

THE OKLAHOMA Observer

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IDEOLOGUE-IN-CHIEF

Oklahoma's Activist AG Is Building Political Empire That Could Lead To Mansion Or DC

BY ARNOLD HAMILTON

For a world-class ideologue, Attorney General Scott Pruitt kept a fairly low profile during his first term.

Oh, sure – he swung at the right's leading foil, President Obama, and defended Oklahoma's constitutionally indefensible ban on same-sex marriage. He warned that religious freedom is under assault in America and took aim at the Humane Society of the United States, a group he clearly regards as extremist left.

It wasn't until Pruitt's re-election was assured – and his eyes turned to higher office, perhaps gover-

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OUR MOTTO

To Comfort the Afflicted and Afflict the Comfortable.

OUR CREDO

So then to all their chance, to all their shining golden opportunity. To all the right to love, to live, to work, to be themselves, and to become whatever thing their vision and humanity can combine to make them. This seeker, is the promise of America.

- Adapted from Thomas Wolfe

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Observations

Welcome!

With our first issue of 2015, we welcome hundreds of new readers, many joining us thanks to the generosity of loyal Observer subscribers who responded to our annual holiday gift campaign.

As way of introduction, The Observer is now in its 47th year as Oklahoma's premier independent journal of commentary – the antithesis to the state's lockstep, conservative mainstream media. While they shamelessly trumpet the interests of the wealthiest 1%, we champion equality and fairness for all – regardless of race, gender, religion, sexual preference or socio-economic status.

We are unabashed liberals, staunch supporters of public education, separation of church and state, and civil liberties – we don't think government has any business snooping in private lives.

Moreover, we believe that together we have a moral obligation to take care of children in the dawn of their lives and seniors in the twilight of theirs – everyone else is on their own, unless they need a hand-up, not a handout.

You likely won't agree with everything we publish. Neither do we. But we believe few things contribute to a healthy democracy quite like a raucous public square, full of diverse ideas and respectful debate.

We believe Oklahoma's brightest days can be ahead – if good-hearted, fair-minded folk are given the facts necessary to demand good-hearted, fair-minded public policy from our elected leaders.

Please let us know what you think. We welcome other points of view – minus any name-calling, innuendo or slander.

If you like what you see, we'd be forever grateful if you'd introduce others to The Observer. Our annual holiday gift campaign – with bargain-rate subscriptions – continues through January. [See page 47.]

Welcome aboard!

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THE OKLAHOMA Observer



Yes! Please send me a one-year subscription for only \$40. This special offer includes my certificate for a free book courtesy of Full Circle Bookstore [a \$20 value]. See page 41 for details.

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IF WOULD



Laurel: To Sen. Ron Sharp, R-Shawnee, giving legislative colleagues another chance to do the right thing – ban texting while driving. Forty-four states have outlawed the dangerous practice.

Sen. Jabar Shumate's decision to quit two years early is good news for public ed supporters. The Tulsa Democrat carried water for the privatizers and choicers.

Dart: To Sen. Don Barrington, R-Lawton, making Oklahoma a laughingstock with his daft proposal that could criminalize wearing hoodies. His bill-writing privileges should be revoked.

Congressional Republicans, led by attack dog Darrell Issa, waited until Christmas Eve's eve to release results of 18-month investigation that cleared White House of any wrongdoing in IRS' alleged mistreatment of conservative political groups.

Laurel: To President Obama, vowing to veto legislation approving the Keystone XL pipeline. Even billionaire energy producer Harold Hamm says it's not needed.

Oops! Former state rep and Democratic gubernatorial nominee Joe Dorman's Web address in the December Observer was incorrect. It's joedorman.com.

Dart: To Oklahoma Southern Baptists, welcoming hate speech specialist Franklin Graham as a featured speaker at Jan. 26-27 conference in Del City. He is infamous for his anti-women, anti-Muslim, anti-gay ramblings.

Fossil-fuel interests directly invested \$721 million influencing Congress the last two years – \$64 million in campaign contributions, \$163 million in TV ads nationally and nearly \$500 million on lobbyists. – Center for American Progress

Laurel: To Oklahoma Bar Association, reimbursing clients of sketchy or deceased lawyers more than \$257,000 last year. What other profession takes responsibility for its bad apples?

Second-term Rep. Kevin Matthews, D-Tulsa, will seek the Senate District 11 seat vacated by Jabar Shumate. The north Tulsa/southeast Osage County district is solidly Democratic.

