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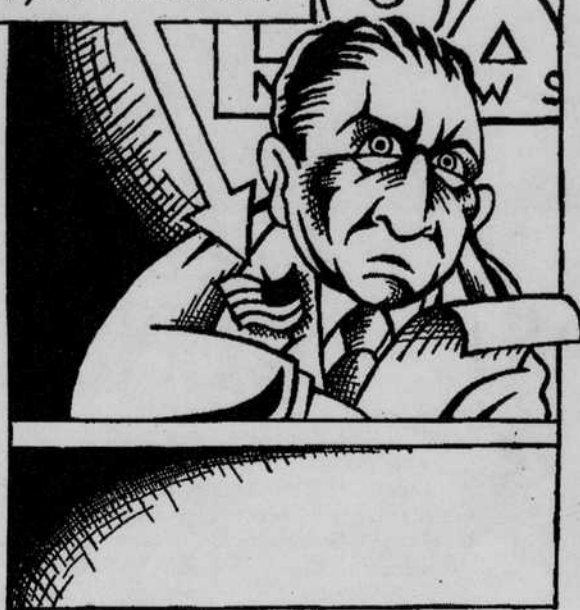
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In my opinion

Priest brawl — When rules overshadow values

News — interesting news — is very often about conflict. Activists, criminals, bidders, ideologues, lawyers, policy-makers, executives, politicians, PACs, political parties, states, nations and alliances argue, yell, debate, connive, sue, sanction and bomb each other in a pursuit of whatever it is they want at the time: Whether at the auction block or the trading bloc, if it's a big conflict, it's newsworthy.

The past two weeks were no exception: Militants in Iraq claimed responsibility for killing two hostages Monday. Amnesty International charged Canada with "terrible official indifference and apathy" toward attacks against aboriginal women that AI described as brutal, citing at least 500 cases of vanishing and murders over the past three decades. Gov. Jeb Bush, R-Fla., requested a re-hearing in the case involving Terri Schiavo, a brain-damaged woman whose husband has fought in courts to let her die. And, of course, President Bush and Democratic presidential nominee John Kerry traded blows in last Thursday's foreign policy presidential debate.

Of course, that conflict can be news isn't, well, news at all. I'd like to spend this space, then, talking about conflict of a less philosophically consistent sort, one largely overlooked by the media in favor of stories more newsworthy but no more potentially instructive.

At the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem's Old City — according to tradition the site of Jesus' burial and crucifixion — priests of different sects traded punches Sept. 27 over whether a door at a nearby



TRAVIS WILSE
RIVALLESS WIT

Catholic chapel should remain open during a particular procession, the priests presumably forgetting their Biblical obligation to "make every effort to do what leads to peace and mutual edification."

That Greek Orthodox and Franciscan priests resorted to fisticuffsmanship — starting a fight that ultimately injured dozens — on what many consider Christianity's holiest site suggests not only that a few clergymen's moral compasses temporarily drifted away from commonsense north, but something deeper about human nature, too.

Despite the importance of the site — indeed, in part because of it — this isn't the first time in the church's history that clerics have curled their prayer hands into clenched fists over dogmatic minutiae.

Two years ago, a Greek patriarch and an Armenian clergyman traded blows over which of them would leave the building's tomb last at the end of the ceremony. In 2003, Israeli police brokered an 11th hour deal among denominations arguing over which would lead an Easter service. But in the most recent spat, the day ended when Israeli police brandished clubs to break up the fight, arresting four priests in the process.

The point is this: It's easy to get so lost in the details — like whether the door of a basilica should remain open when a particular religious progression passes — that one forgets about the important thing those details add up to — say, messages of peace, piety and goodwill toward men. People who operate under rules can become so preoccupied with them that those rules provoke behavior that conflicts with the reasons that they were established.

