

## Larry Benedict

### and the Challenge of Student Life

Interview by Scott Schneider and Vikash Mansinghka

*Though Dean for Student Life Larry Benedict has spent less time here than the senior class, he has been a quick student of MIT culture. We grilled him exhaustively on Orientation 2002, the future of dorm rush, and student-administrator communication, and he related every issue back to the underlying facts and ideas. This interview showed us Dean Benedict's instinct and talent for understanding students' perspectives, as well as his appreciation for the MIT culture of autonomy and self-government.*

**Prometheus:** I'd like to start by just asking you about your background and what brought you to MIT.

**Larry Benedict:** This is now my 32nd year in student affairs and higher education. In my last year of graduate school, my funding ran out. I was working at UMass Amherst on research methods, evaluation methods, stats, that kind

of stuff. I needed money to get through the last year of graduate school. The dean of students at that time was advertising for a research assistant to develop a telephone polling system on campus. So my last year of graduate school was actually the first year of the job that kept me there eighteen years.

**PM:** One of the major topics we'd like to talk about is communication and interaction between students and administrators. There's been some controversy in the recent year and it seems like there have also been some improvements, and we'd like to see that those gains don't get lost. Can you tell me generally what are some fruitful ways for students to communicate with administrators? Is it generally better to discuss overall goals or have conversations about specific plans?

**LB:** I'm smiling because that's an incredibly complicated question, especially for MIT. In most places I've worked, the lines of communication are pretty clear. A student government is usually elected by the student body, and it communicates with the constituency.

At MIT, I found out very quickly there is no student government, per se. There are about 12 or 13 student governments that I work with. We have the UA. We have 4 class councils, which for all intents and purposes are separate student governments. We have DormCon, the ASA, the GSC, and others. I try to meet with those groups as often as possible, to let them know what we're working on and to find out what they're working on. I meet every two or three weeks with the President and Vice President of the UA, the DormCon President, GSC officers, and the IFC Chair, and very irregularly with the class council presidents.

You never seem to have met with the right constituency. For example, *The Tech* criticized the UA last year for not

## Larry Bacow and the Mantle of Leadership

Two years ago, no one really knew what to expect of President Bacow. In general, Tufts students were ignorant of his career at MIT, but as his second year winds down, we now have some idea.

Bacow is a man driven by political expediency, who acts primarily with an eye to how alumni, trustees and donors might perceive any action he takes. To some extent, this is desirable and necessary for a job that features fund-raising and keeping trustees happy. But too often, Bacow is willing to allow injustices to go unpunished, or to crack down on innocent fun, as long as it keeps controversy to a minimum and keeps up all public appearances. I should stress that by "too often," I don't mean "always." Indeed, President Bacow has done the right thing for Tufts on numerous occasions; one only wishes, however, that this could have been more consistent.

### Live nude girls (and boys)

This past year, Bacow ran afoul of Tufts' most popular campus tradition (or, perhaps, vice versa). For several decades, students have celebrated the end of Fall classes in early December by drinking adult beverages and running around the quad in the buff on the first night of study period. Several hundred students participate, and the revelry draws the largest audience of any campus athletic event. President Bacow claimed to be ignorant of the tradition; he was away during the NQR of his first year. This December, he held a meeting with Trustees at the President's mansion, Gifford House, the same night of the NQR. The quad is practically in the backyard of Gifford House -- imagine President Vest hosting a picnic for MIT Corporation members during Steer Roast.

The next day, Bacow fired off an angry email, expressing his dismay with the NQR, and his desire to end the event because several students were injured and required medical attention. A few students, he claimed, were groped by the cheering crowds. "The combination of consumption of alcohol with a mad dash through an icy, hilly campus at night cannot continue," he concluded.

The outcry was immediate, and it lasted at least a month or two into the beginning of the next semester. Letters to the editor, and endless Viewpoints appeared in the Tufts Daily, condemning Bacow's threat to take away the only real source of school spirit and stress relief the school has left. While changes of some kind are likely next year, it is a near certainty the NQR will continue, despite Bacow's best efforts to kill it.

On one level, one can hardly blame him. If anything went wrong at the

NQR, between underage drinking, exposure to cold, and creepy townies taking pictures, it would not be hard for someone to launch a lawsuit. Bacow probably has memories of Scott Krueger in mind. But again, rather than stand on the principle of personal responsibility, Bacow acted so as to minimize any negative publicity to the school. It was more important to Bacow that things not look bad than it was to allow students to take responsibility for themselves. Or to take responsibility himself: just who scheduled his evening with the trustees on the night of NQR?

More recently, Bacow raised ire with plans to remake graduation in his own image. First, without putting it to the students themselves first, he decided that starting this year, all diplomas will be written in English instead of Latin. And far more controversially, starting next year, if Bacow is successful, Tufts will implement a more British-style graduation, which prohibits anyone walking unless all of their graduation requirements are met. This way, students who walk receive their actual diploma at the ceremony instead of through the mail during summer.

This may not sound so bad, but consider how this impacts people who have degree programs that require summer internships, or those on the cusp, who need one last class to be made up over summer school. Worse, many international students will fall into either situation. Obtaining a return visa a year later and funding a trip all the way back the US simply for a ceremony would be impractical.

### Burning down the Bush

While these actions reveal Bacow to be out of touch with students, he nonetheless does the right thing in many cases. For example, former President George H.W. Bush came to speak at Tufts this last February. Campus antiwar activists were outraged, and questioned the educational value his talk could offer. (These same voices found nothing amiss about Bill Clinton's 2002 talk). After mobilizing several Boston-area activist groups, hundreds of protesters marched from Davis Square to campus, chanting slogans about the Bushes being warmongers who want to steal Iraq's oil at the cost of millions of lives. There was significant worry (justified, it turns out) that the protesters would do something to disrupt the talk itself, so cops were out in full force, protecting the entrance with riot-gear.

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communicating well with all of its constituencies. I think again, this year, the UA could have done a better job. The same problem happens with the IFC: the IFC Chair goes back and talks to the presidents, but the presidents forget to go back and talk to their houses. So there's always communication gaps along the way.

How to improve that is an issue. We tried town meetings, but you can only get people to show up who come about the particular meeting issue, so you don't have a chance to discuss broad things. E-mail letters are treated as spam; you might as well just toss that off.

**PM:** I'm particularly interested in housing and orientation. The IFC seems to have a decent level of success in communicating their needs for FSILG rush. DormCon and ILTFP are doing better in recent months. What's your impression of what works and what doesn't work there? What are the fundamental obstacles to be overcome?

**LB:** I think the obstacles are what I was talking about. DormCon and ILTFP is a good example. DormCon has a certain set of roles and responsibilities for what goes on in residence halls, to be the communication link with the administration, and to lobby on behalf of the residence halls to the administration.

However, when something came up a couple of months ago, all of a sudden ILTFP shows up. We met with them, and we got a lot of good work done. But the question I have is, wait a minute, why are we forming yet another group when we already have an existing, well-recognized, well-established group?

I think ILTFP came together around a very specific message. It knew what its message was and what it wanted to do. I didn't sense that same sense of cohesiveness in DormCon, which is why I think this other group got together.

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# Tufts Has a Bacow

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Bacow demanded in a campus email that these efforts not go through, that every visitor to the campus had 1st Amendment liberties that, as a matter of right and courtesy, students were bound to respect. Nevertheless, a few protesters sneaked into the talk, and on cue blew whistles, held up a banner and an upside down flag obscenely marked with duct tape, and chanted antiwar slogans until security removed them, flipping Bush off as they were escorted out.

Bacow never apologized for his actions. But neither did he act as a toady to Bush. A Q&A directly from the audience would have been impractical, so as with the Clinton talk, students submitted their questions in advance, and Bacow read them to Bush. He picked hard questions, about Bush's handling of the Kurds, support for Saddam in the 80's, and similarly difficult questions designed to put the former president on the spot. Bacow has much to be proud of regarding this affair.

