



# Capitol Letters

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ELECTION SPECIAL EDITION OBAMA BIDEN 2012

EDITOR KASEY ROBINSON

## Ole Miss

by Joe Kerry

When I first arrived in Mississippi, I was struck by the famous 'Southern Hospitality' that the state is known for – walking from the hotel, suitcase and guitar in hand, no less than three people stopped by me in their cars and offered me a ride. People are friendly to a fault here. I managed to get a job at the Starbucks in the Ole Miss library, thanks to my J-1 visa. My Yorkshire accent has meant explaining to excitable American customers that, no, I'm not from Australia, New Zealand, or South Africa – I told one poor girl I was French, and she believed me – but I've met some great people through working there, and I've learned that the people here are genuinely excited to have an international student amongst them.

I live on off-campus accommodation at University Trails. It's cheaper than living in Selly Oak, and has a free gym and a swimming pool. Most of the international students live with other internationals, but I ended up living with three American law graduates: one from Alabama, the other two from

Mississippi. Sometimes, I feel a little like the odd-one-out – they're graduate students, they're religious, and we position ourselves at

the opposite end of the political spectrum in some respects – but they're all great guys, and it has been fascinating and eye-opening to talk to and live with people who are so different to me.

The university's American Football culture is fantastic. For every home game on a Saturday, students and locals alike head to the Grove in their thousands and take part in 'tail-gating' – the beautiful, green heart of the campus fills up with colourful tents, and even more colourfully dressed Ole Miss fans, who are more than happy to offer you a beer in a red cup, or a plate of delicious Southern food like fried catfish. I've watched the Ole



Miss Rebels defeat Central Arkansas and get crushed by the University of Texas, and both times the 60,000-strong crowd has never relented in its chanting of the team's 'Hotty Toddy' rallying cry.

**Joe Kerry is a student reading English Literature and American and Canadian Studies and is studying for his year abroad at the University of Mississippi.**

## NEW YORK NEW YORK...

by Sophie Cowling

While I am yet to have a rat run over my feet, cry on the subway or steal a cab from someone when hailing on the street (things which officially qualify you for 'New Yorker' status) I have now been living in NYC for three months and it has become my home.

I am here as one of only four students from Birmingham doing an internship rather than attending an American/Canadian University. My internship is with British American Business and my role is in Communications – an area I'm looking to work in after graduation. I originally decided to apply for the internship instead of the Universities as I wanted to gain experience in the US work environment whilst also living in arguably the most exciting city in the world.

Knowing only two people in the city (but with family friends relatively nearby in Boston) it was also the biggest and most challenging thing I have ever done.

Visiting New York for a few days on a holiday is one thing, but arriving to live for ten months knowing only a couple of people is definitely overwhelming for the first few weeks. This lasts until you form a new routine and familiarity with your new life when the excitement of living in the city takes back over. Something to bear in mind for those thinking about applying for the internship is that the friend-making process is extremely different than in a University setting. The people you encounter at University are all in a similar situation to you but in a city like New York everybody is at different stages and in different situations. While I have been relatively lucky with the friend situation – I have been introduced to friends of friends and have now got a great group of fun people to socialize and enjoy the city with – it is important to know that it is not an easy initial transition.

New York has been an incredible city to work and play in. My walk to work every

day consists of walking up Seventh Avenue (fashion district), through Times Square, past Bryant Park, the beautiful public library (where Carrie almost marries Big!) and towards the Chrysler building to my offices next to Grand Central Terminal. My work networking events have taken place in some incredible locations too, such as a networking breakfast on the 35<sup>th</sup> floor of a brand new office building overlooking the Empire State building and our Transatlantic Business Awards Dinner was held at the Pierre Hotel on Central Park (where our Christmas luncheon is taking place in a few weeks). I have to keep reminding myself of where I am and how different it is from sitting in the library or walking onto campus every day.

It is crazy how walking out of my building in the morning and seeing the Empire State Building now feels completely normal and familiar.

Some of the great social New York highlights I have had include attending the US Open at the beginning of September, cheering on Andy Murray with a few Brits who happened to be sat next to me in 'Team GB' tops. I also went to Fashion's Night Out, have attended a charity gala at Cipriani's and last week saw the Rockettes at Radio City Music Hall. There is so much to do in the city I am barely ever at home – choosing instead to spend my weekends wandering around Soho or the West Village and my favourite Sunday activity of walking through Central Park. The great thing about New York's location too is the proximity to Boston and Washington DC (both 4 hour bus rides) and I have spent several weekends away here to unwind from NYC for a few days while exploring a new place.

