

3-27-2006

Hilltopics: Volume 2, Issue 22

Hilltopics Staff

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Recommended Citation

Hilltopics Staff, "Hilltopics: Volume 2, Issue 22" (2006). *Hilltopics*. 41.
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volume two, issue twenty-two
week of march 27, 2006

Three years into the Iraq war, the forecast for year number four looks as bleak as the last three

by James Longhofer

Exactly three years ago I was in San Antonio visiting Trinity University. I was a junior in high school and I was on a Spring Break trip with my father looking at various colleges in Texas. (I wouldn't visit SMU for another two weeks.) After we checked into our motel room, my father flipped on the news to see if anything had happened in Iraq yet. I was interested as well, but I had only followed the news coverage with passing interest because I was more concerned about getting into college. It was then that we saw that the bombing had begun with a "target of opportunity" in Baghdad. That target was meant to be Saddam Hussein and his sons. They weren't there of course. Saddam would not be captured until December and his sons would be killed that July. Instead of decapitating Iraq's leadership, our bombs just killed and maimed civilians in the area. That first mistake marked the beginning of three years of full of other more costly mistakes.

Those mistakes have come at a furious pace. During the fall of Baghdad, we didn't secure many governmental buildings, which led to widespread looting and destruction of important files. We were told that we would be greeted as liberators. We dissolved the Iraqi army which left many armed Iraqis unemployed. We never found any actual weapons of mass destruction. We didn't do a good job of creating a government where all ethnic groups could come together. We didn't send enough troops to properly secure the country. We still haven't sufficiently trained any Iraqi military units to act independently of American troops. We abused Iraqi prisoners. We haven't sufficiently protected civilians from insurgents. We failed to live up to our values.

Those mistakes have had real costs. These last three years have been expensive both in terms of lives and money. At this time 2,300 American soldiers have been killed while more than 16,000 soldiers have been wounded in combat. Tens of

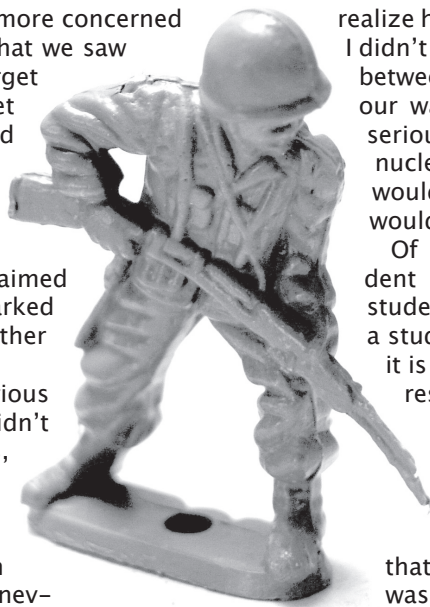
thousands of Iraqis have died, including both civilians and insurgents. Hundreds of billions of dollars have been spent with little actual improvement in the quality of life for Iraqis. Additionally, American prestige and respect have plummeted around the world at time when we need it most to deal with issues like nuclear proliferation in Iran.

When I was on Spring Break three years ago, I didn't realize how big of a mistake that my country had made. I didn't realize that our actions would spark a civil war between different ethnic groups. I didn't realize that our war would make us unable to deal with more serious problems such as Iran's and North Korea's nuclear ambitions. I certainly deal realize that it would worthlessly gobble billions of dollars that would keep us from dealing with issues at home.

Of course, there isn't really a problem if a student doesn't understand global issues. It's not a student's job to understand those issues. Instead, a student should be learning about them. However, it is a problem when the people entrusted with the responsibility to make decisions don't understand those issues, and it's clear that President Bush didn't understand Iraq when he sent our country to war three years ago. He thought there were WMD, he thought that we would be greeted as liberators, and he thought that Iraq's oil would pay for its reconstruction. He was wrong on all three counts.