## Carnage at the Cannon

In contrast to his vocal second year, President Bacow appeared at first to prefer a hands-off approach, wisely remaining above the fray of undergraduate politics. Two major defining controversies erupted almost immediately in fall of 2001. The first centered around the then-senior Iris Halpern, who hoped to galvanize students to the cause of janitor labor unions a la Harvard, by founding the now-defunct Student-Labor Action Movement, or SLAM. The group held a few rallies in front of the administration building, with the aim of coercing the administration into intervening on sub-contracted janitors' behalf in contract negotiations. They failed - the administration ignored them, and so did students. At its peak, SLAM never had more than 20 or so members (though, likely many more sympathizers), out of a campus of well over 6000 undergraduates, and Bacow took none of the actions SLAM demanded.

The women of SLAM hoped to draw attention to their cause by wearing tight, revealing tank tops with "SLAM" emblazoned across. A cartoon in the Source indirectly lampooned the group's tank tops. The cartoon only showed a body, but no face or definitive characteristics were visible. Unfortunately, Iris took the cartoon, and jokes about tight pants to match the SLAM tank tops, to be about her specifically, and brought

charges of sexual harassment against the Source.

At roughly the same time, the Source staff decided to paint the Tufts cannon, as per campus tradition, to mark the beginning of the war in Afghanistan. After painting the cannon in patriotic colors, then-Source editor Sam Dangremond stayed behind to "guard" the cannon until the break of dawn, again, as per campus tradition (and sanctioned by the Pachyderm, Tufts' formal rules of conduct). At roughly 4 AM, three of the campus's most notorious far-leftist agitators physically attacked him. Two grabbed him, threw him to the ground and held him there, while the third defaced the cannon with antiwar slogans. Sam stuck to his story about being attacked, while the three offered inconsistent accounts about Sam physically attacking them. The campus judiciary, while acquitting Sam and agreeing that the three initiated violence against Sam, gave the three radicals a slap on the wrist with a downgraded charge from Assault to Harassment, and a punishment of Probation I, which is essentially the same punishment a student receives for being caught drinking a beer outside of his dorm room. (As post-script - two of the three leftists successfully appealed even that lenient punishment, having it reduced to Verbal Warning.)

These controversies ignited a fierce debate about the Source. Some students defaced copies of the Source with "Imagine a Campus Free of Sexism" stickers. The debate about the Source reached a fever pitch when its last two fall print runs were stolen in their entirety by the Pan-African Alliance, apparently because they disapproved of an anti-affirmative action article. Winter break did little to ease the tensions. No one would have suspected the PAA, had an email from the then-president Carl Jackson, boasting of their "dumping" campaign, not been unwittingly sent to the alumni parent of a Source member. When the Source revealed this evidence, a firestorm erupted: not only was the Source sexist, it was also racist (despite having numerous African-Americans and women on its staff).

Where was President Bacow during all of this? Good question - he offered no public comments about any of these controversies. Only when Louis Esparza, one of the leftist radicals who assaulted Sam at the cannon, wrote a letter to the Tufts Daily explicitly calling Sam a racist, did Bacow finally weigh in. He wrote a mass email to the campus community, imploring civility in campus publications, but reserving the balance of his criticism for the Source itself, equating the Source's tradition of mocking campus figures with the level of abuse the Source had received.

Bacow's biggest failing here was his sense of proportion. A physical assault, a charge of sexual harassment so baseless it was thrown out, and mass thefts of entire publication runs went without comment from Bacow, but worries about the tone of campus publications merited his personal attention.

## Office hours are wage-slavery

Granted, by this time in the year, President Bacow already had his hands full. While the Source controversies brewed, a more potentially dangerous conflict raged within the normally placid graduate student community. In Decem-

ber, a campaign previously carried on in secret by a cabal of English graduate students exploded onto the scene: the United Auto Workers filed with the National Labor Review Board to form a new labor union of Tufts graduate students, claiming enough signatures to warrant a hearing and election. Bacow later recounted that the first he heard of any union-movement was the day in December he received faxed legal documents informing him that the NLRB had received the union's petition. He was not alone; at least half the graduate community was equally shocked by the news.

Graduate students suddenly found themselves polarized by the nasty union campaign, but Bacow deserves nothing but praise for his handling of the situation. Several factors helped him, not the least of which being that his doctoral work in economics was specifically about the UAW, but also that he is certified to practice labor law. The UAW could not have picked a worse nemesis.

Ever since a regional branch of the National Labor Review Board authorized the first graduate student labor union at a private college (NYU) in 2000, thereby overturning 25 years of national precedent, the UAW has fought to set up new locals at private colleges nationwide. Tufts was only one of many battlefronts, like Brown, Cornell, and Columbia. Graduate students, already left of center and many identifying themselves with the proletariat against bourgeois administrations, were tempted with visions of higher wages and benefits to be provided by union membership. The UAW argued that graduate students needed a union to be respected for their work. The administration would exploit grad student labor with too few benefits and too little pay unless grad students organized and forced the administration to bargain with them.

But the reality of grad student unions, particularly at private schools, is more complex. Added to the unseemly nature of organizing a union against a university that pays its students to learn, unions offer a Faustian bargain, promising the marvelous wages and working terms that collective bargaining can bring in exchange for surrendering that bargaining power to union leaders. Unions guarantee only mandatory dues to members and non-members alike that fund pro-union politicians and lobbying. Unions offer new layers of bureaucracy to already top-heavy administrations, and become mandatory third parties in student/department relationships. Contract negotiations can take years to resolve; UC Berkeley, for example, went seven years without a contract, during which time pay and benefits are frozen according to the older arrangement. Any increases in pay have to come from somewhere, making it necessary for some departments to cut the number of TA-ships it offers to make up the difference.

Worse, graduate "labor" is difficult to differentiate from graduate education, so in practice contract negotiations necessarily intrude on the autonomy of departments to determine how education is carried out. Since grads are, by definition, transient, and because many grad students (without TA-ships) would not be covered by a union, a union cannot possibly act democratically, even if the national UAW did not reserve the right to depose locally elected leadership or locally negotiated contracts it disliked. (For example, the union at UMass

Amherst saw its leadership deposed by the UAW in 1998 when it ruffled too many feathers in Detroit.) Graduate students quickly become pawns between the union and the administration.

As a member of the anti-union group, I was often proud of President Bacow's leadership. As the "management," he faced legal constraints on what he could argue to graduate students about how undesirable a union would be. The union, on the other hand, could legally promise students the moon. But with one hand tied behind his back, Bacow effectively demonstrated the folly of labor unions for graduate students, and in every forum he hosted, he ruthlessly shot down every pro-union argument. He was clearly in his element dissecting every fallacy thrown his way. His one failing was that he didn't make more statements and hold more public forums.

Whereas other presidents folded to union pressure -- Cornell's president, for example, declined to contest the UAW's right to hold an election -- Bacow held firm. His arguments were consistent: unions have an important role to play in society, but this was the wrong context for them. Unions could only undermine, not improve, graduate education, and Bacow could cite facts to prove it. He held firm to that principle, and may have saved the autonomy of graduate education (and of grad students) at Tufts in the process.

Bacow battled the UAW not merely with words, but also with law. New England's regional board of the NLRB ordered an election for late April 2002, and it was held. Bacow and the administration appealed that decision to the national board, so as soon as the vote was held, the ballots were impounded, uncounted, pending the outcome of the appeal. The appeal, as of press-time, still has not been heard, though the national board has agreed to at least examine (not necessarily formally hear) the appeal.

The only disappointing turn from Bacow came from how he dealt with the union aftermath. He promised that he would work with graduate students in the coming years to improve conditions. Most in the anti-union movement assumed he was vague because federal law constrained his ability to make specific promises, but in the year since the election, he has yet to even send a single email to graduate students to inform us on the progress of the case or on whatever improvements he has proposed for graduate education. Hopefully, this will change next year.

Instead of attacking problems facing graduate education, former frat boy Bacow prioritized fighting the Naked Quad Run.

