

Readers weigh in on hot topics at writers' forum

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One day after President Bush declared an end to "major combat operations in Iraq," letter writers at *The Tennessean's* annual Forum Banquet clashed on the war and on the issue of speaking against it.

The war, free speech, education and questions about the press were hot topics of discussion at the 64th annual Three Star Forum Banquet Friday night at Loews Vanderbilt Hotel.

The Three-Star Award is given daily to the writer of an outstanding letter to the editor. Every year, the recipients of that award are invited to a dinner in May.

During the event, writers get a chance to speak their minds for one minute, and this year, nearly 50 of them chose to vent. Here's what they had to say:

Education and children

Jack Irby wanted to thank Gov. Phil Bredesen for supporting education: "I know it's been a tough year with the budget, but I think it's very important that we support our teachers." He said that if teachers weren't given a raise, we would lose them to other states.

Maxine Schoggen asked people to have foresight on the subject of education: "Heads of organizations now in public schools will hire your children and grandchildren. It would be useful if they could all read, write and, above all, think. Think — think ahead."

Don Peterson, who has 10 grandchildren and eight great-grandchildren, said early childhood educational development programs in Tennessee were in jeopardy: "Politics is always about the future, and the future is always your children."

David Raybin wanted to talk about children because his son, Ben, challenged him to "keep up with him" in writing letters to the editor. He also spoke on the subject of foster care: "The day we spend as much interest in foster children — little lost children — as we do lost puppies, that would be a great day for the state of Tennessee."

Sue Broder addressed some of the issues currently faced by Metro schools: "In re-structuring the curriculum in Metro schools, the administration seems to be ignoring the fact that the system is made up of individuals, with a variety of interests, talents and abilities and goals. All children in Metro do not need to read the same books. They don't need to take the same courses. They don't need to attend the same types of schools. Or to score the same test scores."

Judith Bates spoke about her experiences as an educator: "I want you to know that 90% of my students are registered to vote by the time they finish my class. ... There's a lot of good out there, folks, in our young people, and I want you to know that. I've got a lot of respect for them."

Mary Jane Tharpe, a science teacher from Cheatham County, also spoke about foster care's impact on education: "We leave (the children) in homes where they're abused and neglected. We put them back in homes where they're abused and neglected, and then we expect them to show up to school, be perfect angels, do wonderful on the standardized test so I as a teacher can look good in the paper, so that my school can look good in the paper and so that my county can look good in the paper. ... The lawmakers tell me that no child is to be left behind, and then they tell me it's all right for 35 middle school students to be in my classroom with only me as the teacher."

Nancy McNeal, a teacher in McMinnville, Tenn., said her students gave her a standing ovation for her letter to the editor, which de-fended public schools that were being bashed. "They were so pleased to hear their schools defended." She told her pupils that at the Forum Banquet, she was going to "tell everybody what incredible students I have. How smart you are. How much you're accomplishing. I think I owed it to them to get up here and say that tonight."

The war in Iraq

Jerry Brown thanked the recently nationalized citizens who "broke Saddam's stranglehold on Iraq. And, I also especially would like to thank the 20 or so Kurdish men from Nashville's Kurdish community who stand with our forces in Iraq as civilian translators." He also expressed prayers for a Kurdish boy who remains hospitalized at Vanderbilt following a car accident after his father left for northern Iraq.

Rollow Mickle was one of a handful of speakers who spoke in favor of the war in Iraq. "Here's the thing about all the anti-war people — what makes you think you know the truth? Because you think something and know something doesn't mean that's the truth. ... The trouble with people is not that they don't know, it's that they know so much that ain't so. Never have so many people been so wrong about so much. ... The nicest thing I can say to the anti-war people is direct from Iraq," he said, holding up a shoe in imitation of the gestures made by Iraqis showing hatred for Saddam Hussein.

Paul Felton, contrasting his day to the day of an average Iraqi: "When I got up this morning, it was afternoon in Iraq. Thousands of Iraqis had spent their day not knowing what to expect and not expecting much from it. Mostly, they looked at dusty rubble through desolate tears, mourning their dead loved ones and their neighbors' loved ones, killed so that my leaders could make me feel safer."

Timothy (Scott) Hill expressed his views about the relationship of politics and religion: "You don't have to be a Republican to be a Christian. You don't have to be a Republican to be a patriot. I love my country. I love our soldiers. I think they did an admirable job." Yet, he believes the war was wrong and that the money spent on the war would have been better spent at home on the elderly and the disabled.

