

Fame, fortune, but not expertise

"Expert testimony" of celebrities a poor way for legislators to gather information

It is acceptable to see professional basketball player and AIDS patient Magic Johnson speak out against AIDS, or actor Michael J. Fox, who left the cast of his television show *Spin City* as a result of his bout with Parkinson's disease, increase awareness of Parkinson's disease. Both have reason to further their cause and will hopefully encourage others to fight for their lives. But when Kermit the Frog lobbies to Congress for a bill regulating the sale of exotic animals, celebrity influence has gone too far. In the past decade, more celebrities have felt the need to address congress with social and political issues, and most lack the education or knowledge to further the issue.



CAYLA CARR

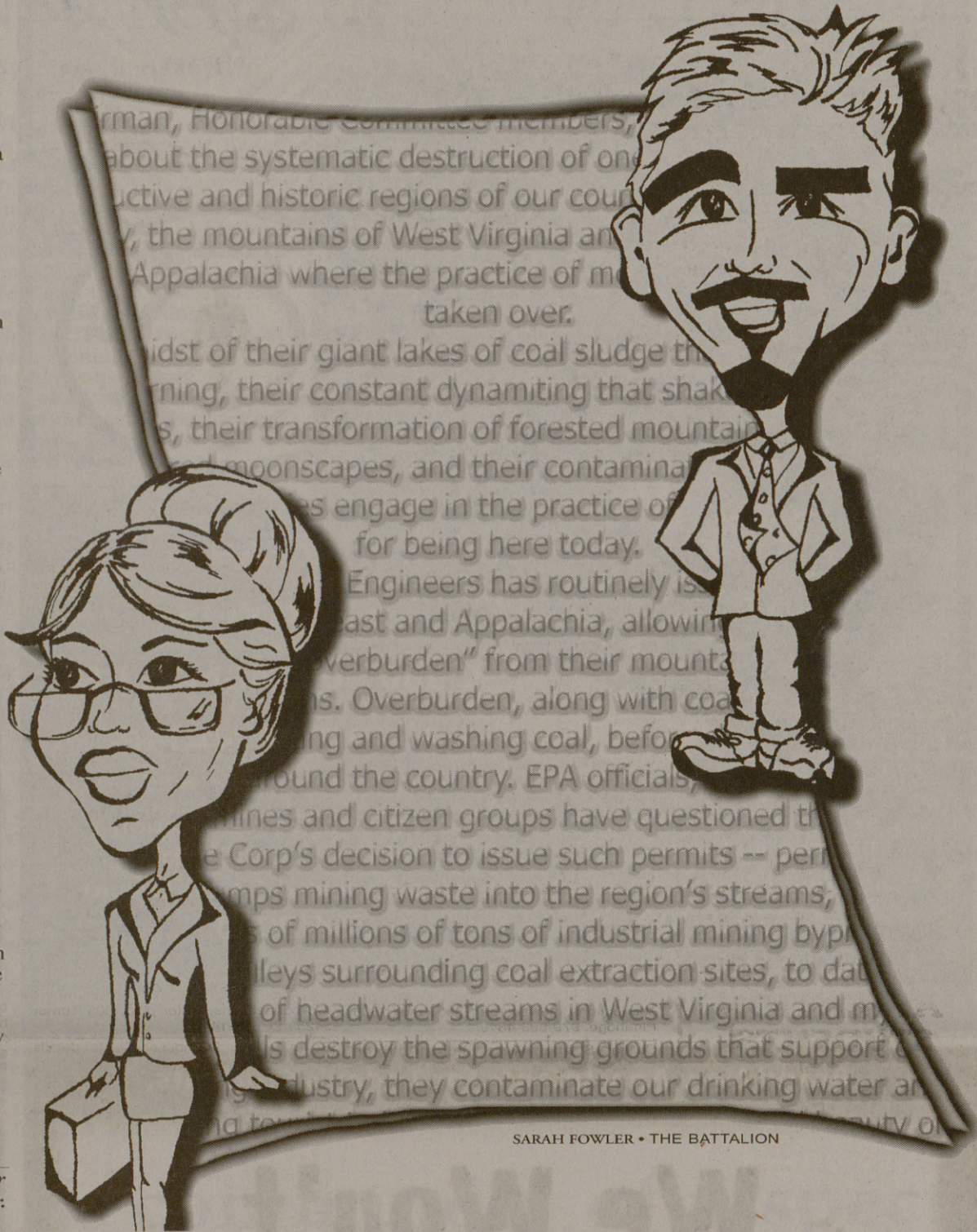
enough knowledge to voice concern. The worst part of this incident is that national representatives encouraged celebrities to speak on behalf of middle and low income farmers. They simply have not been through the experiences real farm families have and should not speak for a cause they have no knowledge of. The fine line between television and reality must be recognized, first by America's legislative branch and then by the average citizen. What is Congress' obsession with media celebrities?