Taken as a whole, Bacow has developed a distinctive style of leadership. In general, he wants to avoid the appearance of anything amiss at his school, especially when taking action might expose him or the school to criticism.

But Bacow is not quite as bad as some paint him. I know little of his tenure at MIT, but despite the poor judgment he has demonstrated on a few issues, he also can act on principle when he puts his mind to it. As President Bacow gets more settled as president, one can only hope Tufts will see more of this morally courageous Bacow.

*Jason Walker is a graduate student completing his MA in philosophy at Tufts University, and is starting work on his PhD at the University of Wisconsin at Madison in fall 2003.*

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## Erratum

In our zeroeth issue, we allocated too little space in a caption and a sidebar, cutting off some text. We will ensure that we are more careful in the

## Letters to the Editor

### Cover to Cover

I just read Prometheus cover to cover - a first for any MIT publication I have ever picked up.

Congratulations on a great first issue. There was a great breadth of topics and each article was a quality piece

of writing.

I especially enjoyed and appreciated the interview with Prof. Vandiver; I think more get to know the faculty/administration articles would be a very good thing for the MIT community.

*Will DelHagen '03*

### Good 0th Issue

Nice work guys - I've been trying to convince *The Tech* that they needed a sense of student advocacy for while now, but this should do it.

*Sloan Kulper '03*

# What You Say !!

## The Use and Abuse of Rhetoric

By Sheeva Azma

With over 400,000 words, the sizeable vocabulary of the English language should be accustomed to exploitation in the name of artistic license by now. Books keep being written and rewritten about things like love and politics, but they recycle the same sentiments in a wide variety of words and phrases.

So why don't people stop saying the same things in different ways? Societies have dynamic vocabularies that adapt to either include new concepts or revamp words that societies don't like any more. So people get creative and start re-working their old words.

The English language automatically adapts to verbal restlessness in many ways. Slang eventually seeps into our everyday lives, regardless of who we are. Even while thoroughly hosed and tooling on a pset, we may find ourselves dropping MIT lingo into zephyrs amidst bouts of punting. This is one example of linguistic experimentation induced by MIT culture.

But the main engine of language proliferation is rhetoric, where the desire for effective speech fuels preoccupation with alternate expressions of a single idea. Rhetoric's power stems mainly from its malleable nature. People can use rhetoric to isolate and convey an idea while deemphasizing or avoiding unfavorable overtones. For example, in preparation to formally begin the war on Iraq, the Bush administration took great care to call the effort a "plan to disarm" the country. In his ultimatum, he rarely used the word "war" itself. The decision to eliminate the word from his speeches regarding it was arguably a response to negative public stereotypes associated with war, a bitter reminder of the Vietnam era.

Bush uses a euphemism for "war" to deemphasize or even omit its negative associations and to soften the tone of his statement. He has frequently used euphemisms like "a plan to disarm," "coalition of the willing," and "shock and

awe" to draw attention away from his more violent agenda. The effectiveness of his words come directly from this -- he insinuates his real plan, which can be deduced from the context of his actions, but he never makes that connection explicit himself.

Rhetoric doesn't always have to be a tool of deceit, though. Its purpose is to make communication clearer and more efficient. Skillfully wielded rhetoric sounds like simple, frank expression. It caters to its audience by matching the context of the audience's background, making new ideas understandable. Thomas Jefferson is famous for the eloquence of the Declaration of Independence: "When in the Course of human Events, it becomes necessary for one People to dissolve the Political Bands which have connected them with another...a decent Respect to the Opinions of Mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the Separation." His language is passionate and direct, and the connotations of his words reinforce his call for revolution, making it clear, candid, and indeed "self-evident."

Though rhetoric can be useful, it can still spin out of our control. When this happens, accumulated connotations can obscure the real meanings of words. Negative connotations associated with loaded words come from external forces, not something inherent to the words themselves. Consequently, these connotations are often difficult to destroy. For example, words infused with racial content, such as "black" and "white," evolve into new words that multiply when they become as racially charged as the old ones. Replacing a word charged with negative connotations is difficult because the connotations will eventually catch up with the meaning. On the other hand, neutral words are periodically replaced with polarized words that may sound awkward or silly: "freedom fries" come to mind.

This sneaky business of linguistic switcheroos can aid rhetoric greatly. Ambiguities and vague connotations give speakers and writers the benefit of the doubt when trying to appease many

audiences. In this way, rhetoric can develop positive connotations, as people extract the meanings most pleasing to themselves. The word "community," a favorite of the MIT administration, is one such abstraction. Though this concept may have started out as a concrete plan to bring togetherness to the school, it now represents an ethereal bond that justifies almost any policy regarding student life.

Of course, the danger of vague communication is developing buzzwords. Buzzwords are hazards to communication because they are so broadly defined that they are meaningless. Words like "democracy" and "liberty" evoke positive mental images, but their concrete definitions are debatable and, since they're so broadly interpreted, may even contradict each other. Those are examples of real words gone stale, but even worse are the artificial ones, the barely meaningful sounds used as placeholders for vivid language: "pro-active," "para-

digm shift," "sea change," and hundreds of others. Buzzwords are spawned when rhetoric goes too far and ends up contributing to the problem it is supposed to solve.

If language is so muddled and contains so many insinuations and cliches, how does anyone know what's true or false any more? Indeed, people do use rhetoric to put a convincing spin on the truth, and although rhetoric can be a powerful tool for honest communication, it can also be abused by those who deliberately lie or deceive. To know what someone is really saying, you have to pay attention to not only what she is saying, but also how she says it. At that point, you have the ability to distinguish between the use and abuse of rhetoric -- and so long as verbal shenanigans abound, you're going to need it.

Sheeva Azma '05 (sheeva@mit.edu) writes good.

### MIT Buzzword Bingo

foobar	punting	IAP	BINGO	east campus
west campus	TEAL	Lobdell	FSILG	HASS-D
smoot	26-100	community	RBA	Brass Rat
zwrite	millenials	znol	tooling	hack
SIPB	001	Course XIX	squatting	Fred



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## Your comments go here

Dear Prometheus,

I enjoyed reading the first issue of your publication. I am glad to see that someone is finally covering these issues with an eye to the underlying ideas. Keep up the good work.

Sincerely,  
Transparent Stooge

prometheus - please include a notice about our committee meetings in your back page "What the hell is going on?" section... it's not for everyone but some students might like it.

"Poppycock."

I was wondering if you guys had thought of writing about this whole "community" thing and how it doesn't really mean anything.

I was interested in what you guys are doing. I don't have any ideas right now, but can I join your discussion list?

j00 r /N0+ 31337

Hey! I want to write about Go and how it's like physics: "Make everything as simple as possible, and no simpler." You said you'd take anything well-written, so... when are your meetings!

hey, you guys messed up a reference to the RSIT S

don't see how that could be an issue of responsibility but not failed to take into consideration, so your point doesn't hold.

Prometheus, I read your article suggesting we change our have actually been considering such a change in light of for interested students to attend and help craft a new policy. Thanks.

E-mail [fire@mit.edu](mailto:fire@mit.edu)

@&#SING PRETENTIOUS IDEOLOGUES WHO COULDN'T REASON THEIR WAY OUT OF

# Whose democracy?

By Aram Harrow

*"O people of Baghdad, remember that for 26 generations you have suffered under strange tyrants who have endeavored to set one Arab house against another ... This policy is abhorrent to Great Britain and her allies.... Therefore I am commanded to invite you, through your nobles and elders and representatives, to participate in the management of your civil affairs in collaboration with the political representatives of Great Britain who accompany the British Army, so that you may be united with your kinsmen in North, East, South, and West in realising the aspirations of your race..."*

-Stanley Maude, British General, 1916

*"What's going to happen the first time we hold an election in Iraq and it turns out the radicals win? What do you do? We're surely not going to let them take over."*

-Brent Scowcroft, national security adviser to President George H. W. Bush, 2003

Democracy in Iraq has been a much-touted goal of the Bush administration ever since its case for stopping Iraqi weapons of mass destruction began to flag. And for good reason. Even though Iraq's economy and infrastructure are currently in ruins, their oil reserves and well-educated population mean that a strong Iraqi democracy has the potential for cultural, economic and political leadership in the region. On the other hand, if democracy fails in Iraq, then we risk a further destabilization of the Middle East, more young men who turn to terrorism for lack of any peaceful political outlet, and decades more of poverty and misery for millions of people.