Dart: To ex-Gov. Frank Keating and ex-Treasurer Scott Meacham, attacking the "education establishment" in an Oklahoman op-ed. Actually, they are the ones needing remediation: They claimed 70% of OK's eighth-grade students "don't read adequately" when in fact 2013 NAEP scores show 75% are reading adequately or above.

State GOP leaders are still trashing ObamaCare, but rank-and-file Oklahomans are warming to it – fast. Final numbers weren't available at press time, but consider this: 55% of enrollees as of mid-December were first-timers.

Gov. Mary Fallin's office agreed to pay \$125,000 to settle a wrongful termination suit brought by her former Tulsa office director. The deal also means Wendy Gregory's open records suit against the governor goes away.

Legalizing and taxing marijuana sales is smart public policy, but it's no guarantee of a revenue bonanza. Colorado was on pace last year to collect less than \$70 million in pot-related taxes.

After only 12 years atop the Capitol, Oklahoma's dome is riddled with significant cracks in 172 of the cast stone units. The \$120 million bond issue for repairs of the People's House is clearly just a down payment.

Letters



Editor, The Observer:

George Orwell predicted these things in 1948 via his classic novel 1984 but we did not heed his warning.

Now a constant state of war has wealth being transferred from the working class to corporations and the wealthy. While we run around chasing our tails afraid of communism, socialism and terrorism, the military industrial complex [Dwight Eisenhower warned us about] actually controls our nation, leading us into an oligarchy where ordinary folks have no control. We pay taxes to fund our wars while 40% of U.S. corporations and the wealthy pay little or nothing. Our money is actually "trickling up!"

We had best forget petty party politics. False issues built on "fear and hate" are being used to set us one against the other. We need not worry about socialism; the most contented people in the world live in northwestern Europe where the social safety net is immense and everybody pays fair taxes to support it. Fascism and oligarchy are the real threat to America and fascist oligarchs are doubtlessly ma-

nipulating us. There is still time but time is growing short.

Frank Silovsky
Oklahoma City

Editor, The Observer:

Re: Editor Arnold Hamilton's December column, *History Lesson*:

I couldn't agree with you more about the status of Democratic Party, statewide and nationally. I can't understand why Democratic leaders and candidates cannot aggressively campaign for their ideas and platform and back their leaders in an election year.

They need a spinal backbone and stand up for their beliefs. The GOP at least backs their candidates and their flawed philosophy.

Paul Martin
Ada

Editor, The Observer:

Upton Sinclair must have anticipated U.S. Sen. James Inhofe when he wrote:

"It's very hard to get a man to understand something, if his job depends on his not understanding it."

Wayne Rowe
Norman

Editor, The Observer:

Obama's torture carbuncle rivals Nixon's Watergate and Reagan's Iran Contra scandal. With even the redacted summary of the 6,000-page Senate report we read what many of us suspected was going on in the Bu\$h war against terrorism which was diminished by Obama but now he has made it his own war with the "no-boots-on-the-ground" redux in Iraq.

The buck must stop with Obama who said six years ago we must look forward when asked about the Bu\$h/Cheney torture policy. Nothing his administration has done can outweigh the profound harm that has been proven to have occurred and that he impeded by not taking this malfeasance seriously at the beginning of his first term. This has been a festering carbuncle that should have been tended to six years ago.

I'm not convinced that secret black site prisons and torture aren't still ongoing despite Obama's own executive order. How much was paid to these redacted countries to allow themselves to be rendition depots?

He can't even handle the racial problem of police brutality by making a strong statement. He's always instructing others to make a report or appointing a commission.

What a wasted opportunity to live up to the much ballyhooed ideals of the American Constitution of which Obama was reputed to be a scholar.

James Nimmo
Oklahoma City

Editor, The Observer:

When is a dome not a dome?

In olden times roofs were designed with post and beam construction. Then the arch was discovered, which later evolved into dome structures. This allowed longer spans without columns. On

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Beware Oklahoma's Fashion Police



Watching the OSU bowl game on Jan. 2, we took note of Coach Mike Gundy's sideline attire: a black Pistol Pete hoodie, tucked into khaki slacks.

The next day, as we watched our coach/son's small college women's basketball team play, Beverly wore a purple hoodie bearing the team's logo.

As I write this column, I'm wearing a black hoodie, one of several I own that represent my alma maters and favorite sports teams – though on this frigid winter day, it's more about warmth than sis, boom, bah.

