

ORBIS

Amplifying Vanderbilt's Progressive Voices

Vol. 9/No.3/November/2009



SPECIAL FEATURE: G-20 Summit in Pittsburgh ... pages 7-11

a note from the editor

It's hard to believe that we're almost halfway through the semester. By now, freshmen have learned the art of the all-nighter and seniors are starting to worry about their post-graduation plans. I'm guessing that you're in the middle of studying for midterms now, so I appreciate you taking the time to pick up a new copy of Orbis.

This month's issue includes a special feature based on the Group of 20 summit meeting that took place in late September. The G-20 event was a reminder of the issues facing the global community, but it also highlighted the problems with the multinational partnership. We've devoted several pages to the street protests that captured media headlines for days (p. 8-9), as well as an overview of past demonstrations against similar summit meetings to provide context for the Pittsburgh protests (p. 10). Representatives at the G-20 summit discussed issues like climate change and economic instability, showcasing the idea that grave problems facing our country and our world will require international action in order to find solutions. With this in mind, we also cover U.S. foreign policy towards Iran, one of the many contentious arenas of international diplomacy (p. 11).

Our next print edition will come out in early November, but you don't have to wait that long to get more Orbis news. Visit us at vanderbiltorbis.com or blorbis.wordpress.com for exclusive online content, including our coverage of Lambda's Drag Show or video footage of the Pittsburgh summit protests.

As always, we're looking for writers, artists and photographers to join our staff and help promote Vanderbilt's progressive voices. For more information, contact vanderbiltorbis@gmail.com.

Good luck on your midterms.

-Erika Hyde

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ORBIS

Amplifying Vanderbilt's Progressive Voices

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Please recycle.

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4349 number of American military deaths in Iraq since March 2003

Cover design: Allie Diffendal and Sam Abney

What is Orbis?

Orbis aspires to change the atmosphere on Vanderbilt's campus and provides a voice for liberal, multicultural and minority viewpoints. This publication strives to inform the public about issues that these groups face as well as to promote diversity and unity within our community. It is a forum for discussion of social, political and religious commentary relevant to Vanderbilt, the nation and the world. Orbis was founded by a coalition of students seeking to raise consciousness about diverse ideas, cultures and backgrounds in our society. We hope to challenge the existing social atmosphere at Vanderbilt and promote a rebirth of acceptance.

College Democrats rebuild for the new year

Building the foundation for a liberal student movement

by Erika Hyde

The year following an exciting election can be a difficult period for most political organizations. Vanderbilt College Democrats (VCD) is no exception. Following the historic election of President Obama and the attention surrounding the 2008 campaign, VCD has seen a decline in political interest, energy and activism among Vanderbilt's progressive community.

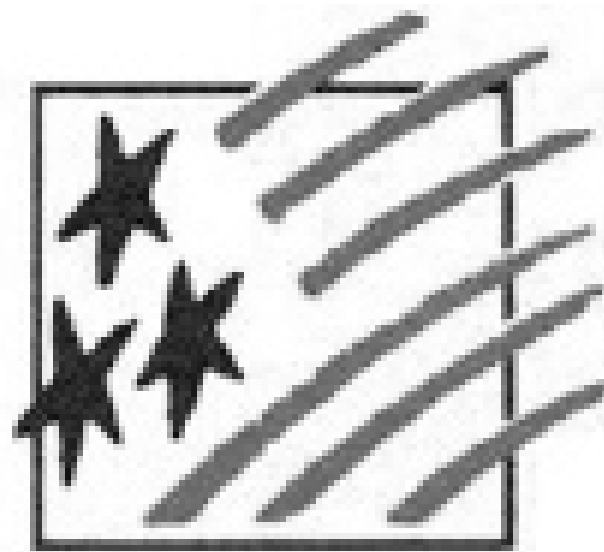
Junior Ravi Singh, the organization's president, is hoping to turn this trend around.

Dubbing 2009-2010 a rebuilding year, Singh has realistic plans for the campus organization. "I see this as an infrastructure-building year, a year to build support. Once you have that solid foundation to work off of, then you can mobilize your support and your activism for all sorts of campaigns to come," he said.

While the 2008 election generated tremendous interest, particularly among the younger generation, most groups have experienced trouble sustaining the momentum from the campaign season. One of VCD's challenges for the new year includes reen-

gaging student interest in politics during a non-election year.

"As much as there are students interested in politics on this campus, we haven't done enough



College Democrats
OF AMERICA

College Democrats' work for change continues after election year.
Image: www.collegedems.com

to make them get involved. We have more we can do, to get our work out there and get people to participate," said Singh.

VCD's goals for the academic year include closer relationships

with local congressional offices, a fully functioning website, and an essay-based scholarship program.

In the coming weeks, VCD is offering multiple opportunities for liberal students to get involved in activism. A handful of students are traveling to Virginia during fall break to canvas for the state's gubernatorial race. The group is also working with Organizing for America to provide grassroots training, canvassing, and phone-banking experience for students in favor of health care reform.

Of course, there's always another election on the horizon. VCD is already paying close attention to Tennessee's gubernatorial race. Although voters won't reach the ballot boxes until November 2010, an open Democratic primary has generated considerable excitement. Candidates have approached VCD for speaking engagements and participation in straw polls.

Students who get involved now will have an opportunity to shape the future of one of Vanderbilt's foremost political organizations, according to Singh.

**To get involved, email rg.singh@vanderbilt.edu
or join their listserv DEMOCRATS@list.vanderbilt.edu
to find out more information about weekly meetings.**

Rev. White couldn't care less about Leviticus 20

National Coming Out Week brings gay preacher to campus

Reverend Mel White is President of Soulforce, a non-profit organization he founded with life partner Gary Nixon to advocate "freedom for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people from religious and political oppression through the practice of relentless nonviolent resistance." He is author of over 16 books, including an autobiography entitled "Stranger at the Gate: To Be Gay and Christian in America," documenting his struggle to reconcile his sexuality with his Christian faith, and "Religion Gone Bad: The Hidden Dangers of the Christian Right," detailing the religious right's misinformation campaign on the LGBTQI community. Prior to coming out, White served as a ghost writer for some of the Religious Right's most prominent evangelicals, including Jerry Falwell, Billy Graham and Pat Robertson.

By Allie Diffendal
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

It's not every day a congregation witnesses a reverend standing behind a podium, wearing a pink shirt and cashmere socks to match, and saying, "I'm so glad I'm a queer but—*oh my God*— what it took to get here." It's not every day but it was Monday Oct. 5 when Reverend Mel White gave a State of the Nation address to the Vanderbilt community in honor of National Coming Out Week.



Rev. Mel White speaks about Soulforce and religion during a 2007 speech.

Photo: jewsonfirst.org

"What state is the nation in?" the nontraditional keynote speaker asked, regarding acceptance toward the LGBT community. "There are so many good things happening, and at the same time so many crazy, creepy things."

"We're a nation divided over this issue," White said. He proposed that the entire country is simply at different stages in the "coming out" process: first the country will realize the difference, then it will reject, accept, celebrate and (finally) thank God for that difference. The problem, he said, is that during this cycle, neither side is listening to the other. The LGBTQI community has plugged its ears, White said, because it can't afford to listen

to the damaging diatribes of the Religious Right. (And this from Jerry Falwell and Billy Graham's former ghostwriter!)

