operations Research Analyst assigned to estimate cost. I deal with Michael Clayton-esque adversaries every time I go out hunting for data. People like Mrs. Watt and the fictional chaser of wheeled emergency medical conveyances portrayed by Mr. Clooney, are a major reason that I, and every one of my coworkers, will never give the US Government an entirely accurate cost estimate for the duration of our professional careers.

The manner in which we perceive the world is only as good as our data. We all exist like the tribe in the Platonic Cave, watching shadows on a wall and attempting to formulate educated guesses regarding reality. And Catherine Watt took steps deal with that issue. Some of her data chicanery follows below.

*The easiest moves, she said, revolved around class size: Clemson has significantly increased the proportion of its classes with fewer than 20 students, one key U.S. News indicator of a strong student experience. While Clemson has always had comparatively small class sizes for a public land-grant university, it has focused, Watt said, on trying to bump sections with 20 and 25 students down to 18 or 19, but letting a class with 55 rise to 70.*

*The university has ratcheted up the faculty salaries it reports to U.S. News by about \$20,000, which it has achieved by actually increasing spending (paid for largely through increased tuition) and by altering the way it relays the data to the magazine's editors. Clemson folded its benefit payments into the average faculty pay figure it reports to U.S. News, requiring the institutional research office to produce several different definitions of faculty pay for U.S. News, the American Association of University Professors and other surveys, Watt said.*

*And to actual gasps from some members of the audience, Watt said that Clemson officials, in filling out the reputational survey form for presidents, rate "all programs other than Clemson*

*below average," to make the university look better. "And I'm confident my president is not the only one who does that," Watt said.*

Predictably, the panel Catherine Watt spoke before was aghast. All of their universities engage in these practices to certain extents, but I seriously doubt they translate them into .ppt; and then plaster them in the faces of others in the setting of a briefing room. The predictable condemnations follow below.

*"We have been criticized for not fulfilling the mission of a public land-grant institution," Watt responded. But "we have gotten really good press. We have walked the fine line between illegal, unethical, and really interesting."*

*"You're pandering," said another, who was especially troubled by the idea that the university would produce multiple versions of its salary data. "It can be confusing, uninformative, hard to keep straight, and I've always been very vigilant about not doing that. It's a very dangerous activity," the administrator said. "How can you possibly justify doing that?" he asked Watt.*

*"To do anything else is not an option," she said.*

*"You mean you're just following orders?" the questioner asked.*

*"Yes." (A spokeswoman for Clemson did not respond to e-mail messages late Tuesday seeking a response to that assertion.)*

Catherine Watt will no doubt need to log on at Monster.com. She has it coming to her in spades. What she did was detestable, and all too common. Similar ethical somnambulism led to economic disaster both in the US and in Europe. [Spengler](#) describes how "just following orders" without examining right and wrong, can bring forth cataclysmic evil consequences.

*The world slid to perdition down the path of least resistance. Until the subprime scandal blew up in June, no one thought that he had done anything wrong. No one robbed the till, as in the case of WorldCom, or used corporate funds for personal indulgence, as in the case of Tyco, or cooked the books, as in the case of Enron. No one, in short, sold an unencumbered soul to the devil. All the ill was brought about by self-seduction of institutional corruption, in which feckless*

*little men in corporate cubicles managed to destroy more wealth than the marauding hordes of ages past.*

It's after the axe falls, and after Catherine Watt has achieved pariah status amongst the professoriate, that my heart will then embrace her sad and miserable plight. She was told to things not decent or right. Piece by piece it broke her heart and destroyed her humanity. She could take no more and unleasher her anger as a moral purgative.

Her presentation was not only a whistle-blowing de jour; it was also a cry of inner pain. Not only that, but it was a warning to us all- an example of how one good person, on one noble day can rip the veil off the mendacious banality of evil.

I wish her healing and salvation. I wish the rest of us would look more closely around us and wake the kfuc up before it becomes too late in the day to bother.

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