

Comic Controversy

Critics: Strips No Laughing Matter

By **NICOLA M. WHITE**
College Topics Staff Writer

In the midst of his term's biggest crisis, Cavalier Daily Editor-in-Chief Mike Slaven consoled himself this way: How many college kids have had their names decried on Fox News?

It was a brief moment of levity in a weeks-long ordeal that tested the strength and sanity of The Cavalier Daily staff.

It all had started over the student-drawn comic strip "Quirksmith."

To many people, however, these comics were no laughing matter.

In the first, "Christ on a Cartesian Coordinate Plane," third-year College student Grant Woolard depicted the Crucifixion of Christ on the X and Y mathematical axis. In the second, "A Nativity Ob-Scene," he showed Joseph asking the Virgin Mary, "How did you get that bumpy rash?" Mary responded, "I swear, it was immaculately transmitted!"

The strips, published Aug. 23 and 24, reverberated throughout the blogosphere. Everyone had an opinion. Critics, especially from a New York-based conservative Catholic group, bombarded The CD and University media relations with thousands of e-mails condemning not just the comics, but the newspaper, the student journal-

The Cavalier Daily gave permission to reprint excerpts of all materials related to the current controversy except the comics themselves. "Since we have denied similar requests, we feel that we can't release them to anyone," Editor-in-Chief Mike Slaven said in an e-mail.

ists and the University.

Even Fox News commentators Bill O'Reilly and Brit Hume chimed in. O'Reilly declared on the air, "Thomas Jefferson would throw this publication off campus so fast."

In a short segment, Hume mentioned Slaven by name and attacked the newspaper for not apologizing to its readers.

Gulp. Most Cavalier Daily writers, cartoonists, photographers and designers join

The CD staff not to make headlines, but to write them. In this comics crisis, which was more intense than the usual flap every few years, those staffers experienced a drastic role reversal. Slaven, 21, a government major from Phoenix, Ariz., even had to change his cell phone number after someone posted it online.

The beauty of a student newspaper is that writers and artists can push boundaries that "real" papers avoid. Edgy jokes? Cool. Off-color humor? Within reason, no prob.

At the same time, though, those harried, over-achieving college students are just that: students. At The CD, they're volunteers. And while 15 years ago, a controversial column or article might have circulated among critics via photocopy or fax, these days, the Internet and blogs make student journalists' gaffes come under a much harsher lens. A lot faster, too.

Slaven and his staff suddenly realized their audience wasn't just the 18-30-year-olds living in the greater Charlottesville area.

Judging by the thousands of form letters they received from all over

the country, their assessment was correct.

"I never anticipated this level of controversy," Slaven said.

Earlier that year, the previous Managing Board had outlined a specific set of guidelines for editing and censoring CD comic strips—a topic that had generated controversy the year before, but nothing at this level.

As Slaven and his own Managing Board reviewed those criteria, they made a bold move: They stuck to their guns. Even though there was much pressure to apologize, The CD did not.

"The intention of our newspaper is not to purposely offend people. It's to foster an environment where free expression is valued," he said. "This is Thomas Jefferson's University. If free expression isn't valued here, it can't be valued anywhere."

The board, of course, came under more fire. Even The CD's ombudsman said the strips weren't all that clever.

Ultimately, the artist himself decided to try to stop the comics from circulating on the Web. In an unusual move, he pulled his strips off The CD's Web page.

He offered his own apology: "The sole intent of my comic strip is to present situations that provoke thought and amusement. As this comic did not achieve that goal, I have requested that it be taken down from The Cavalier Daily Web site. I apologize for the offense that this comic has produced," he wrote in place of his strip.

For Slaven, it was a learning experience.

"We were willing to stand up for the First Amendment, when it comes down to it," he said.

(Nicola M. White, '01, assistant managing editor, is a reporter at *The Tampa Tribune*.)

The CD: No apologies

LEAD EDITORIAL
The Cavalier Daily

SEPT. 11—The Internet makes everything move faster. A comics controversy that began on a few blogs quickly spread to thousands of people and ended up in over a thousand complaining e-mails and phone calls by the time it made Fox News on Thursday evening.

It is unfortunate that so many people took offense to Grant Woolard's "Quirksmith" comics from Aug. 23 and 24, but we are operating under our comic censorship policy articulated in April, and will not be apologizing. We decide about censorship and apologies based on those standards, and not based on how many e-mails and phone calls we get.

The Cavalier Daily is a college newspaper intended mostly for an 18 to 30-year-old audience. The vast majority of complaints we have gotten, however, are from people outside Charlottesville and that intended audience.