William Davis spoke out against the war: "Take a small easy-to-squash dictatorship, concoct an imaginary threat, add a nonexistent link to an existing threat, add a pinch of bluster and a passel of patriotism, shake vigorously for three weeks, and presto," you have a victory.

Ben Raybin said that war overseas overshadowed security problems on the home front. "There's threats here in America. We have all kinds of crime. We have a war on terrorism, but what about a war on crime here? We came up with a bunch of money, billions of dollars for a war on Iraq to protect us, but we can't walk down" city streets without fearing for our safety. "I think that we have more to fear from American criminals than from Middle Eastern terrorists. Each one of those missiles that we shot off could have been a full education for several students.

Eleanor Barrett responded to comments made by another speaker in favor of the war. "This war on Iraq is going to have an impact on terrorism. It is not going to be what this gentleman said. It's going to bring the lunatic fringe out even further. There are going to be more attacks, and we're in a mess of trouble."

Free speech

Hampton Howell said there had never been a time when it was more important to speak out: "I'm talking to those of you in this room and people outside who are thinking of writing letters. Do it. There is a new press for conformity in this country, for individuals and for innovative programs, such as fuel cells, and we're all being crushed, and we need to speak out and keep freedom alive."

Wayne Reece spoke out about freedom of expression: "Our country has become di-vided over what the litmus test for patriotism and liberty really is. Our president last eve-ning said that the war that is not yet ended is to provide liberty for Iraq and other nations. I wonder why he cannot see that public dissent is part of the liberty of our nation as well."

Ken Lass facetiously suggested the House Committee on Un-American Affairs be revived: "What Joe McCarthy could do with these subversive un-Am-erican types who want to squelch our criticisms of our dear president." Speaking seriously, he said that those who think protest is subversive were the ones who were un-American.

Amy Key thanked *The Tennessean* for the opportunity to express her view that not everyone might support. "I would also like to say that despite what President Bush said last night, the majority of the combat might be over, but there are plenty of troops still over there — some from my hometown — who won't get to come home until close to Christmas time. Don't forget that they're there. Thanks to all the veterans in this audience for giving us the freedom to be here tonight and express our opinions."

Pat Oglesby spoke on the importance of freedom of speech in a democracy: "Without the privilege of being able to express our opinions, and succeed in getting them printed, our leaders would never know truly how the electorate feels. *The Tennessean* has once again given all of us the privilege of bringing the diversity of opinions to this banquet."

Government

Fred Cloud denounced President Bush and his allies for "pushing America rapidly toward becoming a plutocracy." He talked about the widening gap between the rich and the poor in America and said, "Democracy means that we need to be concerned about all our citizens and have a floor of decency of affordable housing, education, health care and job training and placement and not give tax breaks on dividends to the already rich."

Phil Schoggen decided to pose a question about the state income tax in Tennessee: "Well, if you're like most Tennesseans, you'd say, 'Oh, no way.' But if you ask a better question, would you support comprehensive tax reform, including reducing a ridiculously high state sales tax, eliminating all sales tax on groceries, ... canceling the Hall Income Tax and keeping \$700 million" in Tennessee that would go to the federal government? Almost two-thirds of Tennesseans, he said, would favor the change.

Robert Sanders spoke about health insurance. One third of the country does not have insurance or is under-insured, he said. "I would like to request, even implore, *The Tennessean* and its able reporters to examine" socialized health programs in other countries and "report back to us, your readers, in hope that the best features could be seriously considered and adopted legislatively by our own country in the very near future."

Jennifer Phippen, 16, said, "I don't get paid enough. I work at a job where I get paid five cents above minimum wage." She said that while that amount supports her in her current situation, it would not support her if she were a single mother. "I would be on welfare" and the "taxpayers would be having to support me. I really do feel like we should have a living wage."

Phil Michal Thomas imagined a world where race and sexual orientation don't matter: "Imagine our lawmakers having the intelligence to know the difference between having a lifestyle and an orientation." He thanked Metro Councilman Chris Ferrell and Councilwoman Eileen Beehan for "putting their life and their career on the line" in voting for the anti-discrimination legislation aimed at protecting gay and lesbian Metro employees.

Lars Hall asked that the United States legalize marijuana. "This is a patriotic plant that produces oil, methane, more protein than soy beans, puts nitrogen back in the soil," making it "ideal for crop rotation. It's so patriotic that the Constitution, Declaration of Independence and Bill of Rights are all printed on hemp paper. ... We should follow our neighbors to the north in Canada and decriminalize and just make it a ticket. ... It's the No. 1 cash crop in Tennessee and it goes untaxed."

