

## Remembering the Bonfire 12

### Should the University hold a memorial ceremony marking A&M's greatest tragedy?

Texas A&M has announced that it is not planning to have a University-sponsored memorial of the two-year anniversary of the 1999 Bonfire collapse. The collapse, which claimed the lives of 12 fellow Aggies and injured 27 others, was a traumatic and painful event for all connected to A&M. By not holding a memorial service, the Aggie community is able to privately remember that terrible disaster and continue healing its wounds.

The collapse affected people individually and deeply, and regardless of whether you knew any of those Aggies, everyone has different ways to remember and heal their wounds. Not having a University-sponsored memorial service does not mean the A&M community is trying to forget or hide what happened. Many would argue that without a memorial service, people will not remember what happened and those whose lives were changed forever. But that is not so. Anyone who was at A&M, or watched at home, never can forget Nov. 18, 1999. That happened that day has changed the A&M community forever. These changes are easily seen throughout A&M.

For the 12 trees planted on the Polo Fields where past Bonfires were burned and fell, A&M cannot forget its fallen Aggies. Yet, there is a time when people must move on from where they are to where they should be going. This does not mean that the past is forgotten. It means that Aggies are not dwelling on the pain, but instead remembering the joy and friendship of those lost. As Student Body President Schuyler said in *The Battalion*, "Students just want to get

through it in their own way and not go through another big ceremony and relive those painful memories."

With a big ceremony, old wounds will be reopened and the grieving process will be halted. Sometimes the best way to recover from a loss is to remember it in unique ways.

As many people have learned from the events on Sept. 11, one of the worst things in the grieving process is repeated exposure to the traumatic event. Reliving the collapse can be as painful as when it happened. Those affected will relive the pain and emotions they felt on that day and the following days. The Aggie community felt the loss of that day, but some were more affected than others. With a large ceremony, those people who were deeply affected by the Bonfire collapse will not remember what was good about those lost but only remember the pain and agony. No one ever forgets a lost friend or loved one, but they can stop remembering the pain of that loss.

With the construction of a permanent memorial for those killed or injured in the 1999 Aggie Bonfire collapse, the Aggie community will have a lasting tribute to its fallen Aggies. But it is time to continue the healing process, and Aggies do not need an University-sponsored memorial service. It is ill-fitting to believe that because there is not an official memorial service people are trying to forget what happened. To not reopen wounds from that painful day, but to remember the good things of those lost is the best thing Aggies can do.

Brienne Porter is a junior political science major.



Nov. 18, 1999. The mention of this date sends chills down the spine and brings tears to the eyes of Aggies around the world. That day forever changed the lives of thousands of people. It changed lives not because of a stack of wood laying on the cold autumn grass but because of 12 young Aggies who were taken from the world. This date will serve as a memorial for thousands of students, friends and families — a memorial not to a 90-year tradition but to fallen brothers and sisters. This will remain a day in many of our lives to reflect not on the tragedy but on the positive. That day is tattooed on Aggies' hearts to remember the good times had with the 12 — not to weep for a lost tradition or to cry for their friends.

Vice President for Student Affairs Dr. J. Malon Southerland announced there will not be a University-sanctioned memorial for the victims of the Bonfire collapse. No Aggie ever will forget the events of that November night, but moving on includes not taking the time to remember our family. Looking back on the memories of another time — seeming like it happened yesterday, and feeling like it was another lifetime — the Aggie family will not be forgotten.

Students have moved on with their lives, yet carry memories close to the heart. As thousands of

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students stood cold in the middle of the night last year, hiding a candle from the extinguishing deluge of freezing rain, standing for the memories of the 12 victims. They stood for those who will never stand again.

Whether there is a University-sanctioned ceremony does not mean there will not be thousands of people who spontaneously show up in remembrance of the Bonfire collapse victims.

If students are planning to go to the Polo Fields in remembrance of their friends and family, the University should hold a memorial there, so that it can be done right. Because anything worth doing is worth doing right, the University should do what it can to make sure that there is a proper memorial service. To ignore the wishes and feelings of the students is to ignore the victims themselves.

