

Letters

Penn Arts & Sciences welcomes letters and reserves the right to edit. Write to us at 3440 Market Street, Suite 300, Philadelphia, PA 19104-3325 or e-mail at pennsas@sas.upenn.edu.

What next?

As a retired faculty member, I was dumbfounded by Dean DeTurck's statement in "Down with Fractions" that "in this digital age, [fractions] are as obsolete as Roman numerals." It reminded me of efforts by one of the state legislators a few decades ago to change the value of pi to 3 because 3.14 may be too complicated. Learning fractions in elementary school helps develop the brain just as crawling helps develop muscles for walking. I have worked with computers since the 1950s. As a consultant for RCA's Advanced Technology Group, I found that some programmers understood how to program, but they did not have a sufficient understanding of mathematics to program equations correctly. In the 1970s, I disallowed the use of calculators during exams after several students, in calculating the speed of electrons in a conductor, produced answers greater than the speed of light. Too often, computers and calculators lead to reliance on the machines rather than proper education, which develops the ability to think. Any nitwit can punch keys on the keyboard but not everyone can tell whether the results are correct or even reasonable! What next? Down with spelling because we have spell-checkers?

*Leon W. Zelby, EE'56, Gr'61
Norman, OK*

Hit piece

I read with interest Joseph McLaughlin's cover story, "Still a Lot More to Do." After summarizing Mary Frances Berry's career in the civil rights movement, the biography dissolves into a hit piece on the George W. Bush administration. There are five paragraphs of negative comments and outright attacks against the current government and its civil rights record. Where is the "fair and balanced" in this journalism?

McLaughlin cites Berry's charge that one of the "contemporary threats to civil rights" is the president's appointment of minorities, such as Secretary of State Rice and Attorney General Gonzalez. What a threat! He quotes Berry as saying that appointments of minorities to positions of power are applauded by minorities "when it happens for the first time." Nothing was then added about minority appointments by the president in his second term, which followed the appointments in his first. Thus Dr. Rice's appointment was not "the first time" a minority served as secretary of state.

McLaughlin's attack gained momentum when he stated that "Bush refuses to address the annual convention of the NAACP." How many conventions did President Bush not attend? One is the answer, but the not-so-clever action verb "refuses" makes it sound like a string of them. Bush was so badly treated at an earlier NAACP appearance that he understandably declined to expose himself again.

The president's acceptance of the Supreme Court's ruling on affirmative action is not treason. It is the same position other conservative leaders have taken, arguing that special preferences diminish the self-help efforts of minorities and encourage a feeling of victimhood and entitlement.



The only political comment that is accurate in the whole piece is that "minorities' ... longtime loyalty to the Democrats has not been rewarded." Comparing the Cabinet-level appointments of the Clinton and George W. Bush administrations leaves no other conclusion.

I trust that in your next issue there will be a piece favorable to the Bush administration's position on civil rights or some other issue of importance to provide a semblance of balance.

*Wesley B. Truitt, C'61
Marina del Rey, CA*

Where does that leave us?

I just read "Still a Lot More to Do" regarding Mary Frances Berry. While she is to be admired and given the greatest respect for her years of work, does anyone see the irony in the first paragraph, wherein she is listed as an Independent and also quoted as saying, "If the people on the right and people on the far left both have bad things to say about me, then I must be doing alright." Is the balance in the last statement between those on the right and those on the far left, and where does that leave us?

*Michael Koehn, Gr'79
Palos Verdes Estates, CA*