

How do you speak to events weeks after the headlines break?

Sexual comment
Sexual assaults

Antonin Scalia dies

Mother Teresa

Korea

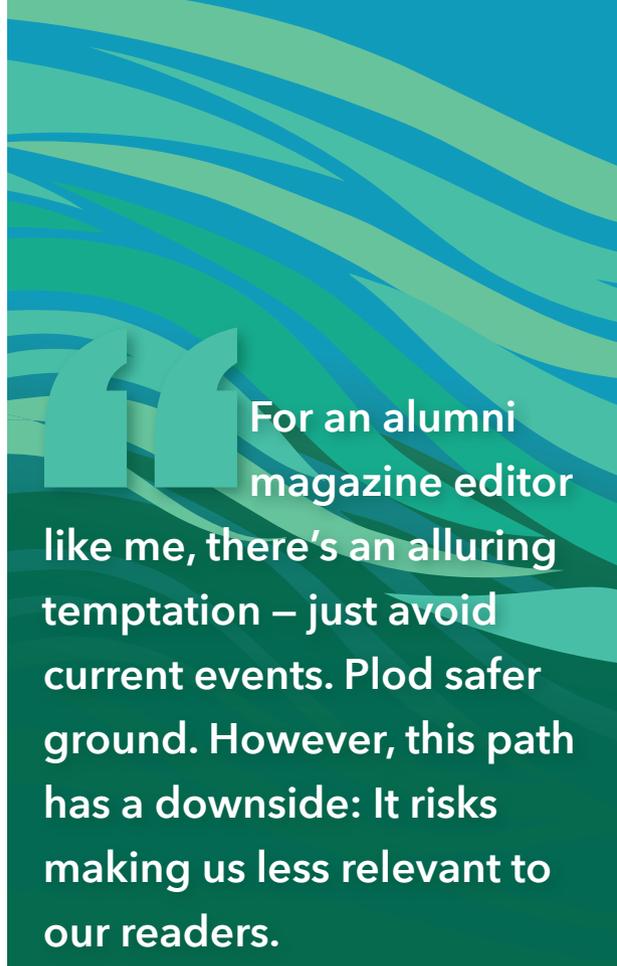
Surfing the Current

By Matthew Dewald



Lets

face it. There's a problem with this article. I'm composing these words in the middle of February. President Trump's administration is three weeks old, public protests are happening all over the place, and Beyoncé just announced she's having twins — twins!



For an alumni magazine editor like me, there's an alluring temptation – just avoid current events. Plod safer ground. However, this path has a downside: It risks making us less relevant to our readers.

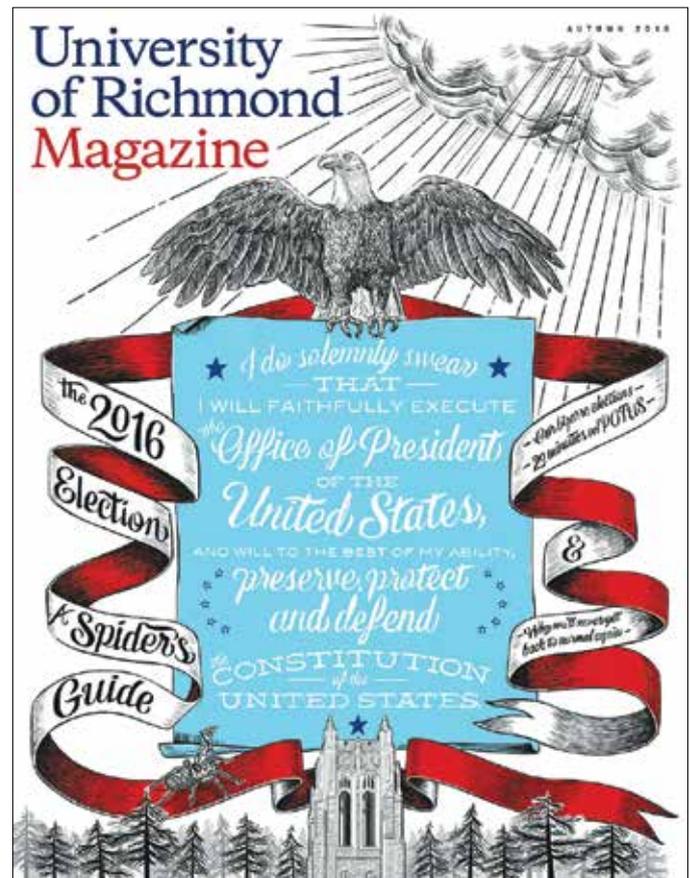
Remember all of that? That's my world today, but it's not yours anymore. You've moved on.

