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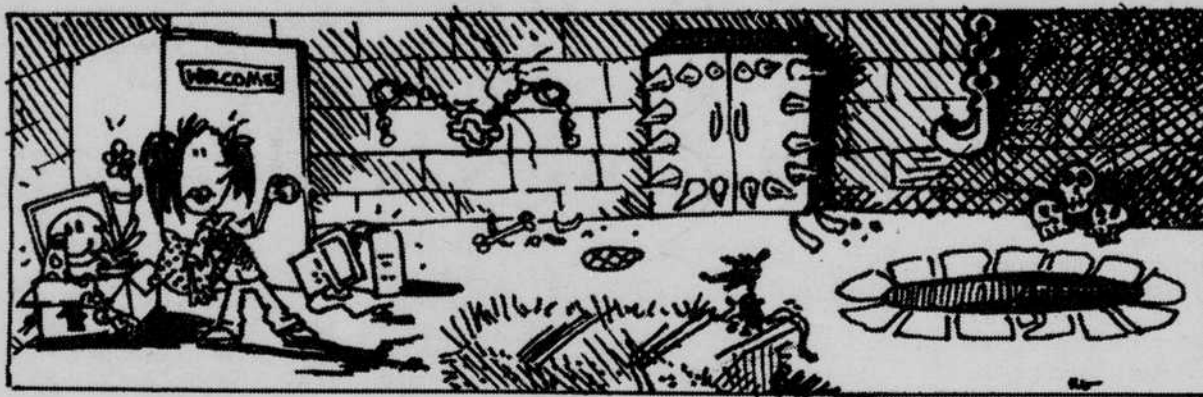
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■ In my opinion

Hot air and cold issues



TRAVIS WILLSE
RIVALESS WIT

Comparing presidential elections to each other is a tricky business. Four years is just long enough to push half-willed campaign promises, near-slandorous commercials and sound-byte debates out of even an informed voter's memory.

But this problem of comparative electoral judgments is even muddier for voters as young as myself, who generally lacked political perspective for most of the elections for which they've been alive. Even after taking account of this uneven appreciation for politics, though, I'm willing to call this year's presidential campaign, without question, the most frustrating contest in memory.

Gobbledygook about Senate votes and dubious analyses of employment numbers clog the public's consciousness, while the major candidates' positions on the economy, Iraq and the war on terror (whatever that means now) are shapeless, impractical or both. And it's not even October yet.

Both parties deserve blame for the intellectually bankrupt kabuki of Swift boats and National Guard service that is presidential electoral politics 2004. But Democratic strategists and their Republican counterparts are culpable for different reasons.

In a gambit demanding more moxie than seems tenable in a presidential race, Republican strategists followed inquiries into President Bush's spotty National Guard service with criticism of Sen. John Kerry's own service from the era. Never mind that Kerry's superiors thought his service merited Bronze and Silver stars, which are awarded respectively for heroic or meritorious achievement or service and gallantry in action against an enemy of the United States. (Incidentally, Kerry

also received three Purple Hearts.)

Really, it's unclear how relevant any of that should be. How much one's conduct three decades ago define one's present character is debatable, and drawing conclusions about likely presidential policy from what someone did in 1972 is tenuous at best. (In the most compelling argument for a relevant connection between the candidates' pasts and presents that I've read, Slate Magazine's William Saletan suggested in a Sept. 16 piece that Bush's Vietnam-era service is relevant because of his present day "abuse" of the Guard. That's fine, but military policy should be defined on the terms of ensuring domestic tranquility and providing for the common defense, not on those of the personal service histories of its executors.)

In any case, for reasons unclear — unless they're those of irrelevance as described above, which are probably too far above modern electoral politics to be practical — Kerry's softball campaign has largely avoided firing back about the comparison, squandering what looks like a forensic freebie of elephantine proportions.

And such is Kerry's worse electoral folly to date: An evident inability to capitalize on key Bush campaign (and policy) shortcomings. The most potent way to counter Bush's unduly optimistic and largely untenable present plan for Iraq is,

of course, offering a more practical, cogent course. (For those who disagree with my prognosis of the Bush administration's Iraqi fortunes, consider both the shortcomings of the plan to date and the administration's unwillingness to curb them to practicality.)

Kerry's problem isn't that America likes the status quo too much to listen: According to a Democracy Corps poll taken Sept. 19-21, only 43 percent of likely voters think that the nation is headed in the right direction. Fifty-two percent said it was on the wrong track.

