

Two party system must expand its borders



John Hitzel

Every American who pays attention knows that the American public has virtually no cultural memory. The past — even big events in the recent past — just evaporate into nothingness, leaving us with an unfamiliar, disorienting present.

There's an old adage that says if you don't learn your history, you're doomed to repeat it.

American politics is absurd, thanks in part to us — the voters — but due mostly to our long-standing two-party system. When there are only two major political parties, each can play off the other, each casting the other as the demon

and itself as the savior. Republicans are currently doing this to the Democrats, even though most of America's immediate problems were created by former president Republican George W. Bush and his three Republican Congresses. Case in point: the deficit being blamed on Obama when Obama isn't totally responsible, and a Democratic Congress passed the bailouts.

The most striking effect of this binary setup is that it drastically oversimplifies the complexity of politics, public policy, issues — of almost anything. Instead of having to demonstrate their knowledge of ethical public administration and philosophy or even their intelligence, candidates only have to demonstrate how their opponents are worse. They often use hints and implications to claim they're better — we fill in the rest.

This is confusing and misleading for the public but good for career politicians. It provides much more room for rhetorical posturing and chessboard positioning than real, honest debate. We get smear campaigns instead of intel-

ligent discourse.

I advocate the emergence of a third major party in America as the solution to our currently ineffective and illogical political environment.

Democrats have no unifying party line, so they're really not a party, just a catch-all group for "non Republicans," which often isn't true, à la Joe Lieberman. Republicans are unified around backward-gazing social values, poorly veiled classism and racism and homophobia, tax cuts for rich people and the fear complex. Republicans used to stand for small government and states' rights. Such is no longer the case — see the Bush years. Democrats act in basically the same way, but so far they've been willing to throw the poor a little more.

This upcoming mid-term election is about Congress. Our current Congress has a 16 percent approval rating, while 56 percent of those surveyed say it's doing a "poor" job, according to a 2010 Rasmussen poll. I imagine this means there will be a lot of new faces next session.

How ludicrous would it be if any of

these pulpit-pounding bullies gets re-elected? How much more absurd would it be if Republicans, the guys behind the Constitution-shredding USA PATRIOT Act and Watergate Scandal and Iran-Contra affair and the Iraq War were given power again? How bad does it have to get before reason and substance vacate American government forever? Dick Cheney already shot a man and was not removed from office. Then the man apologized to Cheney. Where do you go from there?

One definition of insanity, often attributed to Einstein, is "doing the same thing and expecting different results." From this perspective, you don't have to be a genius to see that voting for either of these parties is completely, utterly insane. Both Republicans and Democrats have sold out, ignored, screwed over, alienated and otherwise failed their constituents. I have no idea why these parties still exist. I'll venture a guess that their existence is less an accomplishment of brilliant political strategy than a result of the laziness and apathy of the

American voter.

So please remember all the times the two existing dominant parties have let you down and made you angry and got you thinking about revolution or hope and change. The best way to get out of this binary two-party system is to get some fresh blood in there. Libertarians. Tea Partiers (although they tend to wallow in vagueness). The Green Party. The Modern Whig Party. Independents. The United States Pirate Party.

Sure, a vote for one of these parties is not a vote for the Democrats, who need them now if the remainder of the Obama Presidency is going to be able to accomplish anything else.

But at this point, almost anything is better than the steaming piles the Republican and Democratic parties have become.

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Money should not motivate education



Zach Vicars

A college degree really does pay off. The average person with a bachelor-level education in the United States will earn \$52,200 per year, compared to an average of \$30,400 for a high-school graduate, according to a three-year (1998-2000) survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau. As a result, more and more of us are coming to college with the hope of launching a lucrative career.

This is bad news — very bad news indeed.

As the demand for a college education increases, the competition among schools is bound to simplify the learning process. There's nothing wrong with simplification — that's just how competitive markets work. For example, as the market for laptop computers becomes more competitive, the products have become sleeker, smaller and easier to use. A similar transformation is taking place among universities — CLEP tests, high school transfer credits and online courses have been implemented to streamline students' academic careers.

The problem with our current education system is not that universities are seeking to meet the public's demand, and the problem is certainly not that more people are seeking out a college education. Rather, the problem is the motivation behind the public's demand for education: money. When education is in demand as an instrument of financial reward, the learning process will be streamlined to include only those aspects of academics that lend themselves to monetary gain. As a result, this "new and improved" means of earning a degree makes sure that students are adequately, affordably and quickly prepared for their desired vocation but neglects to prepare students for the wondrous adventure we call life.