That's where the problem comes in. Between my writing and your reading falls a chasm. This magazine, like the alumni magazine I edit, has production timelines measured in months. You're reading this in midspring, maybe later. Perhaps our politics have become less volatile in the months that have passed. Perhaps you're looking back on my now as the good ol' days. I have no clue.

This gap in time makes it difficult for me to write an article for you about current issues.

Another disadvantage I have, particularly as an alumni magazine editor, is a well-grounded self-interest in timidity. I often describe our audience like Walt Whitman described himself: "I am large, I contain multitudes." Our readers range in age from 22 to 102, studied everything from business to poetry to biochem, and have almost every mainstream and fringe political view you can imagine. My magazine's mission is to encourage every one of them to love and support the university I call home. Even appearing to be partisan — by commission or omission — hurts that goal.

I face some other challenges as well. The major news outlets have the world's most recognized experts at their fingertips, ready to be tapped for analysis and perspective.

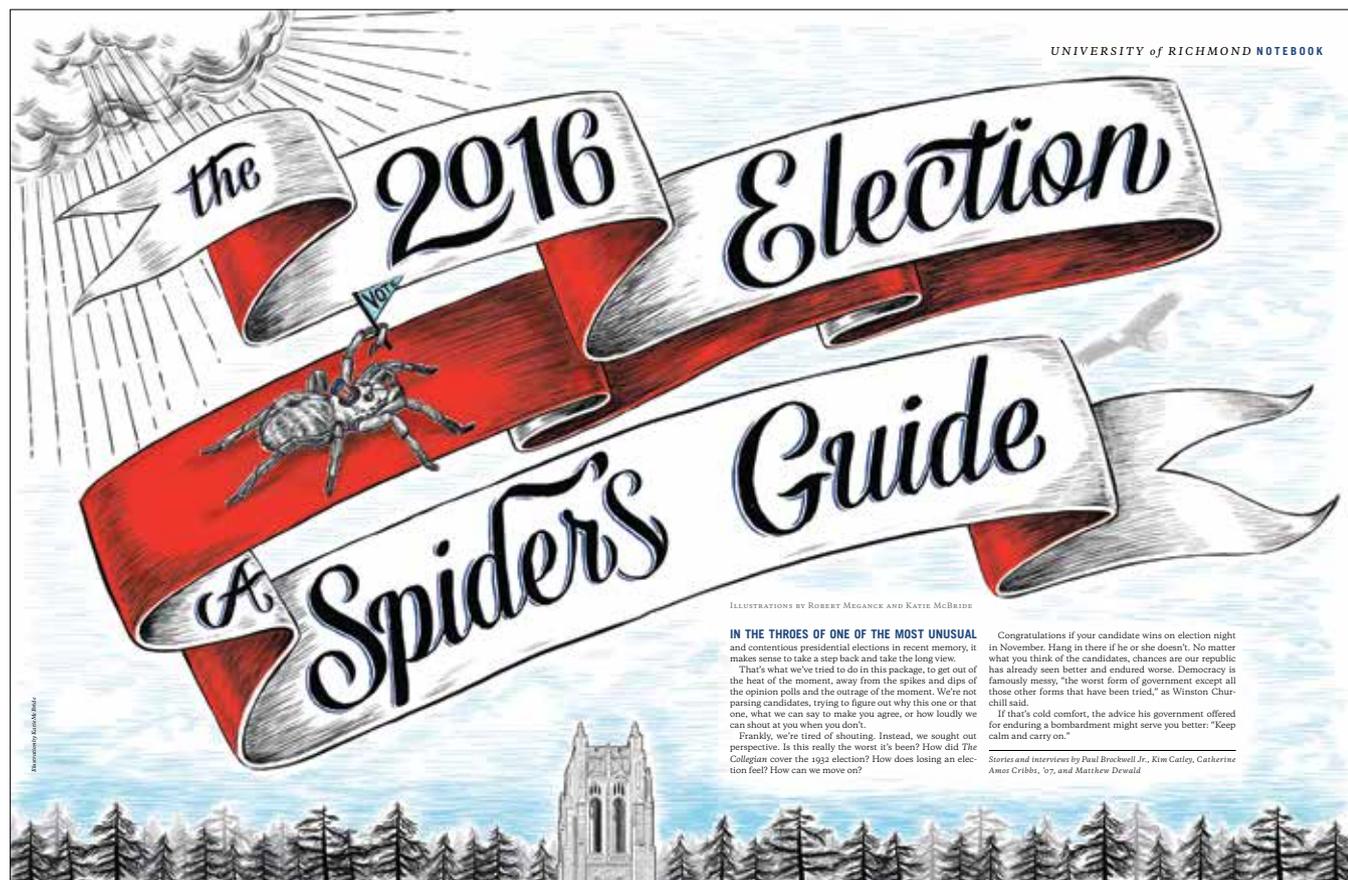


My Rolodex is different. And there's the saturation question. With everyone talking about the top issues day and night, what can we possibly add to the conversation?

For an alumni magazine editor like me, there's an alluring temptation — just avoid current events. Plod safer ground. However, this path has a downside: It risks making us less relevant to our readers. As I write, I don't know what's happening in the news as you read, but I bet it's on your mind.

Despite these obstacles, there are ways for publications with timelines like ours to be part of conversations about current events. The really good news for alumni publications, in particular, is that the strategies we can use to join these conversations are ones that will typically advance the institutional brands we're building.

At the University of Richmond, we had recent experience with this when we decided to preview the November presidential election in our Autumn 2016 issue. We made this decision in May 2016, and it's important to remind you



of the political landscape then. The parties' conventions wouldn't happen until late July, and both of their eventual nominees were inspiring significant intraparty discontent. There was even talk of a third-party run by Michael Bloomberg or someone else.