But before we roll up our sleeves and start translating the Bill of Rights into Arabic we should pause to consider how we got into this situation in the first place. Although our problems with the Arab world may seem recent (how often have we heard that 9/11 "changed everything?"), many of them have their roots in British regional involvement nearly a century ago.

The British were far more experienced in the early 20th century at running an empire than the U.S. is today. However, things eventually went sour for the British in ways that are starting to look disturbingly familiar. If we want a stable, prosperous Iraq 50 years from now then the safest strategy is to let the Iraqis choose their own government and not pretend that we know best how to run their country. Any American involvement beyond installing police and infrastructure risks shaping Iraq according to American and not Iraqi priorities, with predictably tragic consequences.

## British colonialism in the Middle East

The British legacy in Iraq began with a pair of conflicting promises. In 1915 they gained Arab support against the Turks by promising them independence after the war. A year later, however, the British signed the Sykes-Picot treaty with the French, dividing up most of the Ottoman empire between the two superpowers even before the war was over. This treaty was kept secret until the Bolsheviks seized power in Russia in 1919 and published the secret treaties of the Tsars, including Sykes-Picot. When the League of Nations made Iraq a British "mandate" (meaning that the British were to "guide" them until they were capable of self-rule) in 1920, a popular rebellion broke out which was brutally suppressed

using the new military technology of the time: airplanes.

The British soon realized that they needed to rule from a distance, setting up what foreign secretary George Curzon described as an "Arab facade ruled and administered under British guidance and controlled by a native Mohammedan and, as far as possible, by an Arab staff." They wrote a constitution, installed the pro-British King Faysal and immediately signed treaties with Faysal reconstituting most of the terms of the Mandate and granting an extremely lucrative concession for the Turkish Petroleum Company (a British company, later renamed the Iraq Petroleum Company).

In the interwar years, as British imperial and economic power waned, other Western nations were able to get pieces of the Iraqi oil market, until it was eventually shared by British, French, Dutch and American companies. Iraqi unrest continued, until the British granted "independence" in 1932, while keeping King Faysal in power along with a treaty granting them two air bases and the right to unilateral intervention. Even this nominal independence lasted only until 1941 when coup leaders threatened to join the Axis powers in order to obtain freedom from the British. Britain reinvaded Iraq and maintained its occupation for over a decade, declaring martial law in 1948 to crush protests over Israel's founding and the expulsion of the Palestinians. In 1954 all political parties were outlawed.

It was from this background that the Baath party emerged. Moderates who ruled Iraq from 1958-1963 had failed to hold the country together, in part because of the ethnic divide and rule policies of the British. By ruling through the minority Sunni Muslims, the British had ensured that Iraqis would be unable to govern themselves without British support. Even the borders of Iraq had been chosen in 1916 to contain a fractious mixture of ethnicities---Shi'ites, Sunni, Kurds, Assyrians, Turks and others---

*Excluding religious leaders from the political process risks a situation like Algeria's, where local election results were annulled after fundamentalists won, plunging the country into a bloody decade-long civil war.*

designed to be difficult to hold together without force.

Thus, a generation of young Iraqis had been disillusioned by the idea of democracy because they had experienced decades of British promises of progress and liberation as meaning no more than instability, poverty and exploitation.

The reason this history is relevant to the well-intentioned Americans today is because what has been such a disaster for Iraq was not due to British malice, but simply the logical response of the British to the geopolitical pressures they faced.

Initially, the main British rival in Iraq was the French, so they took Sykes-Picot seriously and not their promises to the Arabs. Later they feared Iraqi autonomy, and worst of all, losing control over Iraq's oil. Hence their reliance on divide and conquer rule and trying to keep a symbolic distance from the Iraqi government while maintaining oil ties.

This crucial point is this: colonialism is inherently anti-democratic because it involves one people being ruled by another. The British acted in their own interests, to protect British financial and strategic interests in the region. Since Iraq was a profitable British protectorate, they were interested in its "stability" so that they could continue profiting from it, but their interests were fundamentally different from Iraqi interests.

In trying to learn from the British example, we need to realize that their failings were not because they were evil racist imperialists, or because they were greedy or short-sighted. The results of British colonialism were inevitable consequences of the priorities that began the project. Similarly, if Americans are able to set the rules for Iraqi democracy or help their favorite candidates, then they will do their best to guarantee that Iraq is run for American, and not Iraqi, benefit.

## The American mandate in Iraq

Admittedly, it is sometimes difficult to guess the goals of U.S./U.K. intervention in Iraq; was the war about terrorism, or WMDs, or projecting American power in the region, or removing an enemy so America could draw down its forces in the Middle East, or something else entirely?

Regardless of which tactical decisions are made, a fairly reliable way of guessing overall U.S. strategy is to examine the powerful interests that set U.S. priorities. The Bush administration, for example, owes favors to oil and defense companies, among others. Future administrations will want to avoid unsuccessful wars, economic decline, being blamed for a major terrorist attack, or being associated with scandals.

Recent events seem to be confirming these guesses. Before the guns were cold, Halliburton and Bechtel had been given lucrative contracts for rebuilding Iraq in what can only be described as back-room deals. A bill was introduced to Congress proposing American CDMA as the new cell phone standard in Iraq, with the idea of hedging against European GSM's domination of the rest of the Middle East. France complained that its companies were excluded from the reconstruction, and the Democrats complained that their corporate sponsors didn't get to bid for contracts, while no one holding power spoke for Iraqi interests.

It seems likely that Iraqi reconstruction will mean handsome profits for a few well-connected American companies paid partially by the American taxpayer, and partially by Iraqi oil revenues. Since their owners and priorities will be outside of Iraq, the profits and control will remain outside Iraq.

In contrast, when Saddam Hussein decided that Iraq needed to modernize in the late 1970's so he could stay in power, Iraq's economy and quality of life became the envy of the Arab world. Even though Saddam's rule was more oppressive than any colonial regime,

when he decided that he needed Iraqi prosperity to stay in office, he found the will to move Iraq forward. An outside power will have no such incentives beyond maintaining their influence and making sure the oil continues to flow.

If the economic and strategic power of oil are the carrots that encourage those in power, what are the sticks that the Bush administration fear? A quagmire (a.k.a. the "Q" word) is high on the list. Being stuck in Iraq for years, with the attendant deaths and embarrassment, would be a nightmare. A new Iraqi government opposing U.S. interests would obviously also be unwelcome.

Again, we can predict U.S. actions by judging U.S. priorities. It seems likely that we will attempt to install someone pro-American with an Arab face, like Ahmed Chalabi. We will probably remove troops quickly, but leave skeleton crews in a few bases (since our newly agile military no longer needs to station large garrisons to project power) and favorable trade ties. Already the Pentagon has changed the name of the "interim Iraqi authority" to the "transitional government" suggesting that they intend to ease their chosen leaders into power gradually. A similar maneuver placed Hamid Karzai in charge of Afghanistan (or at least Kabul), where functioning democracy is seeming increasingly remote.

This might strike some as needlessly cynical. After all, aren't we doing the right thing? Building democracy and getting out quickly? Not quite. First of all, Americans know that you don't have to support your favorite candidate with military force - campaign contributions are enough to keep him in power. We seem to be tilting towards Chabali's Iraqi National Congress with financial and other support that will give the party a heavy advantage without actively suppressing the opposition.

