

The Gothic Guardian

at Duke University



Is it really fair?

FAIR TRADE

Perspectives: The NYU Protest 5

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The Miscellany

Great Moments in “Satire”

Regular readers of the *Chronicle* may have seen this puzzling letter to the editor when it initially appeared on February 25:

“Blue Devils United is appalled by the increasing presence of freshmen on West Campus. Freshmen have been allowed to pervade West Campus without the permission of those of us who live here. The sacred institution of seniority is undermined when freshmen intrude on traditional upperclassmen space. Since freshmen already have East Campus, we seek to define West Campus as a space where ‘only the presence of upperclassmen is valid or recognized.’ Following the precedent set by California Proposition 8, join us in defending our campus at the West Campus bus stop between 10 a.m. and 3 p.m. today and sign our petition, Duke Proposition 8.”

This epistle led us to ask ourselves two important questions: What the heck is Blue Devils United, and where did they learn to write satire? Clearly we’re not dealing with Jonathan Swift here. According to their website, Blue Devils United is “the student group for LGBTQ undergraduate students, allies, and friends.” The site offered no explanation, however, for their apparent difficulties with satire.

Their own word choice highlights the contrast between Prop 8’s purpose and their far from analogous gesture. By saying that they “seek to define West Campus” as open to upperclassmen only, they point out a vital difference: their ill-conceived satire proposes to redefine West Campus, whereas Prop 8 merely affirms a definition that has been in play rather longer than West Campus has been around. On the *Chronicle*’s website, a commenter helpfully pointed out that the Blue Devils United effort is an imitation of a similar protest at Princeton, which can be found on Youtube, and in which Princeton’s student activists created a petition to forbid freshmen from using the sidewalks. The Princeton protest seemed (on Youtube) to be better organized and attended, but, alas!, the analogy still fell flat.

We have to cut these people some slack, however – they must be awfully embarrassed, and we realize that it would’ve been difficult to come up with an analogy for Proposition 8 that was simultaneously controversial and apt. In fact, the whole episode puts us in mind of Orwell’s thesis in his essay “Politics and the English Language”: that clumsiness in the expression of an argument usually suggests that the argument itself is flawed.

More Fun with Letters to the *Chronicle*

We were very excited to come across a letter in the March 4

Chronicle addressing one of our favorite topics, grammar:

Duke Student Government approved the revised DSG Constitution Feb. 25. Though the unrevised constitution was severely outdated and confusing, previous student bodies deliberately included gender-neutral language. We applaud many of the Constitutional Review Committee’s changes and commend them for all their hard work.

The committee, however, made a conscious decision to take out all gender-neutral pronouns—replacing them with solely masculine pronouns—on the premise that gender-neutral pronouns were socially “outdated” and syntactically confusing to read. [...]

Though it appears like this issue revolves around seemingly “unimportant” semantics, our language often reflects societal beliefs and, as such, it is important to choose our words wisely to mirror the equality we claim to hold dear. The DSG Constitution should include gender-neutral pronouns that acknowledge the existence of women, who constitute more than half of the student population.

We are both shocked and dismayed at the apathy exhibited by a majority of the Senate—an organization that continually suffers from an underrepresentation of women—when the inclusion of gender-neutral pronouns was regarded as “unnecessary,” “antiquated” and “germane.”

We believe that the hostile environment we encountered last Wednesday is a microcosm of the general indifference and lack of constructive discussion regarding gender issues on campus, and we encourage all members of the Duke community to consider how their language engenders and reinforces underlying social inequalities.

No wonder the authors of this letter dismiss arguments based on syntactic flow – clearly, elegant English is not one of their top priorities. (Nor is vocabulary their forte -- a definition of “germane”, anyone?) They will be glad to learn, however, that English already has a gender-neutral pronoun. It’s called the “neutral he”.