University President John T. Casteen, III and other administrators have been subject to a barrage of e-mails and complaints about a matter over which they have no control. The Cavalier Daily is completely independent of University funding and oversight. Fortunately, we value our freedom too much to allow non-journalists to censor our writers and artists. We will distribute The Cavalier Daily by hand on pieces of notebook paper before we ever allow that to change.

The Critic: What's the point?

By **LISA FLEISHER**
Cavalier Daily Ombudsman

SEPT. 13—The Cavalier Daily apologized the day after it published a comic strip in November 2005 that said the crane was "the gayest of all birds." The paper apologized for a Feb. 23 comic strip that made fun of American Idol using stereotypical religious symbols. This time, the managing board made clear they will not apologize.

Many readers have attacked that inconsistency.

What Grant Woolard's cartoons share with several of the disputed cartoons of last year is a lack of a clear message.

Editors need to understand what the piece is saying so they don't unknowingly publish something they will regret—exactly what Editor-in-Chief Mike Slaven said he would try to avoid last spring. The paper should care more about quality control. If editors do not get the point of an article, neither will the audience.

Woolard's two items were quite inscrutable. I understand and applaud The Cavalier Daily's desire to leave the doors for speech as wide open. But there needs to be a solid, understandable point or message. Offending just for the sake of offending is juvenile and unprofessional.

Cartoonist prompts 2,000 letters

By **KRISTIN HAWKINS**
Cavalier Daily Associate Editor

SEPT. 11—The Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights and individuals from across the country have sent nearly 2,000 letters to The Cavalier Daily and to the University administration in response to controversial comics published Aug. 23 and Aug. 24.

The two comics were drawn by third-year College student Grant Woolard in his strip "Quirksmith." Catholic Student Ministry chairman Kevin Simowitz, a third-year College student, said the comics were tasteless, but within the bounds of free speech.

"The Cavalier Daily can publish cartoons like that if they want to," Simowitz said. All students at the University deserve an apology from The Cavalier Daily, he said.

"It wouldn't just be Catholics that would be offended by something like that," he added.

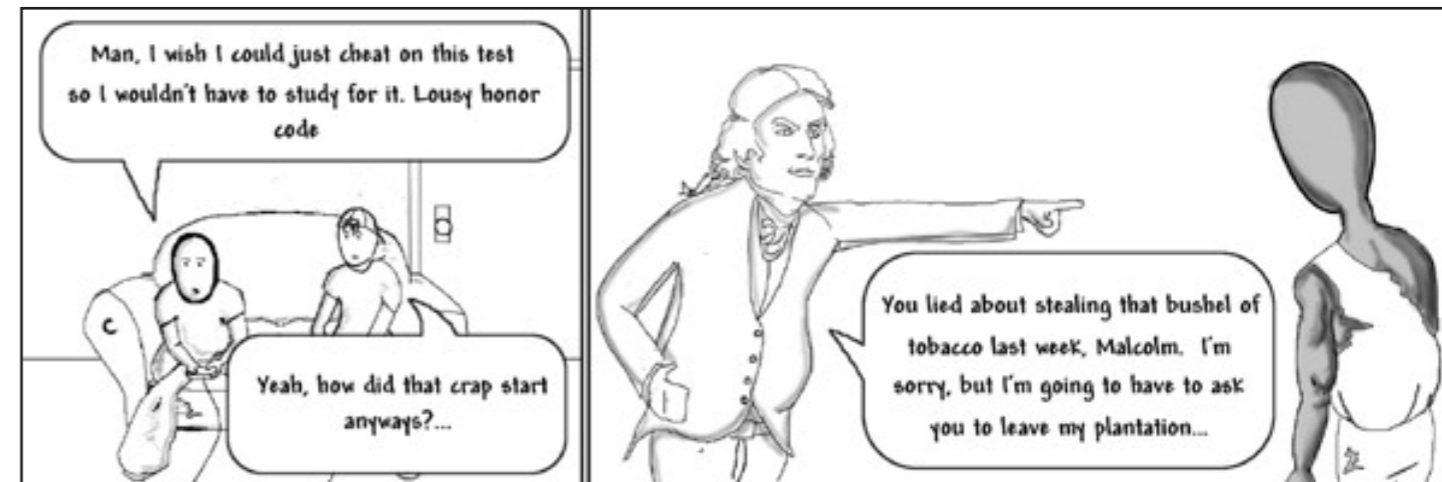
The Catholic League cited the precedent of a previous Cavalier Daily apology in November 1987 until May 1990. No topic was off-limits: underage drinking, Lawnie politicians, and the administration. Jefferson had a Freudian slip and yelled into the phone: "LEMME TALK WITH THE RECTUM!"