Working for a company rather than attending a University has really thrown me into the 'real world' of living in a huge city, on a budget, in my early twenties – working 9 to 5. Unfortunately however it's not 'a way to make a living' as the internship is unpaid. This is an inevitability of interning at this age but it does take a lot to live in such an expensive city for a long period of time

unpaid and isn't a decision you should take too lightly. In spite of not being paid and the huge culture shock of being thrown into a 9-5 work environment rather than University – the experience is invaluable. The skills I have learnt in and out of the workplace will enormously help the transition from graduation to young professional when I finish my fourth year at Birmingham, and the networking I have been exposed to here will (fingers crossed) assist me getting a job in the first place. I am so much more independent and self-sufficient than I was three months ago and am relishing the opportunity to live and work in a place that is so exciting ALL of the time. (For example: I went to the bookstore Barnes and Noble the other day to do some work and there were people lining up around the block because Johnny Depp was there doing a book signing. This is not a normal iLounge occurrence in Brum!)

This week is Thanksgiving which means the office shuts on Wednesday and I can go and have a pre-Christmas feast with my family friends who live in the city. The Christmas build-up is already in full swing here and NY really is the most festive place to be at this time of the year!

**Sophie is living and working in New York on her year abroad. She is studying English Literature and American Canadian Studies**



# Film and Culture

FILM REVIEW by Aileen Suresh

'What's eating Gilbert Grape?' (1993)

*'What's eating Gilbert Grape?'* will make you feel liberated both emotionally and mentally. Set in small town America is a town called Endora Gilbert Grape (Johnny Depp) is a hardworking American teenager struggling to support his obese mother, two sisters, and his mentally handicapped brother Arnie (Leonardo DiCaprio). We are soon introduced to Becky (Juliette Lewis) who teaches Gilbert about how to enjoy life properly.

However, this is not your stereotypical American family comedy cheese fest. DiCaprio's character is one that is probably one of the most unique for Hollywood. His true to life performance and comic timing let us laugh at his habitual nature of making awkward scenes, one of the most memorable being him announcing "the burger Barn!" in the middle of a funeral.

Gilbert's relationship with his brother is heart-warming during their comic routines of "Where's Arnie!" and Gilbert's efforts for Arnie to take baths. Both these actors are at their best in their realistic portrayals of their characters; casting no doubt on their success to date. The chemistry between the two is fantastic yet not too

overwhelming to the point of stifling the other actors' performances.

Gates' performance is heart wrenching and Lewis is perfect as the quirky adventurous girl but DiCaprio steals the show.

With his maniacal laugh and tics, DiCaprio's performance is both mesmerising albeit at times, uncomfortable to watch. In fact this is probably DiCaprio's best early efforts in his acting career. If this film had a stronger budget and marketing it could have propelled this film to the top of the greatest film of the year.

However the simplistic nature of the film shows how beneath the comedy lies a tale about striving to achieve the American Dream. Gilbert's love for his brother is heart-breaking as he juggles both his work and support for the family, in an almost barren land. There is no sense of hope, as the land represents Gilbert's limbo like state of mind of wanting to find his dream yet being tied down by his family duties. Gilbert is almost imprisoned by Endora and as Betty (Mary Steenburgen) states she knew Gilbert "will never leave" suggesting how Endora will keep him captive. The opening of the new Foodland chain store threatening the grocery store where Gilbert works symbolises the capitalist nature of

American society. By putting out local businesses, Foodland represents corporate greed and the vast mass production involved that shapes America today. The film depicts the struggles and hardships within American society in a realistic fashion, but also with an artistic quality as each scene fluidly moves between the pastoral landscapes next to Becky's caravan, to the isolated location of the Grape's house.

This sensational film is definitely one that would send you on an emotional roller-coaster. Prepare to have tissues, as you laugh, smile and cry watching the Grape family's trials and tribulations as you travel through a whirlwind of comedy, drama and romance. A definite must watch.

