

The first words from the editor

Giving this community a much needed voice

The University of Illinois campus is more than a community. It operates like a sovereign state, similar to the Vatican in Italy or Chicago (or at least the Windy City appears that way sometimes). Surrounded by cornfields in all directions, our seemingly secluded institution has taken on the identity of an autonomous state.

The University has its own government, composed of individuals looking out for the best interests of the citizens of Campustown. Accompanying that government is bureaucratic red tape — an unwelcome yet synonymous factor of most governing bodies.

We have commercial businesses and residential areas, law enforcement and churches. We even have our own currency at times: the campus credits we put on our i-Cards (although, I'm not sure how strong the campus credit is compared to the dollar.)

And though we have a truly diverse group of people — whether by race, religion, social status, location, age, what have you — we all call ourselves by one name: Illini. When we arrive at the University, no matter how we identify ourselves, we are all Illini, citizens of this great Campustown and outstanding institution.

As residents, it is necessary for you to be informed about what is going on in and around Campustown. So, not unlike other cities, a media outlet must exist to keep everyone educated on important issues in the community. The Daily Illini is that media outlet.

Since 1871, The Daily Illini has serviced the University as a student newspaper dedicated to informing all Illini. In that time, our editors and writers have changed dozens of times over, as have our building, our look and even our cost (it wasn't always free). However, one thing remained stagnant: we are a newspaper by students for students (and faculty and community members) independent of the University. That has not changed.

But we have evolved beyond a newspaper into a 24-hour information center. We have a 5 p.m. newscast that airs on 107.1 WPGU during the week, as well as newscasts throughout the day, especially, and sadly, when a crisis occurs that our community needs to know about. Our Web site, DailyIllini.com, has grown into an award-win-



STEVE CONTORNO
Editor in Chief

ning operation, delivering up to the minute news, Illini sports updates and anything else we think our readers must know about.

Our goal at The Daily Illini is to be the voice of this community, this quasi-city. However, as the new editor in chief, I would be naive to think that we always accomplish this task. Though the people that work alongside me are the most dedicated individuals I have ever had the pleasure of knowing, we realize that we are students and we have faults.

This isn't a class for us or even a club; we treat this as a job and we take it seriously. Otherwise, how could we expect you to take us seriously?

But from our faults we can learn and from learning we can become a better informer, watchdog and voice for this University and all that call themselves Illini. Each day is a new challenge for us, but we look forward to proving ourselves to our readers and listeners, as we have done for 137 years. This isn't a class for us or even a club; we treat this as a job and we take it seriously. Otherwise, how could we expect you to take us seriously?

During my time as editor in chief, I want to help The Daily Illini develop a closer connection with the students, faculty members and voices in the community that define our publication. I would like to meet with the various RSOs, colleges, administrators and cultural houses on what they would like to see from our print, on-air and online products. It is my hope that a more connected Daily Illini will help us cover the issues that our readers and listeners want to know about and will allow us to put an ear to the ground so we can keep a watchful eye on Campustown 24 hours a day.

But The Daily Illini cannot exist on its own. I know what I want The Daily Illini to do for this community. What do you want it to do for you? Send in letters to the editor. Comment on our Web site articles. Tip us off if you think something should be investigated, or let us know of an important issue you think we should be covering. I encourage you to be an active reader; it will only help us become better informers.

We are the voice of the Illini. Let your voice be heard.

EDITORIAL CARTOON MIRANDA SINGLER, THE DAILY ILLINI



Essentializing the Middle East

I have had many conversations on the Arab and Muslim world during my college career. There are few things that give me as much pleasure as a long conversation on the region. I have been thinking about what most of those conversations focused on. Naturally, most of these conversations covered Islam, Iraq, terrorism and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

While these are important topics, I fear that I have at times committed the grave sin of essentializing the Middle East. Essentializing in this context is the act of boiling down an entire society into a few essential components that adhere to our preconceived notions of what that society is.

At times, a number of my views have been based on a convenient framework of the region and I have overlooked some of the subtleties that may counter my views. I acknowledge this mistake and will also say that it is unavoidable. On any issue, one must create some framework in order to discuss it. We must balance the imperative of discourse that is partially based on generalizations with the realization that they have their limits.

I have found that all too often, conservative commentators in the Arab media will hamstring an argument concerning say, women's rights, by forcing one to consider every little instance where women's rights in the West were violated. The conversation becomes a manifes-



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to on the impropriety of swimsuits instead of a discussion on the widespread discrimination against women in Arab and Muslim societies.

In a similar vein, many well-intentioned liberals will make arguments that claim that we are imposing our values on the Middle East, values that are inherently incompatible with theirs. I cannot count how many times I have heard that any suggestion that there are deep flaws in Arab and Muslim societies is an overt act of imperialism.

The Enlightenment, belief in secular government, and a commitment to human rights, are as applicable to the Middle East as they are to the West and have been advocated by many Arab and Muslim intellectuals.

These fundamental values do not apply exclusively to the societies that articulated them. Hence, one cannot have Islamic human rights any more than one can have Christian agriculture. Some ideas are universal and I sincerely believe, as should all of us, that these are values are not inherently incompatible with any society or culture.