Someone should really take it upon him- or herself to offer these good people a more extensive lesson in composition before they submit another letter to the paper (or, for that matter, before they submit anything for publication anywhere). After all, he or she who struggles with grammar is at a huge disadvantage for the rest of his or her life, especially if he or she tends to bulk up his or her sentences with distracting, gratuitous pronouns.

Though the abuse of language (particularly the abuse of language for ideological causes, and most particularly the abuse of language for ideological causes that we do not personally support) always makes us blue, we were heartened to learn of the event that provoked such a stylistically interesting letter. We’re

The Miscellany does not reflect the views of the editorial board or of the staff of this magazine. We are merely an individual who has self-indulgently adopted the royal we.

The Miscellany

pleasantly surprised to find that somebody in DSG is willing to stand up for sensible, clear, concise English against clumsy feminist Newspeak. It restores, to some extent, our faith in mankind.

Duke Enemies of Israel: “Let’s Not Talk About It”

If you have a difference of opinion with Women’s Studies graduate student Svati P. Shah or Literature Program Chair Kenneth Surin, don’t bother trying to discuss it with them. They may never speak to you again. Both Duke community members publicly support a group of university professors committed to silencing the voice of a community with whose ideology they disagree.

Shah and Surin have endorsed the mission statement of the U.S. Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel, according to the group’s website. The campaign follows in the footsteps of the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel and a British incarnation of the idea. The organization presses American academics to “refrain from participation in any form of academic or cultural cooperation, collaboration, or joint projects with Israeli institutions” in addition to pressuring their university to divest from Israel and their president to issue a public condemnation of Israel.

Fortunately, it seems as though such efforts will get nowhere at Duke. According to an August 2007 *Chronicle* article, President Brodhead eloquently condemned the British boycott, citing Duke’s “proud tradition of upholding the free exchange of ideas, including those ideas that involve the bitter, unresolved conflicts in the Middle East” and commitment to “robust intellectual integrity”. In a March 20 article in *The Weekly Standard Online*, Erin Sheley discusses the American boycott in terms echoing Brodhead’s concerns, noting, “The fact is that any attempt to close scholarly debate to any subset of institutions will necessarily prevent the individual minds in those institutions from contributing to solutions to international problems, and most especially with respect to those problems that form the basis for the boycott in the first place” She also notes the telling absence of boycotts of countries that are actually violators of human rights, a fact that raises questions about whether this boycott is truly motivated by support for human rights rather than by racism and religious discrimination. Although it is a shame that anyone affiliated with Duke should participate in such a boycott, it is heartening to know that our president will not support such willful closed-mindedness.

Ayn Rand to Barack Obama: “Thanks.”

According to the website of the Ayn Rand Center for Individual Rights, President Obama has done the deceased, icono-

clastic founder of Objectivism a favor. Sales of her masterpiece *Atlas Shrugged* are “almost triple” what they were this time last year, the site reports. Yaron Brook, the Rand Center’s executive director, attributes the post-Obama sales spike to the “uncanny similarities between the plotline of the book and the events of our day”.

All of those people rushing out to buy *Atlas Shrugged* have the right idea. If you haven’t read it, you should. Personally, we’re not Objectivists or anything, but the novel, now more than ever, will give you plenty of food for thought.

Quote of the Month

Heather MacDonald on the culture of victimology on college campuses. From “Victimology 101 at Yale” in the March 16 *Weekly Standard*:

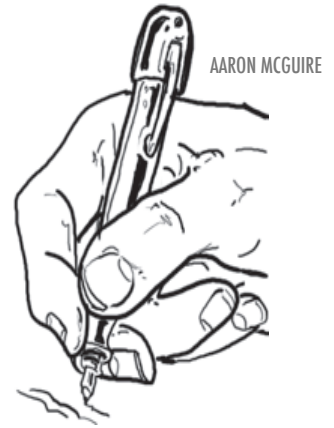
Many students come to college asking the question: Who am I? At its best, a liberal arts education responds to that question by pushing students outside of their limited selves and into the vast reaches of human imagination and experience. It assumes that students can enter lives radically different from their own—that a Chinese-American girl, say, can find meaning in Odysseus’ quest to return home—and that they can start to participate in a centuries-long conversation that contains sorrows and fears that most 18-year-olds can barely imagine. No freshman can understand the battle between Lear and his daughters, but 40 years later, it might return to him with a deep pang of recognition. Thomas Hobbes’s warning regarding the ever-present threat of anarchy will likely remain wholly abstract for secure American students until they have seen more of the world. When they have, however, his articulation of the fragility of social order may echo in their minds as terrifyingly true.

Today’s solipsistic university, however, allows students to answer the “Who am I?” question exclusively, rather than inclusively. Identity politics defines the self by its difference from as many other people as possible, so as to increase the underdog status of one’s chosen identity group. [...]

The economic crisis is the perfect opportunity for every college to say to its students: “We recognize you as young people forged from a common humanity. We hope to cultivate in you humility regarding the limits of your knowledge, a passion to overcome those limits, and a deep gratitude for the landmarks of human thought that it will be your privilege to study for the next four years. We are dismantling the college’s multicultural, identity-based services because you don’t need them. Find yourselves by engaging with beauty, intellectual complexity, and each other.”



A letter From The Editor



On February 19, 2009, I was especially glad to be a Duke student. While our campus watched the Duke basketball team play St. John's College in Madison Square Garden, 500 miles north at New York University, a vocal minority of radical students calling themselves "Take Back NYU" (TBNYU) was busy embarrassing their university in the name of "social justice activism."

The shenanigans at NYU reveal an increasingly pronounced divergence in the understanding of activism across American universities. Indeed, it may be too generous to call TBNYU's occupation of the NYU Kimmel Center cafeteria "activism" at all. If anything, TBNYU's total disrespect for existing institutions and the rule of law reflects an ideological narcissism which is becoming all too common in the nation's universities. Every Duke student and alumnus should be grateful that Duke is largely free of this brand of tantrum-throwing. In light of the ongoing campus discussion about the need to cultivate and sustain political activism post-election, it is especially worth reviewing recent events at NYU as a prime example of what not to do.

The TBNYU demonstrators' demands were a laundry list of sometimes comical, sometimes unfathomable, leftist causes. "Full compensation for all employees whose jobs were disrupted during the course of the occupation" and "public release of NYU's annual budget and endowment" to "allow[ing] student workers (including T.A.'s) to collectively bargain," were among the demands listed on their "official" website.

The group's request that the university compensate staff whose work they disrupted while theoretically protesting on their behalf is absurdly ironic. And seeking to allow T.A.s to unionize hardly seems just cause for barricading a university cafeteria.

Therefore, we look to a more revealing demand: the release of private endowment and budget information. This is nothing if not a liberal interest issue. NYU is a private institution, with no responsibility to disclose internal information about its business decisions. Why would students, hardly experts on business management or investment, want this information publicized? So that they can hold the university's business decisions hostage to their parochial concerns. Anyone who thinks that endowment publication would herald the end of TBNYU-type shenanigans is woefully mistaken. Corporations' every business decision would be threatened by radical left-wing student interests menacing university officials in charge of the endowment.


Some might respond, "But what about corporate social responsibility?" There are already plenty of mechanisms for

environmental and social lobbying interests to encourage policy changes in business decisions. Empowering TBNYU-type radical fringe groups to affect business decisions would ultimately penalize consumers via the higher prices and lower quality products resulting from the adoption of poor business practices. Presumably, these students would justify this influence to themselves on the grounds that they are in the right and everyone else is horribly misguided and wrong.

The underlying theme here is the infantile narcissism of college protesters. Convinced of the righteousness of their own views, almost always without considering them rigorously in the broader context of prospective opposition, extremist students employ radical means to shame society into realizing the error of its ways. Never mind the existence of long-cultivated institutions to mediate these types of demands. The radical TBNYU protesters believed their interests to supersede the institution and the methodical process of refinement it represents. After all, working through the school administration would require direct intellectual engagement with the opposition—an unacceptable option.