4 stars

**Aileen is a first year student, studying English and American Literature.**

# Obama vs. Marijuana

by Sarah Viggers

As many Amsterdam-bound travellers celebrate the decision to scrap the Dutch residents-only “weed pass” earlier this month, residents in Colorado and Washington have voted to pass initiatives making their states the first in the country to allow the recreational use of marijuana. In Colorado, more people voted for Amendment 64 - which legalizes and regulates recreational use of marijuana - than voted for Barack Obama.

While Colorado already has some of the most liberal medical marijuana laws in the country with more than 100,000 patients legally allowed to buy marijuana at hundreds of dispensaries (there are currently more marijuana dispensaries than Starbucks buildings), there are signs of changing attitudes across the country. A medical marijuana initiative in Arkansas, the first of its kind in the deep-South, ended up narrowly defeated at 49 to 51 despite expectations of a landslide of opposing votes. This could be indicative of evolving attitudes even in the most conservative parts of the US.

Under the new initiatives, personal possession of up to an ounce of marijuana will be legal for anyone aged 21 or over in Washington and Colorado. While it was previously available for medicinal purposes at dispensaries, marijuana will also be sold and taxed at state-licensed stores. However, the new initiatives directly contradict federal law under which marijuana is classified as a Schedule I drug, which means that implementation is uncertain.

During his presidential campaign, Mitt Romney said he would fight the legalisation of marijuana “tooth and nail”. Despite talking openly about his personal recreational drug use throughout high school and college, Obama’s administration is also against

the reformation of drug laws, and has been accused of waging a “war on drugs”. With regard to marijuana for medical purposes, Obama stated “I never made a commitment that somehow we were going to give carte blanche to large-scale producers and operators of marijuana – and the reason is, because it’s against federal law. I can’t nullify congressional law”. The same rules apply with regards to marijuana for recreational purposes, although since Obama made this statement there have been hundreds of raids on medical marijuana dispensaries in states where it is legal.

As well as internal pressures, the Obama administration is also facing a growing prominence of changing attitudes on a global scale. 2012 has been a momentous year for drug policy reform, with an abundance of firsts:

- President of Guatemala, Otto Perez Molina, was the first head of state to formally and forcefully call for legalization of all drugs in January of this year
- Drug legalization was placed on the agenda on the Summit of the Americas in April 2012
- Uruguay announced its intention to legalize marijuana under state control in June 2012
- Colombia, Guatemala and Mexico formally requested an open debate about drug policy reform at the 2012 UN General Assembly

On the other hand, the US has been the world’s prohibitionist leader for over a century. All current international treaties on illegal drugs having been produced and backed by successive US administrations over the past 50 years, and a complete U-turn seems unlikely. But with 18 states in partial violation of the international treaties and Colorado and Washington now directly

opposing them, the “tough on drugs” stance seems increasingly unstable.

In a country weary of undue government intervention, it is hard to justify fighting the will of the people. The latest statement from the Department of Justice, “We are reviewing the ballot initiative and have no additional comment at this time”, gives nothing away in terms of what to expect for the future of these initiatives.

Sarah is a final year student, studying English Literature and American and Canadian Studies



# Reassessing the GOP's conservative social vision

by Professor Scott Lucas

Professor of American Studies

**B**ack in November 2010, after Republicans decisively overturned the Democratic majority in the House of Representatives, President Obama admitted his party had taken a “shellacking” in the midterm elections.

Now it is the turn of the Republicans. Despite retaining the House, and the closeness of the popular vote in the Presidential contest, they got a shellacking as significant, perhaps more so, as that handed out two years ago. Many voters signalled not only that they were far from satisfied with the proposed alternative to President Obama's approach to the economy; they rebuked the GOP's conservative stance on social issues such as abortion and gay marriage. A growing and determined majority of young and female Americans put the Republicans beyond the acceptable, causing ethnic minority groups --- who may have been decisive in the Obama victory --- to move further away from the GOP.

So the question in these days after the election: will Republicans recognise that a majority of Americans may not be interested in using the Bible as guidebook for legislating the lives of private citizens? Can they accept that the same majority no longer see the US as the protected reserve of the descendants of the nation's "white" founders?