On June 19, the *Austin-American Statesman* reported that celebrities like Angelina Jolie and Harry Belafonte met and discussed ways in which their names can be used to further the efforts of the United Nations. Just because Jolie is an Academy Award winner does not mean she has adequate knowledge to address foreign affairs.

The *Statesman* and Bureau reported that Eric Densenhall, author of several books on celebrities and media, was quoted as saying, "Expertise does not photograph well. Julia Roberts does." In May, Julia Roberts crusaded in Congress for Rett syndrome, a disease that affects young girls. Roberts has no children, nor was she herself infected with the disease. However, she was asked to present a case to Congress. But, as Densenhall said, she was not asked based on her expertise on the subject, but for her beauty. Roberts should take this as an insult and realize that her high school education does not give her the knowledge needed to address Congress about this issue. Beauty is only skin deep. Since when does it make someone an advocate for a deadly disease?

Many times Congress has asked or allowed celebrities to speak on behalf of average American citizens because their status will attract attention. Congress must realize that by allowing celebrity privileges to dictate national policies, a mockery is being made of the legislative system. An actor like Christopher Reeves speaking on behalf of the American Paralysis Association is more than acceptable since he can relay firsthand the experiences he has undergone and give others hope. Otherwise, the case is futile. As South Park so eloquently puts it, "Just because you are on TV does not mean you know crap about the government." Real words of wisdom, spoken by a cartoon.

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SARAH FOWLER • THE BATTALION

The *Austin-American Statesman* and the Washington Bureau reported that Kevin Richardson, a member of the Backstreet Boys, recently testified against the mountaintop-removal coal mining technique. However, the hearing was short one person, Sen. George Voinovich, R-Ohio. Voinovich protested Richardson's appearance and did not attend. Voinovich doubts Richardson's expertise on the subject, and rightfully so.

According to Richardson, the 30-year old boy band member, he investigates environmental issues between concert appearances. According to *People News* and *The Washington Post*, Richardson claimed to have more knowledge about the subject than Sen. Voinovich because he grew up in Kentucky and took two flights over the coal fields, seeing firsthand the damage of this technique. Using this logic, every person who has driven over the oil reserves in West Texas is an expert in petroleum engineering. Being 20,000 feet in the air makes it almost impossible to see anything firsthand.

Richardson's knowledge on the coal mining technique cannot exceed those that have spent their life making environmental issues a top priority. Richardson simply does not have the wisdom or the education needed to influence Congress' decision.

Voinovich's recent boycott is a milestone for Congress. For years Congress has willingly relied on testimonies of celebrities to make decisions and increase awareness. According to the *Austin-American Statesman* and Washington Bureau, in 1985, a House agricultural committee asked many actresses who played farm wives in movies to testify about the suffering farm families undergo during rural recessions. Jessica Lange, Sissy Spacek, Jane Fonda and Sally Field all made appearances. The highest education any of these women achieved was high school or acting school, neither of which provided them with

Teach religion unbiasedly

"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."



LINDSYE FORSON

This is exactly what the First Amendment to the United States Constitution says concerning religious and governmental interaction. Americans generally hold misconceptions about the Constitution's position on this issue; it would surprise a lot of people to know that the phrase "separation of church and state" does not appear once in the U.S. Constitution or its Bill of Rights. This famous phrase was actually coined by Thomas Jefferson in a letter he wrote to the Danbury Baptist Association of Connecticut, and in the context of his letter, it was intended to assure these people that religious activity would be protected from government interference. Ironically, Jefferson's phrase is used today more often than not to help protect the government from religious interference, specifically in public schools.

In 1962, the Supreme Court put an end to all types of prayer in public school in the case *Engel v. Vitale*. The high court ruled that allowing prayer in federally funded schools is a form of governmental endorsement of religion and a violation of the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment. Since this landmark decision, a great deal of controversy has ensued regarding what constitutes appropriate governmental treatment of religion in the public school system.