Second, if we give in to temptation and exclude religious leaders from the political process than we risk a situation like that in Algeria, where the 1991 local election results were annulled after fundamentalists won, plunging the country into a bloody decade-long civil war. On the other hand, there is currently a power struggle within the Shi'ite clergy in Najaf between moderates and conservatives over whether to have Sharia law or separation between mosque and state. If these moderates were to emerge without the taint of American influence, then they might be able to help Iran liberalize in ways that America never could directly. And even if the Iraqis make the "wrong" choice about religious leadership, this does not have to mean the end of democracy; just ask Turkey, where Islamic leadership has been a force for economic and political liberalization.

When asked his opinion of Western civilization, Mahatma Gandhi replied famously that "it would be a good idea." Unless American priorities dramatically change, it seems likely that for the foreseeable future, Iraqi democracy will likewise remain a good idea.

*Aram Harrow '01 and G prefers cigars from Commie stooges to those from imperialist stooges.*

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# Fetishizing Democracy

By Scott Schneider

As American troops fought their way into Baghdad, the world was already fiercely debating the government that would replace Hussein's regime. President Bush pledged, "We will stand with the new leaders of Iraq as they establish a government of, by, and for the Iraqi people." Skeptics said that America should let the Iraqi people choose their own government, free of American influence. Despite their differences, everyone agrees that Iraq must have a democracy, and pronto.

Yet amidst all the talk about how to seed a democracy in Iraq, virtually no one has questioned whether this ought to be our primary goal. Perhaps forming a stable, incorrupt government that protects Iraqis' rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness should not merely be instrumental to creating a democracy, but should be our essential goal. By focusing on democracy as an end rather than a means, we lose sight of what is truly important.

Nonetheless, the debate about Iraqi democracy goes on. Will the U.S. create the framework for an Iraqi democracy and help them administer it, phasing out their role over the next few years? Or will they convene a constitutional congress in Baghdad, and walk out of the room, and the country, as the meeting gets underway? If America's role in forming the new Iraqi government is unclear, the end result is doubly so. Perhaps this is because the central goal, "democracy," is so poorly defined. George Orwell, writing at another time when creation of new governments was a hot issue, took a rather disparaging view:

*"The word democracy has several different meanings which cannot be reconciled with one another... Not only is there no agreed definition, but the attempt to make one is resisted from all sides. It is almost universally felt that when we call a country democratic we are praising it: consequently the defenders of every kind of regime claim that it is a democracy, and fear that they might have to stop using that word if it were tied down to any one meaning."*

-George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language", 1946

Is democracy essentially government by the majority? This definition has the appeal of simplicity, but few advocate unchecked majority rule. Is democracy an egalitarian system of government that puts power in its citizens' hands? This definition sounds pleasant enough, but doesn't really mean anything. How is the government egalitarian? Does power lie with individuals, or with groups that act through the government? Most definitions of democracy dance around this essential question: if groups exercise their power against individuals, in what sense is democracy still egalitarian?

Let's take a look at some of the possible outcomes in Iraq, and see what we consider an acceptable form of democracy.

## The People's State of Iraq

Unless Arabic translations of Locke's *Second Treatise on Government* and *The Federalist Papers* suddenly top

### Democracy, according to the American Heritage Dictionary:

1. Government by the people, exercised either directly or through elected representatives.
2. A political or social unit that has such a government.
3. The common people, considered as the primary source of political power.
4. Majority rule.
5. The principles of social equality and respect for the individual within a community.

Iraqi bestseller lists, Iraq is unlikely to establish an American-style democracy for itself. The two biggest questions are how much religious freedom the Iraqi government will permit, and how closely the Iraqi government will regulate and control its economy, especially its oil.

Extreme theocracy is one worst case scenario. No one wants to see a Shi'ite Muslim majority vote itself into power in Iraq and proceed to oppress Sunni Muslims, Christians, and Kurds. A majority that turns minorities into second-class citizens is not the sort of democracy that modern-day America or the world would tolerate.

The tricky thing about a moderate theocracy is keeping it that way. If Shi'ites favor their own religion (by teaching it in schools, building their



**Might Iraqi democracy simply trade one dictatorship for another?**

mosques out of public coffers, or mandating forms of worship), Sunnis and Christians will naturally resent it. Once the means of promoting religion through government are established, minorities that gain power can dismantle these tools or turn them to their own advantage. Either way, they win the ability to practice their religion freely; if they use these tools, they can further their own agenda. This temptation will be particularly strong if they see it as compensation or retribution for past repression. Knowing this, the dominant religious faction will be afraid to ease religious restrictions in a way that might allow minorities to gain power.

Aside from the practical difficulties of moderating a theocracy, there are also the limits on religious freedom. Though Americans sometimes think of all those Middle Eastern countries as a pile of Arabs with different dialects (and a handful of Jews in the middle), Iraq is an ethnically diverse nation, so a theocracy would necessarily harm the religious freedom of a large segment of Iraq's population.

Will any element of religion in the new Iraqi government ruin the whole project? Probably not, but religion must be at most a minor influence in an Iraqi democracy.

A complete command economy (like the Soviet Union's) is another worst case scenario. Iraq is rich in oil

*America today does not share Britain's driving need in 1916 to squeeze colonies for every drop of oil.*

resources, but would be slow to develop those resources without foreign investment. Even then, Iraq would not have the finances to bankroll a worker's paradise. And the history of the Soviet Union, Cuba, and developing African nations such as Tanzania has shown worker's paradises to be anything but.

A heavily centralized economy with an extensive welfare state would place many obstacles in the way of economic development. Corporations hesitate to do business in a nation that might nationalize their investments or tax and regulate away their profits. Those that do will lobby the Iraqi government for assurances that their property will remain secure and for special privileges. They might also lobby the U.S. government for diplomatic help with their investments.

The effect of this uncertainty is to discourage investors who simply want to charge a fair price for their work and to make lobbying that is quasi-corrupt (at best) an essential part of foreign investment in Iraq.

This moderate socialism also limits Iraqis' incentives and ability to be self-reliant. If the state provides free housing and medicine, why should Iraqis work for them? And if the state doesn't deliver, what can an Iraqi do? Furthermore, what about Iraqis who would like to go into business on their own, providing goods and services beyond what the state offers? Sudden growth in the welfare state might put them out of a job and on the dole.

Just as a completely secular government is not the only alternative to theocracy, laissez faire capitalism is not the only alternative to socialism. A mixed economy might avoid these problems, depending on how it's mixed. Heavy regulation and intervention in the economy could sustain severe corruption in a nation where jobs were passed out as patronage, based on loyalty to Saddam and sons. On the other hand, straightforward taxation and minimal regulation would deprive corporations of many lobbying opportunities, leaving them to compete for Iraqi oil based on the price and service they offer.

## Sanity check!

Now that we have some idea of what democracy in Iraq might mean, let's take a step back and consider why we want Iraq to have a democracy.

*"It has been said that democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others that have been tried."*

-Winston Churchill

Most alternatives to democracy -- dictatorship, monarchy, aristocracy, plutocracy, and foreign rule -- are so obviously awful that they do not need to be refuted. However, since American rule is the obvious alternative to Iraqi democracy, and since a transition to Iraqi democracy implies American supervision in the interim, let's consider the implications of foreign rule.

British imperialism had its upsides. In 1833, Great Britain abolished slavery throughout its empire, having freed slaves within Britain several decades earlier. British economic influence motivated the Union to issue the Emancipation Proclamation.<sup>1</sup> Pax Britannica (the "British peace") lasted for nearly a hundred years after the battle of Waterloo, and owed as much to Britain's

low trade barriers (which gave its trading partners an incentive for peace) as to its naval dominance.

Around the beginning of the 20th century, colonies became vital to Britain's economy as other industrializing European nations adopted protectionist policies. Britain's commitment to free trade eroded as it scrambled to keep up with its increasingly powerful and ambitious neighbors. The Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 reflects this. It split the Middle East between Britain and

France, and assured that other European powers would not close the world's oil supply to Britain. In part, Britain was forced into colonialism. This does not justify British double and triple-dealing in the Middle East; it simply explains their incentives for imperialism.

