

# Student columnists must rise above partisan quibbles

'Conservative' and 'liberal' mere titles; must not divert focus from pressing issues.

There are a few things in this world that are of relatively minor consequence to my life, yet I find nearly impossible to stomach just the same. Cockroaches. Cilantro. The recent descent of John Mayer into the soulless voids of Top 40 radio.



**Kathryn Spangler**

EDITORIALS  
EDITOR

And, above all, the "talking heads" shows that tend to clutter the networks' Sunday afternoon airwaves.

Healthy debate is a cornerstone of any democracy, but I dare anyone to find something healthy about a group of middle-aged men and women screaming about taxes and health care as though they were auditioning for *Days of Our Lives*.

Those who appear on these inside-the-Beltway versions of *Jerry Springer* (they both can, after all, fill up an entire hour with commentary on the question, "Is he getting it on with a younger woman at work?") have trained as vigorously as any Olympic athlete to *win* rather than inform, exploit base fears of the average viewer before they rebuke unfounded prejudices, avoid even the most straightforward question and insinuate that the opposition is full of lying, cheating scoundrels who

regularly kick puppies, mug senior citizens and leave the cap off the toothpaste.

Wouldn't it be nice if within the university "bubble," a land that idealism hasn't yet forgotten (how else can you account for the number of freshmen who think they're still going to be pre-med by the time they graduate?), one of my idealistic dreams could be fulfilled – the editorial section of the *Old Gold and Black* becoming everything those migraine-inducing shows *should* be but are not. A section that is – you'll have to indulge my idealism rather heavily here – a haven of integrity, brimming with thoughtful debate and well-researched arguments, not the journalistic parallel of two small children bickering in the backseat during a long car ride: "You're un-American!" "Well, you're stupid!"

However, there seems to be some as-yet-unrecorded law of the universe dictating that every year two columnists must strike up a weekly tête à tête within the *OGB*, and argue about whose political party of choice is sending the country to hell in a hand-basket, embodying everything that is wrong with America, orchestrating the El Niño phenomenon or similar. Three weeks into the semester, I can already hear the bickering in the backseat, this time from sophomore Doug Hutton and senior Jamie Kidd.

Consider this column the equivalent of my glaring in the rearview mirror and hollering, "Kids, don't make me stop this car!"

I am reminded of George Washington's warning against "the baneful effects of the spirit of party" in his farewell address: "In those of the popular form (of government) it is seen in its greatest rankness and is truly (the people's) worst enemy ... It serves always to distract the public councils

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and enfeeble the public administration. It agitates the community with ill-founded jealousies and false alarms; kindles the animosity of one part against another."

False alarms indeed. The nation's newspapers have been littered with headlines such as "Bush to U.N. – act or U.S. will" (*USA Today*) and "Blood spills to keep oil wealth flowing" (*The Los Angeles Times*), yet Hutton and Kidd, two skilled writers surely capable of providing insight on any number of issues, found their attentions diverted from those legitimate crises to the petty blame-games of partisanship. Kidd's "Fear and loathing in the capital" (Aug. 29) and Hutton's "Political alliances divide" (Sept. 12) established little more than that conservatives are fearful ignoramuses so full of hate they can't even appreciate a fine Vera Bradley handbag, while liberals are immoral spendthrifts with Mao Zedong's "Little Red Book" stuffed inside their attaché cases: the stuff of a *Saturday Night Live* sketch, not thought-provoking dialogue.

And what has been kindling the animosity between these two columnists, anyway? Nothing more than semantics.

The Greek philosopher Parmenides once said, "Therefore all those (names) will be a mere word – all the (names) that mortals have agreed upon, believing that they are true." Of course, he was speaking of far more abstract things, but I believe the same principle applies here. "Liberal" and "conservative" are mere words, hollow labels – and subjective labels at that. How, for example, can the word "liberal" apply to both Ralph Nader and Sen. Hillary Clinton (D-N.Y.) without its definition being made so broad as to render the word impotent?

