

Point / Counterpoint

Discussion of racism impeded by discrimination

Politics Unplugged hosts failed to listen to minorities.

The theme of the *Politics Unplugged* talk show on WAKE TV Feb. 19 revolved around discourses on racism. We were both a part of that discussion, and feel that it can be used as a springboard for further dialogue about what racism is, and the problems that are associated with even undertaking the discussion.

Daveed Gartenstein-Ross
Al-Husein Madhany

GUEST COLUMNISTS

We are not condemning the individuals whose opinions on the show are herein discussed. Their willingness to share allowed this current dialogue to come to fruition. However, we believe that the manner in which the show progressed is indicative of problems that are faced by individuals who attempt to engage in discussion about racism.

Our intention in writing this column is to help people examine the framework through which they approach discussions centered around race. We believe that until people examine the manner in which they attempt to bridge the racial divide, and ensure that their method is both positive and embracing, dialogue about racism and prejudice will be largely unsuccessful.

In our experiences witnessing or participating in conversations between members of the white majority culture and students of color on our campus, members of the majority culture seem hesitant to acknowledge the problems that students of color face, as though by acknowledging the existence of racism they would be forced to accept some personal responsibility for it.

The Feb. 23 show epitomized the kind of interactions that occur in racial discourse, as the co-hosts of the show, junior Matthew Smith-Kennedy and sophomore Sam Newlands, failed to listen to the personal narratives of both callers and guests, preferring instead to question the validity of these experiences.

It is easy to debate the existence of oppression when one comes from a position of privilege. Members of the white majority can avoid discussing or even thinking about racism if they so choose.

People of color do not have this option. The existence of prejudice is made clear to them daily, as police officers follow them through supermarkets to make sure they aren't shoplifting, as the white woman shields her purse when a black man enters the same elevator as her, even as the white Wake Forest student takes the long way around the Quad to avoid passing within a close proximity to a group of black people who are simply engaged in conversation.

"But these are isolated incidents." This protest, which we heard on Thursday's show, appears in any number of conversations. This and other objections to the narratives expressed by people of color suggest that many members of the white culture do not regard racial dialogue as an opportunity to understand the Other, but instead to invalidate their experiences.

An increasing number of students of color have simply given up discussing their experiences openly. They are frustrated both because it is so offensive to have something so deeply personal questioned, and also because the knee-jerk denial by members of the majority culture suggest that reasonable discussion in which both listening and learning occur is unlikely.

On Thursday's show, a number of campus leaders, such as Black Student Alliance president senior Tiffany O'Neal and Student Gov-

ernment representative sophomore Khalid Jones called in ready to share their experiences and perspectives. These are two students who have not given up discussing this vital issue, and yet were not allowed to clearly articulate their views without having voices raised against them, without being cut off by rhetorical questions serving no purpose but to belittle.

The treatment that O'Neal and Jones received as callers forms an interesting contrast to the manner in which white callers were treated when providing their personal narratives on Monday night's *Voice of the Deacons*. They felt that just as the skin color of minority students is used by people in forming first impressions, they too are judged primarily by their whiteness in their interactions with people of color.

Why are narratives of people of color not given the same respect as white narratives? On Thursday's show, the implications of power in the use of the term "racism" were not considered by the hosts when voiced by O'Neal. They only listened to the explanation when a white student, junior Robert Shaw, provided it.

If we are unable to discuss discrimination rationally at this point in our lives, when will we? University life is unique in that diverse cultures are brought together in the classroom, social settings, and all walks of campus life more often than most students will ever again have the opportunity to experience.

Often one will overhear members of the dominant culture attacking such policies as affirmative action by saying that they weren't responsible for past injustices like slavery, so they shouldn't have to pay the price of reparation in modern times. Individuals who make this argument face a dilemma.

They do not want to be held accountable for past atrocities, yet they are unwilling to recognize, and take responsibility for, injustice in today's world. If they refuse to acknowledge racism in today's culture, would they have battled against the institution of slavery if they, and not their forefathers, had lived in the time of plantations? If their current behavior is any indication, would they have had the courage to acknowledge and battle against the atrocities of slavery, even when fighting slavery would be to their economic disadvantage, even when they would go against the grain of the majority culture's predominant views?