Kerry's problem is the same one that I suggested plagued the Democratic Party's message in this space last fall ("Democrats' demise," ODE; Nov. 7, 2003): His talk about Iraq and the war on terror so far seems vague, disjointed or just noncommittal. In fact, Kerry's views on Iraq are not contradictory, as critics would like to suggest, but they are nuanced, and they haven't yet been digestibly explained. And, for better or worse, casual issue voters pick proposals on gut reaction and quick comprehensibility, not more complex analyses they don't have time for.

Kerry's first chance in some time to parse more clearly his views on Iraq and the war on terror to a large audience is tonight's presidential debate, the first of three planned.

In a race as close as this — a recent vote projection gave Bush 51.1 percent and Kerry 47.1 percent of the popular vote — every turn of phrase counts. If Kerry wants to close the gap, he'll need to pick words that are clearer than the jumble he's offered so far.

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■ Editorial

No.1 worst dorms: not a shock to students

Last week, The Register-Guard ran a reaction piece to an article in our Back to the Books issue. Mike Eyster, director of University Housing, essentially ballyhooed the less-than-scientific method used by the Princeton Review to rank the residence halls at the University as No. 1 in the "Dorms Like Dungeons" category. Scientific or not, — it's true.

Every year, people find out, once again, that the residence halls aren't worth the ridiculous rates charged. And what was this "wincing" in the Guard article when we published the Princeton Review's results? Is the Housing Department surprised? Has anything really changed since last year?

University Housing claimed that students generally seem positive on the more detailed surveys they collect. However, these surveys are deceptively precise in their questioning. Sure, Princeton Review's poll questions are broad — but that's what people look at when they want an overview of a school's housing experience.

Does anyone care that the food is decent, or the maintenance people are friendly when you find yourself living in a frigid, 148-square-foot shoebox with inadequate storage space, a dearth of power outlets, one microwave for 80 people and a roommate who has nothing in common with you?

Don't piss on our legs and tell us it's raining. Prefabricated concrete slab walls accented with heavy masonry and tiny prison-like windows may have been all the rage during the Eisenhower administration, they are a bit outdated today.

We know Housing is building a new residence hall complex, and it's going to be lovely and wonderful because it will be wired from top to bottom, and the toilets will always smell like roses.

But will the Living Learning Center become the next Barnhart — yet another fancy residence hall for athletes and the students willing to pay top dollar for the amenities, like floor space, that other colleges offer? The new complex should be reserved for the average student, who nowadays gets crammed into Bean Complex.

These are the people who deserve the extra architectural elements designed to foster community because these are the students closest to what residential halls are supposed to embody — a mixed bag of people from every conceivable background coming together to build a community from scratch.

OREGON DAILY EMERALD LETTERS POLICY

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■ Guest Commentary

Dungeon-like rating undeserved

Campus dorms not so 'dungeon-like' as Princeton deems.

This summer the Princeton Review released its most recent report on campuses throughout the country and rated the University of Oregon number one in the category "Dorms Like Dungeons." The "Dorms Like Dungeons" rating is neither accurate nor deserved.

The Princeton Review survey instrument contains 73 questions, two of which have to do with residence halls. (Those two questions have to do with "dorm comfort" and "residence hall Internet connection.") No survey with two questions about residence halls is adequate to determine whether or not any campus has the best or worst residence halls in the country.

We have not been unable to ascertain how many surveys they received from University students or even if any residence hall students completed their survey.

In addition, they apparently only

survey students every three years, so the data this year's ratings were based on what was collected in 2001. They claim that student ratings don't change very much from year to year.

Most important, however, is that these results are inconsistent with information University students report when we survey them about their residence hall experience. Students tell us that they particularly appreciate the quality, variety and long hours of our food service, how quickly maintenance requests are fulfilled and the friendliness of the custodial staff.

The one thing they would change is our older facilities. They would like larger rooms and rooms that are better at accommodating their modern needs and keeping out unwanted noise. These findings are not surprising and the University is addressing them in two ways:

1. We are building a Living Learning Center, the first step in updating all of our residence halls. The Living

Learning Center will have rooms that are 50 percent larger than the rooms in most of our residence halls. The rooms will also have better sound-proofing than our current residence hall rooms. After completion of the Living Learning Center we will move on to renovate or replace existing residence halls.

2. We have created several prototype rooms to get feedback from residents about modifications we can make in existing residence halls to maximize the effective cubic footage in each room. Feedback on these prototype rooms has been positive.

The University clearly has work to do with regard to updating our residence hall facilities. However, existing facilities have been well-maintained and the public areas are cleaned regularly and diligently.

Mike Eyster is assistant vice president for student affairs and director of University housing.