Ongoing discussions at Duke focus on cultivating greater political activism on campus. I do believe the campus would benefit from greater political interest and engagement. But we must be careful to define the kind of activism we seek. The core function of a university is to educate. Education must take place in an environment of mutual respect and constructive discussion, rather than polarizing, ostentatious farce. Above all, education must complicate our worldviews rather than merely affirming them.

By "activism," some at Duke may imagine the self-affirming theater that recently engulfed NYU. I certainly hope this is not the case. Such actions, while demonstrative and loud, serve little purpose other than to divide opinion and present false dichotomies on issues far more complex than the mobilization on their behalf would suggest. In cultivating a political culture, we should seek to elevate the tone and level of campus discourse, rather than lower it just so we can claim the dubious distinction of hosting sensational political sideshows.

Say what you will about the insularity of our campus, its isolation from the Durham community, and the general lack of external political engagement. Still, the basic orientation of the student body is strikingly "normal." That's a good thing. Because the world beyond the East campus wall is filled with "normal" people, and a college education which inculcates narcissistic self-righteousness is not an education at all. 

The R Word:

Politics' new trump card



Angela Czahor

If you ever want to cause a stir at Duke, just cry racism. From the Feb. 16 “A Dream Fulfilled?: Barack Obama and the Prospects of a Post-Race America” panel,¹ to the Feb. 25 “Who do YOU sit with at the Loop: An Interracial Discussion about Self-Segregation” run by student groups, to the upcoming March 20-21 “Still Two Nations? The Resilience of the Color Line” conference with Group of 88 panelists² (to name a few), it seems that race and racism are on everybody’s minds.

Even those unaffiliated with the university are capable of sending Duke community members into a damage-control spiral. After attending the men’s basketball team’s Jan. 7 home game against Davidson, one upset basketball fan wrote a letter to the Chronicle accusing the pep band of an “apparently racially motivated gesture.” The action in question was a free-throw distraction that has been performed at least once in the second half of nearly every home game, when the band is in direct view of the opposing team’s shooter. In this often-effective strategy, simply cued by the word “shirts,” the band members pull the backs of their collars over their heads, imitating the character Cornholio from “Beavis and Butthead”, and jump up and down while making monkey noises.

Yet apparently, the band made a critical mistake: this time, the free throw shooter was a black man (Nigerian Andrew Lovedale). If the notorious New York Post chimp cartoon catastrophe (in which a cartoonist was wrongly accused of likening Obama to a chimp as a racial slur³) had only occurred two months earlier, the band would have learned the golden rule: there shall be no representation of nonhuman primates when anyone of black descent is involved, because it automatically evokes the racist notion that black people are no better than monkeys or apes.

This boy-who-cried-racism incident calls to mind the infamous “J.R. (Can’t) Reid” debacle of 1989, when University of North Carolina Coach Dean Smith accused a Cameron Crazie of being racist for holding a poster bearing the aforementioned play on words.

It is beyond comprehension why the Chronicle chose to publish this letter when it is common knowledge that the distraction was benign, and that the only racist aspect of this incident was the author’s assumption that the free throw distraction mocked the race of the shooter. The band president and vice president were then obligated to respond promptly, asserting that “the

band's free-throw distractions are solely based on the color of a player's jersey, not his or her skin."⁴

Although the authors of this response should be commended for defending the "creative," "competitive," and "sportsmanlike" band members, the most disturbing fallout from the Jan. 8 letter became evident in the following months. In a victory for race-mongering, the band took a hiatus from the "Shirts" distraction for (at least) the rest of the season, no matter what race was shooting, giving up a potentially game-altering strategy to pander to one fan's racist misconception. This decision only made the band look guilty and susceptible to manipulation through fear.

