

Northern Flank by Poul Rasmussen and Michelle Rasmussen

Bush's policy under fire in Denmark

Sparks flew between the U.S. ambassador and a guest speaker at the annual celebration of Danish-American friendship.

The largest July Fourth celebration outside the United States is held in Denmark. Since 1912, thousands of Danes and Americans have gathered every year in the hills of the beautiful Rebild National Park just south of the city of Aalborg, to celebrate American independence and strengthen Danish-American relations.

The theme of this year's festival was "cultural exchange." Fifteen thousand people heard speeches by the Danish Minister of Education Bertel Haarder, and the invited American guest speaker, author and radio personality Garrison Keillor.

In his speech, Keillor reflected upon the popular perception of the "American way of life":

"Immigrants brought their dreams to America and America was a more humane society when we were more influenced by foreigners—by 'them.' The immigrants had a public spirit and a love of America and the American dream, but when we left them behind, we began to turn inward, mesmerized by advertising, by movies, plastic images of an Americanism that never existed—fairy tales that led us in the wrong direction. Foreigners have always done us good. We are a nation of foreigners. And it is through foreigners, that my country, the nation of foreigners, struggles continually to save its own soul. That is why we need international exchange—for the good of our soul. We may not like foreigners—we see them as strangers, but God above does not see them as strangers. God expects us to see them as human beings. It's only through

contact that we can do that."

Then Keillor added the following comments on the U.S. conduct during the Gulf war:

"If America had had any contact with the Arab world, and with Muslims, any common culture, any understanding of their language or religion, which we do not, would we have done what we did? Would we have poured such destruction on them in the Gulf war? Would we then celebrate it like a football victory? Would we have killed 100,000 with so little feeling? We did not care about them because we do not see them as human, but God does. And God have mercy on us.

"The American soul is an idea. We are not a people. We are many peoples. We are a land and our soul is borrowed. We take our soul from all of those who believed in the American idea from the immigrants who came. They gave us our soul. America is one international exchange. . . ."

Keillor received warm applause for his comments, but U.S. Ambassador to Denmark Keith L. Brown was not amused. On July 7, the Danish daily *Politiken* published an angry letter from the ambassador. Brown was extremely displeased with Keillor's comments about the Gulf war, and he was equally displeased with the prominent coverage of these comments by the Danish newspapers and television. The ambassador wrote that he is "sorry that he [Keillor] had such bad taste as to use this occasion to air his personal prejudices. . . ." He ended his letter with the following tirade: "Mr. Keillor does not speak for the people

of my country, and neither on behalf of the Danish people, I think. No one ought to give Mr. Keillor's bad judgment any unwarranted emphasis."

Politiken did not let Brown's criticism stand by itself. The paper asked Keillor to respond to the attack, and he said: "Out of a three-minute speech, three sentences expressed sorrow about our war against Iraq, but this poor man apparently can't stand to hear even the least disagreement. It is foolish of him to say that I don't speak on behalf of my countrymen. Of course I don't, and neither does he. Ambassador Brown spoke *for* the war. I expressed sorrow about it. I was a little embarrassed about his speech, and that, after three years in Denmark, he cannot say even a few words in Danish. . . . His letter shows a lack of respect for exactly that freedom we celebrate on the Fourth of July."

Politiken also asked the festival's chairman, Eric Palsgaard, to comment on Brown's letter. Palsgaard said: "The podium in Rebild is free, non-political, and uncensored, and this is how it will continue to be." When asked if the Rebild Association regretted inviting Keillor, he responded, "No."

In the following days, *Politiken's* letters-to-the-editor page turned into a full debate of the merits of Keillor's speech, and the breach of freedom of speech represented by Brown's statement that Keillor should not have spoken as he did. The debate also included a personal letter from Michelle Rasmussen, the American co-author of this article, supporting Keillor's speech and calling for the U.S. to refrain from continuing the war against the civilians of Iraq, by lifting the sanctions. Many Danes, who are normally very pro-American, were shocked by the hypocrisy of Brown's attempt to intimidate Keillor on the occasion of the celebration of the freedom of America.