Clearly, hoodies aren't just for hood rats anymore. They're mainstream. Fashion statements. Twenty-first Century Americana.

Unless, that is, you are a permanent resident of the far right, Fox News bubble, in which case you're likely to assume hoodies are the uniform of certain someones of a certain age, a certain race and a certain anti-social bent.

That is the only plausible explanation for Sen. Don Barrington's silly proposal that is ostensibly aimed at criminal conduct but could – as unartfully written – end up banning hoodies outright in Oklahoma.

Barrington, a retired firefighter, has told reporters SB 13 was born of his concerns about mask-wearing protesters that gathered in recent years at the state Capitol and about masked rioters looting and torching buildings in Ferguson, MO after a white police officer shot and killed an unarmed black teen-ager.

"I like to think we take the security of our people seriously, especially at the Capitol and state buildings," the Lawton Republican told the Associated Press. "It certainly had nothing to do with hoodies."

Barrington's bill – which would amend a 92-year-old anti-mask law aimed at the Ku Klux Klan – doesn't mention the words "hoodie" or "hooded sweatshirt."

But it is so broadly written that it could turn almost any hoodie-wearer into a criminal, unless he or she can prove the "mask, hood or covering" is related to a religious belief or the "pranks of children on Halloween."

This is a classic example of the legislative penchant for offering a solution in search of a problem.

As Brady Henderson, the Oklahoma ACLU's legal

director, put it, "Here in Oklahoma, it has been illegal to use a hood, mask, or disguise for criminal conduct for over 90 years. This bill does nothing whatsoever to strengthen that law or to prevent or punish crime.

"Instead, this bill specifically targets only law-abiding individuals. Worse yet, the bill explicitly attempts to criminalize protected First Amendment rights. This bill would turn Oklahoma law enforcement into literally 'the fashion police.'"

In the far right's alternate universe, hoodies have been linked with crime ever since cop wannabe George Zimmerman shot and killed Trayvon Martin in 2013 in Sanford, FL. Martin was of a certain age [17], of a certain race [black], and wearing certain attire [a hoodie], all the evidence Zimmerman needed to suspect Martin was bent on criminality.

Even if you give Barrington the benefit of all doubt – he's not stereotyping, he's only interested in making Oklahoma streets safer – you have to wonder about his vision, or lack thereof, for Oklahoma.

Aren't there more pressing matters to command the attention of a three-term state senator?

What's really criminal is that Oklahoma's public schools are so poorly funded. That more than half a million Oklahomans can't afford health care. That one in four Oklahoma children is food insecure. That Oklahoma's county jails are the state's largest mental health facilities.

Conservative Republicans should be embarrassed by Barrington's proposal. It's something they belly-ache about all the time – government overreach.

You can't wear a hoodie or a ski mask without arousing suspicion? Even with a "sporting group" exemption, half the football fans in Norman or Stillwater could be in danger of selective enforcement.

These same conservatives would go bat-you-know-what crazy if you demanded a motorcyclist be required to wear a helmet. Or if you wanted to make it a crime to text while driving. Or if you dared suggest restricting places where people can carry guns.

Isn't it ironic that the very lawmakers who wail incessantly about the Nanny State are so often the first to propose legislation that would restrict individual liberties?



Political Parties

This Best of Frosty column first appeared in the Feb. 10, 2008 edition of The Oklahoma Observer.

You hear it all the time – people say they are sick of both political parties, claiming the parties are essentially the same and it doesn't matter who is in power, because the Democrats and the Republicans are in the pocket of special interests and equally disengaged from the concerns and needs of average people.

I have spent more than half a century of covering politics and I can tell you that the claim may be a conversation-starter but it's wholly false.

I love what a Baltimore Sun columnist stressed to show the difference – the Crandall Canyon Mine disaster.

Say you are a miner, a historically dangerous job in which more than 100,000 of your compatriots have perished since 1900.

Who would you want to have in charge of the Mine Safety and Health Administration, the government agency charged with inspecting mines and promulgating and enforcing safety regulations: J. Davitt McAteer, the Clinton appointee, or David Lauriski, the man selected by George W. Bush?

Here is a bit about each:

McAteer was a law student at West Virginia University when an explosion occurred at a mine near Farmington, WV, that killed 78 coal miners.

The disaster led McAteer to organize fellow students to study the West Virginia coal industry. The resulting report helped persuade Congress to pass a series of safety reforms under the 1969 Coal Mine Health and Safety Act.