To offer an intentionally politically sensitive example (and one admittedly oversimplified here for the sake of space): Muckraker extraordinaire Bob Woodward argued in his book "Plan of Attack" that the Bush administration so fixated itself with presenting a case for war with Iraq that it failed to plan sufficiently for the post-invasion occupation. (The point here is not whether the war with Iraq was justified, but that an ill-timed preoccupation has plainly and unduly burdened the Coalition — and America in particular — with a strategic deficit that is now being paid for in lives. That shortfall and human toll surely leave the Coalition's goals in Iraq more difficult, if not less popular, too.)

Instructively, if religious motivation, however misguided or antithetical to a given religion's "intended" or "actual" values, is enough to push clerics to a brawl over something as innocuous as the closure of a door, it's at least easier to see why the perception of a more dramatic conflict of values can drive misguided fanatics to much worse than a street scuffle.

traviswillse@dailyemerald.com

CORRECTION

In Wednesday's issue, the Emerald mistakenly reported that congressional candidate Peter DeFazio attended a gathering in the Knight Law Center on Tuesday. He was not present at the gathering. The Emerald regrets the error.

OREGON DAILY EMERALD LETTERS POLICY

Letters to the editor and guest commentaries are encouraged, and should be sent to letters@dailyemerald.com or submitted at the Oregon Daily Emerald office, EMU Suite 300. Electronic submissions are preferred. Letters are limited to 250 words, and guest commentaries to 550 words. Authors are limited to one submission per calendar month. Submissions should include phone number and address for verification. The Emerald reserves the right to edit for space, grammar and style. Guest submissions are published at the discretion of the Emerald.

Editorial

Balanced coverage is what we've done best

Imagine if lawyers learned their trade by defending axe murders on their first day of class. Or if doctors did open heart surgery. But that is exactly what journalists do. We learn our craft — whether reporting, editing or designing — in front of tens of thousands of readers every day, day in and day out.

This election year is our axe murderer, our open heart surgery. We feel fortunate to be working at the Emerald during this historic time. We take our responsibilities seriously. That is why we also take accusations of bias so seriously, which have been leveled at the Emerald's election coverage.

Accusations of bias come with the territory at all newspapers, just like death threats and telephone calls from the mentally ill. Every politically charged story is met with these kinds of accusations. It happens so often that when we get attacked from both Democrats and Republicans at the same time — which is exactly what has happened — we feel as if we are being balanced.

But that is not good enough for us. More often than not, accusations of bias are the product of a lack of transparency or understanding or both. In the interest of becoming more transparent, the Emerald board would like to lay the cards out on the table.

Our editorial board is diverse politically. We have at least one member that supports Kerry and Bush, as well as neither candidate. We have a self-imposed policy of unanimity, meaning the board will not publish an editorial unless all members of the board agree with its conclusions.

This is quite an experiment — given the fierce ideological divisions in the country — and will result either in clever editorials that perfectly articulate our common ground or watered-down editorials that are a waste of time and ink. We will let you decide.

The commentary editor has made every effort to present multiple political sides on the commentary page, and the Emerald encourages all of our readers to write to the paper. However, the bulk of the letters we receive have a liberal slant. In fact, as of today, we have received no publishable pro-Bush letters.

We have developed a strategy for covering the elections that we feel is responsible and an improvement on the coverage traditionally provided — focusing less on the horse-race and more on the issues. Every day for the next two weeks, we will look at a different issue and see where the candidates stand. Following that, we will spend an entire week focusing on the major ballot measures. By focusing on the issues, we hope to give people the information they need to make an informed decision. But we have no desire to influence the election one way or the other.

So far, our coverage has spent more time on Democrats than Republicans, which has been the subject of much discussion. This is a function of how well-organized the Democrats have been on campus in organizing events and speakers.

This is a marked contrast from spring term, when the Republicans were more organized and active. When our coverage reflected that, we were accused of bias.

We will make mistakes, and when we do, we will be open about it. But accusations of willful, institutional bias at the Emerald are ignorant and misinformed. So far, our coverage of the presidential election can stand shoulder to shoulder with any college newspaper in the country. If you don't agree, we welcome your feedback.

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