To meet our production schedule, we'd need to complete the planning in May and June, the reporting and writing in June and July, and the design in July and August so we could hit our file-to-printer date in late August. In other words, we'd have to develop the guide before we knew with absolute certainty who the major-party candidates were, let alone what issues would erupt once they turned their sights squarely on one another. Furthermore, the issue would begin hitting mailboxes just as the presidential debates were getting underway.

The only thing clear to us as we started to plan was that the election would be the most contentious in recent memory, and we had no interest in making anyone angry with the institution because of the magazine.

Ultimately, we produced a 10-page cover package with 11 distinct editorial pieces, plus 13 original illustrations and a handful of archival photographs. To arrive at the final package, we brainstormed and discarded dozens of ideas and, along the way, gave careful thought to what might have staying power no matter where our political discourse led. Our deliberations often came back to a question I asked several paragraphs ago: What can we possibly add to the conversation? For us, that question was not an end point. It was where we started.

Our magazine is published by a university. We develop critical thinkers who can place information in context, see broad patterns and root causes, and understand multiple points of view. If the magazine can do the same, we exemplify our institution's mission and bring distinctly Richmond voices to our Richmond readers. That's a part of the national conversation we can offer them that no one else will. In this case, rather than examine the throes of this election and events we couldn't anticipate, we focused on a close look at the nature of the presidency and elections themselves. This approach gave us wide range in which to roam and, we hoped, would offer context for whatever day-to-day news would come.



“Most issues have economic, sociological, technical, and personal angles, in addition to political implications and historical contexts. The question of what’s really at stake or why something matters always lurks in the background.”

Here are three specific strategies we used to develop our story budget in a way that was independent of future events but likely to deepen readers’ thinking about them, and that also helped advance our institutional communication goals.

