

MEMORIALIZING THE FALLEN

Columbine High has no right to keep parents from using 'God' in memorial

President Bill Clinton said in a 1995 letter to school superintendents across the nation that nothing in the First Amendment converts our public schools into religion-free zones or requires all religious expression to be left behind at the schoolhouse door. He is right.



THOMAS CAMPBELL

The tragedy of April 20, 1999 — the day Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold stormed into Columbine High School with guns blazing, killing 12 students, one teacher and themselves — will be forever etched in the memories of Americans. Parents' memories of their children, however, may lose their chance to be displayed at the school.

Columbine High School allowed each of the parents of the students killed a few tiles memorializing the loss they suffered that warm spring day. Brian Rohrbough, father of slain student Danny Rohrbough, made a couple of four-inch tiles with religious themes, but the school took those tiles off the memorial wall because of their religious themes, cheapening the memorial they created for the fallen students in the process.

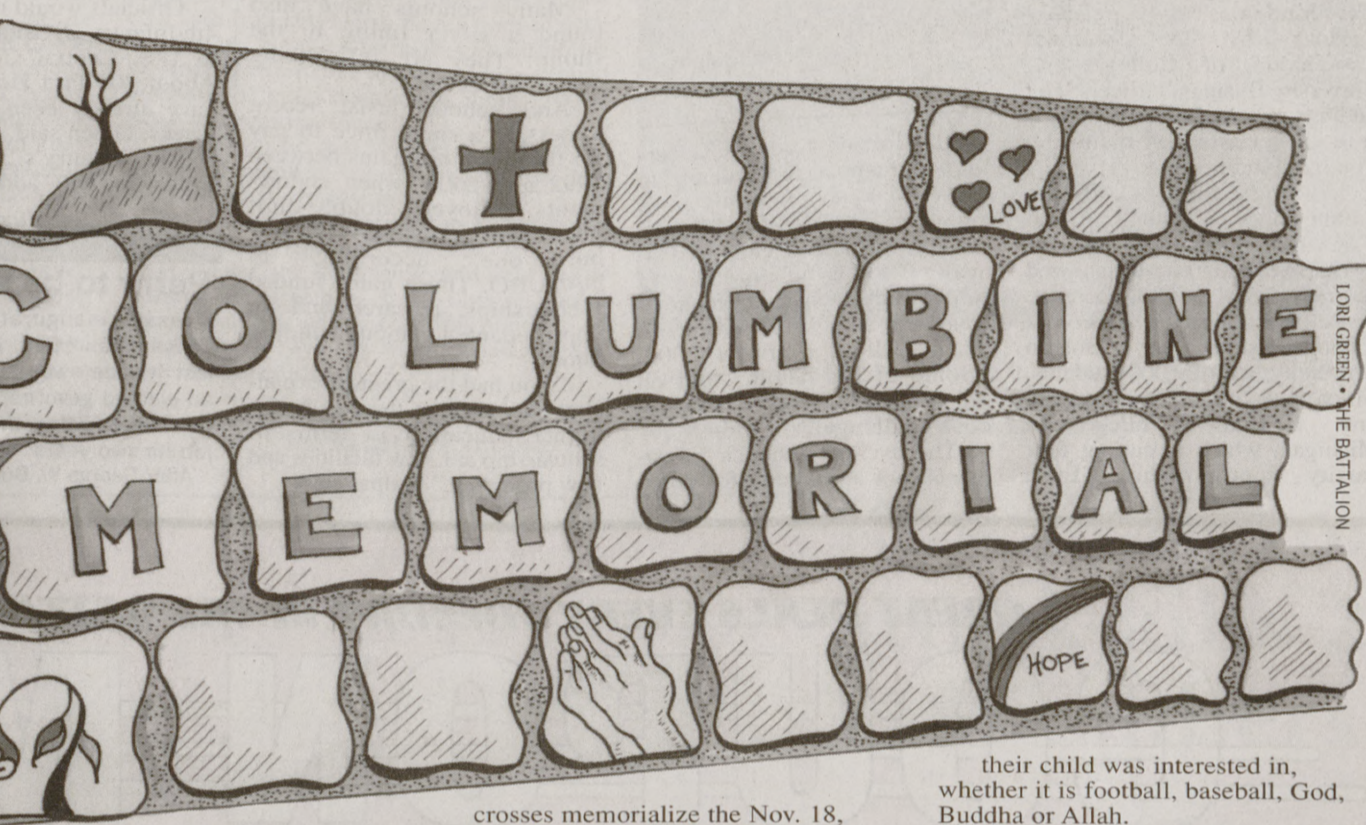
"If you asked me to create a memory of my son, it is always going to include a reference to God, because it is a core value," Rohrbough told foxnews.com. If Rohrbough cannot make his own son's memorial, no one

else is fit to.

