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Presidential Q and A

by Jonathan Wilson

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The questions you ask drive the answers you get. If you ask predictable, conventional questions, you're bound to get canned, conventional answers. It's the political corollary of teaching to the test. You inevitably get what you test for.

So it is with the White House Press Corp. Mostly they ask utterly predictable questions and the President's handlers can anticipate the questions, prepare the President for them with a scripted response, and he can then parrot the prepared responses, repeatedly. ("stay the course . . .won't cut and run . . . situation on the ground . . . all the troops the generals request . . . the world is a safer place . . . we've turned a corner") The answers are sound bites at best, bear little relationship to the facts, and their repetition passes for focus and unbending resolve on the part of the Commander-in-Chief. When dealing with a particularly inept President, the handlers stoop to planting a hidden microphone to feed him answers (until it is apparent that he can't distinguish the microphone feed from other voices in his head, and still fumbles the answers), or to planting a male prostitute dressed up as a real reporter lobbing planted questions that any fool could answer. The one time the President was asked a tough question, i.e., something about mistakes he had made, he went silent and just stood there for an embarrassingly long time. He couldn't come up with a single misjudgment or error of implementation. Nothing. That has now become a predictable question and he has a new, stock, self-effacing response that vaguely references the controversy borne of Abu Ghraib and the slowly learned lesson not to use inflammatory language in international affairs, especially when you're perceived as a religious fanatic in conflict with equally fanatical religious fanatics.

The international conflict in which he has the United States engaged has undeniable, religious overtones. It's time for some tough *religious* questions for this President who so prides himself in his religion (a tenant of which reveres humility). The Press Corp should start with the simple test question, "Mr. President, how old do you believe the world and created universe are?" It could be followed with, "Mr. President, do you believe in Armageddon, the Rapture, and the inevitable end of times that the Book of Revelation predicts will begin in the Middle East?" They then could try, "Mr. President, do you agree with Jesus that various admonitions contained in the Old Testament are simply wrong, like an eye-for-an-eye rather than turning the other cheek?" And, "Mr. President, do you agree with the Bible when it says that those who live by the sword shall die by the sword?" Or, "Mr. President, when you pray for divine guidance in waging the unprovoked war against Iraq; and Muslim extremists pray five times a day, as they apparently do, supposedly for similar guidance, are you praying to the same God?" "If it's a different God, is yours more powerful than theirs, and how do you know?" If it's the same God, is He/She on our side and, if so, how can you be sure?" "Does 'God bless America' for the asking?"

The questions could then turn to the Constitution, the foundation of our democracy. "Mr. President, did you actually say, as has been reliably reported, that 'the Constitution is just a God damned piece of paper?'" And, "Mr. President, given your expressed belief that the original intent of its authors should control the Constitution's interpretation, and given your repeated reliance on your war powers to exempt you from the rule of law, what exactly do you believe the Constitution's authors had in mind about a war on terrorism, i.e.,

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CALENDAR

- ▼ The next FFBC meeting is 7:00 A.M., Friday, August 4 at Hoyt Sherman Place.

Our guest speaker will be Terry Rich, Director of the Blank Park Zoo.

- ▼ R.S.V.P. by Tuesday, August 1 to Jonathan.Wilson@lawiowa.com or 288-2500 by phone.

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war on a strategy?” Is such a war ever over? Those questions could wrap up with, “Mr. President, did you swear to uphold the Bible or the Constitution of the United States of America, and as President of this Republic, which would you uphold if there were a conflict?” “Now before you try to suggest that the two cannot be in conflict, what is your understanding of Christianity on the one hand and religious freedom on the other?” “What is your understanding of equality among all law abiding citizens as guaranteed by the Constitution, and special rights for opposite gendered couples who choose to marry.” “And, Mr. President, do gay and lesbian children of God even *exist* in your mind, or do you think that all same gendered intimacy is simply straight children of God acting out—and sinning in the process?” “On a more personal level, so that you will be sure to understand the question, take Vice President Cheney's daughter, Mary—I'm sure you're acquainted with her—is she a sinner because of being a lesbian or a sinner for being a human being like all the rest of us?” “If sexual intimacy outside of marriage is immoral, and if abstinence until marriage is the only lesson to be taught, isn't your opposition to same gender marriage conveniently circular to reinforce your *religious* world-view and to reward those who agree with you?”

These are important questions. They are legitimate litmus tests. They are obviously relevant to matters of war and peace, stewardship of the environment, the wisdom or folly of deficit spending, the rule of law, religious freedom, and basic principles of civil equality for all citizens in any democracy worthy of the name. But the Press Corp has been bought off—cheap—with the opportunity to be called on at a press conference in order to ask a question, or the opportunity to ride on Air Force One, or the opportunity to receive leaked classified secrets from anonymous White House sources. Jeff Gannon, a/k/a James Guckert, was not the only prostitute there for press conferences; the room was full of them. And our democracy is the lesser for it. I wonder how much embarrassing silence we'd have to endure if some of these telling but untraditional questions were being asked.