Even worse, the fourth year of our involvement in Iraq does not look any more promising. Ethnic tension has reached a new high, and even if you don't think that Iraq has fallen into civil war yet, you must admit that it is on the precipice. I want to believe that there is a way to salvage our involvement in Iraq and to make sure that we can leave a stable country with honor, but there doesn't seem to be a way out. I hope that the president's optimism will be validated, but it looks like year four of the Iraq War will just continue the pain of the last three.

James Longhofer is a sophomore political science, economics, and public policy major.



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Is your bracket busted? Don't let march madness drive you mad; everyone's in the same boat.

by James Longhofer

March is the greatest time in the sporting calendar. March Madness is better than the Super Bowl, the World Series, the NBA Playoffs, or any other championship.

Let's be honest: the Super Bowl is a bad football game surrounded by better commercials, the World Series is only fun when there is an actual competition instead of a sweep, and the NBA Playoffs lasts half as long as the regular season. Compare that to the Big Dance. During three weeks, there are 65 games. Every one of those games ends a team's season instantly, and because of that, every game matters. There is no filler. Even the biggest teams who are riding waves of media hype aren't safe from being knocked off by nobodies. Right, Connecticut?

Then of course, there is the (illegal) gambling. It seems as though everyone must fill out a bracket for the tourney and enter it into pools for various amounts of money. Since so many people feel compelled to waste their money on these pools, the entire sports media devotes the entire week between the announcement of the teams and the actual start of the tournament to an intense analysis of the bracket in search of crucial upsets that will make your bracket into a pool winner. Of course, most of their advice is worthless junk. Then again, I'm probably not the best person to denigrate anyone else's bracket skills.

By the time this article is published, my bracket for the Men's NCAA Basketball Tournament will be completely worthless. I will have ripped it up into shreds after crossing out in bright red ink yet another game that I picked wrong.

This final act of rage is my admission that I have wasted my money yet again by entering various bracket pools and that I quite simply suck at putting a bracket together.

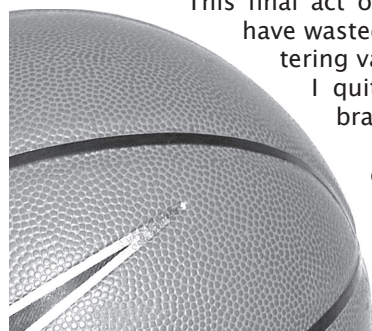
I'm pretty sure that my complete lack of skill at putting together a bracket is not a general reflection on my level of knowledge about college basketball. I love college basketball, and

when the season starts up my television is stuck on ESPN so that I catch whatever game is on. I follow more than the top teams. I can quote shibboleths to show my college basketball cred. (Adam Morrison needs to shave. JJ Redick has textbook form. Bobby Knight needs focus more on his team instead of making a stupid reality show.) I even have an opinion on why the Missouri Valley Conference was given the wrong number of teams for the tourney. So why do I suck at picking a bracket?

It's not entirely my fault. Part of what makes March Madness so exciting to watch also makes it hard to predict. The format of the tourney raises the possibility of upsets because of single elimination. A good team only needs to have one bad game to be thrown out of the tournament. For example in the first round Northwestern State (a 14 seed) beat Iowa (a 3 seed). If these two teams played multiple games like the NBA Playoffs, it's likely that Iowa would win most of them instead of being sent home early. Because of the tournament is six rounds over three weeks, even a good team has a good chance of losing a game against a mediocre one. Because of the single elimination format of the tournament, a person who is knowledgeable about college basketball only has a minor advantage over someone who is a casual fan.

Of course the math of the tourney isn't the only reason why I have problems putting together a strong bracket. Luck, my personal biases, and a variety of other factors come together to make sure that my brackets are worthless by the end of the second round. If I was more rational, I probably would stop throwing my money away every year to participate in a game that I have no aptitude for, but I have a feeling that next March I will be huddled over my computer as I try to create a winning bracket.

James Longhofer is a sophomore political science, economics, and public policy major.