White read aloud some examples of these verbal ear plugs. He quoted the late Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and James Dobson. He explained that these prominent members of the Religious Right do not just say it's "bad to be gay," but they say much more "damning things." "You can't help but laugh because it's ridiculous," said White, "but you can't help but cry because it's painful."

White thinks the reason part of the country rejects the gay community is quite clear: "Once we are

accepted as a legitimate minority, they think the country will spiral down to hell." He cited the rhetoric of the religious right as a prominent force driving gay people into the closet.

Indeed, religious rhetoric kept White in the closet for much of his life. He realized he was "different" at the age of 13 when he fell madly in love with his tent mate at a boy scouts retreat at Irving Ranch. White rejected that difference through aversive therapy, self-harm, and even a heterosexual marriage. "To me, homosexuality was a sickness that needed to be cured and a sin that needed to be forgiven."

At age 43, White separated from his wife and began to accept his sexuality: "All those fears I had... God came down and said to me— She said, 'Look—Go forward,'" White said. "If God created me, then God created me queer. She created me."

Now White receives crates of letters from gay

men and women going through the same process he did. "Every letter is so indicative of what is happening in so many hearts and minds," he said. According to White, many of these letters cite religious indoctrination as the source of their self-hatred.

Christian therapy, White said, makes these

men and women believe that if they "just pray more, fast more, take cold showers enough," they'll be cured of their "sickness." Reverend White tried to make the "gay go away" with electric shock therapy and tasting aloe tablets any time he felt "impure thoughts." The

only thing he got out of the therapy was a new candy: "I got to eating them like M&M's," he said.

Of course, some gay men and women choose to cope with self-harm and even suicide. White described an experience when two gay men who castrated themselves came to his church while hold-

ing their genitals together with a towel. According to White, self-inflicted castration goes back centuries in the gay community.

White discussed his own experi-

ence with self-harm. While addressing his homosexuality with his then-wife, White went into the closet, grabbed a hanger and gouged his wrists. Deciding to separate, his wife then said, "I like gay people, I just didn't want you to be one."

For 43 years, White didn't want to be one either.

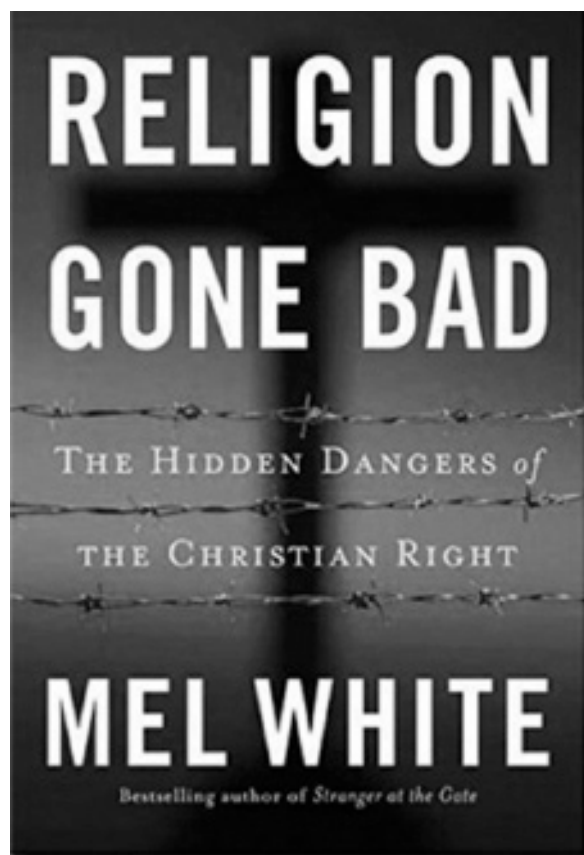
"Once we are accepted as a legitimate minority, (the Religious Right) think(s) the country will spiral down to hell."

— Reverend White

"If God created me, then God created me queer. She created me."

— Reverend White

White recalls attending Northern Hollywood's LGBTQI-based Metropolitan Community Church. "I drove around that little dump for three Sundays



without going in," he said. "I finally went in and for the next year I cried at every service." The church congregation joked later, "You cost us about 100 bucks in Kleenex alone."

By the time White was ordained, he could not only walk into the church, but he came out to the congregation on his first day. "I'm gay. I'm proud. And God loves me without reservation," he said, to a crowd that "just went wild."

White laments that not all congregations are nearly as accepting. "I love my church," he said, "but it's my Church that's become the enemy." White cited religion as the primary source of misinformation on LGBTQI people in today's culture.

Protesting the Christian Right's treatment of the gay community, White and his partner moved

to Lynchburg, VA, and into a house right across the street from Jerry Falwell's church. "You have to stay until they see you," White said, describing signs the two placed in their yard welcoming churchgoers to join them for cookies, and church services they attended to stand in silent protest.

The anti-gay movement has protested White's lectures and services in a much more vocal manner. White even notes "a kind of terrorism that goes along with being anti-gay now." He fears that "they don't just want us denied our rights, they want us dead." He described a lecture in which a crowd of people holding Bibles stood at the back of a lecture hall, took the microphone for the second part of the lecture, and forced him out with security guards.

White has a ready response for these Bible-holders. "You go ahead and be your fundamentalist self, and I'll go be my gay Christian self." Now, when people ask

him whether he has ever read Leviticus 20, he says, "Excuse me, you've mistaken me for someone who cares about Leviticus 20... I have the constitutional right not to be judged by your scriptural understanding."

White advocates Gandhi's notion of "relentless nonviolent resistance" in dealing with anti-gay people, but admitted that certain experiences made him question that path. "I believe

in nonviolence, but there have been times when I didn't," he said. "It is an amazing thing that the gay community hasn't boiled over... kill[ed] a member of the religious right and drive[n] us back

100 years."

White finds the current administration and Obama's potential to sign national nondiscrimination and hate crime prevention acts encouraging. Showing support for the LGBTQI cause, Obama



Gary Nixon (l) and Mel White, co-founders of Soulforce and partners of 28 years. They were legally married in Pasadena, CA, in 2008.

Photo: soulforce.org

***"I love my church,
but it's my Church
that's become the
enemy."***

— Reverend White

was even the keynote speaker at the Human Rights Campaign's Thirteenth Annual National Dinner on Oct. 10. White noted this progress in contrast to the Clinton years of Don't Ask Don't Tell and the Defense of Marriage Act.

Nevertheless, the Obama election has not stopped the religious right, White reminded the crowd. While the Lutherans just voted to ordain and marry the gay community, he said, "we've got to get the Methodists [and Mormons] to break," citing a suicide webpage for Brigham Young University's gay graduates.

White urged the audience to organize for human rights. Gay rights activists are on the verge of generating an era similar to the 1964 Civil Rights movement, he said. "So let's go make that happen."

"What fun it will be to start having justice," White said. "We're going to keep cracking that wall and cracking that wall... [and] get the rights the Constitution owes us."

Become a part of Vanderbilt's progressive voice.

Come to our staff meeting on October 19 at 7 p.m. in Buttrick 312.

E-mail vanderbiltorbis@gmail.com for details.

Kidnapper targets Nashvillian immigrants

By Jon Christian
COMMENTARY EDITOR

Tammy Ray Silas followed Maria Gurrola home from a Nashville Wal-Mart, knocked on her door and introduced herself as an immigration agent, and then stabbed the 30-year-old mother nine times with a butcher knife on Sept. 29. After that, she kidnapped Gurrola's infant son Yair Anthony Carillo and fled back to Alabama, where she remained undetected by law enforcement for several tense days.