The law revolutionized mine safety, requiring regular inspections of underground mines, fresh air supplies for miners and fines for safety violations.

After law school, McAteer worked to develop a mine safety program for Ralph Nader's Center for the Study of Responsive Law.

In 1984, he founded the Occupational Safety and Health Law Center, a public interest law firm, which

is where he was working when President Bill Clinton tapped him to head up the federal mine agency.

Consider Mr. Lauriski, President Bush's choice. He has a far different resume – 30 years in the service of mining companies.

In 1984, Lauriski was employed by the Emery Mining Corp. in Utah when 27 people died in a mining fire. Safety violations contributed to the cause, concluded mine agency investigators. But Lauriski later defended his employer's safety operations before Congress.

In 1997, as general manager at the Energy West Mining Co., Lauriski lobbied for a substantial elevation in acceptable coal dust levels.

I am all too familiar with the problem. Growing up in McAlester, I heard firsthand accounts of mining dust and I saw what it did to the grandfather of one of my friends.

Because of its high combustibility, coal dust has been the root cause of a number of deadly mine accidents. Coal dust is also a demonstrated source of black lung disease, and experts at the federal National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health say the acceptable levels should be cut in half.

Unlike the safety-enhancement agenda that McAteer pushed, Lauriski's tenure at the helm of the Mine Safety and Health Administration was marked by the slashing of regulations.

According to The New York Times, the agency "rescinded more than a half-dozen proposals intended to make coal miners' jobs safer, including steps to limit miners' exposure to toxic chemicals."

In 2004, soon after Bush's re-election, Lauriski resigned to "devote more time" to his family. It also happened to be shortly after a Labor Department inspector general's report found that the agency had engaged in improper contract-letting under his leadership.

Lauriski's replacement was to be Richard Stickler, a former coal industry executive who couldn't get confirmed even by a Republican-controlled Senate. Sena-

tors expressed concerns about the safety records of the mines he managed.

So Bush bypassed Congress and made a recess appointment in October 2006 to put Stickler in the top spot at the mine safety agency.

Then six men were trapped for weeks in Utah's Crandall Canyon Mine and three men who tried to rescue them died.

Stickler issued a cloying statement about how "pleased" he was that the mine owner had agreed to drill another borehole to see if there was anyone alive.

Where were the statements demanding that all

mines be equipped with the latest communications systems, so trapped minors can be located?

Where were the statements promising to fully implement the 2006 Mine Improvement and New Emergency Response Act?

So don't tell me there is no difference in political parties. It was more than the war that helped Democrats seize Congress.

All voters are not the dolts that Jay Leno interviews. Ask the miners. Ask the honest generals who have served in Iraq. Too bad you can't ask the Polar bears drowning while trying to reach ice flows that have disappeared.

How To Use School Answering Service

You have reached the answering service of your school. In order to assist you in connecting to the right staff member, please listen to all options before making a selection:

To lie about why your child is absent Press 1.

To make excuses for why your child did not do his work Press 2.

To complain about what we do Press 3.

To cuss out staff members Press 4.

To ask why you didn't get needed information that was already enclosed in your newsletter and several bulletins mailed to you Press 5.

If you want us to raise your child Press 6.

If you want to reach out and touch, slap or hit someone Press 7.

To request another teacher for the third time this year Press 8.

To complain about bus transportation Press 9.

To complain about school lunches Press 0.

If you realize this is the real world and your child must be accountable/responsible for his/her own behavior, classwork, homework, and that it's not the teacher's fault for your child[ren]'s lack of effort – Hang up and have a nice day.

Farewell

The Observer bid farewell to some dear friends in 2014's final weeks – some who were with us from the day we launched this journal of free voices nearly a half-century ago.

We shall miss their encouragement, their news "tips," their [mostly loving] reproach, and their unflinching generosity in gifting The Observer to family and friends, schools and libraries.

DR. LEROY BRIDGES

Bridges was advisory council chair for OU's Political Communications Center, where he helped amass one of the nation's finest collections of political commercials. He also created and organized the election year Political Junkies Forums that featured expert analysis and predictions. He died Dec. 16 at age 87.

LIBBY PRICE

Price worked with current Observer Editor Arnold Hamilton at the Oklahoma Journal. She also handled publicity for the OKC Symphony and Mummers Theater, sang with the Canterbury Choir and produced The Price Report for OKC's Full Circle Books. She died Dec. 15 at age 96.

