

# The Assault on Contact

Since its inception in 1964, the Contact Committee has suffered a virtually unending barrage of criticism. Its objective is deceptively simple: to bring the outside world to Lexington. The manifestation of this objective, however, has repeatedly earned it the disapproval of faculty and student body alike. Contact is responsible for exposing the Washington and Lee community to a wide variety of speakers, a duty they approach with the utmost sincerity and dedication. "Our mission," said newest member Jack Stanton, "is to bridge the gap between purely academic speakers and speakers that are entertaining. We have to try to achieve a balance." Unfortunately, words like "variety" and "balance" generally mean that someone is going to be disappointed. After all, not all interests can be represented at the same time.

In fact, the representative nature of Contact has been challenged in the past. The committee is small and, until recent years, fairly homogenous. It is difficult to imagine how a body that few students know how to communicate with and whose members are not democratically elected can accurately reflect the desires of the Washington and Lee population. This particular issue has been a stumbling block for the Contact committee for some time, especially when concerned with the types of speakers selected. "In the past, we've really been criticized for having primarily political or conservative speakers," said Vice-Chair for Publicity Logan Gibson, "but this year we're really trying to diversify the kinds of people we bring to the students."

The push for more varied speakers has had several consequences. It has resulted in individuals such as Dr. Neil Baer, executive producer of Law and Order: SVU, and Dr. Richard Lindzen, a leading global warming theorist, being invited to speak on campus later this year. This will hopefully increase the audience in Lee Chapel beyond the regular political science majors and lecture enthusiasts, reaching a broader section of the student body. Of course, appealing to everyone is impossible, as Jesse Ventura's visit demonstrated. Many of his views were different, to say the least, and not necessarily appreciated by a contingent of students.

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## Faculty interference behind the scenes is damaging Contact's reputation and authority.

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What the individuals who complained failed to understand, however, was that many students enjoyed his visit precisely because he was different and entertaining, a far cry from the usual dry academics. Said freshman Rebecca Taylor of Ventura's visit, "As someone who does not consider herself to be exactly a Democrat or a Republican, I identified with some of the things he said about third party politics. His ideas and strategies for the government, even though I did not agree with all of them, were thought-provoking and insightful. I consider myself fortunate to go to a school that can get such diverse and distinguished

speakers." Students who feel marginalized by Contact have to remember that the desires and interests of an entire student body are being considered.

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Students were not the only ones to object to Ventura's controversial visit. The faculty, too, took issue with Ventura's presence, suggesting that a much more intellectual lecturer could have been contracted for significantly less funds. It's important to keep in mind, however, that it is more economic to have an expensive entertainer speak to a full house than an inexpensive scholar to an empty one. The pressure put on Contact by both the faculty and the Executive Committee is partly responsible for the dissatisfaction associated with the organization.

In order to combat rumors that Contact was simply an extension of the College Republicans, the committee was pressured by administrators to bring in several very liberal speakers. Dean Mayock, for example, told Contact member David Kronenfeld, that the "[the Celebrating Women's Committee] only wants a woman from the left or a democrat. A speaker from the right would simply be a woman's mouth voicing a man's ideas." The completely erroneous nature of her comment aside, Dean Mayock's statement is deplorable for several reasons. She was not only abandoning the

principle of balance in speaker selection, so important to maintaining Contact's integrity, but also attempting to manipulate student funds to support a faculty-led initiative. This type of intrusion, combined with Contact's overcompensation for groundless accusations of partisanship, only increased the irritation and perceived incompetence of the committee.

The student body of Washington and Lee is many things, but liberal is not one of them. The interference of the faculty behind the scenes is damaging Contact's

reputation with its constituents and challenging its authority to select speakers. Instead of being held accountable by students, which the committee should be, it is now facing an additional and counterproductive responsibility to please the faculty.

Even when things run smoothly, Contact will never be able to please everyone. According to Charlie Yates, EC Chairman, the biggest problem with the relationship between it and the student body is that the "the students have unrealistic expectations." They want diverse speakers representing a

wide range of interests, provided those interests match their own. They want big names on a small budget, and lots of them. In attempting such a difficult balancing act, the members of Contact need to be careful, lest in trying to please everyone, they end up pleasing none.

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*Jennifer Sanow is a freshman International Relations major from Leesburg, Virginia.*

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