Dorrence Stovall said that he was running for Metro Council in District 29. "The reason I decided to do that is ... we have a real problem with crime and overgrowth. It's causing problems on our schools, on our teachers, and I really want to encourage the editorial staff, as we get closer to the August election, please take time in the paper to cover the candidates that are running for council this year."

Belinda Mitchell said people should stop complaining about the government and take action for themselves: "I just wanted to remind everyone here, since we're all the rabble rousers of our crowds, that we are supposed to be the government. And when less than a third of the people who are eligible to vote choose who's going to run our government, that means, people, that our government is being run by the lunatic fringe, the people who have an agenda to push, and so what are you going to get running the country?" She urged moderates to vote.

Milt Herring wanted to add his support for the president after hearing so many speakers criticize Bush. "I frankly am thankful that we've got a president that doesn't start his talks with, 'I am,' 'I was,' 'I have,' 'I did' or 'I could have,' and a man whose legacy will be done by his deeds and not be fabricated."

Judy Campbell spoke about how she felt some people misunderstood the meaning of separation of church and state as theorized by Thomas Jefferson: "It's not freedom from religion. It was meant to be freedom of religion. The letter that Thomas Jefferson wrote is not in the First Amendment where it talks about separation of church and state. ... I think we get mixed up sometimes about what separation of church and state really means."

Roger Graham congratulated President Bush on a successful war in Iraq, then continued, "I would like to caution everybody here that's in a working American middle-class category, he's also waging another war against you. He's up there — him and his friends are up there — trying to pass a law that says they don't have to pay overtime no more. If this isn't persecution, I don't know what persecution is."

Don Enss wanted to know why President Bush didn't hold more press conferences. He also wanted to know "why the White House press correspondents are ushered in two-by-two like Noah's Ark. Why don't they stand up and say, 'No, we have a right as members of the press to come in as we want to come in, ask the questions we want to ask, and get the answers, the truth we want.'" If CEOs have to meet with their board of directors once a month, why can't the president meet with the press? he asked.

The environment

Laura Turner spoke about the lack of biodiversity in the state and the rapidly declining open spaces in Tennessee: "We lose 80,000 acres of land to development each year. Farmland, wildlife habitat and green spaces are disappearing, and subdivisions are sprouting like dandelions on the once-green fields."

Jack Turner told letter writers about the harmful effects of power plant emissions on health and the environment. "This is not a liberal-conservative issue, a Democrat-Republican issue. This is common sense. Everybody has to breathe."

'The Tennessean'

Holly Spann spoke out against *The Tennessean's* coverage of the Dixie Chicks controversy: "This morning, I just opened up my paper and here we have the headline, 'Chicks' Fans Applaud

Lyrics About Truth.' And, I don't know about you, but this is just a dead story as far as I'm concerned. The Dixie Chicks are out. ... When you laid this paper out, you made a choice between selling records for the Dixie Chicks and selling a better life for 10,000 (foster care) kids in this state."

Keyes Tate wanted to thank two departments at *The Tennessean* she feels are often overlooked: "The home delivery department is superb, ... the other one has to do with your business of-ice, which takes care of our re-quests. I call up and say I'm going to be gone for a while and everything is handled perfectly, as is your billing."

Steve Cates had four points he wanted to make: He thanked *The Tennessean's* Newspapers In Education division, which helps provide papers to the schools. He asked that the paper's semi-retired cartoonist Sandy Campbell be brought back at four times his salary "and get rid of all those fill-in cartoons." He said Gov. Phil Bredesen had done a good job in making cuts and "isn't that what all the horn-honkers and loud talkers wanted? And now what are they doing? They're complaining," and he said to President Bush, "Show us those weapons; we want to see them."

James Delaney thanked *The Tennessean* for providing a forum for public discourse. "I come to you people, and I say the sky is falling, the sky is falling — here's the evidence. And, *The Tennessean* says, 'Welcome aboard, Jim. We'll let the readership decide.'"

June Dye urged a stronger separation between entertainment and is-sues discussions in *The Tennessean*, rejecting "the culture of celebrity." She said, "We have an entertainment section. We have a Living section and that's really where I think those should be. I really encourage you to respect our intelligence by putting those opinions in those sections."

Mike Klein asked *Tennessean* editor Frank Sutherland whether the American coverage of the war was "too patriotic or too slanted that way." Sutherland responded, "Slanted is in the eye of the beholder."