That said, there must be room for pragmatism and understanding. The differ-

ences between Arab and Muslim societies and the West are very real and it does not do us much good to try to fit triangles into squares. If Iraq has taught us anything, it is that spreading democracy has its limitations. We have spent hundreds of billions of dollars, lost 4,000 of our soldiers, and tens of thousands more wounded, only to end up with a weak and fragmented phantom that we now call the Iraqi Government. Think of it as a very expensive and mangled triangle.

Iraq is an example of the limits of essentializing a culture. I remember quite vividly during the early stages of the war, a number of "experts" in our media were fond of describing "the Arab mind."

They would say with furrowed eyebrows and straight faces that the Arabs respected force, and that if we showed them who is boss, the Iraqis would be cowed into submission and would appreciate the wonderful gift that we have bestowed on them. We can all safely say that this is not how things panned out. We must always guard against advocat-

ing values without the participation of the very people whom we are addressing.

This is why disengaging from Iraq right now is a mistake. We are now seeing a number of Iraqis that want to break out of the sectarian tailspin and

bring prosperity to their country. As long as there are Iraqis committed to a unified, sovereign and prosperous Iraq, we must stay and help in any way we can.

You may have noticed that even as I write this column, I have used generalizations. I have used "The West," "The East" and others that purport to describe hundreds of millions of people. We must be mindful of the limits of these terms and phrases.

At the same time, let us not shy away from the claim that the ideals of democracy, human rights and freedom of conscience are universal. Any society that practices them is better for it.

Othman is a senior in political science and recommends that you read "Orientalism" by Edward Said.

WHIMS AND WITTICISMS

Being under-accomplished and feeling happy

An overview of everything that didn't happen to me over spring break

I'm not coming back to campus with a crisp tan. In fact, the final days of my spring break were spent hunkered down at home enduring a Chicago-style springtime snowstorm. No, I didn't build a snow fort after the fact either.

Instead, I am pleased to report that after a nice job shadow experience with corporate America, I now have a vague understanding of what investment bankers do. Wish me luck in finding a job that won't go the way of Bear Stearns.

MTV is pretty disappointed with the way my Spring Break 2008 fell through. Do they really expect teen America to watch an entire episode of me dozing on the Metra en route to Chicago? I haven't given them much to work with. Maybe if instead of wearing a suit and tie, I had shown a little more skin and shown up in nothing but swim trunks and flip-flops. Or maybe if instead of sitting in on the 10 a.m. analysts' meeting, I'd



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done a 10 a.m. power hour with a managing director.

Ah, well. The slim pickings at MTV continue until Tila Tequila gets her second, poorly scripted "Shot at Love."

I'm guessing that my spring break, like many of yours, was spent simply chillaxin'. I planned a bit more sensibly than the MTV proto-types, wanting to have a relaxed yet worthwhile spring break. I even made a to-do list of the great stuff I was going to do over the week. Let's share lists and see how we each did:

1. Work out

I like hitting a tennis ball

around because it doesn't really feel like a monotonous workout routine. I played tennis through high school and wasn't half-bad by the end of it, but I haven't picked up a racket since graduation. The plan had been to hit around and play a few sets with some of my chums.

I ended up playing "Tennis" on "Wii Sports" in my basement until I turned pro.

2. Read

The last book I read of my own free will was "Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows" — even enduring the incredibly dull middle section where Harry, Ron and Hermione live out of a tent hunting for Horcruxes.

Feeling guilty for not having done any free reading since last summer, I went to the library and checked out three books with full intention of absorbing their contents of by the end of

the week.

Of course, this didn't happen. Two of them are still sitting exactly where I propped them on my bookshelf.

The other, Salman Rushdie's "East, West," made good progress into and out of my black messenger bag as I carried it to and from Chicago each day.

3. Catch up on homework

I loaded my backpack with textbooks before leaving for home, promising myself that I would catch up on some of my work. I stopped functioning academically three weeks before spring break began, so I knew I'd be in a bind if I didn't get on top of things over the course of the week.

I did sit down at the kitchen table one night and peruse my upcoming due dates and test schedules.

But instead of reading over my lecture notes, I just badgered my high school sister as she tried to practice for the ACT.

I lugged the same blasted books back yesterday with no progress whatsoever. I'm in a big bind.

4. Party hardy!

Non-Illini friends and I planned a reunion get-together. There would have been balloons and cupcakes, but as group events go, nobody took initiative to work out the details and so nothing ever came of the reunion — not even the cupcakes were ordered.

We ended up talking loudly through all of "Michael Clayton" on DVD and then wondered what exactly U-North had done that was so awful.

After figuring it out, I have to say: Tilda Swinton, you are eeeevil.

5. Make summer plans

I had also planned to finalize plans to study abroad in England this summer. I was going to book tickets, choose courses, find hostels to stay in while traveling.

I got as far as finding out where London Heathrow Airport is relative to Big Ben on Google Maps.

So I'm all set to go. We're all back on campus now, but I'm not regretting my spring break under-accomplishment.

So far as I'm concerned, big plans followed by unproductive idleness are what break is all about.

I'm just happy to be such a pro at "Wii Tennis."

Henry is a freshman in Business. He wants to know what you didn't do over break.