1. Think creatively about who your experts are.

As you would imagine, our story package offered a healthy dose of faculty expertise, but one of our longest sections relied on some less obvious experts: international students. A writer on staff interviewed eight students from different parts of the world about watching an American election up close for the first time and then wrote up the common themes that emerged. We called the piece “Broad stripes, bright stars, bizarre elections: Six takeaways from talking to international students about American elections.” We followed each takeaway — e.g., “We share some common fears” — with relevant quotes from two or three individuals.

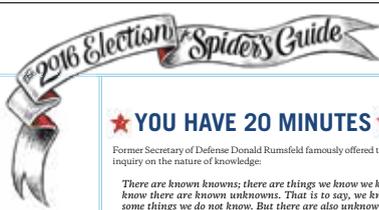
This satisfied several goals. We offered an angle on the election I still haven’t seen anyone else do — another answer to the “What can we add?” question. We also accomplished an institutional goal of highlighting our international programs and offered an example of how recruiting students from diverse backgrounds strengthens learning for all students.

A related, online-only story added another variation on the expert: the novice with access. We learned in early August that one of our students had been an alternate delegate at the Republican National Convention. “I’m the future of the party,” he told us. With this piece, we offered a look at the convention and the issues animating his party through his eyes.

At universities, it’s easy to fall back on thinking that experts are the people whose names are followed by “Ph.D.” They certainly offer important kinds of expertise, but perspective, experience, and access create other kinds of experts who should also be on an editor’s radar.

2. Go there: Get local, historical, and personal. We did all three.

Finding the local angle is a staple of your town’s newspaper and television stations, and it can work well for a university magazine, too. We lucked into a great local angle for us



★ YOU HAVE 20 MINUTES ★

Former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld famously offered this philosophical inquiry on the nature of knowledge.

There are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns. That is to say, we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns, the ones we don't know we don't know.

Got that? In the spirit of Rumsfeld's answer, we asked a collection of Spider experts to address the next president's knowns and unknowns with this question: You've got 20 minutes with the next president, whoever it is. Based on what you know, what are the most critical issues that he or she (and perhaps also we) should be focused on?

YOU CAN'T GET ANYWHERE IF YOU CAN'T GO ANYWHERE.

Keith Parker, GB 96, CEO of Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority, the nation's ninth-largest mass transit system

Adequate transportation — decent roads and transit systems combined with good school systems — is everyone's lifeline to good, healthy food, to health care, and to a path forward from poverty. We need infrastructure that is consistently good throughout the nation. From a mass transit perspective, that means having transportation available for everyone, from the luxury condo owner in midtown Atlanta to middle- and low-income citizens. If we don't look at this broadly, we'll continue to create winners and losers.

Right now, we win grants for the safest, most predictable projects. For spectacular success, we need to be willing to fail. In Silicon Valley, one of the badges of honor is the number of failures you had at different types of startups before succeeding. We need that mindset if we're going to solve these problems. For example, I think there's a chance that self-driving vehicles might be a valuable and cost-effective service in rural areas.

I'll be 50 years old this year, and I can't think of a time in my life when there's been such an anxious feeling at so many levels in our society. Too many people feel as if they're working really, really hard and not going anywhere. But I'm very optimistic that we're around the corner, in a good sense, and that a new entrepreneurial period could lift many, many folks.

[Editor's note: President Obama recently appointed Parker to the National Infrastructure Advisory Council, so he may have the next president's ear.]

PRESS THE RESET BUTTON IN THE WAR ON TERROR.

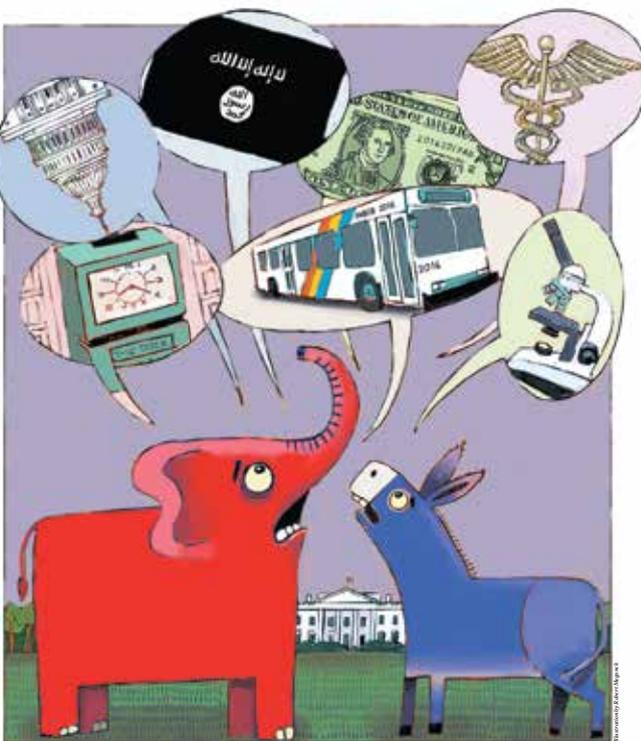
Sheila Carapico, professor of political science and international studies

