

Opinion

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Board Editorials

Entrance Denied

National policies regarding student visas need to eliminate loopholes and institute background checks

The need for increased security has become an accepted part of life in America. Universities will now join tourism and immigration under the scrutiny of security officials.

Two separate proposals in the Senate have addressed the process for issuing and monitoring student visas, both calling for revisions to existing policies. It's important that the new legislation closes loopholes that have been exploited while maintaining accessible educational opportunities.

Legislation introduced by Sens. Edward M. Kennedy, D-Mass., and Sam Brownback, R-Kan., call for special investigation into student visa applications coming from any of the nations on the State Department's list of countries sponsoring terrorism.

A competing Senate bill calls for an immediate denial of any requests from those countries, which include Cuba, Iran, Iraq, Libya, North Korea, Sudan and Syria.

The more restrictive bill is sponsored by Sens. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., and John

Kyl, R-Ariz.

Companion legislation in the House of Representatives also has been introduced, so it appears that some measures will be taken. Their severity seems to be the only aspect in question.

No matter which plan is eventually adopted, it must specifically address areas in the student visa process that have been exploited by terrorists. The most important of these areas is communication between intelligence-gathering agencies (such as the CIA, the FBI and the State Department) and the universities and other front-line institutions where visas are issued and used.

Nearly 800,000 student visas have been issued this year. The overwhelming majority of these people are legitimate scholars and researchers or individuals seeking to improve their lives. But the current global climate of fear and apprehension has forced the hand of Congress.

At least one terrorist involved in the hijackings of Sept. 11 was in the country on

a student visa to study at a California school that he never actually attended.

Attendance monitoring provisions in the proposed legislation will raise a red flag for such situations. Foreign students might feel unfairly scrutinized, but the process is for safety, not oppressive oversight.

The differing policies regarding applications from "rogue nations" are, of course, meant to stop terrorists from taking a direct route to America.

But the Kennedy-Brownback bill will be more effective in detecting false credentials and questionable applications. Some of the terrorists involved in the Sept. 11 attacks obtained access to the country with fraudulent Saudi Arabian passports.

Effective background checks should put an end to such practices.

The combination of these efforts will enable American citizens and their foreign guests to feel safe within an academic climate that thrives on international input and a strengthened global community.

Shedding Some Light

Breast Cancer Awareness Month more than justifies a little pink light at the state's Capitol

I am an obsessive obituary reader. It's an admittedly morbid morning ritual that goes with coffee. I can't help it. After seeing my grandfather's sweet face stare back at me from the News & Observer's obit page two years ago, I read them every day, if only to make sure I don't know any of the listed dead.

I am most interested by their ages, and I am uneasy when someone goes home to Jesus at the age of 47 or 55. Few people die of natural causes at 47, especially women, who have longer life expectancies than men. So I read on, and eventually I get to the obit's end. "In lieu of flowers, the family requests that donations be made to (insert appropriate cancer society here)."

October was Breast Cancer Awareness Month. But now it's November, and the Susan G. Komen 5K banners and pink ribbons have been replaced by Christmas decorations and "50 percent off" sale signs.

The rosy lights that have illuminated the N.C. Capitol have also been taken down, to the probable delight of those who have logged protests with the state's Department of Cultural Resources.

CATE DOTY

EDITORIAL NOTEBOOK

North Carolina's first lady Mary Easley lit the Capitol in honor of Breast Cancer Awareness Month and in memory of all those taken from their loved ones by the disease — people like Barbara Berger, who died Monday. The lights were also in honor of the survivors, those who weathered the chemotherapy and radiation, the hair loss and radical mastectomies — the indelible tracks of breast cancer across their bodies.

The lights were to remind us of who we have lost and what we can do to prevent any more casualties of breast cancer. But the protesters questioned the lights' value and complained that they ruined the Capitol's appearance. One particularly flip-

protest wrote to the N&O that "November is Vegan Awareness Month — will the Capitol be showered in green light?"

