

Century Marks

Century Marks in the [May 31, 2005](#) issue

Calvinist reaction: President Bush, scheduled to give the commencement address at Calvin College on May 21, was the recipient of two separate letters from the college community protesting his policies. One was signed by over 400 alumni, students, faculty and friends of Calvin and was scheduled to appear as a full-page ad in the *Grand Rapids Press*. The other was signed by about 140 faculty and staff, including over one third of all active professors. The letters point to inconsistencies between the faith the president proclaims and the policies he has instituted, especially in regard to the war in Iraq, poverty and the environment. Philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff was originally scheduled to speak, but was bumped to 2006 after presidential advisor Karl Rove arranged for the president to speak.

Cruel and unusual punishment: Two arguments against the death penalty—too many mistakes are made to justify it and a life sentence without parole is a better alternative—do not go far enough, according to Hilary Mantel (*New York Review of Books*, May 12). “The death penalty is not wrong because it is inconsistently administered,” she argues. “If it were fairly administered, it would still be wrong. Finally, the issue is moral; a nation so God-besotted [as the U.S.] should be able to grasp that.” Life sentences without parole may be necessary in some cases to protect the citizenry, but they should be rare. “A system aiming only at containment, with no interest in rehabilitation, is a debased system, which will find itself in charge of the aged and the dying, presiding over their physical and no doubt spiritual deterioration.”

There ought to be a law: Though the crime rate has fallen over the past decade, the prison population in the U.S. continues to rise. From mid-2003 to mid-2004 the prison population grew by over 900 each week, reaching a total of 2.1 million people, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics. This increase is largely due to get-tough policies instituted in the 1980s and '90s, including the three-strikes-and-you're-out laws for repeat offenders (*USA Today*, April 25).

The good die young—again: Marla Ruzicka was only 28 when she was killed in Iraq in April, but she had made her mark as a persistent advocate for the civilian casualties of war, first in Afghanistan and then in Iraq. She founded the organization known as Campaign for Innocent Victims in Conflict, which attempted to verify civilian casualties, and she—along with Vermont senator Patrick Leahy—helped craft a program to assist them. “I decided not to take a position on the war but to try to do the right humanitarian thing,” Ruzicka said in late 2003. “No one can heal the wounds that have been inflicted; you just have to recognize that people have been harmed.” Ruzicka was one week away from returning from Iraq when her car was caught between a military convoy and a suicide bombing attack (*Publishers Weekly*, April 19; *Capital Times*, April 20).

Big questions: A national study of the religious beliefs and behaviors of college freshmen found that they don’t always know what they believe, but they are interested in grappling with the big questions of life. Unfortunately, college and university faculty are reticent to talk about “meaning” issues in class. There are exceptions. Mark Wallace, who teaches a course called “Religion and the Meaning of Life” at Swarthmore College, says that it is possible to deal with the big issues without promoting a particular ideology. He usually has three times more students sign up for his course than he can accept. And Richard F. Galvin, who teaches “The Meaning of Life” at Texas Christian University, in which students read Plato’s *Dialogues* and works by Nietzsche and Mill, tells his students “that there is plenty of time to be worried about their careers but this might be the last time they get to talk about big questions” (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 22).

As we forgive our debtors: The ability to forgive another person depends on a number of factors, including one’s religious convictions. Feelings of empathy, sympathy, compassion and altruistic love toward an offender help erode negative feelings stemming from the offense. These positive feelings can be stimulated by religion, which in turn can “stimulate a mercy motive and a grace motive,” according to Everett L. Worthington Jr., director of the nonprofit A Campaign for Forgiveness Research. Other factors in the ability of a person to forgive include the ongoing behavior of the offender, the emotional maturity of the offended and how safe and secure that person feels. More mature people are readier to forgive because they are less needy (*Science and Theology News*, May 5).

And the winner is: Columnist Paul Krugman argues in the *New York Times* (May 9) that the Bush administration’s tax cuts and proposed Social Security benefit cuts

should be tallied together to see who gains and who loses. “Suppose you’re a full-time Wal-Mart employee, earning \$17,000 a year. You probably didn’t get any tax cut. But Mr. Bush says, generously, that he won’t cut your Social Security benefits. Suppose you’re earning \$60,000 a year. On average, Mr. Bush cut taxes for workers like you by about \$1,000 per year. But by 2045 the Bush Social Security plan would cut benefits for workers like you by about \$6,500 per year. Not a very good deal. Suppose, finally, that you’re making \$1 million a year. You received a tax cut worth about \$50,000 per year. By 2045 the Bush plan would reduce benefits for people like you by about \$9,400 per year. We have a winner!”

Out of control: Televangelist Pat Robertson, recently interviewed on ABC-TV by George Stephanopoulos, declared that no Muslims should be allowed to serve either as judges in the U.S. or in the president’s cabinet, because “they have said in the Koran there’s a war against all the infidels.” He added that “the out-of-control judiciary” is the greatest threat that America has faced in the past 400 years, greater than that of the Civil War, Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan or al-Qaeda. “Over 100 years, I think the gradual erosion of the consensus that’s held our country together is probably more serious than a few bearded terrorists who fly into buildings,” he said.