It's time to completely rethink the so-called war on terror, says Sheila Carapico, an expert on the Middle East. It's not working. It may, in fact, be making things worse. It's put us on a perpetual war footing. "The war on terror has become a kind of mantra," she says, "so neither the political establishment nor the media even think about what it means. Only a handful of members of Congress and some thoughtful military strategists and academic specialists in calling for a new perspective."

As Carapico sees it, we are 15 years into fighting a war against an elusive enemy that keeps fragmenting and morphing into something else. First, there was al-Qaeda and the Taliban, and now ISIS/ISIL, and other groups are emerging as threats in the region — and increasingly in Europe. It's a long game of whack-a-mole against an evolving, splintering enemy.

And depending on how you see it, she says, we're adding fuel to fire and fire to fuel. American intervention in the region has provided a ready stream of recruiting fodder for radicalizing economically disadvantaged groups and deranged individuals.

Carapico would also connect these issues with climate change. "The amount of military resources that we have stationed in the Persian Gulf region — decidedly not carbon-neutral — is another reason she says our strategy requires a big-picture rethink."



Vladimira Dostaleva, from the Czech Republic: I don't find it so democratic as everybody likes to say. A lot of voices are being lost somewhere. I really have this feeling that politics here is more for powerful people or rich people, and money definitely plays a role in politics much higher than politics in Europe.

George Katsisotis, '18, from Greece: It's a very long process that can be very time-consuming. When you don't have all the states voting at the same time [in primaries], they're reacting to each other. Trump gained a lot of momentum, but if all the primaries were at the same time, maybe you'd have a different outcome.

2. WE SHARE SOME COMMON FEARS.

Dostaleva: [Because of immigrants], people became xenophobic, and politicians are reflecting these moods. ... You have society who is afraid of something, and they want an authority figure who will provide a quick and strong decision. They are afraid their conditions are going to be disrupted. We're all human beings. ... This isn't an American problem.

Jerzewski: I understand that this particular election is very special in the view of many Americans, but speaking from a perspective of a European, this extreme polarization is not particularly unusual. This visceral appeal has characterized elections in Europe for a while.

3. SOME CANDIDATES WORRY THEM MORE THAN OTHERS, PARTICULARLY DONALD TRUMP.

Selma [Seoyoung] Jang, from South Korea: The diplomatic relationship [between Korea and the United States] will be worse if Trump does what he says, but I don't think it would be possible realistically.

Xizi Ni, '16, from China: He represents the dark side of people in a way. ... If Trump is elected, I guess he's just a nationalist and opposes any kind of foreign people coming in.