This is just one example of how claiming prejudice is the new trump card for arguments, or at the very least the quickest way to stir up outrage. I could name others, but my point would be the same: Instead of responding to these accusations by rolling over and doling out apologies and clarifications, why can't we defend our decision to judge people "not...by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character"? Requiring people to treat others differently based on skin color is the very definition of racism.

¹ Playing another "prejudice" card, one anonymous reader of the Chronicle's recap of the event left a comment

criticizing the panel of being sexist, claiming that it's not "ok for an all male group to be the 'lively group of intellectuals'" moderating the discussion.

² Author KC Johnson critiques the hypocrisy of these panelists in his March 16 blog entry, found on durhamwonderland.com.

³ While the NY Post cartoon criticized the prudence of the February stimulus bill, sites like bushorchimp.com have been comparing a president's appearance to that of a chimp for years. However, this was apparently acceptable because George W. Bush is white.

⁴ Note the care to use both "his" and "her." The accusation of sexism at Duke is almost as sensitive an issue as that of racism, evidenced by two "shocked and dismayed" DSG members writing a March 4 letter to the Chronicle condemning the "hostile" decision to use the all-inclusive masculine pronoun (instead of pairing masculine and feminine pronouns for every reference to an individual) during the rewriting of the DSG constitution. See page three for an in-depth discussion of this travesty. ☹

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Calling a foul on “fair trade”

Michael Munger

At a number of shops and stores, at Duke and elsewhere, we are given a choice of “fair trade” products. I try to avoid buying it, if I can. I prefer spending my money on products that have good effects, rather than wasting my cash and other folks’ lives on feel-good activities that only have good intentions.

The problems with “fair trade” have been widely documented.

The Exchange Origins of Markets

Early exchange was always personal, and had two origins: differences in tastes, and differences in endowments.

If I have one apple and one banana, and you have one apple and one banana, and we each like fruit salad...well, I could offer

Fair Trade is just a marketing tool, or a misplaced donation designed to signal religious devotion. Fair Trade is the new Joel Osteen for America’s anxiety professionals.

This article from the Christian Science Monitor is one example,¹ but there are others. Fair Trade is just a marketing tool, or a misplaced donation designed to signal religious devotion. Fair Trade is the new Joel Osteen for America’s anxiety professionals.

And that’s fine; it keeps them from pestering the rest of us about more substantive things. But for some reason, lots of people trust Fair Trade, and then try to inhibit market actions based on division of labor.

To see why this is a mistake, you have to understand: Division of labor is the most powerful force in the world. It is creative, and it is corrosive. “Fair trade,” by contrast, is never creative. It is only corrosive. Yet many well-meaning people favor Fair Trade over Division of Labor. Why?

It is because they cherish the intention (help others) more than the actual effect (create human zoo for amusement of rich liberals). Fair Trade suppresses the market processes that are the only real stairway to development for less developed nations. It is time they woke up smelled the (non-Fair Trade) coffee.

you my banana for your banana, but you would think I was crazy, or trying to hide the bruised spot. But if I have two apples, and you have two bananas, and we both like fruit salad, then we have good reasons to “truck, barter, and exchange.” If I trade you one apple for one banana, the total amount of resources available is the same (still two apples, two bananas). Yet our exchange improves both our lots, as resources go to higher valued uses. Likewise, if each of us has one apple and one banana, but I really prefer bananas and you really prefer apples, then again we exchange. Same total resources, but universal improvement in welfare, just from allowing exchange. Not bad.

Division of Labor is the Origin of Impersonal Exchange; Fair Trade Locks in Personal Exchange, and Prevents Progress

And it gets even better. I don’t mean to undersell the importance of trading goods. Ebay, for example, fosters exchanges among people who have, or want, a set of stuff different from

fairtrade

what they want, or have. And Ebay also is a market institution, because exchange is often completely impersonal, or nearly so: all I care about is the product, and its price. I may want to check on the “rating” of the seller, to make sure I am not being defrauded, but that’s it.