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Political discourse in the United States: Where has it gone and what has it become?

by Michael Hogenmiller

Today, people self-identify with politics in a way that prevents meaningful political conversation. It's why pundits yell past each other on shows like *Crossfire*, why the American body politic is so polarized, and why politics is no longer discussed at the dinner table. Issues like gay marriage or abortion immediately become lightning rods for arguments, whether at work, school, or home, and now it's regarded as socially uncouth to even bring them up. Why do today's political conversations make people uncomfortable? When did it become inappropriate to ask someone about their political views, and why are so few people willing to talk about them?

Consider the issues that dominate today's political conversation. Abortion and gay marriage have become litmus questions for candidates, letting their voters know where they stand on "moral values." But a person's position on an issue like abortion comes from an extremely personal place: their religious beliefs or personal morality. How can two people debate an issue like abortion when the stakes are so personal? Who's willing to concede in a political conversation that their views on something like religion could be hazy or even wrong?

It's one thing to admit that there could be different ways to solve an energy crisis, or that you may not know the best way to manage the economy, but to concede that your own views on God, life, or morality could be wrong is a step most are unwilling to take—and shouldn't have to take—in a political conversation. It's why issues like abortion or gay marriage aren't true political issues. They are problems for society and culture, not government.

Politics should be about political issues, issues directly related to government: fiscal policy, energy policy, border security, foreign relations, and ensuring that America runs

an efficient, stream-lined, and effective government.

Instead, we have polluted the political conversation with issues that aren't political, and politics has become a volatile and unfriendly plane. Society and culture are the spheres where these problems should be addressed, through art, literature, television, cinema, education: all of the traditional avenues of expression where people can provoke others in ways that are less threatening. Society and culture subtly entice the mind to entertain new ideas and perspectives—in the way that *The Cosby Show* introduced white America to the African-American family, or that *Will & Grace* introduced mainstream culture to homosexuality. Waging cultural war on issues like abortion in the halls of government manipulates the political system and pollutes the political discourse. It seeks to legitimize a stance on a polarized issue by sidestepping the cultural process in which society addresses, discusses, explores, and ultimately solves a problem facing its people.

The parties should abandon their positions on abortion and gay marriage, issues that aren't political, and leave these decisions up to individuals who can examine them through careful reflection and consideration in light of their religions, morality, and values. Both sides of the aisle should refocus on solving problems that are directly related to government, like finding an energy source that isn't foreign oil, or securing our ports and borders so that we can control who is entering and exiting our country. When the country is fighting a war, when a people are dealing with disasters like Hurricane Katrina and are still reeling from the attacks on the World Trade Center, there's no reason to muddle the political atmosphere with problems that can't be solved by politicians.

Michael Hogenmiller is a senior political science and music major.

V for Vendetta turns out to be P for Pointless

by Douglas Hill

Much has been made of the Wachowski brothers' new project, *V for Vendetta*, which features a terrorist for a hero and an evil and totalitarian English government for a villain. Many have objected to the characterization of a terrorist who blows up the Houses of Parliament as a liberator or hero. Interested by the controversy, I decided to see the movie for myself. After doing so, I'm not left wondering if the movie should have been made in such a way as to promote terrorism, but rather if the movie should have been made at all.

By far the most irritating part of *V* is the constant use of—you guessed it—the letter v. Not only is the main character named V, and not only does he splash his 'V' imagery all over a futuristic London, but someone made the terribly unfortunate decision to pepper his dialogue with almost nauseating alliterations. The virtuous will have vengeance against the veritable vipers vying for victory in Virginia. You get the point, and that was just one sentence.

But the language is only one in a list of reasons for hating *V*. He's long-winded, one-dimensional, cruel-hearted, and, frankly, a boring hero. His mask is creepy in a way that I hope wasn't intended. His karate-style "fighting" looked a lot more like dancing. And his decision to lock the movie's

heroine in a cell for a few weeks of solitary confinement and torture just to "test" her is sufficiently sadistic to erase any possibility of sympathy for our masked hero.

