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EDITORIAL

Knowledge is best hope for lessening cultural gaps

As recent attacks in Iraq have set in the minds of Americans and, no doubt, of residents of the Middle East, an abysmal mutual gap of understanding still plagues relations between the Islamic world and the West. The history of cultural conflict is lengthy.

In 1999, Arabs and Muslims called for the closure of the Burger King in Maale Adumim, the largest Israeli settlement in the West Bank. When the Israeli franchisee refused to close shop, groups called for an international boycott of the burger giant because the outlet was sited on what the executive director of American Muslims for Jerusalem dubbed "stolen land." (Israel seized the land in 1967's Six-Day War.) The restaurant was closed on Saturdays, the Jewish Sabbath, and followed Jewish, but not Muslim, dietary laws. Burger King Corp. shut down the franchise later that year.

Paul Marshall, a senior fellow at Freedom House's Center for Religious Freedom, wrote in a Townhall.com guest commentary that "One distinctive feature of Western analysts is that terrorists' explicit goals are often ignored, and instead their actions are misread as reactions to Israel, third world poverty, or American unilateralism."

And, in 1997, Iran's Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, a speaker-box of hyper-nationalism and intolerance, blasted "unethical" Western interference in the so-called Islamic revolution: "This ethical quagmire will ... engulf the present Western civilization and wipe it out."

During a speech given to students at Georgetown University just a few months after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, former President Bill Clinton faulted certain Middle East regimes for misperceptions about the West: "In the complex combustible mixture of a lot of these countries, a lot of the governments allow people to go into the mosques and demonize us, and demonize the West and demonize Christianity and demonize Jews, because as long as they do that, they think they're shifting the heat of popular distress off of the governments."

As with many problems, from the personal to the planetary, the essence of hashing out misunderstanding is communication.

Clinton agrees.

"We need to do a better job of getting the facts out," he said in the same Georgetown speech. "Most Muslims in the Middle East, I guarantee you, don't know (that) the last time we used our military power was to protect poor Muslims in Bosnia and Kosovo."

But citing simple communication and open arms as a panacea has all the effectiveness of a public service announcement on C-SPAN 2; anyone who thinks differently is shortsighted or has a rhetorically indefensible bone to pick.

Even in the modern world of the superconnected and the media-aware, most international communication flows through several major mass media outlets. The relative merits of this arrangement aside, the soundbyte-oriented format of cable news — CNN and Al-Jazeera alike — is ill-suited to conveying subtleties necessary for cultural appreciation. And with neither the Israel-Palestine conflict nor the Iraqi occupation showing signs of sunny news, even widely accepted cultural tolerance often seems too bullish a goal.

Rather than propose a comprehensive policy solution — which is clearly outside the scope of this editorial, anyway — we suggest a more microcosmic response: Learn more about Islamic language and idea and the context of those ideas. Read through Omar Khayyam's "Rubaiyat," or thumb through "A Thousand and One Nights." If you're reading this and you're a resident of the Middle East, read through Shakespeare's "Hamlet" or Adam Smith's "Wealth of Nations."

This is no end in itself, and almost certainly won't in itself stop catastrophic cultural conflict. But knowledge is a place to start.

As James Madison sagely observed, "The advancement and diffusion of knowledge is the only guardian of true liberty."

The ANGRY peacemaker



Joseph Bechard
Cultural obstetrician

Tonight is country music's biggest night. Millions of country music fans will tune into the Country Music Awards on CBS hoping to see their favorite artists honored for the great work they do.

One of the more interesting stories of this year's awards ceremony is that of rising star Toby Keith. This year has been a good one for the flag-waving rootin'-tootin' cowboy tough-guy.

Keith will gross \$45 million in 2003, and he has been nominated for seven CMAs — more than any other artist this year. He could possibly earn awards for Entertainer of the Year, Male Vocalist of the Year, Single of the Year, Album of the Year, Song of the Year, Vocal Event of the Year and Music Video of the Year, if anyone really cares.

But his success hasn't come without controversy. In response to the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, Keith penned what many critics have called an ignorant piece of nationalistic rubbish, and others have hailed as the greatest American song since the Star-Spangled Banner.

Titled "Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue (The Angry American)" the song features such poignant lyrics as: "And it'll feel like the whole wide world / Is rainin' down on you / Brought to you courtesy / Of the Red, White and Blue / Oh justice will be served / And the battle will rage / This big dog will fight / When you rattle his cage / And you'll be sorry that you messed with / The U. S. of A. / 'Cause we'll put a boot in your ass / It's the American way."

As for those of us who view bellicose and brazen ignorance as a negative quality, we fall on one side of the Toby Keith camp.

The other side loves everything the Oklahoman son-of-a-Korean-War-veteran does. If he charged admission to view his bowel movements before he flushed them, he would have fans lining up in his neighborhood.

I can't help but wonder what percentage of Americans think like Keith. Because Eugene is a cultural vacuum entirely cut off from the rest of the country, it's hard to get a sense of the rest of the nation's feelings about Toby Keith's brand of logic.

