

## Opinion

## Partisan forum puts A&amp;M's integrity in question

The recent decision of the MSC Political Forum to sponsor a "Republican Perspective" panel is not only poor judgment on the part of the staff and officers of Political Forum, it is symptomatic of a much deeper and more serious malaise of integrity that at times threatens this and other campuses across our nation. It emerges from a lack of discipline in our pursuit of higher values that must support a university if it is to remain loyal to its central mission of preparing students for effective, tolerant citizenship.

**John D. Robertson**  
Guest Columnist

No one who has had any formal association with Political Forum would doubt its unwavering commitment to free speech and the objective pursuit of education through public discussion. Yet, anyone who has advised those students responsible for public speaking programs at this or other universities knows that it is not always easy to see how a public forum sponsored by a university will damage that institution's integrity and reputation. This is often more difficult when there is the clear promise of an opportunity to have that university gain local, regional and perhaps even national media coverage from the event they sponsor.

When it comes to public officials in high places of power, the pressure, explicit or otherwise, is always there to associate the university with those in a position of public power so as to win some political favor or monetary advantage down the pike. To rationalize this by saying that we as a university have no alternative but to accommodate politicians is to also suggest to our critics that our university has no independent conscience nor values separate from those who temporarily serve at the public's pleasure.

Whether this was the motivation behind the MSC's willingness or inability to decline an opportunity to feature a partisan Republican rally on the day before an election of such magnitude will never be known. It really does not matter, because what is important here is that the MSC staff and students once again ignored the warnings of those of us who have tried to remind them of the meaning behind the phrase: What is perceived to be real is real in its conse-

quences. The consequences of this perceived partisan rally are that the intellectual integrity of the faculty and the professional integrity of all who were formerly associated with this University have been seriously impugned, not to mention exposing us to charges that we have misused state funds for a partisan political event. Our actions as a university should never suggest that we are willing to compromise our legitimacy as a voice of balanced reflection and broadened enlightenment simply to avoid offending narrow political factions.

The decision of Political Forum suggests that here as in other universities there is a deep undercurrent of cynicism regarding the role of a major institution of higher learning. Rather than being an example of public virtue, many universities find it easier to simply go along to get along. They avoid raising issues that may have immediate costs for the university and thereby rape their own institutional conscience — a far greater long-term cost to overcome.

We see it all the time, as when an athletic program turns its head or complies with a decision to mortgage an athlete's education for the purpose of providing exciting entertainment for the alma mater; or when a professor is unwilling to spend the extra time with his or her class because the next article or book is running behind schedule; or when faculty and administration pressure those in the university community who have qualms with work that remains classified and unavailable for public scrutiny to remain silent about their conscientious concern; or when a faculty member is denied tenure because the content of his or her syllabus offends a faction outside the academic community. While these examples may be abstractions to many at Texas A&M, let those of us in a position of responsibility at this University not forget the values that are implied in our decision to pay almost any price to obtain a winning football coach while we tell our students that this or that new serial or book has to be justified before the University library can purchase it; or when our University's name and reputation become associated with a legal battle to prevent the sexual integration of our band; or when we fail to insist that A&M be strong enough to overcome an



U.S. Rep. Joe Barton, Vice President George Bush, Gov.-elect Bill Clements and U.S. Sen. Phil Gramm visited Texas A&M Nov. 3. Their visit was sponsored by MSC Political Forum.

outdated and embarrassing tradition of encouraging its faculty to allow graduating seniors to avoid final examinations.

It is probable that most people associated with this University will forget quickly the evening of Nov. 3 as they go about their normal routines of teaching, research, administration and policy making. If we want our University to be thought of in the public's mind as a "nonpartisan" institution of higher learning that strives to rise above the political passions of the moment, then we should hope that the public forgets the evening as well. But what should not be forgotten by anyone who values the role

of a university in its ideal sense is that each time we relent when tempted by the seductive influence of an incumbent politician seeking an improper and imbalanced public forum for his partisan viewpoints, we run a much greater risk — a risk with consequences that extend far beyond the ivory tower and strike the core of pluralist democracy. We risk befalling the consequences of a society that cannot say no to what is inconsistent with its values and heritage; of what befalls a society that cannot hold the center against peripheral pressures of those who need the University as a means of sanctioning their factional perspective.

We risk, in short, losing our integrity and honor as a university committed to the tolerant and universal pursuit of knowledge and ideas. We risk squandering our defense of the ceremony of innocence which, as Yeats reminds us, is the condition to which a society as institutions are condemned when they best lack all conviction, while they are full of passionate intensity.

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## Mail Call

## Who pays for AIDS?

EDITOR:

I cannot fathom the agony experienced by victims of AIDS and their families. The death of a person who has contracted the disease is all the more tragic, I think, because in almost every case it was so easily preventable.

My sympathy ends there, however, because when people play with fire, it's difficult to feel sorry for those who get burned. Perhaps \$1 billion appropriated to AIDS research will, in time, prove beneficial to the general population. But, whether or not AIDS spreads widely through heterosexual relationships, it now seems terribly unfair that those who practice sexual restraint before marriage and fidelity during marriage should in any way pay for the treatment of those who continue to take unnecessary risks.