Nonetheless, Smith’s point was that markets create wealth by exploiting the division of labor, and he was exactly right. As we exchange goods, I notice that the way for me to consume more is to produce things you want to consume. The more completely I devote myself to producing things other people really want, the more I get to consume, as long as I have access to markets.

Thus, without thinking about it consciously, I take into account the preferences and goals of people whom I’ve never met, and care nothing about. I work on this problem: “If I produce more, I get to consume more. So, how can I produce more of those goods, more cheaply, that other people want?” Smith illustrated the answer in his famous example of the pin factory.

There is an additional effect, just as unintended as the improvement in the welfare of others. And that is institutional change. Division of labor means that even a small factory can produce 50,000, or 100,000, pins in a day. So trade links far-away places, and exchange becomes highly impersonal.

If I have two apples, and two bananas, and you have 200,000 pins...well, even after we trade, you still have a lot of pins. I might trade you an apple and a banana for a card of 100 pins. I might want three times that many if I want to do some sewing, or to pop a lot of balloons. But you and the other ten people who have specialized in pin-making can’t get along with exchanging with just a few other people. They need a larger market, with many more people in it.

That means two things happen, though not because anyone plans it out beforehand. First, powerful forces are exerted on the locus of exchange, or size of the market. Unless blocked by war, or regulations on currency or standards, or trade barriers that “protect” consumers from inexpensive products, markets always become larger. Second, the focus of exchange shifts to the commodity, and away from the person doing the trading. I don’t know who made the pins, and I don’t care. I just want to buy pins, and you just want to produce pins at a low cost.

Before, each of us grew one apple and one banana, and spent a little time making a few pins. But now each of us specializes. We recognize the advantage of division of labor. Person 1 grows apples, Person 2 grows bananas, and Person 3 and Person 4 form a small pin-making factory. Each quickly develops specialized knowledge, dexterity, and tools to improve their production. And, as always, their goal is not improving the welfare of others, but expanding their own consumption opportunities.

“Fair trade” tries to refocus exchange on the person, not the commodity. Fair trade consciously prevents the pro-

ductivity increases that arise from division of labor, by creating a kind of human zoo, arresting production and exchange relations in a pre-industrial agricultural form. By raising returns to unproductive labor, fair trade shackles people in less developed nations to traditional roles and traditional methods of production.

In Chapter 3 of the first book of the *Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith argues:

As it is the power of exchanging that gives occasion to the division of labour, so the extent of this division must always be limited by the extent of that power, or, in other words, by the extent of the market. When the market is very small, no person can have any encouragement to dedicate himself entirely to one employment, for want of the power to exchange all that surplus part of the produce of his own labour, which is over and above his own consumption, for such parts of the produce of other men’s labour as he has occasion for.

Expanded division of labor, with its two consequences, increased specialization and lower costs, is the fundamental dynamic force behind globalization. The market expands dramatically. But then distance and the number of transactions overwhelm the capacity for personalistic “fair trade” exchange to supply the quantity demanded, and so price is artificially high and quantity produced is suppressed.

“Fair trade” raises costs to consumers. Worse, it enslaves the people it claims to help, with the invisible chains of artificial subsidy, and arrested economic development. If it pleases you to think of happy natives, living primitive lives, just go rent a BBC documentary, and let the market work. **G**

¹<http://www.csmonitor.com/2008/0808/p09s02-coop.html>

Michael Munger is the chair of the department of political science at Duke. He also represented the Libertarian Party in North Carolina’s 2008 gubernatorial race.



The stimulus *and you*

Aaron McGuire

On February 17th, 2009, President Obama signed into law the “American Recovery and Reinvestment Act”, known to most Americans as the stimulus package. The bill passed with relatively large margins in both houses of Congress, despite drawing only 3 of the 217 Republican members. The magnitude of the victory could be said to be a direct result of their back-to-back electoral defeats -- despite near-unanimous opposition, the heavily depleted Republican caucus can't even keep the vote margin close for legislation they ardently oppose.

