

UO professors comment on 1998's important events

By Amy Jennaro
for the Emerald

While University students were enjoying three weeks of vacation, the political world was reeling under the effects of an impeachment process, a new European currency, a war and an approaching computer crisis. Here, seven University experts offer their opinions and analysis on the events that closed off 1998.

The impeachment

The news story that overshadowed all other events in 1998 was the scandal involving President Clinton, a White House intern and Clinton's alleged perjury to cover up the relationship. For many affiliated with the journalism field, the heightening of acrimonious relations between Clinton and the press, in addition to the entrance of the media into the president's private life this year, was a point of discomfort.

Journalism professor Stephen Ponder said he shares this feeling of uneasiness, a subject he explores in his new book "Managing the Press: Origins of the Media Presidency, 1897-1933" to be published by St. Martin's Press this month.

In his book, Ponder details the change in president-media relations from the first half of this century, when the press maintained a distance between itself and the president, to the present day, when presidents are intensely scrutinized.

"For most of the century, the media concentrated on public policies and did not concern themselves with the private lives of public officials," he said. "There was a zone of protection around the president's privacy."

According to Ponder, past

presidents made an effort to maintain good relations with the media because of their reliance on the news media's communication with the public. However, Ponder said he foresees a change in this relationship due to worsening presidential relations with the press.

"In the future, I see presidents trying to communicate with the public through other means, like talk shows," Ponder said.

Ponder said he hopes the scandal will prompt the media to examine the increasingly private stories and how that change will affect future media actions.

"I think the press is less beholden to the president, which is good," he said. "But whether the press coverage this year is good for the country is something that needs to be established."

Operation Desert Fox

The December attack on Iraq, because of President Saddam Hussein's failure to cooperate with United Nations inspectors, marks one of the most controversial events of 1998. The timing of the attack, just hours before President Clinton's impeachment vote in the House, left many wondering if Clinton's decision to attack was an effort to deflect attention from the Congressional decision.

According to International Studies professor Anita Weiss, the timing of Clinton's attack could negatively impact his relations with other countries in the Middle East.

"Many Middle Eastern countries consider it to be an attack against Muslims worldwide," she said. "They felt that Clinton attacked for his own personal agen-

da and didn't care who got hurt."

Weiss said the irony that the U.S. has attacked three Muslim countries (Sudan, Afghanistan and Iraq) in the past five months has not been lost on countries in that region.

"These countries realize that the only people hurt in these attacks have been Muslims," she said. "They feel like the U.S. considers their lives to be expendable."

Geography professor Shaul Cohen sees other problematic elements from the attack.

"This attack is part of a broader regional policy that was ill-conceived in the beginning and is still ill-conceived," he said.

Cohen said the role the U.S. has undertaken as the enforcer of foreign policy in Iraq is ludicrous. Cohen is also critical of the effectiveness of the attack.

"I don't think a single element of the attack surprised Saddam," he said. "He lost the things he knew he was going to lose."

The European Union

Despite its importance as the first merger between multiple countries, the European Union and the December release of the Union's currency, the Euro, was largely put on the back burner in 1998. The Union, which claims 11 countries as members, has shifted to a multi-country currency in an attempt to increase trade and make transactions between countries easier.

Many University professors are optimistic about the enormous possibilities for greater European economic stability.

"The Union will mean a higher standard of living for all European countries," said Economics

professor Steven Haines. "It will provide better health and education."

However, Economics professor Henry Goldstein worries the Union will limit each country's ability to adjust its finances based on the economic circumstances.

"They can't have a separate monetary policy for each of these countries, so they will have to compromise," he said. "They seem determined to pay the price."

Britain, the most significant country to abstain from the Union, seems to share those worries.

"I think Britain is concerned about maintaining the ability to set its own economic standards," Goldstein said.

Whether the union will be a positive or negative force in Europe remains to be seen. Haines said his main hope is that the Union will establish peace on a continent that has been crippled by wars over the past century.

"The Union will force people to get along who haven't gotten along before, so we won't repeat mistakes that have happened in the 20th century," he said.

Y2K computer crisis

As the world rang in the final new year of this century, talking heads were already discussing a computer problem that will be an increasingly covered story in the coming year.

The year 2000 or Y2K computer crisis, as it is called, pertains to the fact that computers are programmed only to read the last two digits of the year. When the year changes to 2000, the computer could become confused

and crash or send out erroneous data.

Opinions are divided on the severity of the problem. Some computer experts claim that the widespread crash of computers will result in problems in the electrical, heating, airline and retail industries.

University professors take a much more moderate view of the problem.

"The problems are going to be widespread, but not critical," said Computer Science professor Stewart Falk.

Falk is doubtful of computer experts who claim that major companies are not prepared for the crisis.

"The people for whom it would be a serious problem — for example Delta Airlines — would not risk planes dropping out of the sky because they didn't fix a problem with their computers," Falk said.

However, some professors point out that problems with embedded systems, or computer chips located in such unlikely places as the local water distribution tank or cars, could be disrupted because of the tendency for them to be overlooked.

"The problem in the embedded systems is probably 80 percent fixed, but the other 20 percent is going to be a pain," said Computer Science professor Michael Young.

Young said he also believes that these problems will not be as serious as some have claimed.

"I do expect things to go wrong," he said. "They won't be disastrous, but they will be an inconvenience."



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