This crisis has basically been the impetus for the liberal arts system. Since the time of Plato and Socrates, a few brave educators have held to the principle that learning is not just a means to an end. It is the end itself. That is why Truman demands that future English teachers take a calculus

course when they really just want to read Shakespeare.

Truman is among an even more elite class of academia — the public liberal arts institution. The Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges (COPLAC), of which Truman is a member, boasts only 25 proud institutions in the United States. I consider it a great honor to attend one of these experimental institutions that is committed not only to a well-rounded, rigorous academic experience but also to affordability through state funding.

However, attending a liberal arts institution is not enough, and coasting through all the Liberal Arts and Science and Essential Skills requirements will not provide the fulfilling education that a young mind needs. What we need is a complete paradigm shift, a change in our perspective and motivation behind getting a college education. As the name suggests, a liberal arts education should be liberating. Our mind should be free to explore any avenue of learning with confidence and excitement.

For nearly 21 years I've had a hunk of flesh called the heart pounding in my chest, sending oxygen-rich blood to the muscles throughout my body, preserving and maintaining my life. And yet I just learned how it all works earlier this week while studying for a health test. I'm a religion student who likes language and farming — the anatomy of the human heart has little to do with my career goals. Yet understanding the very process that keeps me alive fulfills and excites me as a human being, not just as a future member of the work force. I'm equally excited by Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, rural American history and gender differences in communication — none of which will ever make me any money but all of which have been an important part of my academic adventure at Truman.

A rich, integrated, fulfilling education should be what Americans demand from their university experiences — monetary reward should be but a positive side effect. There's nothing wrong with making money — and on some level employers should reward a commitment to excellence in academic pursuits. However, we cannot allow a desire for wealth to be our motivation for learning and thereby pollute our educational experiences. Such greedy aspirations have, after all, polluted almost everything else in life.

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AROUND THE QUAD

Is there an importance to a four-year education?



"There should not be a time limit on an education."

Ryan Harker senior



"It is valued higher in terms of jobs, and even respect, in today's society."

Carrie Weber sophomore



"You grow more over four years, just two is not enough time to get an education."

Bethany Blattel sophomore



"You need the time to get to know people and an institution to be ready for the job market."

Ben Swiderski senior

Internet provides simpler music medium



Tyler Retherford

The Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA), a group of over 1,600 recording labels, claims its objective is to protect intellectual property rights. Considering the sole purpose of a record label is to profit from the intellectual property of others, this is laughable. This sort of cognitive dissonance is essential to defending the recording industry, because it simply doesn't serve a purpose anymore.

Technically speaking, record companies do what their name implies. They help musicians release records. That entails recording songs, producing them, releasing them and marketing them. Today, recording equipment is inexpensive enough that musicians aren't forced to depend on record companies to finance recording an album. As for production, having a company rather than a fellow musician tell artists how to make music makes sense only if their primary goal is to make money, in which case they don't really have any business recording an album in the first place. In regard to releasing and marketing music, the fact that record companies are struggling to compete

with file sharing shows just how unimportant that really is.

With all this in mind, it's hard to feel bad for the RIAA in its massive legal battle against illegal music downloading. That's not to say illegal downloading is morally viable. While the RIAA's methods are dubious, calling it "stealing" misses the mark (stealing implies the original owner doesn't have the object anymore). You're still getting something that lots of people worked hard on for no cost to yourself, and that's wrong. However, it is clearly a symptom of customers being forced to use an outdated and dysfunctional means of distribution.

As Radiohead aptly demonstrated with the release of "In Rainbows," it is perfectly feasible for a band to release its own music. Admittedly, most bands aren't already swimming in a giant pool of money followed by an extraordinarily zealous fan-base and don't have their own recording studio. But the Internet is full of examples of less resource-rich bands making it without the aid of a major record label. Pomplamoose, a musical duo formed in 2008, has made excellent use of YouTube as a marketing tool and have sold over 100,000 songs online according to NPR. Similarly, Arcade Fire's album, "The Suburbs," which was released under the independent label Merge Records, released at no. 1 in the United States and gained most of its support through an elaborate website rather than tradi-

tional label support.