Other issues

Sam Kaplan praised citizens who overcame racial and social boundaries: "Two weeks ago, I was driving through two subdivisions in southern Williamson County. ... It brought a real smile to my face to realize that when someone walked out of one of those doors, I could not predict in advance whether their parents were from Europe, Asia, Latin America or Africa." It's good to see the progress when we drive through our neighborhoods, he said.

Johnny Ellis noted that "optimism doesn't seem to be newsworthy" but was reminded of the day that he and a diverse group of expectant fathers spent in the hospital. "And after a while, we were all sitting there looking through the glass at our babies, and we quit being a black guy, a white guy, a Hindu-Indian guy and a redneck-from-Joelton guy, and we were just fathers, looking in the faces of our children and out to the futures of their lives and wondering what kind of Nashville they're going to grow up in."

David Brengartner thanked *The Tennessean* for giving him the Amy Crotts Award for exhibiting care and concern for fellow human beings. He won the award for a letter that he wrote about turning his life around after a troubled youth: "I didn't think that stealing a truck could get you a humanitarian award." He also gave thanks for his wife of 34 years, saying, "I'd like to say my life, my whole being is my wife."

Tom Johnson spoke on the link between spanking and child molestation: "It's not really news that spanking can take on sexual overtones, as anyone who's seen *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* can tell you — if you doubt it, just type 'spanking' into a search engine and see what kind of results you get. Since there are people out there who are sexually drawn to children, it figures that some would enjoy spanking them. Tragically for many victims, the society has mostly failed to recognize the potential for sex abuse in the practice of spanking children." He recommended the Web site www.nospank.net/101.htm for more information.

DeLois Wilkinson said she missed the display of Christmas lights downtown imploring, "Peace On Earth." The sign has been gone for two years, she said, and "I have really missed it. ... I'd love to see that sign up there again this Christmas." She said, "I hope there are persons here who love peace and goodwill as much as I do."

Martha Akins, vice chairwoman of the Tennessee Preservation Trust, a statewide nonpro-fit historic preservation organization, asked people to support her group. Tennessee Preservation Trust's mission "is to protect those diverse historic resources" such as stone walls, historic neighborhoods and an African-American cemetery. "I'd like to invite everyone here to look at our Web site. It's www.tennesseepreservationtrust.org. We need your support and we hope you'll join us."

Erin Brady Worsham, communicating through a computer that turns text into speech, proposed a toast to the caregivers of the world. "They are absolutely critical to the survival and well-being of so many. Yet they receive no special recognition. Society certainly does not lavish large amounts of money on them." She also thanked her husband, Curry Worsham, for "standing by me when the going got tough. He has given up a lot to take care of me and our son Daniel."

Connie Williams wanted to thank Gov. Bredesen and his wife, Andrea Conte, for being victims' rights advocates. Williams' brother was murdered in April 1994 and his case is still unsolved, she said. About two weeks ago, the Carl Williams 5K walk-run for victims' rights was held. "We donated the proceeds to the Victim Intervention Program, which is a free counseling service through the police department, and we doubled our numbers from last year to this year and were able to donate close to \$4,000 going to VIP this year. So, hopefully each year it will grow."

James Thomas said we enjoy special freedom to be able to criticize our government: "But rather than trying to criticize the government all the time, sometimes we need to do some self-examination. In my generation, I've seen an increase in drug addiction, alcoholism, immorality. We now have policemen in the schools to make our students behave, for their own safety. We have problems in the country, and our criticism only should be for the help of improving our nation, and citizen responsibility is what we can all have and all do."

Jeff Coggins said: "There are two things that we all in this room have to remember. It is that in Tennessee, we have to decide how much we're going to take from those who have to give to those who have not. But we also must remember that we cannot punish those who will and reward those who will not."

William Howell wanted to share a message from a book he'd been reading: "The message to us is that of the angels at the first Christmas and the first Easter, 'Do not be afraid. God loves us. God is with us always.' And because of that, we can say to those who try to manipulate us with fear, to the Osama bin Ladens, the Saddam Husseins, the Irish Republican Armies of the world, to the Tom Ridges, John Ashcrofts and George W. Bushes of the world, 'We are not afraid.' "

Lee Cirillo said that based on his experience, "the British press is far more tenacious and far tougher on their politicians and their leaders than the American press is. When a prime minister in England obfuscates to a live reporter and dissimilates on a question, the reporter says, 'You did not answer my question.' "