Rohrbough and the parents of Kelly Fleming, also killed in the massacre, sued the school. Their suit made it all the way to the Supreme Court in their journey to defend free speech. On Monday, Jan. 13, the Supreme Court decided not to hear arguments in the case, without comment — which defers back to the 10th circuit court ruling that the tiles cannot be hung, according to foxnews.com.

School district officials told Fox News that they invited the parents to create tiles when they were renovating Columbine High School after the attacks. They told the parents not to make a memorial out of the tiles — but parents of these slain children likely had little other motivation. School officials also asked the parents, after they made their tiles, not to have religious themes on them, observing a non-existent Constitutional requirement of the "separation of church and state."

In fact, "separation of church and state" appears nowhere in any governmental document or law for our country. The First Amendment says that the government cannot establish a church. But allowing the parents of a child who was killed while helping other students flee murderers on governmental property to write "God is Love" on a tile is not establishing a national religion or



forcing students to believe in God.

School officials will not let these parents memorialize their children in their own way; yet, in the high school's front office hangs a plaque that says "God Weeps Over Columbine."

Right now on the Polo Fields on the Texas A&M campus, 12 white

crosses memorialize the Nov. 18, 1999 Aggie Bonfire Collapse. The crosses are not construed as the establishment of a University religion, but rather as a memorial to fallen Aggies.

Likewise, two out of 4,100 tiles in the Columbine hallway are not in any way establishing a religion, but rather memorializing those parents' fallen sons and daughters. All the parents should be encouraged to show what

their child was interested in, whether it is football, baseball, God, Buddha or Allah.

This is not an establishment of religion problem as much as it is a freedom of speech problem. By allowing the tiles, Columbine school officials would not be establishing a religion, but by censoring the religious tiles, they are stifling freedom of speech.

Thomas Campbell is a senior agricultural journalism major.

King for a day

King's dream still not reached

"I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." — Martin Luther King, Jr. Aug. 28, 1963.



MATT MADDOX

King stood for hard work. Monday, Texas A&M honored Martin Luther King Jr., a man who labored tirelessly for educational opportunities for all, who toiled endlessly for equality on the job, with a day off for students and faculty. This reverence is just a prelude to the backwards homage paid in the name of the most famous leader of the civil rights movement. This week's events at A&M and the mindset of the University administration is a microcosm of the sad state of the modern civil rights movement.

King stood for equal treatment, regardless of race. Highlighting A&M's week-long "Campus With a Dream" festivities will be an address today by Kweisi Mfume, president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Mfume leads an organization that has abandoned all pretenses of seeking a colorblind society, the foundation of King's dream. The NAACP issued a rebuke last week of President George W. Bush's brief in the University of Michigan affirmative action case, stating that, "The president complained that black applicants at Michigan were given twenty points toward admission, not because of 'life experience,' he said, but because of race. But life experience in the 21st century is determined by race. Race colors all our lives." The NAACP could not have misstated the ideal of the civil rights movement more, and King would be the first to agree.

King stood for straight talk on racial issues. The NAACP also recently launched an attack on Bush's nomination of Judge Charles Pickering Sr. to the 5th Circuit Court of Appeals. Julian Bond, chairman of the NAACP National Board of Directors, said of Bush in a press release that "Elevating him is a sop to the racial politics that has proven so successful for the Republican Party from Barry Goldwater in 1964 through 2002. They have no shame!" In reality, maligning Pickering as a racist is the most shameful play of the race card in recent memory. According to CNSNews.com, risking his life, Pickering worked with the FBI in the 60s to prosecute KKK members in

Mississippi as a county attorney. He went so far as to testify against the KKK imperial wizard in the case of a murdered civil rights volunteer in 1967. Since those activist times, Pickering has served on the board of the University of Mississippi's Institute for Racial Reconciliation and has the support of local civil rights leaders. Unfortunately for Pickering, that doesn't serve the political motives of the NAACP.

Avoiding anything resembling straight talk, A&M President Dr. Robert M. Gates issued a press release last week discussing his diversity plans. "The initiatives have nothing to do with quotas, preferential treatment, lowering of standards or the like." The last time Gates issued a press release, it included the following lines: "This campus needs to look more like the state of Texas; 93 percent of our undergraduates are Texans. Texas is 32 percent Hispanic; we're 9 percent. Texas is almost 12 percent African-American; we're under 3 percent." If issuing targeted percentages of students based on racial statistics is not quotas, then what is?