Those same incentives do not exist

*The tricky thing about a moderate theocracy is keeping it that way.*

today for the United States. America does not have to contend with tsars, kaisers, and emperors for trading rights. Even OPEC does not keep George W. awake at night -- Saudi Arabia realizes that huge nominal profits do them little good when a slowed world economy hurts their purchasing power.<sup>2</sup>

There certainly are incentives for American mischief. Today's politicians always have their debts to repay. (Halliburton, anyone?) The sums promised to corporate sponsors in back-room deals may be huge, but America today does not share Britain's driving need in 1916 to squeeze colonies for every drop of oil. There are many arguments against perpetual American rule of Iraq -- American bureaucracies may entrench themselves, or American foreign affairs priorities may change -- but America's incentives don't preclude the possibility of a transition period followed by real Iraqi independence.

## Put it together

These are the possibilities for an Iraqi democracy: On the religious axis, Iraqis might create a repressive theocracy, a moderate theocracy with unmoderating tendencies, or a mostly (or entirely) secular government. And on the economic axis, Iraqis might choose extreme socialism, moderate socialism with lobbying levers aplenty, or a mixed/free economy. Furthermore, though American supervision would have its problems, it would not doom the goal of eventual Iraqi democracy.

If we surrender the fate of Iraq to a fledgling democracy, it would take an uncertain and possibly disastrous direction. On the other hand, if our primary goal is to create a stable and prosperous government for Iraq and foster individual Iraqis' well-being, the choice is clear. We must aim, first and foremost, to establish a sound and just Iraqi government, and phase out American involvement as the Iraqi people demonstrate that their appetite for national self-government will not ruin their chance for prosperity and individual self-government.

*Scott Schneider '00 wastes his vote on third party candidates.*

1) [http://www.encyclopedia.com/html/section/EmancipaP\\_PurposeoftheProclamation.asp](http://www.encyclopedia.com/html/section/EmancipaP_PurposeoftheProclamation.asp)  
2) <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A12711-2003Mar11.html>

<http://www.gasandoil.com/goc/news/ntn30839.htm> [http://abcnews.go.com/sections/business/DailyNews/opec\\_masterman000704.html](http://abcnews.go.com/sections/business/DailyNews/opec_masterman000704.html)

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# Benedict on in loco parentis, REX



continued from page 1

**PM:** I know that the motivation for some people in forming ILTFP was that there have historically been complaints that the UA doesn't adequately represent various communities. That's in part due to its organizational structure, which is modeled after a governing body, as opposed to a lobbying body.

**LB:** It's good to see you point that out.

**PM:** What do you think about that in relation to the difference between the issues that the UA, DormCon, and ILTFP have unsuccessfully tried to address?

**LB:** ILTFP had a very focused method and a very focused agenda, and acted very cohesively. I did not sense that from some of the other constituencies with whom I've met. By contrast, IFC tends to have a very focused message. It has a very focused body. It tends to speak for its body more than some other organizational units do. And so, as you look at them, they know exactly what they want. Their leaders are their leaders. And so, when we talk to their leaders and vice versa, we get the picture right away. Whereas if I meet with UA, I may not get the DormCon view. If I'm with DormCon, I may not get the ILTFP view, and vice versa. In fact, I will say that I don't. If I meet with the three different groups, I will get three different takes, all representing an undergraduate residence, to one extent or another. So

*Regarding Orientation 2004, how can students go about getting two uninterrupted days for REX?*

part of it has to do with who's generating the message, how they're generating it, and who the message is for. So I think ILTFP was so successful this spring because it has a very narrow agenda, a very narrow focus, and was very articulate about it.

**PM:** Do you think people should adopt similar strategies in future issues, or do you think that some effort should be made to reorganize existing governing bodies to be more effective?

**LB:** (pause) That's a very interesting question, and I'm not going to answer it quite that way because I'd prefer to see a governance body that can play this role. Otherwise, every time an issue comes up, you generate a different

*It's not the role of MIT to be the parents.*

group with whom we work, sometimes more successfully, sometimes less successfully. And so you have all these ad hoc groups coming and going and they represent maybe a large group, or maybe only twenty people, but you don't know.

One of the things we've gotten in trouble with here is that I've met with certain one-issue or two-issue groups, only to find out after we've had negotiations and discussions and come up with a compromise that that compromise is not acceptable to the next group down the way. And so I end up like Henry Kissinger, running around all the countries in the Middle East. You end up caught in the middle, and it's a very uncomfortable position for me or any dean to be in.

It would be really helpful to us, and it would really help communication, if there was a clear governing structure on campus. But that's not the MIT way. I see that across the board. I think faculty are in a similar situation. You go to a faculty meeting and maybe thirty faculty come out of, what, nine hundred faculty? I don't think those thirty faculty speak for all nine hundred faculty, and so when something actually happens there are bound to be faculty who say, "Wait a minute? I didn't agree to that. What's this crazy new policy they're putting in place?" You're always behind the eight ball on the communication front.

**PM:** Why do you think that happens at MIT?

**LB:** (pause) I have no clue. I got here two and a half years ago... that's just the way it is. You guys have been here longer than I have and probably have a better sense of what is going on here.

**PM:** Some people suspect hosage.

The semester is hectic. It's insanely busy after the first week, sometimes even then. But in some cases, major decision making meetings have fallen either right during the heart of midterms or right before final exams. Even professors will say that their lives get insane for the last couple of months of every semester. So I'm

not surprised attendance is low in those cases. This actually relates to an issue we briefly talked about earlier [see the online interview!]: if committees are supposed to be substantive channels of communication between students and administrators --

**LB:** Exactly right.

**PM:** -- they need to conduct their meetings in contexts where students have an opportunity to thoughtfully present

their views and to thoughtfully consider what's before their committee. My experience

on the dining committee was that the structure made that very difficult. The committee made several of its most important decisions at meetings when there were four people in attendance, and most people hadn't done the reading. From speaking with people who were involved in RSIT, I know there has been a lot of dissatisfaction with how that committee interpreted its survey results. There's been a lot of controversy, at least. I heard from somebody that student attendance at the RSIT meetings was remarkably low because the meetings, at one point, were scheduled for 9:30 on a Friday morning. Now maybe the student representatives should have been more assertive. But I was wondering, have you heard of this sort of problem?

**LB:** This is the first I've heard of it, to be honest with you. And I did not

hear the criticism from the RSIT students. I heard just the opposite: they outnumbered the staff at some of the meetings. After the first year I did not go to the RSIT meetings.

**PM:** Grace Kessenich [former DormCon President] told me that there were always some students there, but most students had problems making most meetings.

**LB:** I'm talking about the first year, when I was chairing it.

**PM:** Over the past few years, MIT has made several major changes in policy, particularly student life, and some people think that this trend, which seems to be echoed to varying extents around the nation, is a move towards in loco parentis.

The now infamous Faculty Newsletter article that the Dean of Admissions wrote actually explicitly said that we as an institution have to acknowledge that in loco parentis is part of our role, when she described millennials. And certainly, some aspects of the Scott Krueger decision reflect that attitude from a liability standpoint. What do you think about that issue?

**LB:** At CPW, I had the opportunity to sit on-stage and talk to 200, maybe 250 parents. I began my conversation by saying to them, "We are not the parent. You are still the mothers and fathers of your sons and daughters that you're bringing to MIT. I don't want to be the parent of your children. I'm sure they're lovely children, but it's not the role of MIT to be the parents. And I have to tell you, there has been increasing pressure from parents, here and across the nation, for us to play that role. We're not going that way. MIT students are given more autonomy for more aspects of their lives outside of the classroom than any other school in the country, and we like it that way. You as parents may not like it, if you think of some of the implications. It means, for example, that I'm not going to call you if your son or daughter gets in trouble. I'm not going to call you if your son or daughter goes to the hospital for whatever reason. Unless their life is threatened -- if their life is threatened, different story. I'm not going to call you if your son is found with a can of beer down on the Lacrosse field or on the astroturf or whatever. I'm not going to call you if your son flunks 8.01." I also said, "Now don't you call me if you don't like the residence hall room they get, because we don't assign them to rooms.