Nashville police identified Silas' car by digitally enhancing security footage that showed the license plate of her Kia, and then traced the rental car back to her home in Ardmore, AL. Silas surrendered the child and was placed under arrest for kidnapping.

However, the woes of Yair's parents, Gurrola and Jose Carillo, weren't over yet. Although the family was briefly reunited on Oct. 3, the Department of Children's

Services unexpectedly gained custody of Yair and the couple's three other children, aged 3, 9 and 11. They announced that the children had been placed in foster homes, and speculation swirled that they had been taken because of the family's immigration status. The family is

from Durango, Mexico. Gurrola, still coping with stab wounds and a collapsed lung, reportedly became hysterical with grief when she heard the unfortunate news.

Confidential documents that were leaked over the next five days revealed that the reason that the children were removed actually had to do with a tip that accused certain family members of plotting to sell the infant for \$25,000. The family has now been cleared of suspicion and the four children have been returned to their family. The Tennessee Bureau of Investigation is reportedly interested in how these documents were released to the press.

Standard practice is to relocate children to the homes of relatives in order to avoid unnecessary trauma. In this case, according to Carillo's state-appointed lawyer Dennis Johnson, social workers were not able to perform adequate background checks on close relatives because of a lack of identification documents.

Elias Feghali is a Vanderbilt alumnus who now works for the Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition (TIRRC). According to Feghali, this is a case of a disturbed individual who took advantage of the insecurity of an immigrant family to gain entry into their home and terrorize them. "This tragic story is yet another

example of how immigrants and their families are exploited on account of their immigration status," Feghali said.

The Associated Press reports that targeting undocumented immigrants is not an uncommon ploy used by kidnapers, who wish to exploit such families' possible reluctance to contact law enforcement.

Many, especially via the anonymous discourse of the internet, have expressed racist or xenophobic opinions on the family's apparently undocumented status.

Others have raised concerns that the ongoing media coverage will expose the family's immigration status to scrutiny by immigration authorities. As one blogger put it, "the genie is out of the bag." It is unsure at this point whether this will be an issue for the family.

The family maintained open communication with investigators throughout the harrowing days that Silas was at large. Metro Captain Marlene Pardue, who worked with Gurrola, was quoted as saying that "the mother said...that before this investigation, she was afraid of the police. She's not afraid anymore."

Feghali emphasized that rescuing Yair and returning the children to their home is an opportunity for the community to come together, not be

split apart by hatred. "It seems to me that we would all be better served thinking about reforming this broken system in a realistic way that squares with our values as a compassionate, humane people. The bottom line is that all people deserve to be protected from abuse and exploitation, regardless of where they are born," said Feghali.

The precise immigration status of Gurrola and her family remains ambiguous: one blogger raised an issue of terminology by pointing out that "undocumented" only means that an individual does not possess a visa. It is

unclear what source originally stated that the family was undocumented. Aside from an initial statement made from a wheelchair, Gurrola and Carillo have declined comment except to express the wish to be left alone while their family recuperates.

TIRRC released a statement after custody was returned to the children's parents which commended the police for a job well done, as well as condemning the hateful commentary which has called the moral character of immigrants into question. "As the community rejoices at the family's reunification, we must also come together to denounce the acts of exploitation against our immigrant neighbors and to stand up for the rights of those most vulnerable among us," read the statement. "The perpetrator of this horrific crime gained access to the family's house by impersonating an immigration agent, taking advantage of the fear that many immigrants already experience."

In the meantime, Silas has been formally charged with federal kidnapping and faces possible life in prison. She will appear in court for a bond hearing on Oct. 27.



What is TIRRC's mission?

TIRRC is a statewide, immigrant and refugee-led collaboration whose mission is to empower immigrants and refugees throughout Tennessee to develop a unified voice, defend their rights, and create an atmosphere in which they are recognized as positive contributors to the state.

Source: www.tnimmigrant.org

"This tragic story is yet another example of how immigrants and their families are exploited on account of their immigration status."

– Elias Feghali, Vanderbilt alumnus and TIRRC Communications Coordinator

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G-20 Summit

How should we respond to global climate change, the ongoing economic crisis, and threats to the international community?



Several world leaders met to discuss these problems at the Group of 20 summit in late September. While they didn't form answers to these pressing questions, their meeting attracted international diplomats, news organizations, and hordes of protesters to the streets of Pittsburgh.

In recognition of the summit, Orbis is featuring the G-20 meeting and its related issues in this month's

edition. The following special feature includes coverage about the protests and police response to the Pittsburgh meeting (pages 8-9), as well as an overview of past protests against corporate dominance and neoliberalism (page 10). Bringing the international debate to campus, Orbis also covers Vanderbilt students' reactions to U.S. foreign policy surrounding Iran, a hot spot in today's diplomatic discourse (page 11).



Reporter documents police brutality at Summit protests

By Hugh Schlesinger
STAFF WRITER

One moment from my time at late September's G-20 Summit in Pittsburgh has stuck in my mind: the image of about 300 police officers in full riot gear and backed up by armored vehicles sporting various non-lethal weapons, including the sonic cannon, blocking off three of the four streets of an intersection.

These officers were deployed at this location to break up an unpermitted protest march, dubbed the "People's Uprising," on the first day of the summit. The officers' presence was much larger than that of the protesters, and they seemed more confident and prepared for imminent violence than any of the marchers.

Not surprisingly, violence did occur, as attempts by the police to disperse the protesters, including arrests and the use of tear gas, led to a retreat en masse by the protesters, some confrontations between protesters and police, and sporadic instances of property destruction.

The police's behavior typified the disproportionate force they used throughout the summit. Hours after the People's Uprising, police continued to occupy the area surround-



The G-20 summit in Pittsburgh attracted thousands of colorful protesters.

Photo: Hugh Schlesinger/ORBIS

ing the march, blocking off entire streets and displacing some from their homes or businesses for hours. During this time they arrested

multiple individuals and fired on protesters with rubber bullets and tear gas.

The two arrests I witnessed during this period were particularly shocking. First, I was standing with a group of people on a street corner close to a police line. When the police decided to move forward about fifteen feet, they ordered us off the corner and across two lanes of traffic. The officers immediately apprehended one of the members who didn't move fast enough.

The second arrest involved a protester who had filmed this first arrest. About ten minutes after ordering us to move, two officers charged down the street filled with 50 people and tackled a man to the ground. A person who knew the arrested man reported that he had been bruised and bloodied during the arrest and that his video camera had been smashed. He also said he witnessed a policeman pointing out protesters to his fellow officers and suggested that his apprehended friend had been targeted for video recording the other arrest.

Members of the ACLU were on hand to gather information about detained protesters and to monitor police action during the demonstrations.

That night another rally at Schenley Plaza near the University of Pittsburgh, ironically organized in protest of police brutality and in solidarity with those arrested, was violently



A line of officers monitored the parade of demonstrators during the second day of protests.

Photo: Hugh Schlesinger/ORBIS

dispersed by police and many more people were arrested. While a permitted protest march the next day of nearly 5,000 participants was peaceful, it was accompanied by a police presence of more than 1,000 officers. (Other reporting indicated that about 5,000 officers had been called up for security that weekend.) Then, that evening, the incident repeated itself at Schenley Plaza, with more arrests and another jail solidarity protest violently dispersed by the police.

