

Missing the point on public inattention

Columnist makes significant mistake in analysis of American political apathy.

Ryan Doefler wrote a column two weeks ago lamenting the short attention span of the average American voter ("Public inattention vexing," Jan. 22), in which he quite accurately pointed out that the typical voter invests very little time in determining

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his candidate. Doefler then went on to apply this to the Democratic Party circus in hopes of explaining why the unattractive one won the Iowan caucus when it seemed the crazy one had it in the bag. While I could care less how the liberal mind comes to a conclusion, I would like to point out is that this short attention span is exactly what economics predicts would and will always occur. Not only is such a phenomenon completely expected, it is also the most basic flaw in the democratic system that was lauded in all our high school history textbooks.

The problem is not that people have short attention spans in general, but rather that everyday we have an entire world competing for our attention and thus have to make a choice as to what is worth paying attention to. Take this simple example. This evening I have two choices of what to do with my time: I can either sit down and study my orchestration textbook for my upcoming exam, or I can read the policies and histories of our presidential candidates. Rationally, the answer is clear. If I study the text, then the chances of me doing better on the exam improve dramatically. However, if I instead choose to divert my attention to national politics, if I invest all the effort necessary to decide who is the best candidate for me, then I have gained effectively nothing. My vote is one out of millions—there is no realistic chance that it will ever swing an election, no realistic chance that it will matter at all. The choice is effectively between wasting my time with politics or getting a better grade in orchestration. I, acting in my

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Every voter must make similar choices, and every voter's individual vote is as abysmally insignificant as mine. As such, every voter devotes his attention to issues and causes that affect him personally, and not on distant events in the capital that he can have no effect upon. This is why the rational voter devotes only the smallest fraction of time to catching up on the political climate, why no average American really knows which Democratic candidate's economic plan is the more ridiculous. To the individual, keeping up with national politics is as useful as knowing the axial calibration of Pluto.

This phenomenon, this rational ignorance of the American voter, can be found in any democracy. Logically, we can expect it to have a more profound effect the more centralized a government becomes. The more people that come under one government's rule, the less each vote counts, the more ignorant the electorate will choose to be, and the more poorly candidates will be chosen. The cure is clear: if centralization aggravates the problem, then decentralization is the treatment.

In the current United States system, decentralization can be translated into a transfer of power away from the federal government to the governments of the states. This notion of a weak federal government is in fact nothing new — it was actually attached to the United States Constitution two centuries ago as the Tenth Amendment. Two hundred years of liberalism has sought to blur this clause beyond recognition; it is up to us rationally ignorant voters to save it from complete excision.

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No longer a conservative

Bush's irresponsibility has come to light.

About a year ago the Fox television network did a special interview with President Bush. The President took a Fox reporter on a tour of the White House



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for an hour and described what went on in an ordinary day for him. Most of it was extremely banal; who cares whether the President eats Corn Flakes or Cocoa Puffs for breakfast? However, one statement by the President struck me with a sense of foreboding. "I believe in setting big goals for the nation, and achieving those goals," Bush said.

Suddenly the psychology of George Bush unraveled before my eyes. Here was a man who was determined to make his stamp upon history, at any cost. All of his actions since then make sense to me, the confrontational foreign policy, the sweeping new Stalinist national health plan and the quixotic drive to explore Mars.

It was then that I also knew that Bush was not and never would be a fiscal conservative. Big national goals are never easy on the taxpayer. For every national goal accomplished, a hundred private goals lay in ashes to fund it. For every hunk of metal the government puts on

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Mars, a working mother does not buy school supplies for her daughter, a middle-class family goes without a family car and a billionaire cannot open a new factory. There ain't no such thing as a free lunch.

Fast-forward a year. Bush's State of the Union address promises to push forward the era of big government that started under his rule. He is determined to strip people of the ability to solve the problems dearest to them in order that he may solve ones that put him on the pages of history.

Listen closely to his speech, and see if you notice a pattern. Like all leaders who want to accomplish big goals, Bush lauds all the benefits of his programs while ignoring the costs. He counts on simple ignorance to make his deception work, that when he promises a new program, people will not stop and ask, "To be paid for by whom?" By failing to ask this, the American voter empowers Bush to leave his mark on the world, at the expense of their own lives.

Perhaps the most damnable thing about the speech was its hypocrisy. He starts off by praising small government, a requirement to deceive the old-school conservatives and lesser-of-two-evils libertarians who make up the Republican Party base. Bush stated, "The American people are using their money far better than government would have."

He then goes on to list

program after program of new spending initiatives, all of which will strip Americans and their descendents of their wealth. If we deserve to keep our money, then why, Mr. President, have you gone on the largest federal spending spree since Lyndon Johnson, the father of welfare? If we have a right to the fruit of our labor, why are you shipping it to a barren red rock billions of miles away?

Perhaps the biggest question is: how long will people continue to be deceived? How long will people go on believing that next year, George Bush will rein in federal spending?

President Bush has fallen in love with the seductive allure of big government. It is the same false promise that has driven every would-be savior of mankind from Mao Tse-tung to Lyndon Johnson. It is the idea that the universe will respond to the magic words of the ruler, that the laws of economics will fall flat at his whim, and that with enough power one man may indeed purchase a free lunch. Sadly, this is not the case. Billions of people have paid the price for this fallacy, and we continue to pay for it today.

We will have a chance to change this in 2004. Notwithstanding the ego of the dictator, everyone would be better off in a government returned to its constitutional limitations. There is an old saying, "Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me." Let's hope that Americans are not fools in 2004.

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Pledge night peccadillos

Greek life begs for attention from administration.