Christianity was the religion of many of the founding fathers, and a substantial majority of U.S. citizens have traditionally claimed a Christian heritage; teachers in public schools have been rumored to use the classroom as a medium to pass this tradition on to future generations. Because the Bible urges Christians to "preach the good news," it is not surprising that a few teachers, coaches and administrators in public schools would take advantage of their position and push a particular religion on children in an inappropriate manner. Their intentions are almost certainly benevolent, but any incidence of government interference with one's religious beliefs violates one of our most important civil liberties. Somehow, in response to a legitimate threat, a virtual modern day witch hunt seems to have occurred in public schools across the nation.

School districts and teachers have responded. Knowing that they are contending with dismissal if they mention religious beliefs and that school districts can face public criticism - even lawsuits - for employing "bigots" who endorse religion in the classroom, the public schools of today often choose to remain completely silent on the issue of religion. By choosing a policy of silence, these schools are taking the path of least resistance, but they are also ignoring a crucial aspect of cultural and societal education.

If not for the tragic events of Sept. 11, the current public school procedure would probably remain unchallenged. But in the months following this national tragedy, it became clear that many schools' policies of not regarding religion would no longer be adequate. According to MSNBC, a barrage of questions from students about Islam has caught teachers in public schools completely off guard, bringing to light the fact that schools do not currently train teachers in the appropriately to handle questions of a religious nature.

The attacks of 9/11 epitomized the intimate relationship between religion, culture and politics as critical, and to a great extent inseparable, elements of every society. In order for children to understand the complexity of this type of event, they must first understand the active role religion and morality play in the world's many cultures and societies, and there is absolutely no wording in the Constitution that would suggest the public school system should deprive them of this type of information.

Religion is undoubtedly a more sensitive and controversial subject for many than, say, math, and public schools should treat it as such. First, each public school should use the same textbook to ensure objectivity and universality of teaching; MSNBC suggests the series *Religion in American Life*, which is already being used in some public schools. Secondly, teachers should be trained in how to handle this material without violating the civil rights of their students. Although various school districts may be held accountable for the fairness and success of their policies, the responsibility ultimately rests on the teachers to ensure that religious information is taught correctly and objectively. Lastly, schools need to lay out clear guidelines for how students may express their religious beliefs in the classroom without infringing upon the rights of others. The establishment clause is two-pronged: Congress cannot make any laws regarding the establishment of religion, nor can they prohibit "the free exercise thereof." As citizens of the United States, the Bill of Rights gives students the right to express their religious beliefs, and makes no indication that they cannot do so in a classroom.

It is a gross injustice to students for public schools to exclude a crucial aspect of their education simply because teaching religion in any form is difficult and controversial. If taught fairly and objectively, the writings and teachings of the world's religions can be imparted to students as information without involving the government in the establishment, support

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MAIL CALL

Community reacts to Corps hazing

In response to Christina Hoffman's June 18 article:

As a current Aggie Bandsman, I am, of course, embarrassed by what I saw on three Dallas news stations, but I am not surprised, given the Corps' aptitude to sweep unharmed events like this under the rug.

I am 10 times more embarrassed and disgusted, however, by the release of such revealing images. This release led to an incredible invasion of the Corps members' privacy. The assaulted student's bare body can now be seen by any internet-user worldwide.

If the University is responsible for this injustice, just as much investigation and punishment should be dedicated to the passage of this photo into public hands. I am continually concerned and astounded at the lack of decency with which *The Battalion* operates.

Brad Cawyer
Class of 2003

The pictures turned in to faculty regarding band members "hazing" each other disappoints me. These kids are obviously doing nothing in the picture to build the leaders of tomorrow. However, what the average non-reg

does not understand is this brings unnecessary attention to a military organization and discontinues activities in the Corps of Cadets which build comradery.

I know people may argue the previous statement, but until you have been in the Corps, don't attempt to define comradery-building activities. Have you thought about how many Cadets are possibly going to lose contracts because of this picture?

The Corps in my eyes is at a low point at this moment and will not regain strength until the University stops treating the Corps like a fraternity and allows it to resolve it's own issues.

John Coreil
Class of 1998

Both my husband and I just graduated from A&M and it is good to know that we still have a bunch of stupid boys in the Corps who think the real world involves taping someone else up like a naked pig.

I have never had any respect for the Corps, and those pictures just proved my opinion right. The Corps of Cadets need to grow up. They are not the keepers of the spirit. In my eye, the only thing they keep doing is getting more stupid each year.

Rachel Masteller
Class of 2002

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