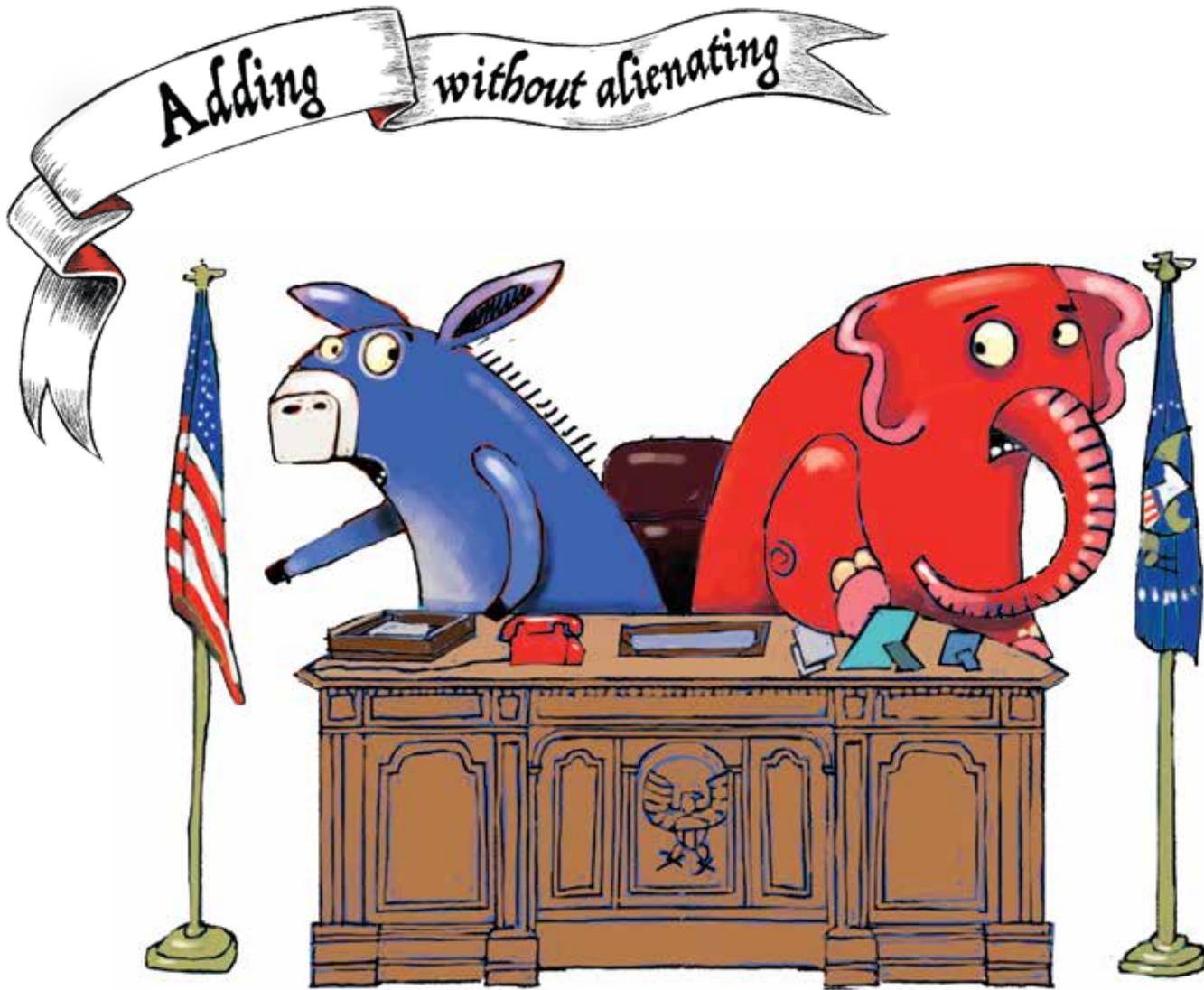
when Hillary Clinton tapped Sen. Tim Kaine, a former Richmond city mayor, as her running mate. He began teaching at Richmond's law school as an adjunct in 1987 and continued teaching and speaking here during his rise through city and then state politics. When he was tapped for the VP spot, he still held a visiting faculty appointment.

While it wasn't appropriate for us to advocate or oppose his candidacy, it was appropriate for us to highlight the connection. A story in the magazine's News section recapped national media interviews with our faculty that included their comments about Kaine as both a candidate and colleague. We also ran a funny-in-retrospect quote from a commencement speech Kaine gave during his last year as Virginia's governor, in which he said he didn't expect to see his name on a bumper sticker ever again.

Getting local also meant getting historical as we took advantage of an opportunity to show off the university's past

brushes with presidents. We ran a 70-year-old quote spoken by Dwight Eisenhower in the university's chapel and recounted the historical significance of the groundbreaking Bush-Clinton-Perot town hall-style debate in 1992, which happened in our basketball arena. We listed other times presidents had been on campus, all with the unstated but clear message that Richmond is the kind of place to which presidents come. Finally, we reflected on student engagement with politics in a look back at the student newspaper's coverage of presidential politics over the last century.

