

Thomas G. Palaima REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR

Speak freely to this UT turkey

Question: Why did the turkey cross the street? Answer: To prove to the armadillo that it could be done. Question: When is a committee not a committee? Answer:

When it is a Task Force.

Life teaches us to be wary when metaphors are used to describe people appointed to "study" a problem.

At the University of Texas at Austin, "appoint a committee" was recommended as a "secret principle" of successful management at a workshop for prospective departmental chairpersons I attended. These workshops were started too late to help me. When I took over chairing, a naively optimistic prof plunged cold turkey into the mysteries of state and local sub-accounts, teaching load credits and departmental intrigues that rival anything in Dostoyevsky. I foolishly tried using reason and intelligent debate to create consensus and wise policy on critical issues.

The workshop had a better idea: appoint a committee. And it gave three reasons.

Committees take so long to issue their reports that problems, or even perceptions that there are problems, often disappear of their own accord.

Second, committees make recommendations that are so watered down by opposing viewpoints, nobody can object to them.

Third, committees offer a chairperson deniability: "Don't blame me. I was following the committee's recommendation." I am sure you have seen these principles at work. I am still waiting for the concrete results of the "energy SWAT team" appointed at UT-Austin during the spike in natural gas prices.

I approached then with understandable cynicism the lengthy report of the Task Force on Assembly and Expression now accessible on UT's Web site (www.utexas.edu/news/index.php). As reported in the *American-Statesman*, this "task force," headed by law professor Douglas Laycock, was appointed after several incidents raised questions about how to handle free speech on campus.

The report is now in the examination-and-comment stage. I recommend that all readers think

about its proposals and write to the committee (TFEA@po.utexas.edu) with your opinions.

The task force does a fine job of articulating what free speech means and how tricky it is to guarantee the rights of all concerned. It defines freedoms of speech as containing three elements: "the right to assemble, to speak and to attempt to attract the attention of others" and "the corresponding rights" of individuals "to hear the speech of others when they choose to listen" and "to ignore the speech of others when they choose not to listen." The task force then recommends ways to try to guarantee these rights.

You will no doubt agree with some and wonder about others. The report therefore offers in microcosm a careful discussion of problems that should interest all of us as American citizens in our international, electronic-media-saturated, post-Sept. 11 world.

There is a second reason for you to get involved. The university is and should be the arena of free and well-informed give-and-take on important issues. In my opinion, the task force somewhat underplays the vital role of the University of Texas at Austin as a "public" institution. It addresses free-speech issues almost exclusively as they affect faculty, staff and enrolled students on campus. But within the past 10 years, the university has become the locus of constant interaction between its professors, staff members and students and the general public. What we do about free speech on campus affects lots of people: Texas Exes visiting the Alumni Center, business women and legislators lunching at the Longhorn Club, families visiting the Texas Memorial Museum or discovering academic departments across campus during Explore UT, adults attending open lectures sponsored by the Union or the new Humanities Institute, and citizens of Texas using their guaranteed rights to read and think in UT's once-great libraries.

UT-Austin is not and should not be an intellectual monastery. Express your opinions to the Task Force. It is not a typical committee. It is a turkey, and it can help us all across the street to a place where we can talk constructively about our problems together.

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OPINION

Page 4 THE DAILY TEXAN Wednesday, November 20, 2002

Faulkner is totally prude

It was nice to return from a scholarly conference in Greece and find that President Faulkner has the University's priorities straight and is spending time and money removing a men's club advertisement from the UT directory. The presidential recall placates the moral majority, but there is more work to be done.

Men's clubs regularly run ads in the sports section of the *Austin-American Statesman* right beside coverage of Longhorn football. I bet the revenues of places like the Crazy Lady soar on Longhorns' game days! So look for a presidential advisory against putting ourselves in the occasion of sin by reading the sports page during football season: He might even consider Mack Brown's ever-underachieving teams the ultimate cause of temptation and banish all such sports from our University. He might also appoint a University censor to review the choreography of the UT pom girls, their dance moves and outfits at Lady Longhorns' games would make the mothers of the NBA Lakers Girls blush.

All of this is the natural result of the commercialization of the University. We need money. We cannot expect to increase revenues

through higher fees, higher tuition and larger legislative appropriations. Rather than discourage lucrative advertisers, we should extort from men's clubs that want to advertise in the directory the same kind of "tax-deductible contribution" to higher education that the men's athletics program squeezes out of its skybox renters. How many needy students or underpaid faculty would turn down the Crazy Lady Scholarship or Professorship?

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