*"Look, it's your house.... You come back to us and we'll talk about how we can help you."*

If your daughter is on a floor with a co-ed bathroom, I don't want to hear it, because that is not our responsibility. That is the responsibility of your daughter and the housing assignment chair."

I think it's important for you to understand, philosophically, where we're coming from, at least where some of us are coming from, even if it doesn't always look that way from the outside.

**PM:** I know a few years ago, Marilee Jones had a letter to the prospective freshmen saying, "I'm your mom away from mom this weekend." It's pretty infamous, and prefrish were supposed to wear wristbands identifying themselves as prefrish. I think some undergraduates dressed up as sheep.

**LB:** Are you sure it wasn't a hack?

**PM:** Yeah, it was a hack.

I remember, actually, that wristbands were given out my year.

**LB:** Interesting. I had not heard about that.


**PM:** There were some statements like that. Have you read Marilee Jones's faculty newsletter? You can understand how statements written in that are very different than the attitude you just described.

**LB:** I understand, but I'm not talking about general trends in any particular category of students like millennials or boomers or anything like that. What's important to me is this -- and this is why the philosophy of not moving to in loco parentis is important -- you're going to learn as much outside the classroom as you are in the classroom. Many faculty disagree with me, but in terms of life skills, communication skills, collaboration skills, listening, negotiation, and team-building skills -- those are every bit as important whether you're going to be running your own dot com or on the faculty. The fact is, these are the kinds of skills you need, and these are the things you learn outside the classroom. You're learning a very important lesson by doing these kinds of things, as if you were sitting in a lab. You come here for the academic experience, no question about that. But your education is a lot more broad than a pure academic experience.

**PM:** How to do laundry...

**LB:** Silly things like that, but also, how do you run a house government? How do you run the UA? How do you run a club sport? Do you know how much experience you get running a club sport, in terms of scheduling and organizing, and team work and negotiating?

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It's remarkable. Twenty years from now, if you come and talk to me, you're not even going to mention most of your coursework. You'll mention a few faculty, but you're going to mention the experiences you had with roommates, with classmates, with housemates, with whatever team you might have been on.

*You're going to learn as much outside the classroom as you are in the classroom.*

The biggest pressures I get come from some of the athletic alumni, saying that was the most important thing that ever happened to them.

So you have to be sensitive to that, and in my position, you do not want to structure things in such a way that you're missing that opportunity. That's a huge loss if you miss. You go to... You go to certain universities, and they tell what time you can close the residence hall, the sex of guests you can have at certain hours. Talk about taking away the student learning and responsibility...

If I can leave you with one thought, though, the thought is that in loco parentis is not a governing philosophy here. I know that freshman on campus was a very, very difficult decision, and still is causing ripples through the system, as you know. A lot of that stuff, from a student point of view, makes students say, "They're taking our autonomy away from us." I don't believe that. Look at the kinds of things we're trying to leave in place, like the housing assignment chairs. My life would be a lot easier, my staff's lives would be a lot easier, parents would be a lot happier, if we didn't have that. But we're not going to go there. It causes me headaches, mostly from parents, but, you know, that's part of my job. I've worked where we actually assigned every student to every room, and I've had more problems with those systems than I've had with this system, in terms of roommate complaints, unhappy parents, and those kinds of issues.

There are problems with this system, don't get me wrong. I've had student leaders tell me that the old R/O was the worst experience of their entire lives. They won't say it in public, but they'll tell me about it behind closed doors. There are some problems with it. There are some students who are hurt by the system the way it is. I'd like to work on fixing that part of the system rather than changing the entire system to try and take care of a relatively small number of problems. I want every student to arrive here and have a good first experience coming into the Institute. We've got a ways to go.

**PM:** There's another question of whether in loco parentis is a de facto policy -- something that falls out of various constraints that you have and various incentives that administrators at all levels have. You can see some examples. Freshmen on campus is a huge constraint. There's also suggestions of mandatory dining. You could see why many administrators thought that it was a good idea for reasons that had nothing to do with in loco parentis, but that would have been an effect of that policy. What do you think about that kind of de facto policy, and do you do things to combat that?

**LB:** (pause) That's a very good question. I can see from a student's point of view why some of these things would appear to be in loco parentis. Let's take the freshmen housing example: the decision was made by the president that freshmen would live on campus. Beyond that, how they actually end up living on campus becomes as much a student process as an administration process. For example, we kept the housing assignment chair process. I don't know of any other school in the country where they say, "Here are thirty freshmen. You put them where you want to put them, and decide how you want to put them there." I think if we were really in loco parentis, we probably would step in and assign them to rooms, make parents happy, maybe make some freshmen happy, and make upperclass students unhappy. But I

think we're respectful enough of the process and individual cultures of the houses.

Now there are times we do float trial balloons. Dining was a good example. We ended up with a very active campus dining board, with student input. I know attendance was up and down, but the fact is I'm looking to that board to make recommendations.

Another example has come up: one of the unanticipated outcomes of FOC and Senior Segue and opening Simmons hall all at the same time was the disproportionate number of frosh in Next House. I talked with Next House student government and reps, and they're looking for help. I basically said, "Look, it's your house. You talk about what kinds of help you might want. You come back to us and we'll talk about how we can help you do that; rather than the dean coming in saying, all right, Next House is going to do this and that." At some schools (ones that I've been at, actually), the administration would simply go ahead and "fix the problem." Well, what we decide is a fixed problem, you may not think it's fixed. In fact you may think it's a worse problem.

The best experiences and most positive for both sides were those where we've worked from the beginning with students to help develop policy. That doesn't mean we'll always be able to work with students, and it doesn't mean that we'll always have policies that students like.

There are, for example, some safety concerns, where we've got to play a little bit heavier hand than we might otherwise. Just before I got here a number of procedural policy changes were made with heavy push from the administration, again for health and safety reasons. Now from one point of view you might think that's in loco parentis. Steer Roast is a good example. About the flaming toilet paper to light the fire -- the fire department had some serious concerns about that. Well, they worked with the students, and they've got some new contraption and it works just fine. So the event is still there, the students still run it, and I think everyone is relatively satisfied.

We're not 100% successful, I'll be honest with you. But we're also not 0% successful.

A lot of parents don't like this. I had an interesting letter from a father who was not pleased that his son had decided to move into a fraternity. He wrote me and said, "I want you to know that I withdraw my permission for my son to live in a fraternity." I wrote back and I said, "Thank you for sharing your concerns with me, but this is not my decision. This is your son's decision, and you need to tell your son you don't want him to live there." Well, the father had told the son and the son decided he wanted to live there anyway. In the old days, the dean would have stepped in and moved him out, because he would have been acting for the parent. We don't do that.

**PM:** When we spoke to Dean Vandiver about the squatting issue in the context of Orientation, he said that one of the primary concerns was that parents were a lot more comfortable with the system when they had some certainty, and that that certainty served some students as well. What do you think about that -- specifically, the significant role that parental concerns played in that decision,

*... so I ended up like Henry Kissinger, running around all the countries in the Middle East.*

especially given the change in flexibility and the implications for freshmen moving in and looking around?

**LB:** I don't think that parent satisfaction was the primary mover or shaker for that. I can't tell you for sure. The Bacow report said that parents did complain a lot, and they did complain less this year, that's true. The issue is that students need the opportunity to move around and look around. I think that really is the key.

I think the in-house rush works pretty well. I wasn't convinced of that my first year here.

Somehow we've got to come up with a system that meets many goals, some of which are not exactly aligned. And that's where we're struggling, because I think students think the administration has a secret plan. Let me tell you, you give us too much credit. I went

how can students go about getting two uninterrupted days for REX?

**LB:** Kim Vandiver's chairing a new committee on the academic component, and Julie Norman is on that committee, and a number of students. While the immediate goal has to do with Orientation for this August, they also open the door for a year from now, since we already have people together working

#### Topics in this Interview

We only fit half of this 90-minute interview in the printed version.

