

## Connecting N.C. with the other side of the world

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia - "What do people in your country think of Malaysia?"

I have been asked this question a hundred times in Malaysia by people who are anxious for Americans to know that this small country (about 23 million people) has pulled itself up by the bootstraps to become the U.S.'s 10th largest world trading partner. They are proud that they have transformed themselves from a poor country exporting only raw materials like tin and palm oil into a maturing industrial economy with a growing focus on high tech productions-willing to do business in any country in the world, and increasingly successful at it.



D.G. MARTIN

They want North Carolinians to know. I had to tell them that most of us don't know much, if anything, about Malaysia.

Maybe some of us know that the main part of the country lies between Singapore on the south and Thailand on the north. Others remember the twin tall buildings in Kuala Lumpur that were, until recently, the tallest buildings in the world. We don't know much.

I got tired of admitting and explaining away our ignorance about their country and went on the offensive.

"What do you know about North Carolina?" I am asking them.

What do you think would be the answer?

Mostly, they know about as much about North Carolina as we know about Malaysia. Not much, if anything.

So how can I explain to them what is special about North Carolina?

I talk about our beautiful mountains and beaches, our worldwide banking centers, our great colleges and universities, our great history, and our hard-working cheerful people. They listen politely, but there is no "click." I have not given them anything special to bond them to North Carolina, something they will remember about us. I am looking for some word, or idea, or person that is already familiar to the Malaysians. Then I am trying to make the connection to North Carolina-so they will remember us.

Let me tell you some of the things I have tried in my effort to build a lasting "mental bridge" to North Carolina for people who live half way around the world.

First of all, the connection that clicks almost every time is the Wright Brothers' "first flight." Almost everybody knows about this event. "Of course," one of my new Malaysian friends said, "it was in Kitty Hawk."

But my new friend did not know that Kitty Hawk was in North Carolina. Nor have other Malaysians known that the Wright's first successful flight was here. But since they know about the event, I can use it to build their "mental bridge" to North Carolina.

Another connective link that worked almost every time was Michael Jordan. They knew the basketball player, but did not know his North Carolina connection. Same thing with Andy Griffith.

Here are some other things I tried.

Research Triangle Park. Surprisingly, almost no one remembered the name of our pioneering research-based economic engine, even though the Malaysians are pouring money into research zones and hi-tech manufacturing parks, obviously inspired by RTP's success.

Pinehurst. Most golfers knew about Pinehurst, but not that it was in our state. "Maybe," one of them told me, "you should persuade them to say Pinehurst COMMA North Carolina."

Winston-Salem and tobacco. I had to point to packs of Salem and Winston brands of cigarettes before they understood the connection.

Charlotte and Bank of America and Wachovia. Surprisingly, these names did not seem to register. "Those banks do not do much business over here," I heard several times.

One connective link that registered very often was the Soong family name. The "Soong Sisters" are well known in Asia because of a popular movie about them. One of these sisters married Sun Yat-sen. Another, Chiang Kai-shek. The North Carolina connection comes from their father, who was nurtured and educated in our state-perhaps our first Asian exchange student.

Now, it's your turn. What links have you used to help people in other countries remember our state? Let me know (at [dmartin13@nc.rr.com](mailto:dmartin13@nc.rr.com)) so I can add them to my list the next time I travel overseas. And if I get enough good ideas, I will share them in another column soon.

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## Literacy more than idle skill

Illiteracy may not be important if you are trying to win on American Idol. But for the other 99.9 percent of youth who will never become famous, it should be.

Recently "American Idol" winner Fantasia Barrino, who is from High Point, shamefully admitted that she is functionally illiterate. She disclosed that she was able to get by on the show by listening to the other contestants sing the words to their songs and, when she was corrected for mispronouncing something, laughed it off and said that she's just "country."



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It took a lot of courage for Fantasia to admit to having this embarrassing problem, and it is a good thing that she says she is now dedicated to learning how to read and write. But for other youth who are not properly educated, there will be no second chance and no viable plan on which to fall back. Under the North Carolina state constitution, every child is entitled to a "sound basic education." But for various reasons, not all children are receiving it.