**Paul Koch**

## Interpretation ignored

EDITOR:

I have faith in the existence of a collection of concerned individuals who do a mental wince every time they hear Jimmy Swaggart preach on television and sigh with resignation after reading the slightly smug admonitions of spiritual roadhogs that periodically get printed in Mail Call. The attitude I'm referring to is one of religious arrogance that periodically labels anyone who refuses to jump through the legalistic hoops of fundamentalism as a "secular humanist."

Here are some classics: If you were to die tomorrow, would you go to heaven? Do you accept the Bible as the complete word of God? Do you believe in the divinity of Jesus? The list is long and tiresome. And don't bother bringing a blue book to this test, a Scantron and No. 2 pencil will be provided.

The issue, conveniently ignored by religious literalists, is interpretation. One gains nothing, for example, by simply agreeing that Jesus is the son of God if one does not have the courage nor the intellectual honesty to acknowledge the inherent difficulty in reconciling the contradictory notion that Jesus was somehow fully human and yet completely divine. What does it mean to be "completely divine?" To what extent do we have this capacity? These are the questions of interest. They raise new questions. They are relevant to all people. And they cut past the simple certainties of fundamentalism that promise salvation at the expense of trivialized faith and the promotion of intolerance, hypersensitivity and polarization among different belief systems.

This matter of interpretation works to shroud, in a haze of ambiguity, the moral high ground that the fundamentalist had previously found easy to defend. The line that distinguishes "them" from "us" is blurred, making righteousness difficult to come by. Interpretation cannot be avoided nor should it be neglected, for it is a requisite of enlightened thought and mutual understanding.

**Glenn Streiff**

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## Automotive illiteracy results from a liberal arts education

Help! For about a month now, depending on my mood and whether I have the stomach for it, I have set out to buy a car. I paid my first visit to a dealership before the summer, was lied to by the salesman about financing and decided to take the summer off. Now, with my old car failing and the new tax law starting me in the face (sales tax will no longer be deductible), I have no choice but to proceed. I am ill-prepared for this task.

I blame my plight on my schooling. I am the product of a liberal arts education, one of those people who smiled condescendingly when the school bozos were marched off to auto shop. I, on the other hand, was marched off to algebra, which I have not used once in my life. As best I can recall, it is the science of determining how long it would take two boys to mow one lawn if it took one of them half an hour. The correct answer, then as now, is "who cares?"

Cars befuddle me. I know next to nothing about them and absolutely nothing about buying them. Only twice have I bought a new car, the last time nearly 15 years ago — and I still have it. In that time, I have spent maybe \$345,876 on repairs, leaving the shop each time not sure what was repaired and certain I was ripped off. The men I scorned in high school now talk down to me and do so in a language I do not understand. I pretend I do, because car talk, like football talk, is one way we men, doglike, sniff one another. But I'm afraid I always fail the scent test. I think they smell a subway rider.

The first new car I bought was a 1968 Volkswagen. It was a wonderful thing, but one day it failed me. By then, it was my wife's car but, knowing my sex role, I took it in for repairs. The service man-



**Richard Cohen**

ager was a proper German who explained that the car would have to be given all sorts of diagnostic tests before it could be determined what ailed it. "Vere can I reach you?"

"Me?" I asked. "Why me? It's my wife's car. You can reach her at..." The service manager looked at me scornfully: What sort of man was this? In fact, was this a man at all? "If it was me," he said, "I would not allow my wife to make this decision."

What could I say? That my wife knew as much about cars as I did? That he could lie to her as easily as to me? That at least she was not supposed to know anything about cars and therefore was pardoned in advance (like Richard Nixon) if she goofed? No way. "Of course," I said. "By all means. Call me." I paid, I think, \$98,000.

When I say I blame my inadequacies on my education, I mean my entire education. I was a Cub Scout, Boy Scout and even an Explorer Scout, learning many things that are absolutely worthless. I can make knots that I have never once been called on to make. I know that moss grows on the north side of trees, but not once have I been lost in the woods. I can kill a bear with a sharp stick, gut it and with the yukky stuff inside make a small house with one bedroom, fireplace and conversation pit. What good is that?

Where, I ask you, is the merit badge for buying a car? Where's the one for

knowing that interest on the loan is negotiable? While we're at it, how about the merit badge for checking into a hotel the one that teaches you to ask for the lowest rate? Why not a merit badge for handling headwaiters and another ordering wine?

My head is cluttered with isosceles angles, with the valences of elements but I never learned how to buy a house or hire a contractor. Scores of men looked at my leaky roof, all of them armed with appropriately thick pencils, each one with a different tale to tell, none of them true. Soon, the toothy woodsmen of Virginia will knock on my door, selling firewood, and I will ture out to their truck, touching nothing and, I'm sure, fooling no one. The best I can do is figure out that if I hire one toothless woodsman 15 minutes to unload a cord of wood, it takes two long for two of them. That's how they usually fight with each other.

On Saturday, once again, I will buy a car — still a virgin at the dealership, take notes, pretend I have done this a hundred times before, strike a pose, make a pass at bargaining and, doubtably, get taken. I am the predictable product of a shoddy education. Success at school, a failure at life. Many customers does it take for a salesman to sell a car he's been driving to unload at a price he never thought of? The answer is one. Here I come. Copyright 1986, Washington Post Writers Group.

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(USPS 045 360)

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