The civil war on social issues that will be waged within the Republican Party over the next few months and years will bleed

over into the economic choices facing GOP politicians in Washington. Mitt Romney's defeat means that his party can only adhere to its strict conservative message of tax cuts and decreased federal government spending if it gives way on hard-line social positions. The Republicans will have to abandon a commitment to the Defense of Marriage Act, stop the quest to overturn Roe v Wade, and end resistance to the DREAM Act. Playing hardball on both fiscal and social issues is no longer an option if the GOP wants to present a viable candidate in the next Presidential elections, and indeed in some Congressional contests in 2014.

Pragmatism is not a word often associated with the conservative wing of the Republicans Party. However, if they do recognise that the authoritarian approach is unlikely to triumph --- Rick Santorum, for example, would have lost this election by a much wider margin than Romney --- then they could widen their appeal as the standard bearers for fiscal conservatism. Take immigration, abortion, and gay marriage off the table, and young, female, and ethnic voters will be willing to listen again.

There could be a lesson for American conservatives from Britain as the US supposedly heads towards a "fiscal cliff". The Conservative Party here has launched a root-and-branch assault on the welfare state in the name of debt reduction. The nation is largely tolerating

that upheaval because the Government is avoiding any imposition of a conservative social vision, which would be rejected by a majority of the population.

A proposed strategy for the Republicans: allow the DREAM Act to pass as the first priority of the lame-duck session, ideally before President Obama pressures Congress to move. Disavow the Defense of Marriage Act. Stop adding amendments de-funding Planned Parenthood to legislation. Then the GOP might have the strength on their principle of no new tax raises to raise revenue, focusing instead on cuts in government spending and on entitlement reform as the means to reduce the deficit.

That may be a daunting challenge for the conservative wing, but if Speaker of the House John Boehner and Senator Minority Leader Mitch McConnell cannot persuade their colleagues to accept the new reality of American politics, then the GOP will face defeat long before the next election. Moderate Republican legislators --- recognising that it is not “angry white men” but those in a growing socially-liberal coalition who cast the key votes --- will not just break away on the social front. They will also be amenable to working with President Obama on his economic programme, including tax increases and an easing of some of the drastic reductions in Government spending.

# Minnesota election period experience

by Lucy Shilling

When I discovered I would be spending a year in Duluth, Minnesota as part of my American and Canadian Studies degree I had not even considered the thought of witnessing the election rallies first-hand. This is especially since Minnesota does not tend to be thought of as a very competitive state. However, the hype surrounding this election throughout the country has been phenomenal. The fact that this race is so close saw the Democrats come to town last week and I was lucky enough to gain an up close experience of the election process.

Within the same week I was able to see former President Bill Clinton speak at my campus and witness Joe Biden on a rally in Wisconsin. I was one of only a few hundred that got to witness Clinton's speech in a very intimate environment. I was in awe of the atmosphere that this powerful speaker created. The passion and patriotism was overwhelming. This was a cry for people to vote, and to vote Democratic, in this election of which no one seems to be able to predict the result. The campus as a whole became the hub of activity with a sense of something special happening.

Just a few days later I was then lucky enough to go and see the

Vice President Joe Biden speak in Wisconsin. He was a real crowd pleaser and this rally was on a larger scale than the Clinton rally which had been predominantly college students, due to its location. Biden drew teenagers, families, the elderly and many veterans too. It was amazing to be surrounded by such a diverse selection of Americans. Listening to Joe Biden was an experience in itself but I was then lucky enough to shake his hand, once he descended upon the crowd. To get so close to such an influential figure was an experience I will never forget.

The atmosphere in the United States is incredible; there are flyers posted all around the campus, volunteers are telling students to vote in classes and they are knocking on doors every day. Everyone knows this is a close race and so turnout is the key issue, in a result that could go either way there is a sense of duty for Americans to play their part. I have received many phone calls asking me to vote and have been stopped numerous times by volunteers. Once I could eventually tell them that I am in fact British and cannot vote they still go on to tell me of how their party will benefit America. The passion, the enthusiasm, the dedication to their country's politics is enviable. It does not matter that I am not American and that I cannot vote, they are proud and want to share that with me!

My last ten weeks in Duluth have been dominated by election talk

from the debates to the TV ads to the rallies. My year abroad experience would have been dramatically different if I had come on a different year. I would not change this experience for anything, I feel privileged to have had these opportunities.