It must be said that during all of these events, there were participants who planned to commit acts of vandalism and destruction, and they did succeed in causing about \$50,000 worth of damage, \$20,000 of which was reportedly caused by a single demonstrator. But these violent protesters made up only a fraction of the demonstrators, and they necessitated a proportional police response, not overwhelming force, to stymie their efforts.

Unfortunately, the Pittsburgh Police Department instead treated all protesters as if they were violent.



Many people took to the streets in favor of economic and social justice.

Photo: Hugh Schlesinger/ORBIS

to have the means or the organization to cause much damage to the city or to present any threat to the G-20 delegates.

The disproportionate police response had no goal other than to intimidate, and this was the most disturbing aspect of the police's actions. They seemed purposeless, acting only to demonstrate the force and authority they had been granted and to try out the new toys they had obtained. For example, they proudly claimed during the protests that they were the first police force in the United States to publicly use the sonic cannon.

As a nation, we allowed this to happen. As they have done many times before, the public and media stood by with seemingly little notice or concern. Because of the marginal nature of the political ideas represented by these protesters, few cared to stand up in their defense.

Editor's note: To see video footage of the G-20 summit protests, go to vanderbiltorbis.com.

Police officers sported full riot gear and used sonic cannons, rubber bullets and tear gas to disperse protesters.

Photo: Hugh Schlesinger/ORBIS

When applied, force and arrests were used indiscriminately, with protesters and non-protesters (including a number of University of Pittsburgh students) being targeted.

These experiences left me with a central question: What was the point of law enforcement's harsh treatment of protesters? It was clear that the amount of security dedicated to the demonstrations was excessive. I also have little doubt that the tactics used against these demonstrators instigated the violence that occurred, making them highly ineffective crowd-control methods. Even if some of the protesters were motivated to disturb the peace, these individuals appeared not



Police officers arrested several demonstrators during the Pittsburgh summit.

Photo: Hugh Schlesinger/ORBIS

G-20 Protests highlight neoliberalism woes

By Richard Williams
STAFF WRITER

Tens of thousands of protestors marched into the streets during the World Trade Organization (WTO) Ministerial Conference in Seattle on November 30, 1999. Farmers and factory workers, students and teachers, immigrants and natives—people of all walks of life joined together to rally against a common enemy. Despite their differing origins, they were united by a common perception of the WTO as a profoundly undemocratic group with entirely too much power over the world economy.

It was this unity that gave rise to the global justice (or, as its critics call it, the “anti-globalization”) movement of the past decade, and it was this movement

that inspired the protests against the Group of 8 (G-8) and the World Social Forum as well as the recent protests against September’s Group of 20 (G-20) summit in Pittsburgh.

The G-20 held its inaugural meeting on December 15 and 16, 1999, less than a month after the so-called “Battle of Seattle.” Since then, it has grown to become one of the most important institutions of globalized capitalism, having officially replaced the G-8 as the main economic council of wealthy nations last month. This puts the organization in a position to shape the policies of the most powerful economies on the planet, to make international agreements that put pressure on poorer countries to privatize, deregulate, and open their economies up to foreign investment and exploitation.

At the same time, the group has the power to maintain protectionist measures and border controls that favor multinational corporations based in the wealthy nations that comprise it. It is a basic principle of democratic governance that organizations with the potential to wield such power must be representative of the people their actions affect. Yet, the G-20 does not represent the interests of any of the myriad nations of the world that lack the economic power to force sanctions on other countries.

In fact, it can’t even really be said to represent the interests of the people of its member nations. It has no charter or permanent staff, its debates take place behind closed doors, and, until 2008, the meetings featured unelected central bank governors and finance ministers rather than elected heads of state.

Putting aside the undemocratic nature of the institution, though, one might argue that the G-20 and similar institutions have had a net positive effect. The conventional understanding of international econom-

ics, which has its roots in the adoption of neoliberal ideology during the Reagan and Thatcher administrations, is that “free trade” and the growth of a global capitalist economy is ultimately in the best interests of poor countries.

Supposedly, privatization of state-run institutions, removal of trade barriers, deregulation of all sectors of the economy, and concentration of wealth into the hands of the wealthiest, most “productive” members of society will promote greater competition and, thus, greater efficiency in poor nations’ economies. This will in turn result in economic growth and a rising standard of living for all, though perhaps not in an equitable manner. According to this theory, if this package must be forced upon poor nations through sanctions or even political intervention,

so be it; it’s for their own good.

The problems with this neoliberal orthodoxy are numerous. Most glaring is its empirical failure to produce the intended results. According to a paper by development economist Ha-Joong Chang, “roughly speaking, per capita income in developing countries grew at 3% per year between 1960 and 1980, but has grown only at about 1.5% between 1980 and 2000.” Proponents of neoliberalism often cite progress in terms of economic growth, life expectancy, infant and child mortality, and literacy from 1950 to 2005 as evidence to the contrary. However, isolating the data to only include the period from 1980 to 2005, during which neoliberal reforms were implemented, reveals that progress has actually slowed since the adoption of the free-market ideal as a guiding principle for economic governance.

Even in the United States, neoliberal economic policy has had clear negative effects.

According to a Center for Economic Policy Research study on the US economy relative to the economies of continental Europe, “The U.S. economic and social model is associated with substantial levels of social exclusion, including high levels of income inequality, high relative and absolute poverty rates, poor and unequal educational outcomes, poor health outcomes, and high rates of crime and incarceration.”

Neoliberalism has other major problems. For exam-

ple, it posits that privatization of state-run industries will lead to greater competition and, as a result, greater efficiency. Unfortunately, this is rarely the case. More often, privatization takes the form of a government selling collective assets off to the highest bidder, who then controls that industry. Thus, the industry ceases to be a public monopoly—over which the people had at least some democratic control, even in relatively undemocratic systems—and becomes a private monopoly, over which the people have no control whatsoever. Even if the government sells its assets to a group of high bidders, the effect remains close to the same: the concentration of power over an industry into the hands of a few wealthy capitalists.

Then, there is the basic problem with neoliberalism: the problem of inequality. Any data that indicates an overall increase in the GDP of a nation is an unreliable measure of the well-being of the people of that nation, simply because the idea that whenever the rich get much richer, the poor get a little richer, is not necessarily true. It is just as possible for the rich to get much richer while the poor get a little poorer even as the GDP increases. Even if the well-being of the rich is positively correlated with the well-being of the poor, inequality has many negative effects besides simple material deprivation.

Specifically, concentration of wealth necessarily brings with it a concentration of power. By controlling the wealth of a nation, a nation’s elite are able to exercise control over the masses, forcing them to rely on the ruling class for access to the means of production and, consequentially, for survival.

A few thousand protestors gathered in Pittsburgh in September to show their opposition to the newest centerpiece of neoliberal economic policy and corporate dominance, the G-20. It wasn’t nearly as big an event

as the Battle of Seattle. In fact, most reports indicate that the police present outnumbered the protestors. However, the same spirit that animated the protestors in 1999 animates them still.