In an age of iPods, music just makes more sense as a digital medium. Most people who buy CDs immediately transfer the music to their computers anyway. One of the biggest advantages of this shift is that digital distribution is incredibly friendly to the experimental, do-it-yourself mentality that permeates musician culture, eliminating the need for the creativity of music to be filtered through a corporate medium.

The general system that record companies use to market music is to try to make the music they're selling sound like what's currently selling well. The advantage of using the Internet to sell music is having easy access to a huge number of people. So, artists instead can find the group of people that like what they are already making. That's the real advantage to digital distribution — finding the right audience instead of trying to create the right product.

Ultimately, creating the "right" product is all record companies are good for, and those days are over. Simply taking music without paying the people creating it isn't a viable alternative, but instead of claiming that it is destroying them, the RIAA should see it as a sign that their role in the music industry is obsolete.

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Atheism leads to reexamination of religious beliefs



Connor Stangler

The essayist, public intellectual and notable atheist (or, according to him, anti-theist) Christopher Hitchens is dying of esophageal cancer. After a lifetime of unabashed opposition to religion, thousands of letters from fans and critics have arrived at his doorstep containing, ironically, prayers and, not so ironically, promises of his eternity in hell.

As a tribute to a dying man, this column and a recent rash of articles about the rise of atheism in America demand a reconsideration of its relationship to religion.

The growth of atheism is a good thing, not in and of itself (I'll leave it up

to you to decide whether atheism is a good or bad thing), but rather because it forces religious followers to reexamine their own beliefs.

A recent survey by Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life revealed that atheists and agnostics tend to know more about religion than those who profess to be members of a religion. In its Sept. 27 issue, The Los Angeles Times reported that, among other things, a majority of Protestants could not correctly identify Martin Luther as a catalyst for the Protestant Reformation, and four in 10 Catholics could not correctly describe the concept of transubstantiation. Besides the offbeat cultural irony, there's a lesson to be learned. Perhaps the reason atheists, agnostics, irreligionists, skeptics, etc. know more about religion (generally) is because they've taken the time to question, to examine and to reflect. Some religious followers might take their own religion for granted once they have been raised to trust it.

This is not meant to be a sweeping generalization. I know many devout followers of different religions who are

both knowledgeable and have endured one or more grueling examinations of their own religious consciences. They have faith in something and know why.

We live in a society steeped in religion. Whether we would like to acknowledge it, we are surrounded by its influences and references to it. The First Amendment protects against a state-established religion but also grants the freedom to exercise beliefs. The fact that 53 percent of the country believes that America is a constitutionally ordained "Christian nation" is more of a comment on our perception of the dominant culture rather than a lack of legal savvy. In spite of the growing prevalence of non-believers (USA Today reported in its Sept. 22, 2009 issue that 15 percent of Americans do not identify with any religion), we can neither ignore nor deny religion's profound forces.

Fledgling atheists, then — whether raised in a religious or non-religious household — mature in a culture infused with theology. The process can't be easy. Atheism is second-guessing. Atheism requires the examination of all beliefs and assertions of faith and

the denial of any transcendent, spiritual being. An atheist cannot irreverently dismiss thousands of years of history as it relates to one of the most fundamental aspects of society. If someone does that, he or she is not an atheist. Atheism requires reverence.

This is not to say that atheism is a higher form of thinking. Anyone who has taken a religion class at Truman State University can attest to that.

Besides still being a long way from widespread cultural acceptance (this country would have a hard time electing an atheist president), atheists confront an army of opposition daily: demographics (in the broad category of "secularists," non-believers rank third in the world, by number of adherents, behind Christianity and Islam), dogma (issues of morality, spirituality, etc.), and justifications (demands to explain complexity, phenomena, etc.). In a Nov. 24, 2009 story about the expansion of atheist groups on college campuses, USA Today equated the social stigma of "atheist" with that of "socialist," a separate but similarly confounding issue.

This is also not to say that different

religious sects have not endured persecution and doubt. Some of the world's most horrifying atrocities are and have been products of religious persecution. Conflicts among theories of divinity, however, are separate from a conflict between the divine and the secular.

Atheism should not force the religious to become more uncompromising in their beliefs. It should foster discussion and knowledge. Atheists have taken the time to learn about other religions in order to formulate their own beliefs and defend against relentless opposition. They have demonstrated that an examined dogma is more fulfilling than a passive one. This is not a victory for atheists. This should not be thought of in terms of superior or inferior. Maybe this is the century when secularists and the religious finally decide they have something to learn from each other.

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