Despite a lack of proper consensus on their definitions, these labels still breed stereotypes – it is much easier, of course, to make all manner of inferences from a label than to seek the truth. I know some readers have branded me "liberal" based on my past columns discussing issues such as gays' rights, pacifism, animal rights and environmentalism, and therefore presume to know the full range of my political ideology.

They wouldn't imagine that I am actually *opposed* to abortion, for example, or seriously conflicted over affirmative action (not to mentioned rather annoyed by having assumptions made about me).

Labels become our worst enemies when they "enfeeble the public administration." Opposing "liberal" and "conservative" forces – which have become practically synonymous with "Democrat" and "Republican" – have made Washington into a battleground where political rivalries and alliances trump everything else, including the law, the will of the citizenry and the common good. Is Congress not doomed to fail from Day One if there are essentially two teams pitted against one another, hell-bent on victory? So, if "liberal" and "conservative"

lack suitable definitions, promote stereotyping and stagnate progress by emphasizing competition over cooperation, why do we embrace them and grant them credence?

My ideal government would have no political parties at all, but until the day the members of Congress show up on my doorstep and tell me to run the country as I see fit, all I can do is shun simple stereotypes and embrace rational discussions of policy as the first step towards change. Such discussions should obviously *never* begin with statements like "Conservatives loathe liberals because they take our money" or "It has been suggested – though not, of course, by me – that conservatives are demons born without a soul that hate anything good or right." They should identify problems clearly, gather facts for analysis, debate possible solutions and then recommend the appropriate action.

Columnists, let's change our methodology. Instead of asking, "What are the liberal and conservative views on this issue – and who is right?" let's ask, "What is the issue, and what are the pertinent facts?" Note that I said "we" – I'll readily admit I'm guilty of falling into the trap of partisanship, and despite how much fun it is to taunt President George W. Bush (and, honestly, is there an easier target than the man who asked, "Is our children learning?"), I know I can't set standards that I myself won't try to meet.

Besides, the policies of Dubya and his henchmen alone give me *more* than enough to write about (consider yourselves warned).

That said I'm going to pop a few Excedrin and take a long, hot bath because *you kids are driving me crazy!*

*Editorials Editor Kathryn Spangler is a junior who plans to major in history.*

## Increased technology parallels privacy loss

Convenience afforded to us by Information Age is worth several sacrifices.

They're watching me. I can feel their eyes upon my skin. No, I'm not talking about the people who watch my voyeur-tastic Web cam, I'm talking about the University Police.

Ladies and gentlemen, nothing you

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do is private – no matter how safe and secure you might feel, there is always somebody watching you. I'm standing right outside your window right now.

Bad jokes aside, it should come as a surprise to nobody that the police have access to your e-mail: you are using a university computer. And while we're at it, don't keep anything you might not like somebody finding in your dorm room either, because the police have access to that area as well. Its all university property anyway, we're just being allowed to use it. Of course, this may shock, surprise and even offend some of you, but get used to it – if you think that anything you do is truly private then you're sadly mistaken.

I'm not usually one to sew conspiracy theories, but I can't help but think of the film *Enemy of the State* whenever the issue of privacy comes up. I'm reminded of when Gene Hackman's character states that the more technology you use, the easier it is for you to track.

Okay, I will admit that the idea of somebody monitoring your every move through a global positioning system and watching you from spy satellites is a little silly, but that doesn't mean that you're not being watched.

Perhaps some of you should actually read to licensing agreements that come with most of the products that you use before you complain about your lack of privacy. Most Web sites that you have to "sign up" for reserve the right to buy, sell and trade the personal information of

any of their members – don't believe me? Just look at all the spam that has collected in your Inbox: where do you think it comes from? Think ordering that sweater off of J. Crew's Web site with your daddy's credit card is secure? Think again.

It's not just big corporations who are getting your personal information so that they can better market to you – that little pimpled, four-eyed computer nerd whose heart you ripped out in high school knows exactly what size underwear you order online.