Subjects in **bold** are transcribed here.

Those in *italics* will be available at <http://fire.mit.edu> soon after publication.

- *How did Benedict come to MIT?*
- *The role of Residential Life Associates.*
- **Communicating with a dozen student governments. + more**
- *How is meeting information distributed to the student body?*
- **Proliferation of student representatives.**
- **Getting students to attend forums.**
- *Orientation 2002 and the importance of dorm rush.*
- *Defining and promoting community, and the role of academics.*
- **In loco parentis**
- *Who's making the rules?*
- **REX 2004 - How to change the future.**
- **De facto in loco. Does it boil down to parenting styles?**
- *Plans to keep crowding under control.*
- **How to contact Benedict.**

to talk to one of the fraternities the other day. This was my first question: "How many of you think the administration is picking on you?" Every hand went up. I said, "How many think that the administration has a secret plan, that we're trying to get you?" Every hand went up. You

*I think students think the administration has a secret plan. You give us too much credit.*

give us too much credit. Honest to god, you give us too much credit.

What we're trying to do is to take the principle goals in the [Bacow and Student Life and Learning] reports, and put them into action. We don't have all

there. It's not too early to start. If we can find students who are willing to work with us this early on, that would be terrific. I would encourage them to do that.

**PM:** Do you think two uninterrupted days is a reasonable goal?

**LB:** I can't answer that right now.

I'd have to look at all the other kinds of things that need to happen during Orientation

and if it can be squeezed in. The thing is, everyone wants a piece of Orientation: police, chaplains, career counseling people want to come and talk. Everyone has things to offer students and they want the students to know that in the first three or

### What the hell is going on?

#### with my student reps?

• Next year's Undergraduate Association President and Vice President are Pius A. Uzamere '04 and Jacob W. Faber '04.

• Next year's Dormitory Council officers are President Emily Cofer '04, Vice President Johnny Yang '04, Rush Chair and Housing Chair Nikki Johnson '04, Secretary Dominik Rabiej '05, Treasurer Mike Childress '05, and JudComm Chair Justin Nelson '04.

• The Committee for the Review of Space Planning (CRSP) has tentatively approved \$500,000 for a renovation of the Reading Room, which would include repairs and the addition of two soundproof group study rooms.

#### with Orientation?

• The semi-recently resurrected student group ILTFP is involved in ongoing talks with administrators about housing, orientation, and rush. E-mail [iltfp](mailto:iltfp) for more information, or *blanche-a Suser iltfp-forum*.

#### with this feature?

• E-mail [fire@mit.edu](mailto:fire@mit.edu) if you know what the hell is going on.

the answers -- you know that. You don't have all the answers -- we know that. My hope would be that, working together, we come up with the best fit, which won't be perfect. So that's my goal.

**PM:** ILTFP started talking with the administrators in March and you'd already scheduled some things...

**LB:** Orientation planning actually starts in August/September for the following year, but for students, March is early to get involved. From their point of view, they're months early, but from our point of view, we're well down the road for planning. So there were some conflicts there. I think we resolved most of them pretty amicably and productively. There were tense feelings for a while, but at this point everybody's moving forward on those issues.

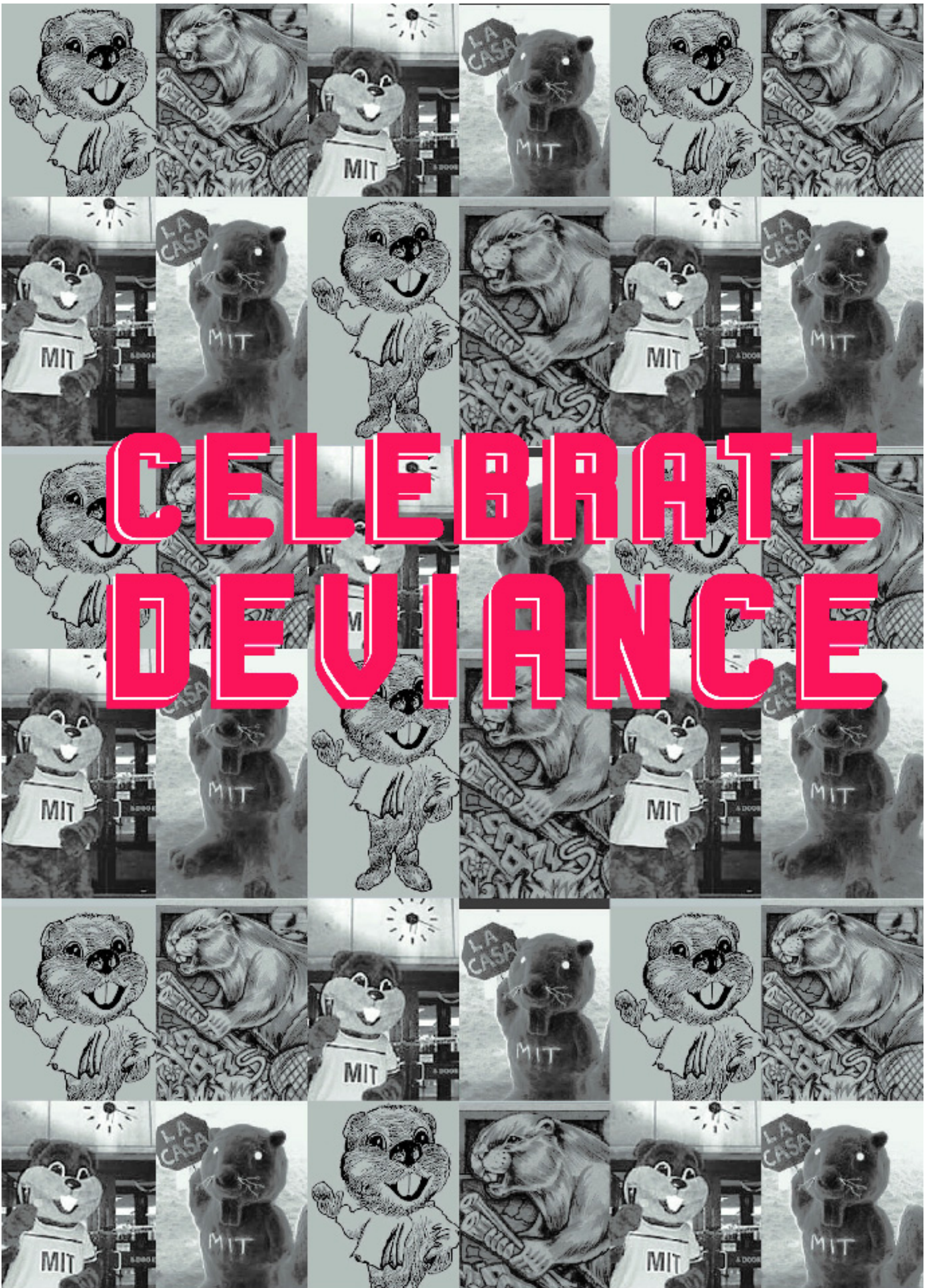
**PM:** I know that before ILTFP understood that things had been scheduled so early, some people wanted to push for even more time for Orientation 2003 than we have now, and deprioritized that when they realized that things were planned so far in advance. My question is, regarding Orientation 2004,

four days of the semester. My experience is that you overwhelm freshmen with all these messages. There's just too much information.

The schedule this year is full. Without adding more days to the schedule, I don't know what you would take out to have more time for REX. It'll always be a compromise in the negotiation process. I think that it's not too early to begin those conversations.

**PM:** How can students talk to you one-on-one?

**LB:** There's several ways you can do that. I have open office hours every Friday at 10. I give my e-mail to all students, alumni, and parents -- [larryben@mit.edu](mailto:larryben@mit.edu) -- and I check my email every morning. I may not answer right away, but I will certainly acknowledge that you e-mailed. If you want to talk to me, you can call my assistant Bonnie and make an appointment, or you can invite me to talk to a group. So there are a bunch of ways you can get access to the Dean of Student Life.



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