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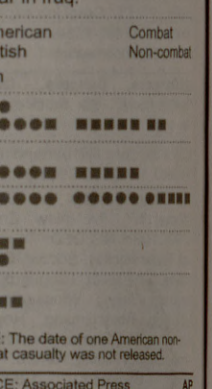
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The date of one American non-combat casualty was not released.

Source: Associated Press

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# OPINION

## Questionable police work

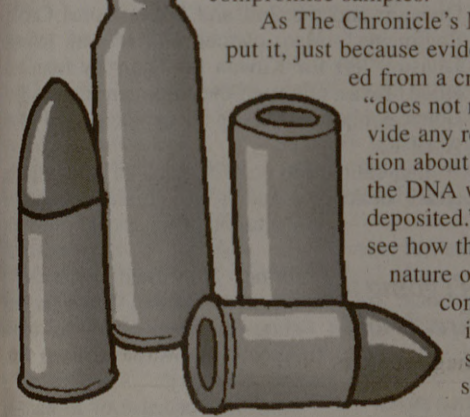
### Irregularities, sloppy science plague Houston's crime lab causing lab closure

Though currently at war with Iraq, this nation now faces another important war, one being waged in the cities and streets of Texas. The brutal regime Texas' citizens must deal with is not that of a dictator, but one imposed by the incompetent work of police ballistics and DNA labs such as the Houston Police Department's crime lab and similar research facilities across the state. Only now are decades worth of illegitimate convictions stemming from tests conducted by these labs coming to light, according to The Houston Chronicle, which calls into question the validity and accuracy of ballistics and DNA evidence throughout Texas, specifically when peoples' lives hang in the balance. The seriousness of the Iraqi conflict can't be downplayed, but saving innocent civilian lives must start right here in Texas.



GEORGE DEUTSCH

In a scathing indictment of the Houston Police Department's crime lab, The Houston Chronicle this week cited an independent audit revealing that "sloppy science, an undertrained staff and a leaky roof" were tainting, if not totally corrupting, DNA evidence. In the multiple examples presented by The Chronicle, lab mistakes still resulted in convictions, as juries didn't question the information police and prosecutors gave them. But DNA evidence alone has always been questionable, in spite of the fact that it is often referred to as flawless by prosecutors and police. This assertion of flawlessness could not be any further from the truth, as minuscule DNA evidence can inadvertently be carried from one place to another and even slight human error can compromise samples.



As The Chronicle's Mallory S. May put it, just because evidence is collected from a crime scene, it "does not necessarily provide any reliable information about when or how the DNA was originally deposited." It is easy to see how the unreliable nature of this evidence, compounded by an ill-informed staff and sloppy science, could

result in a faulty conviction and send an innocent man to death. DNA testing in Houston has now been discontinued and cases are being reviewed, according to The Chronicle. Though overdue, this is the Houston Police Department's first step toward real justice in quite some time.

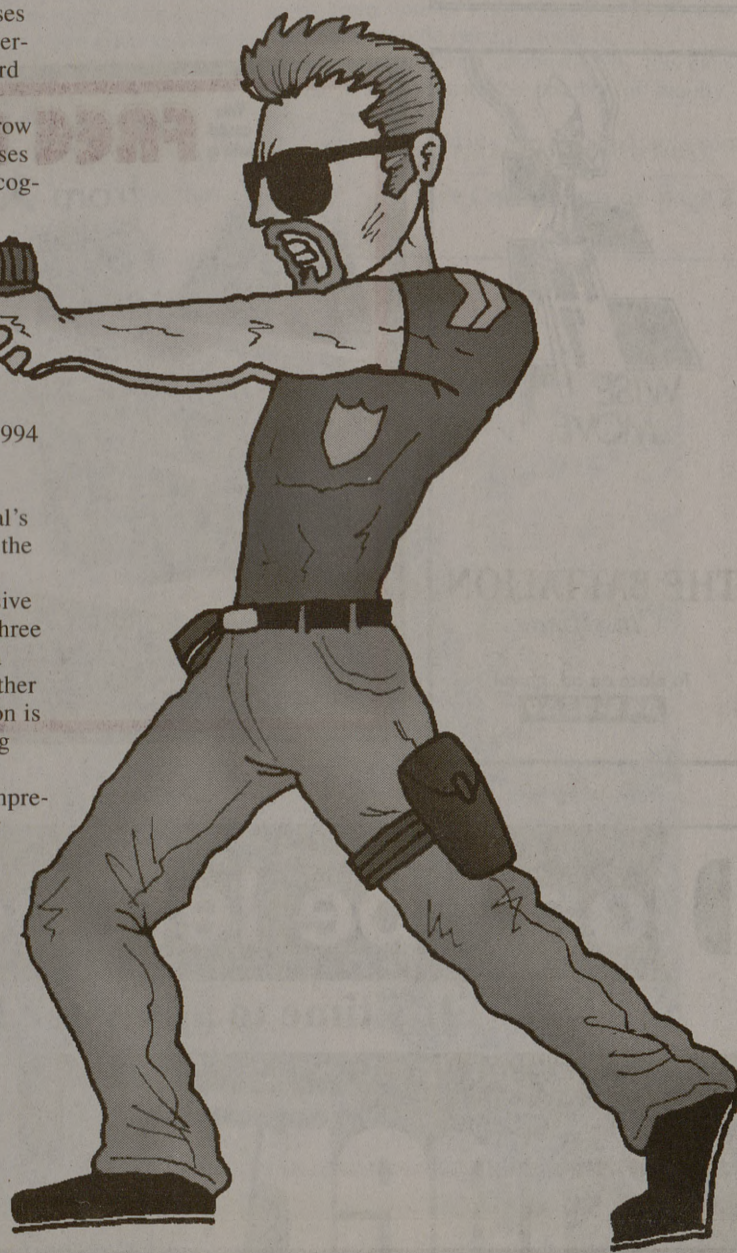
But as Robert Rosenberg, a lawyer for a Houston death row inmate, told The Chronicle, "It is not just DNA. In these cases we have (a weapons examiner) who is not following any recognized set of standards, (yet) he didn't have any problems taking the stand to get convictions. Why should we trust him or anyone else in the department who is reviewing his work?" The answer, Mr. Rosenberg, is that we should not.