A memorial is not just for the dead but for the living, as well. While there were only a few dozen physical victims, there were thousands of additional emotional victims. Students want to remember their friends and will do so, whether sanctioned by the University or not. After all, "there's a spirit, can't be told. It's the spirit of Aggieland."

No matter what the administration of Texas A&M decides, a candle should be lit to represent the burning desire of loyalty, friendship and remembrance that was lit within us all on Nov. 18, 1999.

Thomas Campbell is a senior agricultural journalism major.



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## Saudi Arabia is an unsteady ally of the US

Since the United States took military action in Afghanistan on Oct. 7, it has come under fire from a number of Middle Eastern countries for inflicting damage on an Islamic brother. It was no surprise that long-time foes like Iran and Iraq were critical of the U.S. strikes. What was surprising to some was the lack of response from America's allies in the region, Saudi Arabia in particular.

People who closely follow the Middle East are not shocked by the silence, and more recently, the tacit criticism from Saudi Arabia. It has become clear during the last few years, that Saudi Arabia is no longer an ally of the United States. Indeed, the Saudis hold the sad burden of being responsible for much of the terrible situation that now befalls America. It is time that the United States, in turn, look elsewhere for support.

In the 1980s and 1990s, it was clear that the Saudis were loyal allies of the United States. Since that time, King Fahd, Saudi Arabia's ruler during Operation Desert Storm, has largely become incapacitated. He has been replaced in day-to-day operations by his half-brother, Crown Prince Abdullah. Abdullah is no friend of the United States; he actually opposed the introduction of American forces into Saudi Arabia after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. Abdullah has caused Saudi Arabia-

American relations to significantly cool. Saudi authorities did not allow the FBI to interrogate any suspects involved with a 1995 bombing in Riyadh that killed five Americans, or the Khobar Towers incident in 1996 that left 19 American servicemen dead. The Saudis arrogantly told the Americans that they had no business becoming involved in internal matters, although no Saudi national was killed in Khobar.

They also have stepped up their rhetoric against the U.S. alliance with Israel, culminating in Prince Alwaleed bin Talal's outrageous comments that seemed to give justification to the World Trade Center attacks.

The Saudi government also is facing major problems at home and abroad. The Al-Saud dynasty claims to be a purely Islamic monarchy. It bases its rule around Whabbism, a hard-line Sunni Moslem sect, whose leader gave his backing to 'Ibn Saud, the founder of the kingdom, in exchange for his following of strict Whabbist interpretation of the Koran.

The Afghan Taliban claims to operate in much the same fashion, leaving the Saudis in the difficult spot of claiming it is "more Islamic" than another supposed theocracy.

The Saudi government has, over time, alienated many of the nation's leading religious clerics. It has furthered the problem by spending large amounts of money to send Saudi men abroad to study in Islamic colleges and by founding Islamic schools in places like Pakistan. Instead of receiving

thanks, those educated on the Saudi's dollar now despise the royal family. Many see the Al-Saud as enemies of Islam and seek their destruction, just as Osama bin Laden, a Saudi national, does. Their mistake can be seen in the number of Saudis who took part in the Sept. 11 attacks, and the large number of Saudis who have donated their money to bin Laden's al-Qaida network.

The Saudis have responded in their classic form: by throwing money at the problem. Fearful that they will be deposed from inside or out, the Saudis are bribing their foes with millions of dollars in subsidies. This includes millions sent to al-Qaida, that has been used against the United States. Such actions, and the hatred of the west espoused by Crown Prince Abdullah, led a senior member of the U.S. intelligence community to say that the Saudis had "gone to the dark side."

It is time for the Bush Administration to recognize the threat the Saudis pose to American interests and act accordingly. Americans should move to solidify relations with other Persian Gulf states (including, perhaps, Iran) and some of the former Soviet republics, such as Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan. In this case, our reliance on Saudi oil will become far weaker, and the Saudis can be left to their own devices. It would be interesting to see how they react when this marriage of convenience is no longer convenient.

Mark Passwaters is a senior political science major.



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