LOWELL BETOW

Betow was a Minnesota native and chemist who worked 38 years for Conoco, the last 15 as director of personnel relations at the Ponca City refinery. He was an active member of Common Cause Oklahoma and tutored elementary students until just before his death on Dec. 11 at age 92.

BARBARA STAGGS

Staggs was a longtime Muskogee educator who served 12 years in the Oklahoma House of Representatives – the first woman elected in District 14. A former chair of the Muskogee County Democrats, she helped establish the Oklahoma Music Hall of Fame. She died Nov. 22 at age 74.

FATHER JOHN VRANA

Vrana was widely known for his commitment to peace, social justice and the environment. Oklahoma born and bred, he served Catholic parishes in Midwest City, Union City, Edmond, Norman, Ponca City, Clinton, Ardmore and Duncan over four decades. He also served on the Archdiocesan Commission for Justice and Human Development. He died Nov. 14 at age 84.



Good Grief, Charlie Brown! What Were You Thinking?

BY CAL HOBSON

Let me paint you a scenario faced often by too many families: Money is tight, the roof leaks, a new bedroom is needed because an unplanned baby is on the way. Mom called yesterday to explain she just can't make it on her own any more since dad died last summer. Can she move in at least for a while?

Adding to this crisis your employer is downsizing and, although your job will be retained, the company no longer will provide health insurance for family members. The owner blames it on ObamaCare.

Notwithstanding this unexpected plight, common sense and long-term fiscal planning must now prevail. Therefore, you and your partner set lower expectations, cut out any frivolous or unnecessary expenditures, and wait for better times.

Of course, your three other children, all teenagers, expect their comfortable lives to continue as always, including the annual family vacation and their own wheels at 16. iPods, iPads and personal computers for each is a necessity so they can talk, endlessly, with their friends about, among other things, college

plans. Because their lives are so busy they are and have been oblivious to the fact that their loving parents have been setting aside scarce dollars for years to make higher education a reality.

So how do you break it to these Millennials that things, they are a changin', and not for the better? You can bet this cold dose of reality will hit them like a lump of coal at Christmas time.

Let's now leave the mythical and newly dysfunctional Oklahoma family and move on to our own painfully real and often misguided family – Gov. Mary Fallin and the 149 members of the Legislature. Whether they realize it or not their own fiscal nightmare, and thus ours, is just beginning primarily due to four yet still correctable major policy missteps. An examination of each follows.

First, our guys and gals regularly fall in love with and eventually marry, via the tax code, more credits, incentives, gimmicks, promotions and write offs annually than Elizabeth Taylor had husbands in her entire life. At least The Beautiful One got diamonds.

The average, hard working Oklahoma taxpaying stiff just gets the shaft while well-heeled special interests thrive, represented by an ever more numerous, clever and princely paid cabal of lobbyists who outwork, outsmart and out-maneuver our term-limited lawmakers.

State tax commissioners estimate that the giveaways proliferating in our revenue code cost Oklahoma's budget – *meaning you* – more than \$1 billion annually and most come gift wrapped in the warm glow of economic development.

Like Ms. Taylor, our solons apparently can't resist the well-crafted and convincing overtures tossed, like so many bouquets, in their laps for action after traveling the oft-predictable route from lobbyist pen to capitol printer. Following the usual overwhelming "yes" votes in both the House and Senate, only one minor obstacle awaits the handiwork of so many co-operative and compliant collaborators – a governor's signature. Such affirmation is routinely affixed year after year, regardless of the incumbent's party registration, to more than 98% of the proposals presented to Oklahoma's chief executive.

Second, the precipitous decline in the price of crude oil, traceable directly to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, not NE 23rd and Lincoln Blvd., will wreak havoc not only in the state budget but even more devastatingly in the oil patch.

For example, Continental Resources, led by my former high school classmate and now still a billionaire Harold Hamm, announced a cut of 40% in this calendar year's drilling program. However, our blinders-wearing gang at the Capitol was complicit in the upcoming huge drop in severance tax collections when they established last May an unnecessarily low extraction rate of 2% on both oil and natural gas.

By comparison North Dakota's severance is 10% and allegedly anti-tax Texas charges over three times as much as we – 6.5%. Additionally lawmakers in those states long ago established permanent endowment accounts from the energy largesse benefitting higher education and infrastructure.