We got personal in the editor's note and the president's column. In my editor's note, I told the story of walking to the polls alongside my father the first time I voted; we joked the whole way about canceling out each other's vote. The president's column offered a similar theme in more high-minded language, with an anecdote about the importance of listening across differences. Both emphasized civility, something we were hopeful the entire issue would reinforce.



3. Ask questions that are contrarian, counterintuitive, and fundamental.

These questions yielded some of the most amusing and, I hope, enlightening passages in the election package. We set up one of our contrarian questions by pointing out how long the campaign had already been going on and how expensive it would be, all to elect someone to an office that pays less than the minimum for an NFL rookie. “Is who gets elected really this important?” we asked. That question became the springboard for showcasing faculty expertise in a piece on the nature of the modern presidency and the expansion of the federal government during the 20th century. It also helped us hone in on the stakes of the presidential election without commenting on the merits of particular candidates.

We observed that the overwhelming focus of the media coverage was on winning: winning a primary, a nomination, a debate, and, eventually, an election. Counterintuitive thinking

led us to a different question: What is it like to lose? In a snippet called “The lonesome loser,” we talked with an alumnus who’d worked in Marco Rubio’s campaign about how it feels to lose on election night. “All you can do,” he said, “is hope that you’re just as passionate about the next fight as you were about this one.”

We also asked a fundamental question that looked forward with hope: Amid such partisan rancor, how do we reconcile with one another? We turned to a Civil War expert on our faculty for the long view. “I’m hard to impress with partisan divide when you look at the Civil War and reconstruction,” he assured us.

Recurring events — like elections, Olympics, and such — make it easy to reach back as a way of looking forward, but spontaneous events that percolate in the news can yield great alumni magazine articles, too. Demonstrations

2016 Election Spiders' Guide

STUDENTS IN THE FRAY
More than 600 students received UR Summer Fellowship funding for internship and research experiences during summer 2016, totaling more than \$2.2 million. Some of them used the opportunity to gain a front-row seat to our nation's politics and government:

- **Caroline Wicker, '17**, interned at the White House through its summer internship program.
- **Claire Conroy, '16**, interned in the office of U.S. Sen. Richard Blumenthal of Connecticut.
- **Gabriella Schneider, '18**, interned with the Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program at the Lehigh Institute at the University of Pennsylvania, which conducts research on the role policy institutes play in government and its civil societies around the world.
- **Thamini Noyem, '17**, interned with Voice of America, the official external broadcasting institution of the U.S.



★ THE 1992 TOWN HALL DEBATE ★

Moderator Carole Simpson introduced the second presidential debate of the 1992 election as "unlike any other presidential debate in history" to a national television audience, and the University of Richmond played host. In the first-ever town hall-style debate, President George H.W. Bush and candidates Bill Clinton and H. Ross Perot stood in the Robins Center taking questions from uncommitted voters selected by an independent polling firm. The format drew mixed responses in the immediate aftermath — one citizen questioner told *The New York Times* afterward, "I heard some typical, canned expressions and few specifics being thrown out. What did I learn? I don't know." — but in bringing candidates closer to voters, it fundamentally changed how candidates communicate with voters.

★ AFTER SUCH A PARTISAN FIGHT, CAN WE EVER GET BACK TO NORMAL? ★

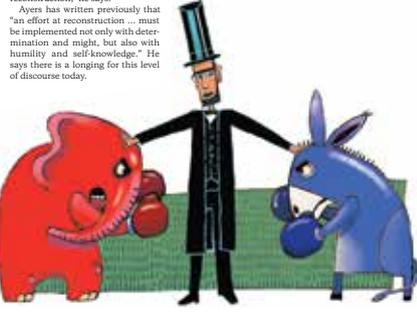
No matter the outcome of this year's election, one thing is clear: Some great percentage of voters will feel disillusioned, heartbroken, scared, betrayed, antagonistic. You could say that about any major election, but with this year's party infighting, racial tensions, and feminist wave, 2016 is markedly more contentious.