King stood for brotherhood and was against segregation. Further desecrating this dream are A&M programs based on race. This week, A&M will play host to the Southern Black Leadership Conference, a mostly segregated program sponsored by the University, but to be fair, a person of any race can join. The Minority Enrichment and Development through Academic and Leadership Skills (MEDALS), slated for Jan. 24-25, operates with the same racially segregated pretenses. Ending the week is a "Miss Black and Gold Scholarship Pageant," another segregated event that would very likely violate the law against discrimination in higher education. Race relations are furthered by programs of inclusion, not exclusion, so why not include students of all races? The NAACP states on its Web site, "Affirmative action is the just spoils of a righteous war, won at great cost and intended to heal division and end centuries of discrimination." It is sad that 37 years later, King's movement has turned to supporting a racial spoils system that furthers racial division.

Texas A&M should take a lesson from King, and seek not the politically correct and easy route, but take the moral high road of color blind policies. Stopping racially discriminatory and segregationist behaviors will mean lots of hard work and perseverance, but that would be the best tribute to a man who fought and died

Matt Maddox is a junior business major.

PUF must stay untouched

Permanent University Fund shouldn't split

In order for the Texas A&M admissions office to skim the cream off this semester's applicant pool, the undergraduate ceiling was raised to 42,000 just to accommodate the University's most elite applicants.



LEANN BICKFORD

To top it all off, A&M is quite the bargain education. Part of the reason the University enjoys the quality and quantity of its applicants is simply because tuition here is dirt cheap. That's right; the A&M system is selling us a \$30,000 education for a little more than \$10,000. Whoever is signing off on our tuition checks each semester can thank the 1839 Texas legislature for that.

Almost 200 years ago, Texas congressmen set aside a public endowment, giving future students at A&M and the University of Texas a little gift called the Permanent University Fund (PUF), which helped to establish both schools. The fund, which was thought to be of petty to moderate value at the time of endowment, came to include all proceeds from oil, gas, sulfur, railroad and water royalties in Texas and currently generates nearly \$300 million in revenue annually for both schools.

Revenue from the PUF today helps to subsidize student tuition costs at A&M and UT by quite a generous percentage, an estimated 50-70 percent, according to the Houston Chronicle. And now, everyone is out to get a piece of the PUF pie.

An estimated 50-70 percent of a \$30,000 education is a heck of a birthday present from the state of Texas, especially when you consider that Texas dishes out a little more than \$2 a day to its welfare recipients. And although other universities in the state outside of Texas' "big two" have their own endowment funds, there is little that schools such as the University of Houston, Southwest Texas and Texas Tech would love

more than to tap into our PUF revenue base.

For A&M's sake, the PUF fund must remain untouched.

During the current legislative session, lobbyists are pouring into Austin, pressuring congressmen to see that the PUF pie is expanded to mutually include and benefit the schools they represent.

Other lobbyists in Austin are arguing that the revenue being spent to maintain and expand A&M and UT should instead be borne by the students who benefit so greatly. Perhaps they are bitter at the fact that college graduates earn \$19,000 more per year on average than those without degrees, precisely the amount the state subsidizes each year for each student at A&M and UT. These same lobbyists cite the median family income of college freshmen at both schools exceed \$50,000, which is more than national averages.

The lobbyists' argument is a simple one: the benefit received by college students in Texas should more closely resemble the amount they contribute. "Equity, equity!" they shout.

There are a couple of problems with that argument, however. Cutting the PUF pie too thin could be the worst-case scenario for Texas' higher education. A&M and UT would either have to significantly cut spending, which would significantly reduce the quality of the two schools, or would have to begin to charge private school tuition rates for public school education. A&M's funding does not need to be cut any further.

Still, less money would be available to recruit quality instructors and several programs would have to be cut as a consequence. Our public schools would have to begin to rely a little too heavily on private donations to maintain the degree of excellence they currently exhibit. And honestly, there are just too many out-of-state and in-state private schools for Texans to apply to.

There are only so many Texans who can afford to pay higher rates, and Baylor, Trinity and

Southern Methodist University already hold that market. Sure, there are plenty of true-blue sixth-generation Aggies and Longhorns, but there are also plenty of very smart people that attend Texas' public university system because of its comparatively low cost. The quantity of A&M and UT students would undoubtedly crash, never mind the quantity of quality applications, if A&M and UT's share of PUF is sliced. The two schools would fall out of the prestigious national rankings they hold.

And at the risk of sounding politically incorrect, who among us really wants well-to-do applicants who can afford the cost of private schools but who choose to attend A&M because of its cheaper price, thereby eliminating room for the less qualified who would typically only qualify for federal grant money? In this case, public money would come out of the same pot, and be much worse spent.

A&M and UT should continue to be a great source of pride for Texas. The PUF established both schools in the name of quality education. If the lobbyists have their way and the PUF is expanded to include all state universities, or even worse, the PUF is expanded to include state programs other than education, the reputations of "the big two" will certainly be in danger.

So, for goodness sake, A&M, write your congressman and tell him to protect our PUF.

Leann Bickford is a freshman business administration major.

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