The clearest and most highly publicized example of this injustice is the case of Houston death row inmate Johnnie Bernal, who was convicted of a shooting death in 1994 and awaits execution, according to The Chronicle.

A weapons examiner testified against Bernal at his trial, claiming a bullet found in the murder victim matched Bernal's gun. According to The Chronicle, the problems arose when the weapons examiner, Robert Baldwin, was test firing the gun, which he did 25 times before making a somewhat inconclusive ballistics match. Ballistics tests usually don't even require three shots. Baldwin also coated the barrel of Bernal's gun with a chemical solvent, according to The Chronicle, which is another inappropriate step in ballistics testing. The lingering question is how long Baldwin and others like him have been performing tests in this grossly amateurish manner.

Fortunately, state legislators decided Tuesday that a "comprehensive audit" of DNA and ballistics work in Harris County was necessary, but this should only be a first step. When lives hang in the balance, meticulous care must be taken in doing lab work that determines their fate. Shoddy police work will no longer suffice. If mistakes are made, police must begin erring on the side of caution and no longer on the side of guilt. As Rep. Harold Dutton, D-Houston, told The Chronicle, "Harris County has the greatest number of people going to death row. Isn't it ironic that it is the place where they can't get it right?"

George Deutsch is a senior journalism major. Graphic by Josh Darwin.



### MAIL CALL

#### Conoley responds and clarifies statements

In response to Rolando Garcia's front page article on March 26:

I am writing in response to the story that appeared on the front page of The Battalion titled "Gay tolerance brings controversy to faculty."

Although I applaud you for writing an article about the very important issue of diversity on this campus, many of the quotes in the article attributed to my name are inaccurate and I want to take a moment to clarify what you have written.

In the brief phone interview I had with Mr. Garcia on March 17 I did not say that I found Crouse's letter "rather pompous and arrogant." I did say that there had been charges and countercharges in regard to a newly proposed college-wide statement on diversity and, in fact, I had been called pompous. Further, I said that people on all points of the spectrum of acceptance of GLBT individuals felt they were being attacked. Finally, I said that we must get beyond personal attacks and move toward collegial conversations. These conversations are currently happening in our college.

A memo from me is quoted as saying, "I generally consider distinctions that call us to love the sinner while hating the sin to be empty, rhetorical gestures at best and covers for persecution at worst." The article fails to mention that in the next sentence I say that I am also cognizant of the great good accomplished by many denominations of many different religions.

This very same memo speaks of the immense trust and respect that I have for my colleagues whose signatures appear at the bottom of the letter opposing the wording of the proposed diversity statement for the college (which, by the way, passed unanimously yesterday). I have known most of these signers for almost seven years and have complete trust in their dedication to fairness.

In another letter to the faculty in the College of Education and Human Development, I wrote, "In our culture, the introduction of religious perspectives always give rise to deeply felt responses. The right, however, to hold those beliefs and be open about them must be protected as must the right to be who you are, in terms of sexual orientation, be protected."

The Battalion article also states that I "instituted a new policy that states the college 'celebrates and cherishes GLBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered) people.'" This is not a new policy; it is an operating policy that has been upheld by the college's administration, at least since 1996 when I arrived at Texas A&M. In sharing this operational policy, it is not my intent to confront any existing TAMU System policy or to quell anyone's thoughts or opinions. Rather, my intent is to encourage enlightened conversation from which our community can grow together and learn from one another.