Needless to say, there were a lot of mistakes made during *V*'s production, but surely the biggest was the lazy manner in which the story was constructed in an effort to parallel current events. The Wachowski brothers had a genuine chance to air real criticisms of the current administration, or totalitarian regimes, or theocracy, or whatever they might be worked up about. To do so, they would have only had to create situations in their movie that tackled issues head-on. Instead, they opted to make vague references to "America's war" or "America's disease" or some such nonsense, and to present us with an over-played, 1984-style totalitarian state. The idea of a lone freedom fighter in a world without liberty is already overdone, but the shallow attacks on American policy leave audience members with a sour taste in their mouths, and I couldn't help but feel that this movie was kind of a cheap shot. I had hoped that, with all of the controversy surrounding this film, it would be thought-provoking, but the only thought it seemed to provoke in me was a profound wish that I'd seen *Curious George* instead.

Douglas Hill is a junior international studies major.

Hilltopics editors past and present give shout outs to their favorite (and least favorite) readers

by Yasmin Awad and Jared Dovers

The Liars: The distributor opens the box of freshly printed *Hilltopics* articles and picks up the week's first issue. It is proudly offered to the first person walking by. The bystander smiles confidently, "Already got that one, thanks!"

The iPoders and cell-phoners: Those listening to their iPods or talking on their cell phones are oblivious to anything around them, much less a person sticking a sheet of literary genius into their bee-line for the soda and sushi at the Market. This gets frustrating for a hard-working editor. What song or conversation could possibly be more important than that week's *Hilltopics*? Pause your favorite band and put your mother on hold to pick up an issue. This stuff will change your life.

The Planners: There are strategists (probably business majors) who purposely evade our publication like it's a flu-stricken bird in China. It's not hard to see the planning that goes in their head: "Those annoying *Hilltopics* people are distributing...again. Quick, look away. Focus on one spot. The display in the market! *Focus*. Sushi. Soda. Fair trade coffee. They're sticking the paper in your face. They're cheerily asking you a question. Keep a straight face. Don't flinch or blink. You're almost in the clear. It's like they do this every Monday."

The Pinkiers: It makes any distributor feel appreciated when those who are busy carrying a big load (probably science majors) still stop and offer a finger (usually the pinky finger) to accept an issue. It shows that even busy people have time to leaf through the two pages.

Those living under a rock: There are still those at SMU who have no idea what *Hilltopics* is, even though you've been passing them out for almost two years now. After a long explanation, they accept the issue, still looking confused. Luckily for them, they have no idea what the *Daily Campus* is either.

The environmentally/mentally wasteful: Some people pick up an issue as they walk by and throw it away at the end of the hallway—totally within sight of the distributor. This is not only a waste of paper, but a waste of money that the editors personally begged and pleaded for from the wise and judicious Student Senate (We love you!).

The illiterate: These are the people who make your degree worth less simply by the fact that they attend the same school as you do. These beasts are the first to offer up such questions as "You really expect me to read?" Yeah, fella, we here at Southern Methodist, in fact, do. Is it too much to ask university students to spend five minutes (three minutes if you speed read) every week to read four pages, with pictures, of usually enlightening and creative writing?

Staunch DC supporters: *The Daily Campus* supporters act as if they're crossing a picket line every time they walk through distribution. They would rather bend their backs and pick a Friday issue of the *DC* rather than accept the most recent *Hilltopics* being handed out to them by a smiling face. Now, we are the first to tell you that *Hilltopics* is in no way the *DC*'s competitor (If you don't know what the *DC* is, that's cool, too). The publications serve different purposes.

The non-published and the published: The former are those who submitted, but didn't get published, so they give the editors the evil eye when they walk by. The published grab 30 copies so they can mail them to all their relatives.

The fans: Our favorites are those who come up and eagerly ask for more than one issue. Those are the people we're writing and editing for. Thanks to all who support our sincere efforts and take a few minutes out of their week to read what SMU students have to say. And again, thank you Student Senate.

Yasmin Awad is a sophomore journalism major. Jared Dovers is a former Hilltopics editor and one of our founders.



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