Wake Forest is Greek. We might as well put that blue and white striped flag next to every sign declaring that we are "Pro

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Humanitate." The fact of the matter is that Greek life on this campus figures predominantly into the social life of the university. Recent clandestine work to remove Pledge Night from the Quad either serves as Wake Forest's denial that we need fraternities and sororities to have a foundation for our college experience or its refusal to admit that Greeks are not alone in despising the idea of having Pledge Night off campus.

As an independent I am willing to admit that this event, derided as a celebration of debauchery, actually celebrates our good fortune as students of a college that meets our needs on an academic and social level. By restraining Pledge Night, Wake Forest severely curtailed the social experience. Given the poor student attendance at events more to the university's liking, such as Springfest and the Lighting of the Quad, social unity on this campus cannot survive the blow this school gives it by restricting a previously open event to closed spaces off campus.

This effectively furthers the divide between the Greeks and independents since Pledge Night serves to

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bring these at times disparate facets together. I saw this night last year as a chance to be near Wait Chapel, a symbol of unity, while enjoying some of the funniest and communal moments in my college memory. I am not alone in this and the feeling was only stronger among those students who were welcomed into a new brotherhood or sisterhood.

The real issue is not exclusivity, because obviously a party isn't a party without people. Students will still attend Pledge Night in its modified, Burke Street dispersed and potentially skeletal form. The real issue is hypocrisy. The Greek organizations seem to be either scared of probation to the point of being driven away or the university has become monomaniacal in its enforcement of an alcohol policy to the point of ignoring the problems the enforcement creates. Nobody knows the correct answer because for whatever reason, the student

body has been kept in the dark.

Greeks have been told to refuse comment on the event to protect the experience for the new pledges. Well, here's what we're hiding.

Holding these events at bars or the Millennium Center keeps them away from campus, and away from alcohol violations. Wake Forest, apparently concerned about its reputation for not allowing underage drinking, creates a whole new set of problems.

Drunken driving, regardless of who provides shuttles, will run rampant if there continues to be a mass exodus from the Reynolda campus. General inebriation and underage drinking will definitely not decrease, because of that phenomenon we so adore and A.L.E. despises known as pre-gaming.

Add to that the increased economic burden of having to pay for weekend rentals of popular night spots and it appears that Wake is trying to wash its hands of this event in the most ruthless way possible, by pushing it away rather than taking responsibility for it.

This university wants so desperately to play to the reputation that it is a school where a strict alcohol policy is enforced, that it risks being seen as a school without concern for its students' social and physical well-being. As a tour guide, I have to tell visitors about the wonderful Greek and non-Greek social life on this campus as well as our alcohol policy enforcement.

Be certain that I will mention in the future the hypocrisy that had both of them suffering this weekend.

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Method of ticket campout must be reassessed

Ticket campout procedures confuse students and irk dedicated basketball fans.

Play by the rules. It's a simple concept that you learned at a very young age. Sure Candyland can be hard at times, but it's not rewarding when you win unless you play by the rules, right? Of course, we all learned how to get around that problem sometime during grade

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school when we learned that if you don't want to break the rules all you have to do is change them. Don't want to lose at cops and robbers? The easiest way around that is changing the rules so that you have super-strong bullet-proof armor. Everybody wins. Except for that little kid you always forced to play the robber and who always lost.

It is amazing to me how much life hasn't changed since those days. If you don't believe me, you need not look any further than the way that the university handles student basketball ticket distribution. In one night the rules have changed twice, which brings the total number of rules we've had to play by to get tickets to the UNC and Duke games to four — this doesn't even include the rule changes that are going to occur when Student Government steps in.

The way the ticket pick-up is supposed to work is simple enough: Student Government picks a date when three tickets will be distributed, at 5 p.m. the night before Student Government hands out numbers and administers check-ins every hour and a half starting at 7 p.m. until tickets are given out at nine the next morning. Simple. The problem is that students are going to want some tickets more than others, particularly the tickets to the Duke and UNC games.

Naturally students are going to start camping out for tickets long before they are going to be handed out: in this instance the camp-out started on Jan. 28, and tickets were not to be distributed until Feb. 6. Enter the "unofficial list." First come, first served: whoever gets there first gets to make the rules that the rest of us live by. Not bad for a playground game when you're 10, really bad for something as important as basketball at this university when you're 20.

Let's be civil, people. Student Government

I'd sympathize, but until Student Government realizes that ticket campout starts when the students start to camp out, it isn't going to change. Why can't we all just agree that the

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already has a decent system in place, why don't we all just stick to it? Yes, it's unfortunate that if you're at the top of the list you're going to have to stay put for days in advance and will probably miss significant amounts of sleep.

I'd sympathize, but until Student Government realizes that ticket campout starts when the students start to camp out, it isn't going to change. Why can't we all just agree that the Student Government's system of having to check in every few hours is pretty fair in that it doesn't require every student to lose lots of sleep or miss lots of class?

Also, could we try and be practical? Random check-ins aren't fair, even if you're supposed to be there 24/7 to get tickets — everybody's got to eat and use the restroom.

While we're on the subject, why doesn't the university open Spry Soccer Stadium so that the students can actually go the bathroom on a toilet? For that matter, why is ticket distribution held at Spry in the first place? The swamp, better known as the Magnolia Quad, is a thousand times more practical and is better served to make ticket distribution a campus-wide event.

They show movies, have concerts and do various other activities to attempt to entertain the student body there: why not combine them and actually get decent student turnout at these events for a change?

I remember when Skip Prosser came to this university. He said that he wanted to turn around the ticket distribution system so that we could create an atmosphere similar to that at other ACC schools. So far that hasn't happened, and it's mostly due to logistical problems that can be solved with a little effort. Ticket distribution is a mess and it needs to be fixed if we ever want to really be the sixth man for our basketball team.

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