I am quoted correctly once in the article. I did, in fact, say that I use sacred texts to guide my personal life and not to judge others. This is true. I try my best not to judge others. I seek to understand and learn from others — those who are like me, but more importantly, those who are very different from me.

Jane Close Conoley  
Dean and Professor  
College of Education and Human Development

#### Anti-war protesters are not anti-troops

The continued accusations that anti-war protesters do not support the troops are getting tiresome. Before attacking those who oppose the war, take a moment to listen to what the protesters are saying. The protests are against the war, not the troops. The protesters are concerned with the reasons we have gone to war in the first place and the future precedents this war could set in regards to international relations. As the daughter of a retired Air Force officer, the girlfriend of a Marine, and with friends who are now fighting in Iraq, I feel even more compelled to make my voice heard in regards to the need for peace. I feel for the families with loved ones fighting in Iraq, and I feel for the soldiers who are far from home. I do not support the decision to go to war; I do not support the international policies of our president. It is possible to both support the troops and not support the president and his decision to go war. Certainly the troops need our support — I have not heard any peace protesters say otherwise.

Gina Opdycke  
Graduate Studies in English

#### Protesters, patriots raise critical concerns

In response to Erin Pirrung's March 27 column:

There are many in America who have been accusing those who oppose war in Iraq of lack of patriotism, of undermining the war effort, of making the nation appear weak or undecided, and even of opposing the troops who are risking their lives for our nation, and the argument which was wielded by Erin Pirrung in her recent column. All of these arguments are dangerous and misleading, equating dissent with opposition, pacifism with anti-Americanism.

Those of us who oppose war with Iraq do so because we are patriots, because we love our nation, and because we treasure the freedom and democracy that America affords us. This nation was not built to its current strength because of its uniformity or harmony of opinion. It is exactly the diversity of people, of beliefs, and of opinions, and the fact that all of these differences are equally heard and considered, that has lent this nation its strength and endurance. America thrives on debate. Issues from civil rights to abortion, taxes to the environment have all been a part of this continuing and crucial dialogue that serves to shape the path that our nation will follow.

How, then, can war, the most ultimate, costly, and controversial choice a nation can make, be exempt from this critical debate? How can those of us who feel that war is the wrong choice, that it is damaging our great nation, remain silent and still call ourselves patriots?

Many, Ms. Pirrung included, point to Vietnam and say look what happened there. Some misguided protests were actually aimed at the troops rather than at their proper target, which was the policy makers. This shameful mistake is one that will not be repeated, for I know of not one protester who does not hold both respect and appreciation for our troops. And while we are looking back at Vietnam, we also must ask ourselves how much longer we might have remained in that misguided war if dissenters had remained silent. How many more lives would have been lost in vain if the protesters had not voiced their opposition?

Robert Deegan  
Class of 2003

#### War solved many of the world's problems

In response to Melissa Fowler's March 21 news article:

Except for ending slavery, fascism, nazism and communism, war has never solved anything. I saw the demonstration on Thursday. The protesters could at least come up with better slogans for the signs. "No Blood for Oil"? How cliched! If anyone has a motive for oil, the French, Germans and Russians all have billion dollar oil contracts yet to be filled. While the rest of the world was trading "food for oil," France, Germans and Russia all decided to go the extra step and trade "arms for oil."

Also, the Rev. Danita Noland stated, "The actions and words of President Bush have caused this country to be at odds with most of the world, and we hold our government accountable and responsible for the lives of each and every Iraqi citizen." How about the French, Germans and Russians have alienated themselves from the rest of the world and the 45+ nations (including many Arab nations) that have joined the coalition aimed to disarm Saddam Hussein and liberate the Iraqi people.

God Bless America and our Troops!

Grayson B. Anderson  
Class of 1997

#### Global community is the future

In response to Michael Ward's March 21 column:

I read the Newsweek column you wrote about, Mr. Ward, and it seems to me that getting defensive is not the approach we should be taking. America is facing a real dilemma right now, and that is global opinion. We are emerging from a time in our history when we lived blissfully isolated from the rest of the world, separated by two massive oceans, but with the rise of the Internet, satellites, globalization, etc., the global community is beginning to take shape. The notion of a "superpower" is becoming obsolete. A generation or two from now, children born in America will identify themselves more with the world community than with the American community. The more we fight to preserve our "lone superpower" status by parading our massive military might, and flaunting and dismissing as ludicrous the will of the rest of the world, the more hostile, violent, and anti-American a world we will be bringing our children into.

Scott Monk  
Class of 2005