The spirit of Seattle is not dead, and the calls of the protestors—for fair trade policies, for a halt to privatization and deregulation, for the relaxation of border con-

trols so as to encourage international solidarity and the growth of the global labor movement—have not faded. Indeed, if the 35,000 people that rallied against the London G-20 summit earlier this year are any indication, those calls will only grow louder as the current economic crisis continues. Whether or not any lasting change comes out of this crisis is entirely in the hands of the people. They have an opportunity to change the world for the better; all they have to do is seize it.

The Group of 20 is profoundly undemocratic with entirely too much control over the world economy.

The spirit of Seattle is not dead, and the calls of the protestors against neoliberal economic policy have not faded.

Students react to threat of nuclear Iran

By Jon Christian
COMMENTARY EDITOR

The Obama administration convened with 10 close allies in early October to gain consensus on international sanctions against Iran. Iran has been pursuing nuclear ambitions and a possible weapons program with increased vigor for the past several years, worrying many in the international community. There has been widespread speculation on the tone and action that President Obama will take against Iran.

Some Vanderbilt students are watching carefully for signs of how gently the Obama administration will handle the Persian Gulf nation.

"It is high time [that] Obama decide whether he's going to conduct his presidency as a leader and commit to substantial action or as a perpetual candidate," said the Vanderbilt College Republicans president Brian Kelly.

Not all students suggest such strong measures. "We should not, ever use military might against them or their government," said senior Alysha Tribbett, citing the 1953 coup orchestrated by the CIA. "We tried that once, and turned the country into a vortex of misery for its people," said Tribbett.

Iran's sitting president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, has proved a controversial and polarizing figure since his election in 2005. As early as December of his election year, he controversially suggested that the Holocaust was a myth. He also expressed hope that Israel would be "wiped off the map." Since his contested reelection this year, he has enjoyed decreased support from many Iranians.

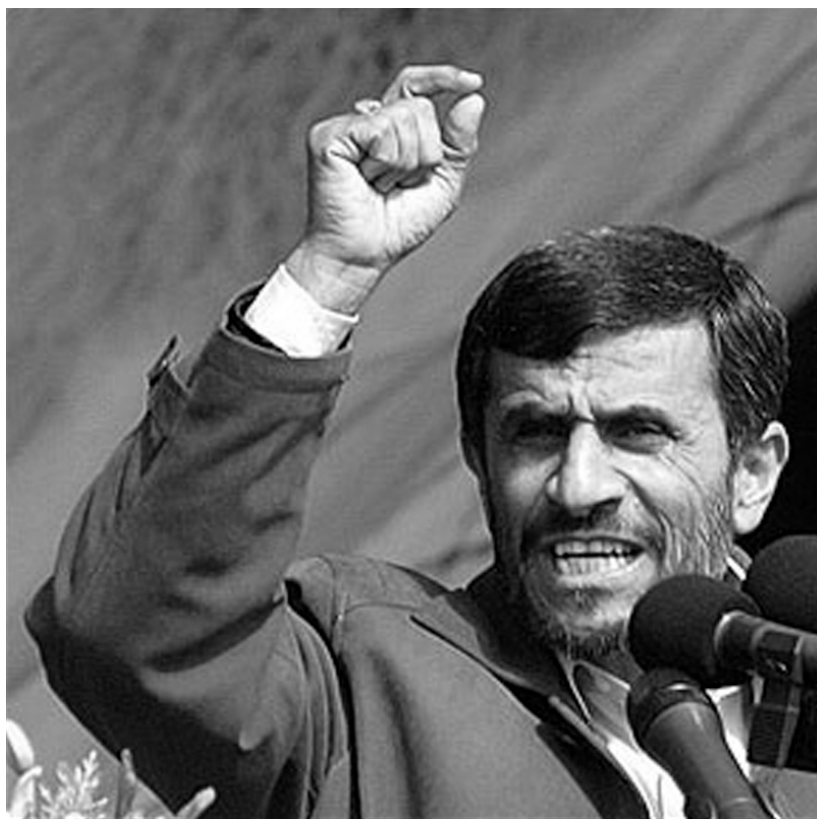
Ahmadinejad has also demonstrated strong nuclear ambitions, accelerating Iran's existing nuclear program and, according to many critics, pursuing nuclear weapons. He has often been difficult in his communications with international regulatory commissions and with public figures, including a public back-and-forth with former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in 2006.

Iran's nuclear program actually dates to the 1950s, when it was established with help from the United States as part of the "Atoms for Peace" program. After the Iranian revolution in 1979, the program was briefly suspended before its revitalization in a less transparent form.

Apparently slow progress added up, as the Middle Eastern nation now sports a uranium mine, multiple research facilities and a nuclear reactor. According to the Iranians, they are scheduled to start operation of their inaugural nuclear power plant, Bushehr I, by the end of

this year.

Sophomore Andri Alexandrou frames the issue in terms of diplomatic consistency. "I feel like it's right to want to get nuclear weapons out of the Middle East, but unless the U.S. can withdraw its unconditional support



Iranian President Ahmadinejad's stance on nuclear weapons worries international community.

Photo: Getty/AFP

of Israel, Middle Eastern states won't feel like the U.S. is treating them fairly," said Alexandrou.

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), a multinational initiative to promote peaceful use of atomic energy, became concerned about Iran's nuclear ambitions in 2002, when the country's budding nuclear sites were announced. Although the IAEA's inspection attempts have met with mixed success in the intervening years, the organization does not know at this time whether Iran is actually pursuing nuclear weapons.

The IAEA's Director General Mohamed ElBaradei has consistently urged caution in the handling of the situation. "Force can only be used as a last option... when all other political possibilities have been exhausted," he told Radio France International in an interview this year.

Obama's Iran task force, which met in early October at the Treasury Department's Washington headquarters, includes Saudi Arabia, Australia and South Korea. Proposed sanctions include measures as mild as heavy

insurance penalties, but other options brought to the table aim to disrupt Iran's international shipping means, which are vital to the small, oil-producing nation. Conversely, there is significant interest in limiting Tehran's gasoline imports, which reportedly account for 30 percent of Iran's usage. However, Japan, China and India, all of which benefit enormously from Iran's crude oil output, may be concerned about the effects of such a measure on their own oil supply.

"Sanctions are probably worth a try, but if that doesn't work I might suggest some kind of military coercion," said Wolf Clifton, a freshman.

In addition to the early joint efforts of this so-called "coalition of the like-minded nations," Obama has stated that should Iran cease the production of nuclear fuel by the end of the year, he will actively pursue enhanced trade relations and other benefits between the U.S. and Iran.

Many Vanderbilt students support a pragmatically ginger approach to dealing with Ahmadinejad. "I do think that Obama needs to be very cautious, because Ahmadinejad seems, to put it one way, one fry short of a Happy Meal," said sophomore Megan Ramirez.

Brian Kelly expressed concerns that the Obama administration isn't dealing with Iran in a decisive fashion. "When Obama isn't busy appeasing whoever is nearest... he and the rest of the government manage to conclude that the belligerent regime's motivations are tantamount to a 'grave and serious threat,'" he said.

Not all Vanderbilt students are so pessimistic. "I approve of how the Obama administration is handling the possible nuclear threat from Iran," said sophomore Emma Dansak.

Alysha Tribbett believes that given Iran's uncomfortable history with the U.S., any coercive actions ought to be removed from consideration: "Basically, do nothing... Ahmadinejad knows that using [nuclear weapons] will result in his entire country's immediate destruction by the rest of the world's arsenal, so he'll never deploy them. And the more you try to stop [countries from developing nuclear weapons], the more they will push on as a matter of pride and sovereignty."