Reaction: Krehmeyer: "The Board of Visitors was furious."

"Self Proclaimed" by Daniel Gantz

Favorite Flaps

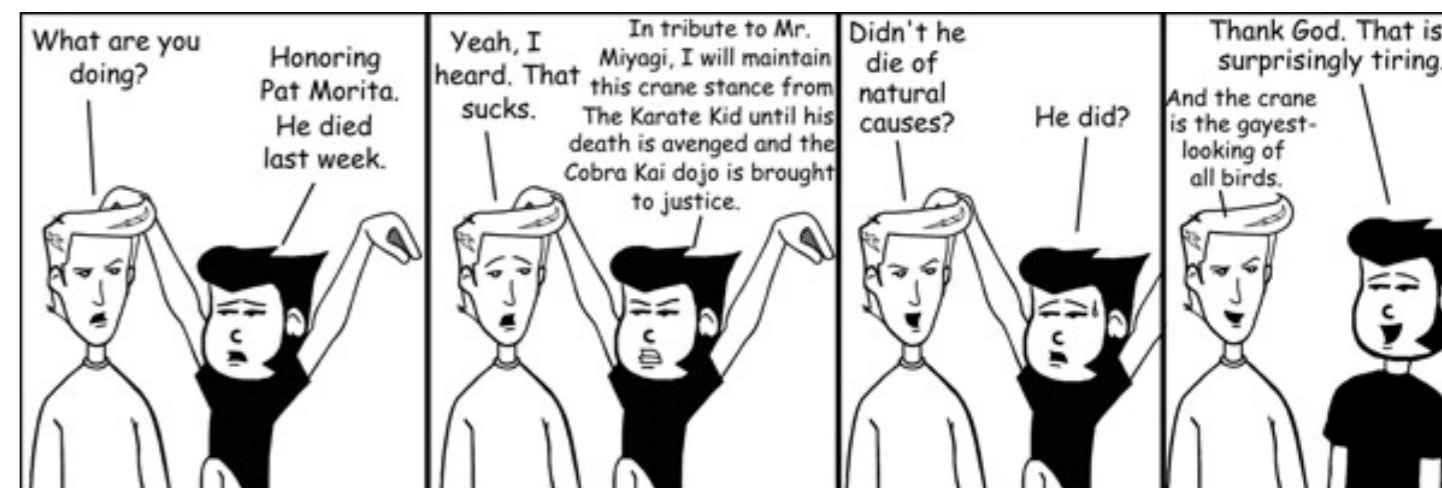
"Self Proclaimed" by Daniel Gantz



The Cavalier Daily has a strong tradition of student-created comic strips. Some are wildly popular -- such as Sean Polyn's "Shallow Grave" in the late 90s. Some ruffle feathers. Many put the newspaper's editors in the hot seat. Here is a sampling of comics controversies.

NOVEMBER 2005

"Schizophrenic Bosnian" by Jason Adams and Faruk Pasic



OCTOBER 2005

"Hoover" by Lee Keath

Strip in question: Recurring irate character Thomas Jefferson calls up the University president's office and asks for the rector. Except he doesn't call him the rector. Diane Krehmeyer ('91, editor-in-chief), a student at the time, recalls: "The Cavalier Daily will never have a better comic strip than 'Hoover,' which ran from September 1987 until May 1990. No topic was off-limits: under-

age drinking, Lawnie politicians, and the administration. Jefferson had a Freudian slip and yelled into the phone: "LEMME TALK WITH THE RECTUM!"

Reaction: Krehmeyer: "The Board of Visitors was furious."

"Self Proclaimed" by Daniel Gantz

Strip in question: October 2005 strip on the origin of the University's Honor System. Jefferson yells at a slave.

Reaction: Students and community leaders said it was racist and made light of slavery. It was a tense time already, with reports of graffiti painted over two black student groups' art on Beta Bridge. Then-editor-in-chief Pat Harvey met with black student groups, but the controversy didn't die. The CD also was criticized for its lack of diversity on staff.

"Being stuck in the middle of a comic controversy is a learning experience like no other," Harvey recalled.

"Schizophrenic Bosnian" by Jason Adams and Faruk Pasic

Strip in question: November 2005 strip with a character referring to a crane as "the gayest-looking of all birds."

Reaction: The University's gay student community decried the strip, and the paper apologized.

--Nicola M. White