We recall host Sam Newlands' closing words on last Thursday's *Politics Unplugged*, when he asked that minorities remember that not all whites are racist. For those who believe themselves to be free of prejudice, discussing the issue should not be a task. Rather, they should be capable of listening to others' narratives and empowering them by giving them a voice.

Before you attack the reality that somebody else is recounting, it is first crucial to look within yourself. To be defensive is to not recognize the sensitivity of the issue. Those who protest first and loudest when racism is discussed should look within themselves and ask what they are afraid to find.

Accusations of racism are actually unfounded

Talk show guests misinterpret the hosts' treatment of callers.

This is yet another column concerning racism on campus and in the world at large. Next to this column lies another one, although from a different perspective.

The catalyst for the current discussion on these pages was last week's episode of WAKE TV's *Politics Unplugged*. The last half of the show

Matthew Smith-Kennedy

STUDENT COLUMNIST

was devoted to discussing some concerns about Black History Month. However, the show soon evolved or degenerated (depending on your point of view) into a general discussion of race-related issues.

Sophomore Sam Newlands and I co-hosted the show. We have come under fire in a neighboring column written by senior Al-Husein Madhany and junior Daveed Gartenstein-Ross.

Among the accusations explicitly and implicitly presented in the column are that we (the co-hosts of *Politics Unplugged*) treated callers differently because of their race and that we did not listen to their opinions. Madhany and Gartenstein-Ross have presented an extremely unfair view of us as co-hosts of *Politics Unplugged*. The two columnists note that we interrupted callers on the air. Yes, we did, but not because of their race.

It is our job as co-hosts to manage the content and length of speakers on the show. Sam Newlands, who normally handles the phones, will often interrupt a caller and ask a question or ask for the clarification of some point.

Madhany and Gartenstein-Ross claim that Newlands treated two black individuals differently from other white callers. In other words, they claim that we somehow silenced or belittled these individuals while they participated on our show.

I find their accusations ironic for several reasons. Black Student Alliance President senior Tiffany O'Neal, who allegedly experienced our oppressive hosting, actually silenced a white male, Tim Fisher, who had been patiently holding up his hand.

Similar occurrences on the show included O'Neal interrupting guests junior Omaar Hena and junior Elizabeth Rogers (Hena interrupted O'Neal as well).

Unlike the other two columnists, I am not bitter about the way these other guests were treated.

Furthermore, I do not hold a suspicion that O'Neal is somehow racially motivated in her interruptions.

It was a strong political and emotional discussion involving interjections and interrup-

tions by many individuals.

Gartenstein-Ross and Madhany say that we only listened when a white student explained the concept of power in racism. However, Newlands and I listened to O'Neal (a black student leader), who first mentioned the relationship between power and racism.

Not only did we listen, but O'Neal remained on-air for ten minutes the first time she called (she called again later in the show).

In many ways, O'Neal's input was an essential part of the show, and for this reason she remained on the air for more time than any other caller.

Did we treat O'Neal differently?

Yes, we gave her more time to "clearly articulate" her views than anyone else.

One of O'Neal's first comments was, "I can never be racist as a black individual because I have no power in this country, and you can ask anybody who is an expert and they will tell you that."

It was comments like these which prompted Newlands and I to question our guests and our callers. We question people when we think that they are making broad and unjustifiable generalizations.

We believe that a person should be held accountable for the truth value of generalizations. For example, in discussion about students' behavior towards campus workers, Hena said, "By and large people's qualms are suspect — they are suspect to being racist."

Throughout the show there were sweeping generalizations about how white people feel, and about how they are or are not racist or prejudiced.

Hena said: "By the mere fact that I'm around white people all the time ... I immediately know how they act because they are 90 percent of the population."

If you are a guest on *Politics Unplugged* and make statements such as this, you will be questioned. In fact, you will be questioned just as thoroughly as people who try to make generalizations about blacks or any other race.

If someone says, "In my experience all whites are racist," we will question your experience because in *our experience* not all whites are racist.

Unless Hena has mind-reading capabilities, it is impossible for him to substantiate any broad claims about a race.

Hena's attitude is analogous to racist white people who make negative claims about black people based on their limited experiences with blacks.