Ahmadinejad has responded to the increased international attention by signaling his readiness to negotiate. "There have been some proposals by individual countries and groups of countries. We are ready to hold talks with anyone interested," said the head of state.

Although reports at the time of Ahmadinejad's election suggested that Iranians were largely in favor of Iran's nuclear ambitions, this trend has shifted. According to the Washington Post, only a small minority of Iranian citizens are now interested in pursuing nuclear weapons.

Can't wait for next month's issue? Get your progressive fix at the Orbis blog:
blorbis.wordpress.com

ACORN hunt bears no results

Orbis staff writer Steve Harrison attempted to contact the Association of Community Organizers for Reform Now (ACORN) to get their reactions about the negative publicity surrounding their offices. His investigation took an unexpected turn. Read Harrison's article for an inside look at how reporters work to deliver the news.

By Steve Harrison
STAFF WRITER

I wanted to give ACORN a chance. Really, I did. The nationwide organization campaigns to secure affordable housing, provide adequate health care, and end predatory lending, which contrasts strongly with the incessant negative coverage that Fox News and other conservative-leaning media outlets devote to the group. As a self-professed card-carrying liberal and Orbis journalist, I set off to write an informative article detailing the Nashville branch of ACORN's contributions to the community and its upcoming projects. This could have depicted a different side of ACORN not commonly shown by the media and provide a local connection for the Vanderbilt community.

I believed that an organization rocked by scandal like ACORN would embrace the opportunity to receive some publicity. The organization has been accused of voter registration fraud, misappropriation of funds, and other unscrupulous activities. Just last month, two people advertising themselves as a pimp and prostitute entered ACORN's Baltimore office and were advised by ACORN employees to declare members of their prostitution ring as dependents in order to receive tax benefits.

Surely the target of such unethical undercover set-ups would be eager to greet honest journalists and dispel the nasty rumors in circulation. Much to my disappointment, ACORN did not make this an easy task.

Round one, Sept. 30. I went on ACORN's national website in an attempt to retrieve the phone number and e-mail for the Nashville office. 'Easy,' I thought, 'I'll just give them a quick call, shoot them an e-mail, and get to work.' No such luck. The number dialed was not in service and my e-mail immediately bounced back to me. Confused, I called ACORN in New Orleans, one of the three

national offices, for clarification. The New Orleans branch also had a defunct phone number and no means of immediate contact. It was at this moment that I determined something was awry.

What is ACORN?

ACORN campaigns for social and economic justice through voter registration drives, free tax preparation, foreclosure counseling, and legislative advocacy.

After engaging in a long and unnecessary pronunciation battle over the words 'national' and 'Nashville,' a member of the New York branch informed me that there was in fact a Nashville branch and that their number was plainly listed on the ACORN website. I informed them that I had in fact called this inactive number and that my purpose for calling New York was to find out if the Nashville branch existed. The voice at the other end of the phone promptly told me to check the website again to see if I acquired the number and e-mail correctly and to have a good day.

Round two, Oct. 2 and 3. Since the national website had provided an address for the Nashville branch, I figured I would find this mysterious office. I pulled up to an average-sized brick house that had a small sign reading "Nashville Center for Justice and Peace" and nothing more. There was no indication that ACORN had operated, was operating, or would ever be operating in this location. I

didn't really expect a giant ACORN flag to be flying from the rafters during a period of unfavorable press coverage but this was getting ridiculous. I decided to get to the bottom of this and called the Nashville Center for Justice and Peace to see what they knew about ACORN in Nashville. After leaving several voicemail messages, the NCJP finally called back and explained that the ACORN office had vacated the address in Oct. 2008 without leaving a forwarding address or new phone number.

Round three, Oct. 5. Scrambling to acquire even a tiny piece of information about the elusive Nashville ACORN office, I decided to reach out to the third and final national office in Washington D.C. I explained to the woman who answered my phone call that I could not get into contact with the Nashville office at all and I asked if she had any information that could help me.

She told me in a matter-of-fact fashion that there must be no active Nashville branch if the phone number didn't work, a claim that I asked her to check. The exasperated representative said that inactive numbers meant inactive branches and that she didn't have any specifics on each of the country's branches.

Dumbfounded, I stared blankly at my computer trying to think of how I could talk about ACORN's work in the Nashville community when I didn't even know if the branch existed or not. I decided to adjust to this new situation and find out all I could about the Memphis branch. After all, it was a mere three hours away and would be the next best thing to information about the Nashville branch.

I dialed the number provided by the website with a newfound optimism and energy for my article, but sighed when I heard the words, "The party you are trying to reach is not in service..." Ultra-liberal me tried to give you a chance, ACORN in Tennessee, he really did.

"Your call could not be completed as dialed..."

Orbis called 62 of the ACORN offices listed on the organization's website in mid-October 2009. We could not establish contact with 17 of the 62 locations, or roughly one in four of every ACORN office.

13 of the offices had disconnected phone numbers, one was a wrong number, and three of the numbers had full voice mail boxes.

Each time we found a working phone number for another branch, the person we contacted could not provide information on the branches with missing or defunct numbers.

Orbis breaks down health care reform

An overview of the issues before Congress

By Meghan O'Neill
STAFF WRITER

What is really going on with health care reform? Many people have become increasingly confused over the country's health care debate amidst conflicting reports on the bills making their way through Congress.

So what is being proposed? There are a number of bills currently under consideration, with a variety of ideas designed to reform our ailing system.

Mandated Insurance

Almost all proposed health care reforms would require everyone to purchase some form of health insurance - or pay a fine ranging from \$750 to \$3,700. This is because uninsured people cause insurance premiums to rise for those who do have insurance. When uninsured patients can't pay their health care costs, hospitals and doctors pass the unmet costs on to insurance companies, which raise premiums for their customers. For those who can't afford health insurance, the government would provide subsidies to cover their costs. Some plans also require companies to provide health care for their employees.

Insurance Exchanges

Creating new "insurance exchanges" would bring buyers and sellers together, allowing consumers to compare the coverage and prices from different plans and different providers. In order to be listed in an exchange, policies would have to be clearly worded, provide a minimum benefit package, and follow minimum coverage standards. However, many areas would continue to have only two available health plans, and current exchanges have not been shown to reduce premiums.

Coverage Exchanges

Both parties seem to agree on three key coverage changes. First, insurance companies would be banned from refusing to cover people with pre-existing medical conditions. Second, insurance companies would not be allowed to drop a customer if they have played their premium in full. Third, incentives need to be created to encourage preventive health care, which could ultimately cut health care costs.

Also, most bills would restrict the amount that insurance premiums could vary based on age, place of residence, and other criteria.

Public Plan

The most divisive aspect of the health care debate is the public plan. Some plans call for a complete overhaul of the health care system, with the majority of care provided by the government. However, most Republicans have refused to support such a bill, saying it would put health care companies out of business. Other plans have specified "triggers": if the health care industry failed to meet certain goals within a specified amount of time, a public option would be introduced. Some plans propose that the government provide only an option for citizens who cannot afford other health care. But many Republicans are rejecting the public option altogether, which makes its future dubious.



Rising medical costs reveal the need for health care reform.