The staggeringly large 787 billion dollar package was under deliberation in Congress from the bill's introduction on January 26th to its final passing in the Senate on the 13th of February – a total of 18 days. For comparison, the Patriot Act (rightfully derided by progressives as having been improperly rushed through congress) was under deliberation for 45 days. But even this understates the true haste with which the bill's was passed – the final text of the stimulus act was released at 10:45 PM the previous day, roughly 11 hours before congress passed the bill.

Given this, it is literally impossible for anyone who wasn't on the conference committee to have read the 207,421 word act – the average person reading at 200 words per minute for 11 hours straight, with no breaks at all, could only have read at maximum 66% of the bill.

But despite the dubious process that produced the bill, it now stands as law. And having had the time to review the details of the legislation, it is in all of our best interests as college students to understand what provisions of the package directly affect us and our standing

Perhaps the most important provision of the bill for most college students is in the portion composed of tax credits. The bill provides a \$2,500 expanded tax credit for college tuition and related expenses for 2009 and 2010. Unfortunately for many at Duke, couples making more than \$ 160,000 are not allowed to apply the tax credit to tuition. Still, this provision is the most directly relevant to the average college student. In a similar vein, the bill applies 15.6 billion dollars to the federal Pell Grant program, raising the grant from \$4,731 to \$5,350. According to the Century Foundation, roughly 629 Duke students receive federal Pell Grants.

Students on Federal Work Study won't see it, but the work study program was given money to defray debt – roughly \$200 million. Of perhaps more direct import, the bill allocated \$16 billion to a variety of federal agencies for research grants and

facilities. This will, presumably, flow to higher education and perhaps offer opportunities over the ensuing years for Duke students interested in governmentally funded research. That total includes \$10 billion for the National Institutes of Health (\$8.5 billion for research grants and \$1.5 billion to renovate university facilities), \$3 billion for the National Science Foundation, and \$2 billion for science and research programs at the Energy Department. Also of interest to Duke students with an eye towards community service, Americorps was given a significant budget increase to the tune of 200 million dollars.

Somewhat amusingly, I found in my research that very few provisions of the bill outside of those were of any direct importance to Duke students. In fact, it'd be hard to argue that any of them are. Some of the tax credits, obviously, will benefit our families. And there are certainly some infrastructure investments that we'll see in the next few years. But the particular lack of focus on education -- less than 10% of the funds in the final bill -- and the lack of higher education aid, is to a small degree amusing.

This all is rather direct – all aforementioned facts deal directly with the text of the bill. This in no way describes the most significant boondoggle the bill ties to members of our generation: the debt accrued. The stimulus is, nominally, worth \$787 billion dollars. That's \$787,000,000,000. If you add the payments the government will be making on the debt, the cost balloons into the trillions. This is not a small amount, by any scale – there is a principal that applies to all debt, and that is that it must be paid off.

Absent a complete restructuring of the relationship between our economy and our government, it's extremely hard to envision a future where we aren't in some way touched by this poor decision on the part of our predecessors. Paying off this debt will be a factor in virtually every budget passed by future governments, and it will undoubtedly weigh heavy on the set of choices we make when we're the leaders of the world. And as the ones who will (realistically) end up paying the full price for this bill, one would think that college students and young professionals would have gotten a bit of a better deal.

Well, one would have thought. But it was not to be. After making a myriad of promises to make college more affordable, Obama and Senate Democrats judged it to be unnecessary at the moment. The response is not entirely unexpected. But, even as a conservative, it's disappointing – all broken promises are. **G**

Books:

Revolutionary Road

Rachel Stern

“I don’t suppose one picture window is necessarily going to destroy our personalities” is Frank Wheeler’s flip remark about the suburban house he and his wife buy. Yet Frank’s wife April and, to a lesser extent, Frank himself, seem to blame the degeneration of their marriage on the deadening conformity of the suburbs. Yates himself, however, apparently disagrees.