By now, you have heard about the long-running statewide lawsuit known as the Leandro case which concerns how much North Carolina spends for education and how well districts are managing that money. Lawyers for the parents, including famed Charlotte attorney Julius Chambers, argued that CMS's student-assignment plan is unconstitutional, saying schools with large numbers of "at-risk students" can't provide an equal education.

Currently, 10 out of 17 CMS high schools are considered "low-performing" schools. These schools are consistently failing to generate adequate test scores, and they exist in high-poverty, high minority areas. Some schools are experiencing high concentrations of poverty as one result of a federal judge's order ending race-based student assignments in CMS six years ago, saying the school system was sufficiently desegregated.

Wake County Superior Court Judge Howard Manning, Jr. who has been presiding over the Leandro school financing case, expressed vehement disapproval with the way CMS has handled its problems but also stated that busing is not the answer to solving academic problems at CMS's poorest public high schools—and it isn't.

Shuffling students from one side of town to the other at six in the morning will not necessarily ensure that students are being adequately educated. Students considered at risk can still fall behind no matter where they are. Busing does not guarantee that those students who need extra help reaching an adequate level are getting it. And as Judge Manning rightfully pointed out, you cannot move all students out of low performing schools, especially considering the numbers. According to statistics, the number of low-income students in Mecklenburg's schools has grown, and the percentage of children qualifying for lunch subsidies rose from 38 percent in 1997 to 45 percent last school year. Instead of students changing locations, the schools should be changed.

Recruiting and retaining qualified, experienced educators, even if it means bringing them in from out of state, instead of ushering in substitute teachers fresh out of school themselves is vital. Students can not perform up to par if the proper instruction is not there to begin with. Teacher turnover rates for low performing schools are high. Budgetary measures need to be allocated toward offering teachers better pay, equipping schools with necessary resources, and creating an environment that is safe and conducive to learning.

In addition, many students at low performing schools come from unique situations that need to be taken into consideration. They are already at a disadvantage before they even step foot into school, coming from unique backgrounds that may affect the learning process. Issues such as poverty, single parent households, presence of negative influences and exposure to violence can all contribute to a student's behavior both in and out of the classroom. Many researchers have found a direct co-relation between high poverty and low performance. But several school districts prove otherwise.

Students in high minority, high poverty schools in Atlanta, Georgia and Norfolk, Va., for example, both boast some of the highest achievement scores in their respective districts. The Hamilton County (Tennessee) school district receives assistance from a Chattanooga-based foundation which works with and funds programs at high poverty schools. They offer innovative high school programs that are a lure for students. CMS officials even invited representatives from the Hamilton County district here to discuss strategies that may work for CMS. If pioneering programs and specific goals can work elsewhere, they can work here.

CMS has proposed a plan which includes block scheduling for core classes, more spending power for principals, and a promise to hire more math and science teachers. These are good starts because if schools are not organized to rectify the issues, they will perpetuate them. In addition, the curriculum should be more challenging so that acceptable test scores will become more attainable. Offering watered-down curriculum is not doing students a favor. If the bare minimum is acceptable, then that is what many students will put forth. After school tutoring for those who need it should also be made available.

Perhaps most importantly, however, is that a good education needs to be a priority again. Doing well in school was once the ultimate measure of success, and teaching careers were highly revered in the community.

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## The trouble with Democratic Party

To the puzzlement of a lot of people, in an important Senate vote on the nomination of Judge John Roberts to the Supreme Court, 22 Democrats voted "yes" for this long-time conservative, while 22 said "no." This is but the most recent example of a poorly kept secret in Washington: Democrats are often equal to, or worse than Republicans in their treatment of Black issues in the Congress. Why? At least two things account for this.

First, many Senate Democrats, especially in states where the vote is often influenced by who is running for president, are now afraid of the power of conservative voters. If you look at the 22 Democratic senators who voted for the Roberts nomination, nine of them were in states handily won from 52 percent to 60 percent by George Bush in 2004.

Another group of Democratic senators were from four states won by Kerry, but only narrowly. So they were cautious in risking that their vote against Roberts would come back to bite them in a subsequent election. This means that in addition to the 55 Republican votes in the Senate, many more Democrats are vulnerable where high-profile votes are concerned that touch on the senator's ideology. This is what creates the "conservative consensus" in that body.