—Jonathan Wilson

City Manager Discusses

“Six Things To Do” at July Meeting

by Bruce Carr

Our July speaker was Rick Clark, celebrating his five-month anniversary as City Manager of Des Moines. Mr. Clark, whom Jonathan Wilson later praised as “one of the good guys,” has worked for the city for 33 years, starting in the City Planning department in 1973, serving most recently (since 1985) as deputy city manager, acting city manager with the departure of Eric Anderson in 2005, and city manager since January 2006.

Clark began with numerous facts and figures (Des Moines city government has 2,000 employees and an annual budget of \$545 million; the city's median household income in 2000 was \$38,000—far less than such nearby cities as West Des Moines and Clive; its population scores about 20% on the diversity scale), and he gratified many listeners by praising Des Moines as a most “gracious” city. But his main purpose on this morning was to outline “Six Things To Do” to improve Des Moines's social and financial effectiveness and its image and standing among cities in Iowa and the nation.

The first task Clark listed was communication of the city government's story to all its audiences. To this end he has started a series of informal, neighborhood “Coffees with the Manager” and has devoted considerable attention to *City Update*, a well-received citizen newsletter begun in January 2005.

The second task is to increase collaboration between the city and Polk County and between the city and its suburbs. Clark cited the brand new (established in March) DART—Des Moines Area Regional Transit—reorganized from the former Metropolitan Transit Authority and working now with its own taxing power transferred from the individual municipalities in the transit area.

The third task Clark sees is to build on the extraordinary amount of economic development continuing downtown AND to take that creativity out to economic centers in neighborhood centers which can benefit from similar development and upgrading, such as the Roosevelt area, Beavertdale, and the former Eastgate Plaza at E. 14th and Euclid.

Clark next turned his attention to seeking better ways of financing Iowa cities in general and Des Moines in particular. City governments are “way too reliant on the property tax,” he noted, “which is, moreover, a regressive tax.” Des Moines's property taxes are the highest in the metro, only partly because of the city's high rate of tax-exempt property. In addition, a recent Iowa Supreme Court ruling has now put a cloud over use of “franchise fees” in lieu of property taxes. Whatever solution is found, Clark said, it must be (a) fair, that is, not regressive, (b) predictable, to provide stability for budgeting and forecasting, and (c) uniform across municipalities, allowing no exceptions or favoritism. Also, the solution will have to come from the Legislature, the only state-wide authority over cities and

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Pride Pics



A PRAIRIE HOME COMPANION

Starring Meryl Streep, Lily Tomlin, Woody Harrelson, John C. Reilly, Kevin Kline, Maya Rudolph, Lindsay Lohan, Virginia Madsen, Garrison Keillor, Tommy Lee Jones, L. Q. Jones.



Directed by Robert Altman

1Hr 45 Min

Robert Altman has hit another home run with his latest film, **A Prairie Home Companion**. But a lot of the credit goes to the witty writing of Garrison Keillor. This is not a performance of **Prairie Home Companion** caught on film; instead, it is similar to a radio program that is being broadcast. It is the last night of the old show because the owners of the Fitzgerald Theater, where the program is performed, have sold the place and the theater is going to be destroyed the next day to make room for a parking lot. It is the end of an era. All that will be left on radio is “people yelling at each other and computers playing music.” But the radio program is just the backdrop. The real humor comes through the many stories that are told backstage by the performers. Tales of how they got into show business with quirks of luck and lots of embellishments by the tellers of the tales.

The film begins with a camera panning the rural countryside featuring a tall radio tower as one hears the type of radio programs that are broadcast in this part of the country. They are AM radio stations with generally poor reception. Eventually the camera picks up Guy Noir who is at Mickey’s Diner eating a grilled cheese sandwich and a baked bean chaser. He explains that the **Prairie Home Companion** is “a live radio variety show, the kind that died 50 years ago, but no one told it.”

One of the true joys of the film is the teaming of Meryl Streep and Lily Tomlin as the Johnson Girls, the last remaining performers of the Johnson Family. Meryl, before becoming an actress, had trained early in her career to be an opera singer, and her voice is surprisingly beautiful. The Johnson Girls learned to sing, “because it was the only way to make mamma happy.” It is wonderful to watch this talented duo banter back and forth telling stories of the old days, including one story with tragic results of a sister who “stole a 59-cent donut.”