I have yet to see the film that has recently been made of Yates’s absorbing novel, but the hype about the movie brought the book to my attention. The book’s emphasis on individual responsibility certainly sets it apart from standard Hollywood fare.

Yates pulls no punches in his depiction of the deterioration of the Wheelers’ relationship. Both Frank and April are perpetually filled with disdain for their suburban surroundings and neighbors. Frank despises his uninteresting job and April sees motherhood as a shamefully conventional obligation. They console themselves for the “deadly dullness” of their environment by insisting, in private, upon their own superiority to everyone around them. Although they go through the motions of a typical suburban existence, they tell themselves that they stand apart from the other suburbanites.

In a typically ironic scene, Frank opines upon the tedium of other suburbanites’ social gatherings in order to salvage an evening get-together that is fast coming to exemplify such gatherings:

“Frank began to see that if he allowed things to go in this way [...] the evening might [...] degenerate into the dreariest kind of suburban time filler, the very kind of evening he had always imagined the Donaldsons and the Wingates and the Cramers having, in which women consulted with women about recipes and clothes, while men settled down with men to talk of jobs and cars,” and so launched into an impassioned speech about the “decadence” of society:

“It’s as if everybody’s made this tacit agreement to live in a state of total self-deception. The hell with reality! Let’s have a whole bunch of cute little winding roads and cute little houses painted white and pink and baby blue; let’s all be good consumers and have a lot of ‘Togetherness and bring our children up in a bath of sentimentality.’ [...]

“It was the kind of outburst that normally won their clamorous approval [...] But it seemed to have no effect. The three of them sat watching while he talked, and when he stopped they looked mildly relieved, like pupils at the end of a lecture.”

Frank’s impassioned rejection of the suburban way of life has

become merely another convention within his social circle – a sentiment that he trots out in order to win insipid accolades in conversation, an opinion he is only bold enough to share with an audience whose agreement with him has been long established. The Donaldsons, Wingates, and Cramers – the Wheelers’ neighbors – epitomize suburban dullness for Frank, yet he has to struggle to distinguish himself from these people, or from the stereotype that he has imposed upon them.

Frank and April seem to define themselves largely in opposition to other suburbanites. Frank has always felt that he is destined for great things, but has no idea what. Deprived of a chance to “find himself” in graduate school by his wife’s first pregnancy, he seeks out a mindless job, telling a friend, “All I want is to get enough dough coming in to keep us solvent for the next year or so, till I can figure things out; meanwhile I want to retain my own identity. Therefore the thing I’m most anxious to avoid is any kind of work that can be considered ‘interesting’ in its own right.” It is unclear why Frank believes that an “interesting” job would prevent him from “retaining his own identity”; at any rate, the year of mindless work does not give him a better chance to “figure things out,” and the job for which he “can sort of turn off [his] mind every morning at nine and leave it off all day” becomes his long-term employment.

April, although aware that she would not have had the talent to succeed as an actress, nevertheless clings to her past as an acting student rather than embracing – or even accepting – her current role as a mother.

Neither Frank nor April seems to see their children as individual human beings with budding personalities of their own – or indeed as anything but obstacles to the formation of Frank’s and April’s brilliant identities. It is their childish absorption with delineating their own identities – and their cowardly assumption that their environment prevents them from doing so – that is the Wheelers’ greatest difficulty. They fail to understand that the shaping of their characters is not put on hold until they can reach an ideal environment; they fantasize about escape from the suburbs rather than trying to make the best of their actual situation. Although Frank criticizes the suburban culture for its supposed rejection of reality, it is Frank and April who fail to rise to the challenge of facing reality.

Yates provides a surprisingly fast-paced and gripping, yet simultaneously poignant and thought-provoking, account of suburban life in the 50s. **G**

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