I agree with Madhany and Gartenstein-Ross that the show was "indicative of problems that are faced by individuals who attempt to engage in discussion about racism."

However, they are not exempt from blame in this matter.

While they request white people's understanding of their experiences, I request that they proceed in a manner that does not involve generalizations about the white race.

I sense from my conversations with them that if I do not completely agree with their plans of action and their generalizations, then I am, as they say, "part of the problem, not part of the solution."

Just as the majority members of society must come to the table willing to listen, so must minority leaders have an open mind about the motivations and the opinions of white people. Some white Americans have been part of the problem, and some have been part of the solution.

Clearly, a white person can disagree with the opinions of these minority leaders and still be part of the solution to race relations in this country.

At the same time, the discussion on *Politics Unplugged* has shown that sweeping and unjustified generalizations by minority leaders can contribute to the racial problem just as much as any "white mindset."



MORE LETTERS

Bravo to women leaders on campus

I would like to commend freshman Travis Langdon on his Feb. 19 article titled "Women find room at the top." With Women's History Month approaching in March, I'm glad that Travis took the opportunity to highlight the achievements of many of our female student leaders.

As we have been doing in February for Black History Month, it's important to again appreciate the many advances made in our society and on our campus in putting aside our physical differences and looking to the things that truly define a person's value.

We should pride ourselves in being more educated and open-minded in viewing people first for who they are and what they can do. While we should be thankful that our campus seems to surpass society in this regard, we should continuously challenge ourselves to do better in forgetting about gender, race, religion or any other such distinction as we interact with each other and select our student leaders.

We may all fall short in this challenge from time to time, and when that happens there is some value in discussing what is wrong and what needs to be fixed.

However, I feel that on this campus (and in our society in general) we spend too much time complaining about what is wrong instead of taking action. For this

reason, I appreciated Langdon's article because it was focused on recognizing women taking positive actions in our student organizations.

After reading "Women find room at the top," I felt it would be beneficial to share an extraordinary example of women in leadership that was not mentioned in the article. I happen to be a male member of this particular campus organization, and I wanted to bring attention to its leadership because I know that many students do not know a lot about it or the people who are involved.

Student Union consists of seventeen Program Council members and well over 100 committee volunteers who plan, organize and coordinate a wide array of activities on campus. Out

of the 17 executives and chairpersons in this organization, 14 are women.

Besides being a great model of the value of women in leadership, Student Union is also a great example of diversity, as there are chairpersons and committee members from multiple ethnic groups as well as an even mix of Greeks and Independents.

Senior Karin Osburn, the current SU president, has been a dedicated Student Union volunteer all four years and she has attended the university and has been instrumental in turning the organization into the great success it is today.

Seniors Elizabeth Lenox, Lindsay Mitchell, Amanda Kennedy, Tracey Cranston, Elaine Merrill and Carolyn Odom have among them also dedicated many years to the organization and are currently providing strong executive leadership, a wonderful lecture series, educational short courses, travel events and fine-arts features.

Juniors Laura Hensley, Kimberly Lo, Cynthia Cox and Jen Schwegel and sophomores Audrey Young, Kristin Hemric and April Buscher are currently leading the committees in charge of the film series, games, family weekend, homecoming, social hours and Springfest.

It has been a great privilege to spend a year working with these great female leaders, and I just wanted to take this opportunity to give them the praise and recognition they deserve.

I am thankful for the progress we have made in this organization and in many others, but I know there are still many instances where women and members of minority groups are underrepresented in leadership positions.

SU obviously isn't perfect, but I'm proud to be a part of an organization where women play such a vital and important role. It's already time to start thinking about our student leaders for next

year, and I would like to encourage all students, regardless of gender, race, religion or other group classification to consider the rewards of volunteering and student leadership.

For those who are interested, applications for Student Union leadership positions are currently available in Benson 335, and all students are always welcome to join a SU committee at any time. I can obviously write only from my firsthand experience in the SU, but I know that there are many other great organizations that need volunteers to help make a difference on this campus.

At the very least, please take the time to express your appreciation to our student leaders, particularly if they are a member of a group that has been traditionally underrepresented in leadership positions.

Todd De Jong

Student Union Treasurer