

■ Guest commentary

Democracy does not imply the separation of church and state

The Iraqi elections are scheduled to take place Jan. 30 despite the rise in violence over the past few weeks. Along with the escalating insurgency, the elections will have to contend with other obstacles, such as a potential Sunni boycott. If the elections run smoothly, Iraq will have a 275-member legislative assembly that will draft a constitution and be responsible for electing a future Iraqi prime minister.

Although the elections signal the beginning of Iraqi self-determination, observers are questioning what form that autonomy will take. Many elements of the Iraq assembly are likely to be pushing for sharia, or traditional Islam-inspired law, to be the basis of Iraq's legal structure. The majority Shia population of Iraq, led by Ayatollah Sistani, who is expected to gain considerable influence in the assembly, will be among those looking to establish sharia. Mohsen Abdel-Hamid, the president of the Iraqi Governing Council and a Sunni hardliner, has already proposed to make Islamic law the principal basis for legislation.

This possibility has led to very different opinions across the political spectrum, as well as mixed responses from the White House. On Oct. 19, when asked his thoughts on what should happen if Iraq becomes a fundamentalist Islamic state, President Bush replied, "I will be disappointed, but democracy is democracy." However, in February, Paul Bremer, top U.S. administrator in Iraq, made veiled comments that sharia would not take precedence over Iraqi civil rights. The debate over sharia's role in Iraqi society is sure to be hotly contested in these final weeks leading up to the election. Most of the opposition to sharia in Iraq comes from Iraqi women, who have been designated 25 percent of the assembly. It is difficult to blame Iraq's women for detesting sharia law because in many ways they are treated as second-class citizens under it. However, if the majority of the country — including women — votes to govern via sharia law, should the U.S. oppose that and move to protect women's rights?

Before answering that question, we must remember our own history of women's suffrage. Americans have always considered the U.S. to be a democracy after throwing off Britain's colonial yoke in 1776, yet women did not have the right to vote for the first 132 years of our history (though they were allowed to run for office in 1788, only twelve years off of Iraq's current pace). Is it possible

that Iraq needs to develop its own resolution to the conflict between tradition and progress without our influence? Is it worth sacrificing their political autonomy (and perhaps legitimacy) at the expense of women's rights?

Other opponents of sharia include secular political parties such as the Iraqi Communist Party. For non-religious Iraqis it may be disheartening to see their long-secular republic "liberated" from Saddam Hussein only to be replaced with a different abrasive legal system impacting their day-to-day lives. For these Iraqis, the invasion would be remembered as a failure, bringing oppression rather than democracy.

The majority of Americans favor the separation of church and state. Yet our current administration has brought religion back into the political landscape in a forceful manner. Bush's policies, from the "sanctity of marriage" bill to foreign policy in the Middle East, have roots in the "good book." Bush is our most publicly religious president to date. His speeches are scattered with biblical references and privately he has stated to his friends he believes God has chosen him to lead our country. Would it be hypocritical of the Bush Administration to increasingly use Christianity as a cornerstone of its policies while stating that Islam can't be used for the basis of Iraqi government?

Other people argue that America should not talk of spreading democracy to Iraq because America is not a democracy itself, but a constitutional republic. Therefore, we have certain rights laid out in our constitution that cannot be altered to fit the majority preference of the time. For proponents of this theory, civil rights take precedence over the democratic process (in the purest sense of the term). The majority cannot literally do whatever they want in American society, so why should they be able to do so in "liberated" Iraq?

I have no answers to any of these questions. In reality, I don't think there are any good, consistent answers. As an American, I'm used to democracy and civil rights running hand-in-hand. When one is separated from the other the choice becomes very difficult to make. For the sake of the Iraqis I hope that whatever issues they encounter can be solved in a coherent and non-violent manner, though this has not been the pattern of events thus far.

Jeremy Berrington is a freelance columnist

IN BRIEF

Public buys into ignorant Sunriver spin

Recently, I read the new spin ASUO is taking to protect the senators who paid for their good times with our student account. What's most surprising is the public's willingness to swallow such ignorance without any hint of offense to their intellect.

The ASUO claims the original intent of the retreat was accomplished; therefore, there is no reason to make the senators "do the right thing." While it's reassuring that our senators can get the job done through a haze of marijuana fog and in a drunken stupor, I just don't think this

is the kind of "retreat" students should have to support. Last I checked, marijuana was an illegal substance. Not only did they break student conduct guidelines, they broke state and federal law.

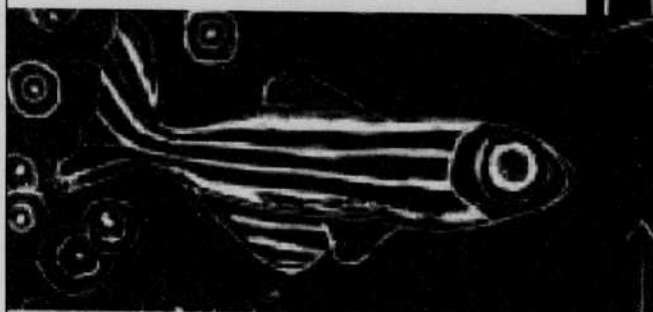
What is most devastating is the knowledge that one day these senators will grow up and perhaps take positions of leadership in our communities and governments. Will they maintain this cocky, brazen attitude? I suppose it has less to do with the abuse of power and more to do with the power to abuse. Hey, maybe they are fit to govern after all.

*Opey Freedle
Undergraduate*

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LOTTE STREISINGER



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