**Lucy is currently on her year abroad at University in Minnesota. She is studying American and Canadian Studies.**



During the summer months I (Kasey) spent 3 months interning for the US Navy. I have visited, worked and lived in America many times before I never came into much contact with politics, however this time I found myself in the midst of a ridiculously expensive election campaign that was sat on the world stage. I was thrust into a whole new environment where your political opinion really did matter. "I'm Barack Obama and I approve this message" commercial complaints aside, I learnt so much about how Americans really feel about the politics of their politics...

## Drowning Out Political Agendas

by Chelsea DeMark

No one raises his or her voice outside of closed doors in Washington, DC. The tone of conversation is usually amicable, whether you overhear it in an office building, restaurant, or on public transportation (excluding the fair share of irascible crackheads who frequent the busses in the US Capital).

Every four years though, there is a disruption in the calm I experience during my morning commute, during lunch with coworkers, during my part time job as a waitress in the middle of the city. This disruption even permutes my day job, where I'm supposed to be working with the nation's finest intellectual personalities employed by a top think tank.

This disruption is called the American Presidential Election.

All of the sudden, for an intolerable 1-year span, tones become more hostile. Friends having drinks in public wind up shaking fists at each other over the issue of the freedom to obtain contraceptives or abortifications. Strangers on the train sporting election paraphernalia for opposite parties can be spotted arguing about the national debt, spitting through their teeth from anger.

The title of Libertarian, Republican, Democrat, or other weird third party will put you at odds with any other, as discourse rises from a slight murmur to a practical shout along the course of 11 months, and then subsides thereafter. Now, two weeks after the election and probably for another two weeks still, the losers of the race are hesitant to curb their opinions and the winners are hesitant to stop slamming it down everyone else's throat.

I'm personally a-political by nature. When politics gets brought up in conversation, I have historically tuned out and ignored whoever was spewing their opinion at me. When I graduated college and started taking positions at government affiliated or politically oriented institutions, I had to adopt to the conversations that were going on around me, which meant at least developing an opinion on the important topics.

There is a certain point though, between the month where people start shaking their fists (August) to the month where friendships literally end over political issues (October), where people like me want to retreat and hide under a rock until it's all over. Until civilization returns to its previous state of normalcy, the a-political and the ambivalent regard their fellow citizens with disdain for the idiocy of their behavior.

The only way to sway the opinion of someone who opposes your own views is with a delicate combination of rhetoric and reason. There needs to be trust and respect between two individuals for perspective to be altered, and we usually make friends with people who hold viewpoints similar to our own. The only people we argue with are strangers, and the arguments are always futile.

I would like to walk along the monuments and not have to hear tourists babbling about how Romney would have made a better president, or walk down the street in Dupont Circle and not have to hear how Obama is the right man to save my country. The truth of the matter is, neither of them was the right candidate for the job, but now we're stuck with what we've got.

What I'm especially tired of, though, is people offering up unsolicited yet shoddy reasons about who they voted for and why. Stop calling into the radio and saying you voted for Obama because, well, you're black and so is he. Stop saying you voted for Romney because he has nice hair. Stop saying that either of them was going to put America on top, because they won't. And for the love of all that is beautiful stop saying that if you didn't vote you're an imbecile, because if you voted without a good reason then you are the main problem with American Ethics.

"Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent:" sound advice that my fellow citizens ought to abide by.

**Chelsea is a Philosophy and Mathematics graduate of American University and is currently a National Security Research Intern in Washington DC.**

## A different perspective...

As this month's newsletter comes as an election special, in light of the reelection of the Obama Biden Democratic Party, it is interesting to see the thoughts and feelings of our neighbours on the other side of the Atlantic that are more than political articles.

Rose Jaffe is a Washington DC resident and very talented artist. Some of her political artwork provides an insightful perspective on how those in America personally feel the election will affect them and the future of their country. More of Rose's phenomenal artwork can be found at the URL's provided below.

[www.rosejaffe.com](http://www.rosejaffe.com)

[www.rosejaffe.tumblr.com](http://www.rosejaffe.tumblr.com)



"I did [this] for a fundraiser for a student publication. It is called "Secondary Colors" The purple represents the blending of our two colored parties; a move that is essential for this President in the next four years for us to advance as a united country. The bottom of Michelle's shirt is the skyline of the capitol building - in the home city (my city!) of the Obamas. And we are happy they are here to stay."

– Rose Jaffe, Creative Arts teacher at Parkmont High School