So to that letter writer and all the protesters who didn't like the pink lights: Get over it. The aesthetics of an unattractive lump of limestone in downtown Raleigh can't hold a candle to breast cancer awareness. As another more reasonable letter writer put it, "Talk about color is obscuring the point of having the lighting in the first place."

This year breast cancer will strike nearly 5,500 North Carolina mothers, wives, girlfriends, sisters and daughters. It will kill 1,100. Pink lights on a symbol of our state is the least we can do.

In lieu of flowers, Barbara Berger's family requests that donations be made in her memory to the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation. She was 60 years old. Rest in peace, Mrs. Berger.

'New Kind of War,' But Age-Old Dilemmas For Nation's Media

As the now familiar mantra goes, September 11, 2001, changed America forever. Certainly we have lost much as a country: our innocence, our sense of security, our isolation from the rest of the world's problems.

But even those Americans deepest in mourning can concede that some good has come of the disaster.

The fallout has brought Americans together in a way unprecedented in most of our lifetimes.

Almost 9 of ten Americans are standing proud behind a president who didn't even win a majority of the popular vote a year ago.

An equally impressive ratio is in favor of a war that doesn't have a defined enemy or a likely objective.

But while most Americans might appreciate our newfound solidarity, there are those who fear its repercussions.

Will dissenting voices be heard in these sensitive times, or will we protect ourselves from potentially troubling speech?



JOSH MYEROV
OMBUDSMAN

From our recent past, we know that once-discredited voices of dissent are often seen kindly through the lens of history.

Both the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s and the anti-Vietnam War movement of the 1960s and 1970s were decidedly unpopular campaigns in their infancies.

But with time came increased media coverage. As disturbing real-life images from the front lines were aired nightly on the news, the movements gained mainstream support.

Military leaders to this day criticize the "liberal media" for undermining America's war effort in Vietnam. But the images themselves were neither liberal nor conservative; they were only compelling and shocking, and they allowed the American people to make more informed decisions about American government actions.

Now, as America finds itself in this "new kind of war," as our president is fond of saying, the American mainstream

media must grapple with age-old dilemmas.

Should the media hush the voices of dissent in the interest of maintaining high morale? Or should it heighten its responsibility to act as a forum for all voices, including those of dissent?

Too often in the last eight weeks, our media have chosen the former. Two newspaper columnists have already been fired for criticizing President Bush's actions in the hours following the attacks. And television host Bill Maher was forced to publicly apologize for making anti-patriotic remarks on his show "Politically Incorrect."

Certainly not all dissent has been tamped down.

Most newspapers are running anti-war letters to the editor, although they are often buried among the mass of pro-war letters.

The Virginian-Pilot, the Norfolk, Va.-based newspaper, ran a story in its Sunday Commentary section titled "Peace marchers aren't going away — we're against this war."

Unfortunately, the story itself, penned by a student at the University of

Wisconsin at Madison, is poorly written and the author's case poorly argued. "We protest this war because we don't want innocent civilians in Afghanistan to die. We don't believe that the war will solve the problem of terrorism. It may actually create more terrorists who are repelled by the bombings."

Compare that column with another in the same section by Tribune columnist Cal Thomas. Unlike the anti-war piece, Thomas' column is given import by virtue of where it's placed (above the fold), how it's played (with an accompanying illustration) and who it's written by (a nationally syndicated columnist). Thomas' column, "U.S. shouldn't rule out the nuclear option," is arguably just as dissenting as the anti-war column, but its stance is much more palatable to a pro-war American audience.

"The Taliban fight with the weapons of terror, determined to kill every man, woman and child they can. The United States should spare no effort in wiping out the Taliban and all terrorists who would follow in their sandals. If there is collateral civilian damage, that's war," Thomas writes.

The Virginian-Pilot's decision to run Thomas' column should be staunchly defended (I'm not aware of any outcry). His perspective is likely shared by thousands, perhaps millions, of other Americans and deserves to be elucidated by a gifted and passionate writer. The same, however, must be said of other perspectives, whether that of anti-war protesters, Pakistanis, Afghans, or Taliban members.