Photo illustration: Erika Hyde/ORBIS

Medicare and Medicaid

Several of the health care bills propose to expand Medicare, the federally subsidized health care program for senior citizens, which will give people ages 55 to 64 the option to buy into the program. However, these new customers would be paying full price for Medicare, unlike senior citizens, who currently get government subsidies to cover the majority of Medicare costs.

Some plans also expand Medicaid. Medicaid is a federal-state health care program for people whose incomes are at or below the federal poverty level. Plans propose various expansions, ranging from covering people who make 150 percent of the federal poverty level (\$16,245 for the individual; \$33,075 for a family of four) to people who make three times the poverty level. This expansion could cover another 20 million people, which is approximately 40 percent of the current uninsured population. However, opponents say an expansion to Medicaid would put too much of a burden on state finances, especially during economic downturns.

Government Subsidies

Nearly all of the current proposals would have the government granting subsidies, in varying amounts, based on income. In general, the government would help families who make up to five times the poverty level (\$54,150 for the individual; \$110,250 for a family of four). The government would also provide subsidies for small companies so that they could purchase health care for their employees.

Cost

All of the proposed health care bills come with heavy price tags. The Congressional Budget Office estimates that the least expensive plan would cost about \$775 billion over ten years. It is the only plan being seriously considered that costs less than \$1 trillion over the next ten years.

Republicans have recently introduced legislation that would make it mandatory for health care reform bills to be analyzed by the Congressional Budget Office at least three days before they come to a vote.

The Senate Finance Committee will vote on a bipartisan bill on Oct. 13. The bill, originally introduced by Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus, only needs to pass through the Finance Committee, the fifth of five required committee approvals, before it can proceed to the Senate and House floors for debate. The bill, the cheapest of all proposals, requires all citizens to purchase health insurance, but includes subsidies for those who cannot afford it. It has no public option and would not require employers to provide health insurance for their employees. The plan, which has been amended several times to appease both parties, lacks support from both parties and is unlikely to pass in its current state. Meanwhile, several other bills are being considered in various committees in the Senate and the House of Representatives.

It is unlikely that a health care plan in line with the boldest ideas of the most ambitious Democrats will be realized anytime soon. Though they have a large enough majority to pass legislation without Republican support, they appear unlikely to do so. Ramming a bill through a vote would cause long-seated division between the parties and threatens to ruin public opinion and support. For now, it seems like meaningful health care reform is in the distant future. However, that doesn't mean that all hope is lost - given the available options, basic reforms are definitely possible during this session of Congress.

VUT presents *The Merchant of Venice*

Theater production draws laughs, little thought

By Jickai Jeremy Chua
STAFF WRITER

Shakespeare's comedies were written to entertain the masses, but they beg deeper analysis. *The Merchant of Venice* is no exception: most of the play clearly panders to the lowest common denominator of humor with its sexual innuendos and horseplay. On the surface, it is a performance that elicits chuckles and shock, not intellectual conversation.

Nevertheless, our modern sensibilities no longer grant us the mindless luxury to simply lean back and laugh.

Instead, we tend to look past the silliness for a manifestation of Shakespeare's genius more pertinent to the issues we face today as a society. Despite some attempts to conform to a more cerebral, modern interpretation, this Vanderbilt University

Theater production depends on humor and slapstick to pull the evening through, and this lack of conviction to either interpretation weakens the performance.

Brett Bolton plays Antonio, whose friendship with Bassanio sends him dangerously careening into an uneasy alliance with the loan shark, Shylock. Bolton brims with a somber confidence, sailing through his melancholy passages eloquently, and firmly holds all his lines with an effective gravity. Tim Patten plays Bassanio with a good deal less dignity, however. With bumbling physical humor, he interprets Bassanio as a frivolous buffoon, not the suave buccaneer dashing enough to seek the hand of Portia.

As Shylock, Mario Martinez emphasizes humor as well, but a contrived accent wanes the audience's sympathy for Shylock after a few artless inflections. The drollery of the awkward Princes and the wag-

gish Launcelot is adequate. The play does not require another cavalcade of clowns to augment the madcap energies vested in dialogue.

The parts of Karen Kasha's Jessica and Trevor Anderson's Lorenzo are strong, but the acting is sometimes inconsistent and the conviction in their relationship is not fully realized. Some of the women are also weakly portrayed, lacking the maturity and spunk to carry through some of Shakespeare's strongest female protagonists.

As Portia, Sarah Williams is meek at best, and she can definitely do better with her "Quality of Mercy" appeal when she holds the court. Like the rest of the cast, William and Hannah Hayes (as Nerissa) seem more concerned with the mischief they can cause, rather than with the drama they have in their hands.

Director Terry Hallquist pulled through, but the performance

would have been stronger had the interpretation been grounded in a more firmly intellectual or comic tradition, instead of straddling the two. The cast, if unimaginative, is effective at least in the one-upmanship of who can draw the most laughter from the floor.

The final scene condescended to its audience, altered to involve Jessica receiving details of her father's ruin, by which she is overwhelmed with guilt. Antonio is left pondering the turn of events as the lights fade from a general wash to a deep hue of blue before the blackout.

The need for poignancy is understood, but this is obviously arm-twisting the audience into contemplating the larger implications of the play. It is far too convenient and underhanded, and this reviewer is offended by the petty manipulations to make the play appear more thoughtful. The result is a general

unevenness in pace as the production dabbles by turn in comedy and introspection.

The costume designer has done a splendid job, deftly capturing the historical spirit of the play in the costumes. There is, however, a tendency to color code: the antagonists are dressed in dull colors and the protagonists in brighter hues, while the block-headed royals are clad in clumsily flashy ensembles. The downside to this decision is that the costuming gives the game away from the start, instead of letting audience members come to their own conclusions about the characters through the performance.

This VUT rendition of *The Merchant of Venice* is neither grounded squarely in a renaissance nor a modern interpretation of this classic. Nevertheless, the personal sacrifices that made this production possible are obvious, and the free tickets are certainly appreciated. To pass muster however, this company still has a long way to go. It is not just gaiety, but also meaning that one seeks in the bard today. It remains to be seen how VUT in its next Shakespearean production will review its priorities and methods to get this balance right.



Vanderbilt University Theatre performed *The Merchant of Venice* in October.

Photo: VUT website

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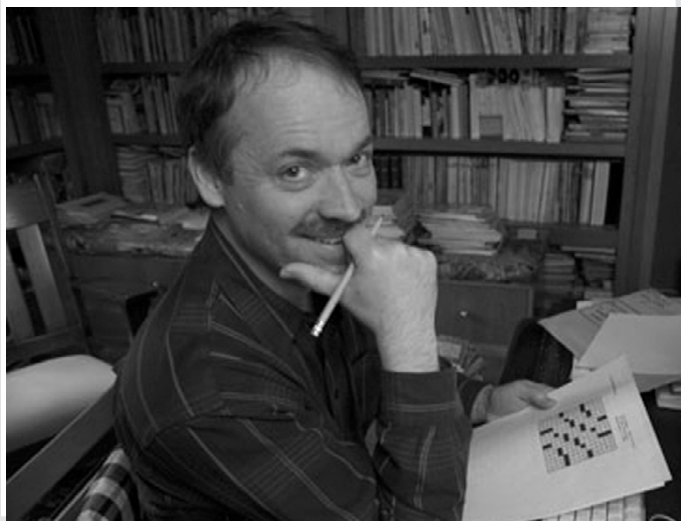
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Screening of the "Story of Stuff" and Panel Discussion for