Pew Research Center reported in June that partisans' views of the opposite party are the most negative they've been since 1992. Fifty-five percent of Democrats said the Republican Party makes them feel afraid, and 49 percent of Republicans said the same about Democrats. Come the inauguration in January, how do we move forward?

Civil War expert and president emeritus Edward Ayers naturally looks to the past to consider the future. And he is quick to remind us that things have been much worse.

"I'm hard to impress with partisan divide when you look at the Civil War and reconstruction," he says.

Ayers has written previously that "an effort at reconstruction ... must be implemented not only with determination and might, but also with humility and self-knowledge." He says there is a longing for this level of discourse today.



"Abraham Lincoln is the perfect example," he says. "He was called much worse things than either Trump or Clinton are being called today, and his second inaugural address is the very embodiment of humility and self-knowledge. Lincoln led us through the hardest crisis by far the nation has ever faced, yet he refused to goad. He shows that there is no contradiction between strength and modesty."

But even Lincoln was a fierce partisan, Ayers reminds us, and the nature of our two-party system makes modesty difficult.

"We want to be strong partisans, but we want to be one great people," Ayers says. "There's a great tension there. How do we transcend and get things done? You do it by acknowledging that's how things are and try to use that to accomplish some good. We seem perpetually surprised that parties are disagreeing with each other, but that's what we want." ★

Dastalova: I would love for America to be the country that everyone imagines, but everybody needs to work on it to fulfill this equality that is being proclaimed in these foundational laws and declarations. ... The American dream is a nice idea and would be amazing if it worked, but it doesn't work. People are suffering here because they don't admit it. But what you think depends a lot on where you're from.

5 BUT THEY ALSO SEE ALIGNMENT WITH OUR IDEALS.
Ni: Anybody who is an American citizen has this eligibility to campaign for the presidential election. That's the essence of democracy — everyone has a chance. Even if your opinions are really biased, people give you a chance to speak. The Chinese government, they don't give you a chance.

6 THEY CARE DEEPLY ABOUT OUR ELECTION, EVEN IF WE DON'T RECOGNIZE.
Kilmuricata: Foreign policy matters more than domestic when you're abroad — you pay attention to it. I'm surprised by how little people are involved in what's going on in the Middle East. People are more interested in tax rate and business.

Dastalova: It would be nice if sometimes the United States looked around and took an example from others. That would require some modesty, but that's not what [the country] was founded on. I get it.

Jerzewski: I think many U.S. students don't realize how interested people in other countries are in the campaign. Because of the extremely strong position of the United States in the world, because of the impact of U.S. policies, it's an issue that is crucial to everyone.



that erupt suddenly always address issues with deep roots. Dramatic changes in policy direction and the waxing and waning of diplomatic relations have antecedents. Most issues have economic, sociological, technical, and personal angles, in addition to political implications and historical contexts. The question of what's really at stake or why something matters always lurks in the background. These are the kinds of deeper questions we ask our university students to consider in class every day. We can raise them in the magazine's pages for alumni, too.

Before we went to press with the election issue, I confess that I proofread with the expectation that Hillary Clinton would win the election. That's what every poll was saying. I read each sentence with that outcome in mind, asking myself how anything might be interpreted to our detriment after the election. The "lonesome loser" piece is a good example. Our alumnus source was a Republican, and the polls pointed to a Republican loss. Were we writing about losing any election or about Trump losing this one? I wanted to be

able to look back at the package and have a sense that it held up no matter how the election turned out.

Clinton's loss was a good litmus test of whether my incorrect expectations colored our package, and I think we did all right. I'm already looking ahead to a possible feature on an alumnus who was just elected to the House of Representatives. I'll report and write it months before anyone reads it. My goal is that it will illuminate one alum's experience of being a public servant at the dawn of the Trump administration and that it will increase every reader's connection to the university. Wish me well.

Matthew Dewald is editor of University of Richmond Magazine in Virginia. He reads a lot of news but does his best not to make it. Before, he read a lot of Irish novels and modern poetry as a graduate student in literature at the University of Cincinnati. Connect at tinyurl.com/linkedin-dewald.