Keith's viewpoints have sometimes costed him valuable exposure. ABC removed him from its Fourth of July special last year when, according to Keith, Peter Jennings said he wouldn't allow that type of angry, incendiary music on his show.

Conservative talking heads — especially the nitwits at the Media Research Center — quickly pounced on ABC, labeling it a bastion of liberal news bias. Even Democratic



Eric Layton Illustration

Senator Zell Miller of Georgia, who recently published a book criticizing his own political party, joined in lambasting Jennings. Not only did he participate in Keith's "Send Your Old Boots to Peter Jennings Campaign" last year, he actually delivered a message on the Senate floor asking to add the lyrics of "Courtesy" and two other "great patriotic song(s) from my generation" to the Congressional Record.

Censoring any artist, no matter what the viewpoint, is hardly an answer. Keith has a right to voice these opinions and his fans have the right to hear them, but I still can't understand why Keith is so damn popular.

He is now becoming a powerful force in the cultural war taking place in the United States. As the Bush administration looks desperately for a human lightning rod to rally Americans behind its impossible and misguided war on terrorism, we're going to see a lot more of big stars like Keith. And he is becoming, evermore, a symbol of Americanism to be exploited by those who want to capitalize on the new American sentiments created by the terrorist attacks.

In 2003 alone, the White House invited Keith to open for George W. Bush at two of his addresses to troops and their families. Wouldn't you invite Toby Keith to your party if he sang songs about you like he does Bush? In "It's All Good," Keith, after singing about the fears of living in a world where you can't open your mailbox or take a plane, says: "I think I'm gonna let the president / Save this ol' world tonight." Damn Bush, don't let this one slip through your fingers. He's the cultural answer to your "Bring it on" comment.

After Keith's performance at MacDill Air Force Base, Bush thanked him "for coming and providing your talents today in support of — support of our efforts to make the world a more peaceful place." Yup, he, just like Bush, is a man of peace.

Another song on Keith's "Unleashed" LP, titled "Beer For My Horses," is up for four CMAs and illustrates the previous

point perfectly. In this duet with country music giant Willie Nelson, the lyrics get nearly asinine enough to induce rampant, uncontrolled vomiting.

"Grandpappy told my pappy, back in my day, son / A man had to answer for the wicked that he done / Take all the rope in Texas / Find a tall oak tree, round up all them bad boys / Hang them high in the street for all the people to see that / ... It's time the long arm of the law put a few more in the ground / Send 'em all to their maker and he'll settle 'em down."

Yes, that's my idea of peace and justice, and I'd love to see Toby and his boys out there exacting it for us.

Just yesterday Keith's new album "Shock 'N' Y'all" was officially released. It features even more of the insidious jingoism and bravado for which we have come to know and love him.

Now we're sure to see even more of Keith as he promotes the new LP. He just appeared on 60 Minutes II and he'll perform during the CMAs. On top of that, he also has dates lined up for early November on Jimmy Kimmel Live, The Tonight Show with Jay Leno, The Sharon Osbourne Show and several other news programs.

He also recently did some new ads for Ford trucks, and signed with Coors Brewing Company and Mr. Coffee.

But perhaps the most repulsive performance of Keith's this year will come on Thanksgiving Day. When we're all gathered with our friends and family, celebrating the interdependence of man and remembering the costs of freedom, Keith will play the half-time show of the Dallas Cowboys' Thanksgiving Day game. For the show, he will play a medley with excerpts from "Beer For My Horses," "Courtesy of The Red, White and Blue" and "How Do You Like Me Now."

Now what's wrong with that picture?

Contact the columnist at joebechard@dailyemerald.com. His opinions do not necessarily represent those of the Emerald.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Ensure accuracy in voting system

Lane County Elections has followed the mandated reform (and flawed lesser-of-evils theory) by choosing a new optical-scan vote-counting system. Presumably there is a physical record (pencil mark on paper ballot), but the virtual tally will be much easier to rig than with a punch-card system.

Some questions need answers: Is the software proprietary? Will Lane County Elections have access to the code? Will au-

ditions or recounts account for ballot input and vote tally, but not the black box in between? Will anyone outside of elections have access to the software, such as political oversight or media investigation? Or only the voting machine corporation?

Will elections allow the press to audit both the vote tally and the software data after every election? If the company that makes the machines has the sole access to the software, and since it is a constitutional requirement to hold transparent elections, is this not by definition an illegal voting system?

Why not choose the system (hand-

counting paper ballots) with the lowest error rate, the least risk of rigging, the most honest and transparent process and which tabulates the votes in a few hours?

Is it typical or expedient to avoid a recount or audit of vote-counting procedure, especially after an actual election, rather than merely pre-testing mock-ups? (As evidenced in the 2000 coup with the suppression of any true recount in a contested election where the spectacular and primary issue was exactly how many votes were cast in Florida.)

Bernard Nickerson
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