Of course, now I've gotten myself off topic. The simple fact of the matter is that privacy is a commodity that simply doesn't exist in the digital medium. This is the Information Age, people, and what information is more alluring than somebody's personal information?

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Of course, Uncle Sam doesn't exactly frown upon that kind of action – they actually engage in it. Now you can officially start calling me a conspiracy theorist, but do you honestly think that the Department of Homeland Security doesn't have access to your university e-mail account, let alone your Deacon OneCard, credit card, debit card, bank account and basically all things digital? Of course they do; if they're supposed to protect this country from terrorists they'd better have access to these kind of things. I may not agree with the concept of the Department of Homeland Security, but I certainly want them to be able to do their job well.

Should the government, this university and anyone with an ounce of programming knowledge have access to your personal information? I don't think so. What you do in the privacy of your own room, through your own e-mail, on your own phone and so forth should be your own business. And while I was afraid to order things online for years, now I'm right there with you.

I just bought a new computer online, as well as several toys off eBay for my personal collection, and I did so with a credit card. I don't enjoy giving away my information online, nor do I think that's a vital aspect of stopping terrorism. I do, however, love Big Brother.

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## Florida voters face crisis again

State doomed to repeating history of election woes as long as issue's unresolved.

While doing research for this column, I found an Associated Press article from July 16 discussing the problems with the new voting machines in Florida. According to expert testimony in a hearing related to a disputed City Council election that



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took place in March, the new machines "don't provide voters any assurance that their votes are being cast." Considering all the trouble the nation suffered in the 2000 presidential election, I would think that such a statement would send Florida officials scrambling to ensure that this year's voting would be flawless.

However, the situation on Sept. 10 was, if possible, worse than that of two years ago. Due to malfunctioning machines and confused poll workers, polls in the Miami-Dade and Broward counties opened late and closed early. Despite an emergency two-hour voting extension, some residents were turned away from the polls multiple times.

Even when people did get to vote, their votes were not always counted correctly. As I write, the Democratic

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gubernatorial primary has still not been decided because of these issues, giving Republicans an unfair advantage. Worse, thousands of Floridian voters have been disenfranchised again, and a severe blow has been struck at faith in the American political system.

The blame for this snafu has been tossed around the state and the nation. Florida's governor Jeb Bush has denied any responsibility for the situation, asking "What is it with Democrats having a hard time voting?"

Miriam L. Oliphant, the Broward County supervisor of elections, has blamed redistricting for increasing the size of her district by 218 precincts.

A popular source of blame is Elections Systems & Software Inc., the company that provided the touch-screen machines. Critics say that the machines were delivered late and calibrated incorrectly, and that the accompanying manuals were too complex to easily understand under pressure.

Many blame poll workers for the problems. ES&S troubleshooters' notes included phrases like "Clerk is out of control," and "Clerk does not speak English well enough." Officials say that the clerks were resistant to the changes the new system brought and unwilling to work harder or stay the extra two

hours. The clerks in turn blame any problems on their end on a lack of training and the extreme stress of the job. Reports from the day leave no doubt as to the panicked state of poll workers in the face of the machine malfunctions.

However, I suspect it would have taken super-human strength and courage to not react in such a manner in the face of this situation. ES&S probably could have done a better job. Given this, their machines functioned well in the other nine counties that used them.

The blame for the second Florida election debacle in two years rests on the election officials in the counties and ultimately on the state's chief executive, Gov. Jeb Bush.

Voting is vital to the health of our nation. In a state that has suffered so much from voting irregularities, it would be difficult for the government to place too much emphasis on ensuring free and fair elections. If I can find an article using a simple Google search warning of potential difficulties with the new systems months in advance, surely Florida officials knew about the problems.

Instead of demonstrating responsible leadership in a time of crisis, Bush has chosen to take a laissez-faire attitude towards the difficulties, including taking cheap and inappropriate shots at Democrats.

I cannot help but wonder if his attitude would be somewhat different if Florida's voting issues did not benefit his family, his party and himself.

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