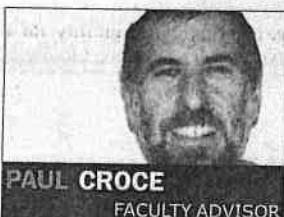


Obscenity exposes foolish prejudices



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I spent part of my spring break in Las Vegas. It was a tough job, but someone had to do it—that is, serve as an advisor to the *Reporter* staff attending the National Collegiate Newspaper Convention. Besides, as a certified United States culture watcher, it was... well... sort of my duty to do some genuine culture watching in this remarkable town.

Founded in 1905, Las Vegas grew faster than most cities in the big-growth twentieth century. In recent years, the city in the desert valley of southern Nevada has doubled every decade.

Twenty-first century Las Vegas may make these figures look old hat: there are now almost one and a half million souls in this brash and brassy town, and it is still growing fast.

Las Vegas reminded me a little bit of Orlando. They both have heavily leisure-based economies, and most tourist travel to both cities is to see recently built attractions, not natural scenery or tradition-steeped history.

They are each such young cities that they have imported their own history. If America is the land of new beginnings, these cities are America Extreme.

With all this dedication to the leisure trade, Las Vegas is a child of the twentieth century in another way: just as our culture as a whole has turned from a dependence on production to an emphasis on consumption, this city is one of the capitals of consumption.

And what they consume there would raise eyebrows in most other

places.

For the casual visitor, the place seems all about money and sex. Although Nevada is a solidly Republican state, there is not much room for traditional family values when it comes to the favorite topics in Las Vegas.

There are gambling tables and slot machines in each hotel and at many storefronts, so many opportunities to make money, with the help of fickle Lady Luck.

If you do well, maybe you can ride around in a bright new stretch-SUV Hummer with tinted windows.

And sexual references are everywhere, from the billboard promising "One Resort, Too Many Temptations," to the hawkers plying pedestrians with baseball-card-sized photo ads for particularly young ladies who specialize in "tantalizing human pleasure."

There's Katie who is "barely legal and loving it," and even some fleshy multiculturalism with "lovey Latina Lucia." In the language of tradi-

tion, this is a sin city—and proud of it.

The sign on the highway coming into town is not kidding when it proclaims "Seven Deadly Sins—We Demand a Recount."

While this stuff is raw and crude and exploitative, it is not essentially different from the daily fare of some reality TV shows and shock-jock radio talk. But Las Vegas takes that explicitness about sex to an extreme, and it's right there in person, not mass mediated and not segregated to some seedy part of town.

It was a telling coincidence that Las Vegas was the city where the *Reporter*'s handling of the furor over last year's *Distorter* came before fellow college newspaper people.

You should all be glad to know that Editor-in-Chief Bryan Funk represented Stetson very well, first by preempting potential critics of the April Fools' issue with a frank admission that mistakes were made in not thinking enough about the impact of

these stories.

He also faulted community indifference for offering no feedback when earlier *Reporter* issues included increasingly offensive articles. Then he explained the steps the staff has taken to raise their awareness about sensitive issues and to doublecheck stories before they go to print.

But the broader cultural setting for those mistaken judgments by last year's staff was all around us in Las Vegas. The whole culture—well, OK, especially Las Vegas and certain radio and TV shows—has taken all kinds of private issues, especially about sex and racial stereotyping, and made them public fare.

Some good has come from this: notably, shedding public glare on foolish prejudice.

That raw public discourse is generally presented as personal liberation, but often without thought about its effects on the individuals on the receiving end of the sexual reference or the racial joke.

Las Vegas and the *Distorter* were reminders that we are engaged in a massive social exper-

iment, and the young es-

pecially are our

guinea pigs.

We've stag-

gered into this

as a blind result

of our political

polarization.

Conservatives heartily endorse the market forces that are at the heart of these changes, even as many are disgusted with the moral result; liberals nervously support freedom of expression and ask for raised awareness about the damaging effects of stereotypes.

The jury is still out on the upshot of this experiment. While we are trying to figure this out, the *Reporter* has set a good example by learning from past mistakes and trusting in the power of education to put our choices into perspective.

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