They recognized what few leaders in Oklahoma admit: Someday, sooner or later, fracked or not, horizontally or vertically drilled, we will deplete all the recoverable hydrocarbons embedded far below our surface. Since our energy taxes now rank a strong third in revenue collections behind only sales and income taxes, just what new source[s] of operating revenue will future elected officials consider to keep the lights on in Oklahoma?

New assessments for marijuana, dog races or cock-fighting? Higher tobacco, alcohol or property levies? Internet, web and domain charges? Eliminate tax loopholes, raise sales and/or income rates? Don't bet on it, but – speaking of betting – how about legalizing sports gambling?

Everyone's doing it already and if you don't think so just ask your college age kids. I'll give you 8-5 they already know all about the spreads and they don't

mean what they put on their dorm beds.

Third, regardless of the predictable decline in energy revenue, exacerbated by the ever-growing list of corporate exemptions, Mrs. Claus and her statewide elected elves, also known as the Equalization Board, cheerfully agreed in December that our economy is strong, will get stronger, and thus previously approved tax cuts should proceed.

After all, the Supreme Court has finally declared them legally crafted. As court watchers know well a ruling of constitutionality concerning an act of the current Legislature comes around about as often as Haley's Comet is observed in a telescope – once every 84 four years or so.

As these budget-wrecking personal income tax reductions kick in, certified as affordable by a single tax commission economist's opinion of our monetary outlook, one undeniable result will be that the wealthiest 1% of income earners will receive fully 55% of the forthcoming \$160 million bonanza, while 37% of our poorest citizens will gain nothing, nada, zero, zip, zilch.

For middle income earners, typified by a family of four struggling to make ends meet on \$40,000 annually, they, of course, will be delighted to learn their paycheck will grow by \$4 – monthly – before taxes. And since our lawmakers have quietly raised fees, fines, assessments and license renewals totaling over \$500 million, Mr. and Mrs. Average Taxpayer now carry a heavier burden tax than before Gov. Fallin was first elected in 2010.

The only net winners are the Sooner state's 17,000 wealthiest families, many of whom were also maximum contributors to numerous Republican candidates and even to a handful of near extinct Democrats. Of course, there's no quid pro quo here but ... I'm just saying.

Fourth, now that Gov. Fallin has been re-elected, albeit by a smaller margin than predicted, she should listen to her better angels – and I know she has some – rather than the Tea Party know-nothings who during her first term kept her quivering in her heels.

Our CEO/CFO should accept back from the feds billions of dollars of *our own money* available under the Affordable Care Act, aka ObamaCare. That desperately needed cash currently is being spent in other states on health coverage for their poorest citizens. We, too, have a bunch in that impoverished category – in fact, the fourth highest percentage in America.

Over 200,000 of them, mostly children and low paid working adults, would benefit immediately by Gov. Fallin's magnanimous maneuver. And just why wouldn't she want to help these most needy folks? The governor's own highly-touted and Republican-written Leavitt Report [it cost to us taxpayers \$500 thousand-plus] convincingly proved Oklahoma would be an overall net gainer monetarily during the next seven years even when accounting for the almost ir-

relevant 5% state match.

[Sad but selfish footnote necessary here: In the Oklahoman's Dec. 28 Sunday paper, readers found a lengthy interview with now-retired U.S. Sen. Tom Coburn. The piece, written by excellent and longtime Washington bureau chief Chris Castell, reiterated much about Saint/Doctor Tom – but not much new. Notwithstanding the fact that he is facing ongoing prostate cancer requiring expensive specialized care and lifesaving chemotherapy, the good doctor, of all people, remains steadfastly opposed to millions of his fellow citizens having what he routinely accepts as a property right – affordable, taxpayer-funded health insurance. Thus, in 2015, I pray citizen Tom Coburn is cured of his two most serious afflictions – cancer and hypocrisy.]

Eliminating just a few of the most egregious tax loopholes, repealing or delaying the counterproductive tax cuts, modifying too low energy extraction assessments and accepting our Medicaid money are just four of many important, useful and indeed conservative policies that could and should be implemented when the Legislature convenes next month.

However, you may ask just why should its members heed advice from this washed up liberal from Lexington?