Despite this, there were four other Democrats from Connecticut, Delaware, Vermont and Washington (states with small or non-existent Black and Hispanic populations) who apparently felt free enough to vote for Roberts. I consider these to have been seduced by his charm, his high level education, his intelligence and his ability to persuade them that he would consider each issue on the merits, that he was not a right-wing ideologue and that he considered *Roe v. Wade* to be settled law.

Why Senator Patrick Leahy of Vermont, the Democratic minority leader of the Judiciary Committee felt this way is inexplicable, since he is an old hand and knows that nominees will say such things to get confirmed. As the leading Democrat on that committee, he stared the consistent right-wing record of Roberts in the face, then abdicated the leadership of his party to his own faith. It was a decidedly weak historical move.

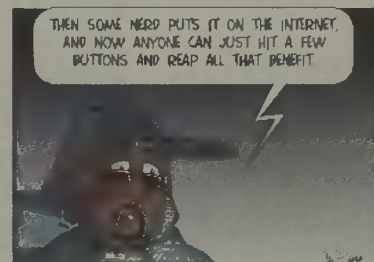
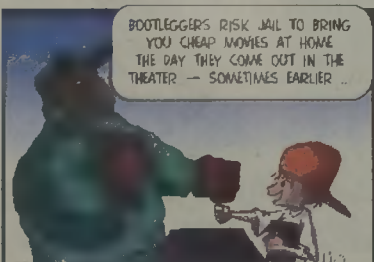
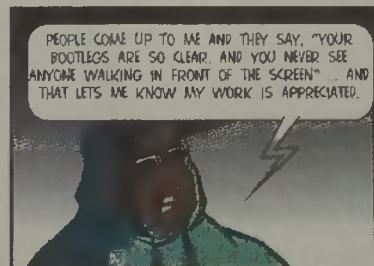
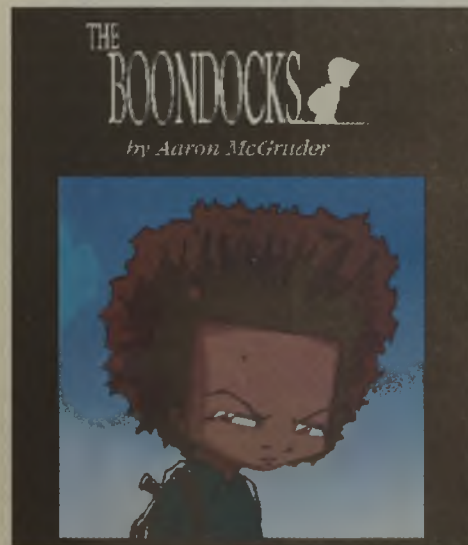
The second problem with Democrats is their philosophical confusion. This, too, is created, in part, by the fact that there is a conservative consensus on issues that especially touch black life. Thus, issues such as affirmative action in higher education and contracting, whether government should do more to help the poor, and also housing, welfare and crime issues, are all issues that are unpopular with whites, regardless of party.

Recently, two former Clinton White House staffers, Dr. William Galston and Dr. Elaine Kamarck wrote a report for The Third Way, an organization that was influential in shaping the Clinton approach to governing. While the Third Way postures itself as a "progressive" organization, it is directed toward the "middle class" a term that in the political parlance has been code for the white middle class. In this, it has supported issues little different from those of the Democratic Leadership Council, the right wing of the Democratic Party.

For example, this report argues that Democrats can't win the White House by relying on improving the turnout of their base to win elections, that they need to appeal to swing voters instead. They report that the Hispanic vote was increasing slowly and also swung toward Republicans in 2004; women did not come back to the Democratic party even though married women were targeted; and blacks would add little even if their turnout improved 4 or 5 percent. Their conclusion then, is that Democrats shouldn't concentrate on their liberal base—and by extension liberal issues—and they need to become more tolerant of conservative values such as those that put George Bush into office in the last election.

The question I would raise is that, since this is a recipe for further dismissing the interests of Blacks, Hispanics and women, the base of the party, then how does a "swing vote party" operate to give confidence to its base that it will honor their concerns. In other words, if they can win without appealing to the base, then why do they need to cater to them when they get into the White House? This is the key to the difficulty that blacks have with Democrats in this era of history. When Democrats win the White House, we receive little in the way of public policy, and as the minority, when they vote with the Republicans in the House and Senate, we don't hold them accountable.

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