Embracing voices of dissent is never easy, least of all in the midst of war. With public opinion skewed so squarely in favor of American military action, finding voices of dissent among the press corps can be tricky in itself. Columnists renowned in the pre-Sept. 11 world for challenging readers have suddenly found themselves on the majority side of public opinion. But dissenting voices are out there, whether within our borders or beyond, and our media has a responsibility to find them.

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Gary Birdsong: Preaching to The Converted

We've all seen him around — or more likely heard him.

He'll show up often in the fall, forehead veins a-bulging, then open his mouth, making Jerry Falwell look like a raging liberal hippie. Some think he gives religion a bad name. He is known for making Muslim students cry.

Gary Birdsong, the Pit Preacher, has become a bit of an institution at UNC.

Walking through the center of campus, soothed by the lulling cadences of screaming and derisive laughter, I wondered about the man behind the voice. So I called up old Mr. Birdsong to see what he had to say.

Birdsong is a family man from Halifax County. He travels to more than six states all year, doing exactly what he does at Chapel Hill and has done for more than 20 years.

We had a 45 minute conversation that was, while enlightening, in all honesty a bit spooky. He said pretty much what I had expected — Jews, Muslims, Catholics, relaxed Christians, non-churchgoers, homosexuals, women who work or wear pants, people who attend sporting events, players in sporting events, Democrats, liberals, feminists, people who like peace, people who like the arts, the Bill of Rights, UNC administrators and faculty and essentially anyone who disagrees in any way, shape, or form with Gary Birdsong are all subject to judgment.

The most surprising part about our interview was that it was a civilized, calm discussion rather than the traditional scream/response/interruption of the Pit talks.

Here are some of the highlights.

Erin: You traditionally use a forward, abrasive preaching method. Is this the most effective strategy?

Birdsong: I get riled up because it gets people uptight, emotional. If I see repentance, I'll stop! Chapel Hill's real bad, real, real bad — no repentance there. UNC-Chapel Hill is anti-God.

I wonder if the 45 recognized student religious organizations would agree. He went on to say that getting people angry is his most effective method of preaching.

Birdsong: See, when I leave, everyone is still talking — that's my purpose. I could compromise and get along with everybody, but it wouldn't help. It's when folks get attitudes that I get attitude.

Erin: Do you get used to all the verbal warfare?

Birdsong: You never get used to people blaspheming God. **Erin:** This University has received national press for being liberal. What are your thoughts on that subject?

Birdsong: This University is the most stupidest place I have ever been. That administration is wicked people. All this stuff, this humanistic theology is all teaching from the federal government. All the sin is because of prayer out of school. They've perverted the First Amendment — the state was told not to interfere with the First Amendment, the freedom to practice religion. Well, just look at what religion they're talking about! It's Christianity — look at the founding fathers!

Erin: The true religion on this campus is sports. What can you suggest to our teams to keep a good record?

Birdsong: What they need to do is quit it all together. Ballgames represent the world and sin. Christians shouldn't be participating in that. Cheerleaders in ungodly outfits, everybody drinking, smoking the marijuana. That sort of stuff is the reason God descends his wrath on America!

Wow. Hear that, coaches Bunting and Doherty? Perhaps it's time to rethink your gametime philosophy.

Seems the key would be to just ignore the man — hostility only plays into what he is trying to do. The reason behind the animosity is obvious — people don't like having someone come into their space and sling hate like hash. It's hard for me to listen to someone who's telling me I am booked with a one-way, first-class, express ticket to eternal hellfire.

When he visits, UNC students don't talk. We yell. We mock. We ridicule. I can certainly understand that — I have been angered and seriously offended by just about everything he says. But because someone disrespects me does not mean I have the right to disrespect him or that I should, especially if it only eggs him on.

It is sad that a person can devote so much fire and energy spreading such a hateful message. Talking to him made me realize just how genuinely he believes in what he says, which is unsettling to say the least. At the same time, I was alternately left wishing I could muster that much passion about anything.

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