Good question. Here's why: The political timing to do so is perfect. House Speaker Jeff Hickman, R-Fairview; Senate President Pro Tem Brian Bingman, R-Sapulpa; Gov. Fallin; and minority leaders Sen. Randy Bass D-Lawton, and Rep. Scott Inman, D-Del City, are all term-limited. Therefore they can lead forcefully and effectively using their enormous powers while fo-

cused on important policies – not campaign fundraising and elections. Moreover, 2015 is not an election year – for anyone.

Additionally the average citizen would clearly benefit from these four actions through improved education, health care, infrastructure and public safety.

Importantly special interests would be reminded they don't exclusively own the policy-making process at the capitol. And finally The People's budget, whose crafting is the most important task tackled each year by the legislature, would be stabilized and strengthened in both the short- and long-term.

So I ask you, the most informed 25,000 readers in Oklahoma, what's not to like about these doable proposals? Are they just too difficult for our leaders to address?

Not at all – certainly now when compared to previous legislative successes such as the 1990 education reform bill, or the \$1 per-pack tax on cigarettes in 2004 earmarked for health care, or the \$500 million higher education construction program of 2005, or ... or ... or ...

If the newly-elected 2015 Legislature can't implement these modest suggestions, then I propose it at least adopt a more accurate state motto to be imprinted on future car tags. For generations our metal plates modestly proclaimed that *Oklahoma Is OK*. In the name of truth-telling, how about replacing it with *Ain't It Nifty We're Number Fifty!*

Love, Lucy

Cal Hobson, a Lexington Democrat, served in the Oklahoma Legislature from 1978-2006, including one term as Senate President Pro Tempore.

Oklahoma Policy And Human Value

BY DAVID PERRYMAN

In 1943, during World War II, as the Allies were driving back the Axis powers across Europe, President Franklin Roosevelt was informed that huge caches of artwork and cultural treasures were being destroyed by Nazis. In response, he commissioned the Monuments, Fine Arts and Archives platoon.

The group, consisting of 17 middle aged men and a few women who interrupted careers as historians, architects, museum curators and professors, searched for, recovered and returned to the rightful owners, hundreds of thousands of priceless artwork and treasures that would otherwise have been destroyed.

A Harvard professor, George Stout, was a member of the platoon and was the basis of the character portrayed by George Clooney in the 2014 movie, *The Monuments Men*. Clooney's character summed up the urgent mission of the platoon when he said, "You can wipe out an entire generation, you can burn their homes to the ground and somehow they'll still find

their way back. But if you destroy their history, you destroy their achievements and it's as if they never existed. That's what Hitler wants."

In a broader sense, the professor was stating an absolute truth that goes to the very core of man's existence: The fundamental difference between humanity and all other living creatures is that a life without a creed, a heritage, or a religion is a life without purpose. Consequently, stripping those anchors strips a life of meaning.

During that same war, Viktor Frankl, a young Jewish doctor from Austria, was stripped of all humanity, having passed through four concentration camps, lost his parents, his wife and most of his family. At war's end, Frankl authored *Man's Search for Meaning*, considered by many to be one of the 10 most influential books of the twentieth century.

Quoting Frankl's message, "There is nothing in the world, I venture to say, that would so effectively help one to survive even the worst conditions as the

knowledge that there is meaning in one's life."

Conversely, the most effective way to murder the human spirit is to devalue the person by eliminating its sense of greater purpose.

Observing current Oklahoma political direction, it is difficult to locate a single policy that would tend to nurture self-worth in students or teachers by saying that we are willing to commit enough funding to even bring them closer to the regional average.

It is virtually impossible to find any plan that would communicate to those without access to health insurance and health care that they have sufficient intrinsic value that we should even be concerned.

A vocal and aggressive contingent of citizens refuses to mandate that working Oklahomans who live in poverty be paid a wage that is sufficient to house, clothe and feed a family or to purchase and insure adequate, reliable transportation.

When public policy says a person has zero value,

identifying one's purpose becomes virtually impossible. Unfortunately, the devaluation of a class of people ultimately devalues all classes of people.

Oklahoma's current preoccupation with cutting taxes has and will continue to cripple our ability to educate our children, have safe roads and bridges, allow correctional employees a safe place to work, improve access to health care, treat mental health and move this state forward.

Words of compassion ring hollow when public policy communicates that many Oklahomans are simply not worth the trouble.

The 55th Legislative Session will begin in a few short weeks. Will it perpetuate an agenda that robs them of all purpose? Or will we be led by "Monument" legislators who search for solutions, recover hope and return opportunity to the people?

David Perryman, a Chickasha Democrat, represents District 56 in the Oklahoma House.

