Students Pose Challenging Questions to World Leaders

During the first week of the World Leaders Forum (Sept. 17-21), presidents of several countries addressed the University and engaged in an open dialogue with students. Below are a few highlights from their exchange, plus reactions the students gave afterwards.

Liesel Yamaguchi to Finnish President Tarja Halonen

Yamaguchi: I’m a student at Columbia. You speak about the importance of women’s equality in development and in developing countries, and Finland has an excellent job of integrating women into society. When I was studying there, I saw for myself how active a role womenplay. If you could recommend one structural change that would encourage women to take on stronger roles in society, what would it be?

Halonen: Society should encourage women to have both family as well as job and career. You don’t necessarily have to become president, but whatever you want to do, whether it’s to become a nurse or a teacher or a gardener, just think of it as your right. Your parents, your family and your society should encourage you in pursuing that goal. At the same time, you will also demand that you have a right to be a mother if that’s what you want to do, and you find a good partner. It’s much healthier when girls don’t have to choose, when they can try to have both.

Finland does not have quotas for elections, but we do have quotas in the administration. State committees or other state bodies must have both men and women—at least 40 percent women.

My second advice is education, education. Education. Yamaguchi’s reaction: I have studied a great deal about women in politics and particularly about women in Finnish politics—that’s actually the topic of my study proposal for 2006-2007. So, to have the President of Finland appear on colleague opportunities, I asked President Halonen about structural changes that would encourage women to take on stronger leadership roles in society, because Finland, as I’ve witnessed myself, has women leaders in all kinds of fields, politics, business, education. Her response was a little more holistic than I was expecting. She talked about encouraging women to lead a whole life rather than making them feel they have to choose between a family and a career—they really can do both, and should insist on doing both.

Andrew Harder to Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili

Harder: I am a student at the School of International and Public Affairs. Could you elaborate on what you would like your legacy to be?

Saakashvili: We don’t have global ambitions. We’re a small country trying to survive in a very complicated geopolitical environment. Still, we are proud that the Government of Georgia is an inspiration. President Bush came to Georgia and spoke of the country as a beacon of liberty for the whole world. He told us we’ve created one of the most important moments in history. What small nation would not be proud upon hearing that?

Another point is that Georgia is a European country; it’s simply a matter of winning recognition of this. I believe there is a realistic chance within my current presidential term [ending in 2008], to speak about Georgia being integrated into NATO Things are moving much faster on this front than you’d imagine. We see NATO as an entry ticket to other European institutions, because it signals our commitment to further economic and democratic development and to the greater empowerment of our people.

A few years ago, when you first heard about the acceptance of Baltic countries into NATO, people thought it was a joke. Former Soviet countries in NATO? It was inconceivable. Yet it has already happened—not only NATO but also the European Union. Georgia has a few women, some of whom thought about Romania and Bulgaria. And today they’re already part of NATO and are joining the EU.

Likewise, who would have predicted that one day the president of the United States would go to Georgia and praise it as an example to the whole world? After all, nothing is unimaginable. We’ll definitely get into the European Union faster than people will go to Mars. And they’re going to Mars quite soon.

Harder’s reaction: Obviously, President Saakashvili is an optimist, so his answer to my question stressed the positive with respect to NATO and EU membership, predicting that this would come faster than many people expected. His prediction fulfills the fall of communism to the Baltic States and other momentous events throughout the 1990s, saying that no one had predicted these things, and yet, here we are. I’d also be interested to hear his thoughts about the situation in Abkhazia and the South Ossetia region. But I’m interested in his response, because it signals our commitment to further economic and democratic development and to the greater empowerment of our people.

Birk Oxholm to Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf

Oxholm: Thank you very much for coming to New York and to Columbia. I’m a senior here, and I’d like to ask you to elaborate further on what you said about rooting out extremism by reaching into the hearts and minds of the youth and the masses of Pakistan. Would you outline some specific measures that you and your government have taken—and also comment on the role of religious leaders in Pakistan and how they are helping or hindering your efforts.

Musharraf: We have three areas of immediate concern. The first is checking into banned extremist organizations that try to reemerge with different names. We are coordinating internationally to freeze and control the flow of funding to these groups. Having identified the leaders, we are moving against them and putting them under arrest.

Second, we are addressing the misuse of mosques’ loudspeakers to spread hatred and militancy.

Third, we are attempting to ban all the religious hate literature floating around the books, pamphlets and handbills urging people to wage jihad all over the world. We have arrested many of the people who are writing, distributing and publishing this literature.

We are also taking three longer term measures. First, we are attempting to modify the curriculum and syllabus in our educational institutions with the help of Islamic scholars. Textbooks should be focusing more on moral teachings of the Quran and hadiths that pertain to the character of individuals and their responsibilities to society, nation and family, less on their right.

We are also trying to address the problem of the maddras Islamic school system. Maddrasas provide the poorest of the poor with free board and lodging. In this sense, they’re perhaps the world’s biggest NGO. We’d like to see the maddrasas become more integrated into the goals of mainstream education. They should be taught a wide range of subjects rather than being confined to religious education.

Finally, we are trying to project the true values of Islam to the world and with in our own society. I am hopeful to achieve what I can call an ‘Islamic Renaissance.’ Islam is not what the world thinks it is; it’s not what the terrorists are projecting. Let Pakistan be the source of light on Islam. That is what I am aiming to do.

Oxholm’s reaction: In his speech President Musharraf talked about rooting out Islamic extremism by reaching out to the hearts and minds of youth and the masses, but he hasn’t gone into specifics. He answered my question very forthrightly, by laying out the three short-term and three longer-term objectives of his government. His response was very direct as well as inspirational.

Hala Al Saraf to Iraqi President Jalal Talabani

Al Saraf: I am an Iraqi Fulbright student majoring in health policy. As an Arab Muslim Shiite woman, I feel very privileged to stand here and talk to you, because this is the first time I’ve had the chance to talk to a president and I am more than 40 years old. Actually, I never wanted to speak to the Dominican president because he is a man, but I am very honored to be here talking to you now. I’m doing my masters at Columbia, and I had to leave my family behind. I want to go back to Iraq as soon as possible and try to join in all the reform efforts. I’m also a little worried, though, being a woman. I do acknowledge that there are women leaders. But what other assurances can you provide, especially in light of what you have said about the dominance of the clerics, with their strong fundamentalist attitudes towards women’s participation in Iraqi politics?

Talabani: I’m proud to have you here with us, an Iraqi woman from a Shiite sect of Iraq, and I’m proud to see you, a woman, expressing your attitudes very frankly. I’d like to assure you that our new constitution guarantees the principle of equality between men and women and the right to reserve 25 percent of parliamentary seats for women. Right now we have six female ministers, and there are many female members in our national assembly. We are also committed indirectly through our constitution to the principles enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which includes women’s rights.

We may have a strong fundamentalist movement in Iraq, but I can honestly say that the clerics do not deny the fundamental rights of women. Of course we have our differences with the clerics over women’s rights, but we are trying to reach compromises.

Al Saraf’s reaction: I wanted the president to respond to my concerns regarding the status of women, as it’s important for those of us who are receiving education outside Iraq with the objective to go back and serve. We want to make sure that when we finish our studies, we will have some kind of role to play back home. I was very happy that President Talabani listened and appeared to understand my question. I’m very happy that the first lady was sitting there and that the minister of women’s affairs was sitting there. Both of these women listened and seemed to appreciate the point I was trying to make, that while women do have a voice, we also have certain constraints.