The other great teaming is Woody Harrelson with John C. Reilly. They are Dusty and Lefty, and they spin yarns and sing bawdy songs with equal skill. In the song, “Bad Jokes,” they get to tell the jokes Garrison Keillor could never have gotten away with on his real radio show. Bawdy, but very

funny. Keillor also wrote the lyrics to most of the songs in the film.

Keillor is, for the most part, playing himself. When others ask him to get nostalgic since it is the last show, he refuses, saying radio is about the future and “every show is your last show.” He does not want to make a big speech. They ask him what his next job will be and he says he hopes it is “one in which he does not have to say a word.” That would probably seem like heaven to him since in radio you can never have dead air.

Kevin Kline plays Guy Noir with all the verbal skills of the character on the radio show, but his character is much more of an Inspector Clouseau with great comedy fumbling bits, making him much more incompetent than the radio character and even funnier.

For those who love the radio show, there are enough snippets of songs, humorous ads, and fun with the sound man to bring out the quirky qualities of the show. But most of the movie is filled with delightful bits of witty tales that are thoroughly enjoyable.

I highly recommend this movie. It has a wonderful soundtrack as well.

—Gary Kaufman

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taxation.

In concluding his talk, and thinking now more long-term, Clark noted that it’s again time for cities to be about prioritization, deciding in the most democratic manner possible what are the most important things that city governments ought to be doing. And right after that, reorganizing city government to match the goals and priorities just identified. He urged creative restructuring of the system to best facilitate what we—the citizens—need and want.

—Bruce Carr

BRIEFS & SHORTS

Be sure to RSVP to Jonathan.Wilson@lawiowa.com no later than August 1 for the August 4 meeting. Our speaker will be Terry Rich, CEO of the Blank Park Zoo. Jonathan can also be reached by phone at 288-2500.

Thanks to Michael Thompson for his introduction of our July speaker, Des Moines City Manager Rick Clark.

A board vacancy has been created by the resignation of D. Steven Carlyle. Any FFBC member interested in filling the vacancy should contact a board member.

FFBC

*First Friday
News & Views*

Des Moines, Iowa

AUGUST 2006

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From the Editor

Gilead: A Balm for the Reader

Ah, the writing process! It was my intention for this month's column to write about some aspect of my recent trip to Italy: the beauty of Venice; the art of Florence; the architecture of Ancient Rome. And I will get around to that at some point because those places profoundly changed my world view. But it was a few days spent at my brother and sister-in-law's cabin in Minnesota that changed my topic.

Like any reader, I love a good book. At the cabin, my sister-in-law had a copy of this year's All Iowa Reads book, Gilead. Now I have to be honest with you: the title alone was enough to turn me off. It smacked of organized religion and that, to me, is one of civilization's great follies. Belief, I think, should be an intensely personal action, not some community endeavor. Still, I had read the previous three All Iowa Reads books* and enjoyed them in varying degrees, so amongst the chipmunks, the ducks, the eagles, the herons, the pelicans, the sun, and the water, I decided to give Gilead, by Marilynne Robinson, a try. Like my trip to Italy, the book had a pervasive impact on me.

Religious? Yes, it is, but not religious in an evangelical manner. The book is epistolary, a letter from the aging Reverend John Ames to his seven-year-old son to be read when the boy is grown up. Reverend Ames has been diagnosed with a terminal heart problem, and since his second fatherhood began at age 70, he wanted to leave his son with a sense of who the boy is as defined by the three Reverend Ameses who preceded him.

The eldest Reverend Ames felt called to the cause of abolition and took up arms with John Brown in "Bloody Kansas." He eventually ended up as a chaplain in an Iowa regiment in the Civil War where he lost an eye in a fierce battle with the rebels. John Ames's father also preached but, he eventually gave it up for intensely personal reasons explained in the story.

Gilead, as it turns out, is a town in southwestern Iowa near the Nishnabotna River. Like its biblical counterpart, the town is a haven. The good Reverend Ames learns all the lessons in life that he needs in this back-water village.

The book's prose is extraordinarily beautiful; the lessons it teaches are even more so. The parallels between the Reverend Ames and his father, searching in the parched plains of Kansas for the elusive gravesite of the old Civil War reverend and the wanderings of the Ancient Hebrews in the first few books of the Old Testament, are evident enough. But the scene in the story where Reverend Ames's father feeds him, as a young boy, a hard biscuit from his ash-stained hands after helping to douse a church fire, is proof of the universality through the ages of the teachings in the Bible, including communion.

The book is a must-read for those who cherish family, friends, and learning. It is also available in large print and audio formats (as are the previous All Iowa Reads books). I hope you will take the time to live with this book because, once read, it will stay with you for a very long time.

—Steve Person

*Peace Like a River, Niagara Falls All Over Again, The Master Butchers Singing Club.