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Sustainability Day

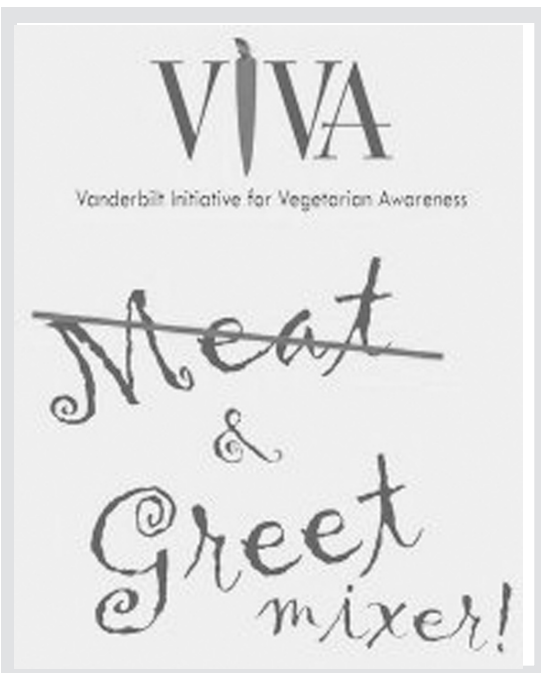
Sponsored by SPEAR October 20
at 5:30 p.m. in Wilson 126



John Seigenthaler

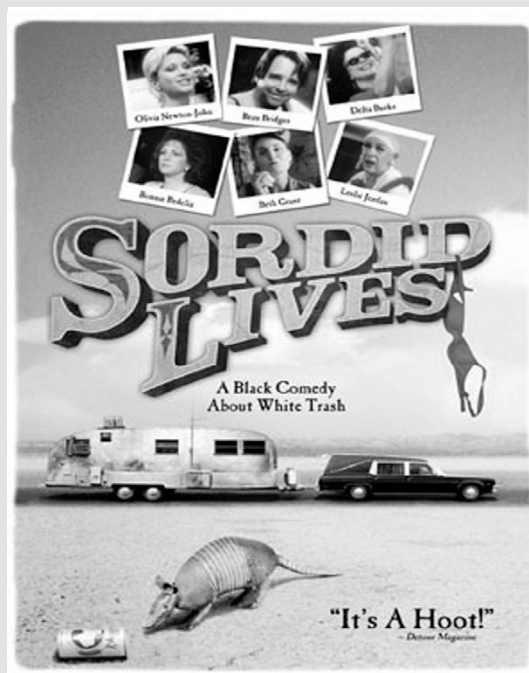
speaks at leadership breakfast
Hosted by the Cal Turner Program for Moral Leadership of Vanderbilt Divinity School.

Oct. 15 at 7:30am at the University Club



Potluck vegetarian dinner and mixer

Hosted by Vanderbilt Initiative for Vegetarian Awareness
October 16th at 5:30 - 8 p.m.
in Sarratt.



Sordid Lives Screening

a 2000 black comedy by Del Shores
Hosted by HRC Vanderbilt
October 28 at 7 p.m.
at The K.C. Potter Center for LGBTQI Life



State of the Word Performance

Hosted by Vandy Spoken Word and Youth Speaks Nashville
November 7 from 7-9 p.m.
at Sarratt Cinema

Does President Obama deserve the Nobel Peace Prize?

1 Obama was a wise choice

■ John Chen, Features Editor

The selection of President Barack Obama by the Norwegian Nobel committee certainly came as a surprise. Obama himself said that he does “not feel [he] deserve[s] to be in the company of” the previous winners. Many Republicans and world leaders agree



that the prize came far too early, criticizing his lack of concrete accomplishments so far.

Despite these sentiments, the committee’s choice is backed by sound reasoning and strategy.

People are mostly concerned about the award’s timing. Their criticisms refer to the fact that the prize was awarded based on just one year of his presidency. Yet, if we really take a look at Obama’s actions, we can see that they have already begun to transform the tone of American foreign policy. To Iran and North Korea, he has replaced military threats with diplomacy. He has restored relations with Russia and reached out to the Muslim world. In order to restore peace in the Middle East, he has made a point of fairness by calling on Israel to cease settlement activities. Although less concrete than many people prefer, these are certainly worthy credentials.

Moreover, the committee’s selection of Obama serves as a motivational force. Obama said he viewed the decision less as a recognition of his own accomplishments and more as “a call to action.” In fact, the Nobel committee has a history of awarding the prize for the purpose of encouraging future efforts. For instance, the prize was awarded to Yasser Arafat to maintain momentum for achieving peace in the Middle East. Likewise, the Peace Prize serves to put increased pressure on Obama to make accomplishments towards peace in Afghanistan, Iran, Korea, and the Middle East. The Nobel committee has made an intelligent and influential move; they’ve essentially prepared a pair of giant shoes that Obama is now obliged to fill. I hope Obama has big feet.

2 Obama choice fits Prize aims

Carol Chen,

Issues Editor

In the uproar over Obama winning the Nobel Peace Prize, there are several aspects that do not get addressed.

First, decrying the political nature of the Nobel Peace Prize is naïve. Awarding anything of such prestige and international significance is

going to be divisive, and when someone wins and many people lose, it is political.

In fact, the awarding committee shows an admirable transversal of opinion considering its political diversity. As per Alfred Nobel’s will, this specific committee comprises of five members appointed by the Norwegian parliament and roughly reflect its political makeup—currently, the parties represented are Labour, Conservative, Progress and the Socialist Left. It is further testament to the extraordinary confidence in Obama that the award was given by unanimous vote.

The Peace Prize is not just an acknowledgement of past achievement but a vote of confidence for future accomplishments. In the recent past, the awards were mostly commemorative. This year’s choice returns to Alfred Nobel’s original intention of recognizing whomever has done “the most or the best work for fraternity between nations.”

The committee praised the “new international climate” of diplomacy that Obama is in the process of creating as president. This points to what the committee values: the intention and potential of creating future cooperation among countries. There are few people in the world with as much influence, power, respect and opportunity to affect change for better or for worse than the president right now.

One thing that’s undeniable is that a burden—the burden of hope for the international community, and particularly upon American leadership. Obama interpret the award as a “call for action” but just for him, or for the government—it’s also a call for each and every individual.

the prize is future that the early Europe, was right to it’s not a call

3 Obama choice cheapens Prize meaning

■ Erika Hyde, Editor-in-Chief

What has President Obama done to deserve the Nobel Peace Prize? To put it plainly, nothing of substance.

Choosing a winner based on aspirations instead of actual accomplishments cheapens the meaning of the prize. Instead of repurposing the prize as a “call to action,” the awarding committee should reward real contributions to the international community.

Obama has inherited wars in both Iraq and Afghanistan, neither of which he has made meaningful attempts to end. Threats in Iran and North Korea continue to loom on the horizon. International crises facing his administration are matched only by the growing list of domestic woes in the U.S. The president has not authorized investigations into the torture allegedly committed by the preceding administration, and closing Guantanamo Bay prison remains an unfinished goal.

If he is able to follow through on the ambitious goals made during his presidential campaign, Obama may be well-deserving of a Nobel Prize in the future. At this point, however, even his supporters are hard-pressed to find comprehensive accomplishments in the president’s record.