New Film Tells Untold Story Of OKC's Lunch Counter Sit-Ins

A new documentary that tells the story of a six-year campaign by African-American teenagers to break the color barrier in Oklahoma City restaurants will debut Feb. 7 at the Oklahoma History Center.

The 56-minute film – *Children of the Civil Rights* – was produced by Oklahoma-born Julia Clifford, whose father, Bill, was among white supporters who joined the students in the sit-ins aimed at ending discrimination.

"I grew up in Oklahoma and I never heard the story," says Julia Clifford, now 51 and living in Bellingham, WA. "They did sit-ins for six years and it never really got violent, it never made the national news except once when Charlton Heston came to town and walked with them.

"The more I learned, the more I realized this story needs to be told to today's young, because it really shows the power that we do have – that we can make a difference."

Clifford spent seven years working on the project, which includes Oklahoma History Center archival footage of civil rights champion Clara Luper – she was too ill before her death to participate in the project.

Many credit the Greensboro Four with launching the lunch counter sit-ins in 1960, but Clifford said the Oklahoma City teenagers began their sit-ins a year and a half earlier.

As part of an NAACP youth program, the students had performed Luper's play *Brother President*. Luper was inspired to write the play after meeting and striking up a friendship with a 27-year-old Martin Luther

King Jr. at a national NAACP conference.

When the black teens performed Luper's play, the NAACP's national youth advisor happened to be in the audience. He invited the students to perform the play in New York City, where they were able for the first time to eat in the restaurants of their choice. On the trip home, they stopped at Arlington National Cemetery, where Luper taught them about the lives sacrificed for their freedoms. The journey then took the group through the south where restaurants again were off limits.

Struck by the visit to Arlington and the restrictions they faced in the south, the teenagers decided to attempt to "turn around every restaurant" in Oklahoma City, Clifford said.

It took six years, but they succeeded in integrating all but one.

In addition to the Feb. 7 debut at the Oklahoma History Center, the film will be shown at the Pickford Film Center in Bellingham, WA on Feb. 26.

It then will be made available to school classrooms across America on Mar. 6 – almost 50 years to the day after 600 civil rights marchers left Selma for Montgomery and were beaten back at the Edmund Pettus Bridge in what became known as Bloody Sunday.

For more information, visit www.childrenofthecivil-rightsfilm.com.

Read The Observer On-Line
www.okobserver.net

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1



LEFT: Attorney General Scott Pruitt, right, and First Assistant AG Tom Bates depart the 10th Circuit Court of Appeals in Denver after a court hearing.

COVER: Top, Pruitt with Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia. Below, Pruitt with Justice Clarence Thomas.

MORE COMMENTARY: Page 21.

nor or U.S. Senate – that his far-out agenda came into sharper focus.

First, the New York Times revealed Pruitt's water-carrying for Devon and other energy companies, a breathtaking ethical lapse that may not have violated the letter of his oath of office but certainly shattered its spirit.

Then, in a clever campaign aimed at helping Oklahomans forget about his perfidy, Pruitt took off after some of the uber right's favorite targets – abortion, marijuana and ObamaCare.

No one who's paid attention to Pruitt's political career should be the least bit surprised.

For two terms, he was one of the farthest right members of a state Senate trending that direction.

When a 2006 bid for Congress failed, Pruitt became a modern-day Hamp Baker. Baker built political name recognition – and eventually won a Corporation Commission seat – by attaching car hoods with the message "Hamp Baker says drive with care" to trees and fences across Oklahoma; Pruitt became the face of Oklahoma City's minor league baseball team, appearing in most of their TV ads.

Four years later, his Boy of Summer routine helped him win election as attorney general. He was re-elected without opposition in 2014.

Pruitt always has been a poster child for the modern Oklahoma GOP – content to focus on God, guns and gays.

And there were hints about Pruitt's political – and ideological – ambition, beyond his far right rhetoric and his anti-ObamaCare litigation.

Just weeks before the Times' story, Pruitt Tweet-

ed photos of himself with two of the U.S. Supreme Court's leading ideologues, Antonin Scalia and Clarence Thomas [see Observer cover].

Then, the Times reported that Pruitt took a letter that Devon crafted, cut-and-pasted it almost verbatim onto his official state stationery, and signed it as the official state position – changing a mere 37 words in the 1,016-word draft.

As the Times noted, "The letter to the Environmental Protection Agency from [Pruitt] carried a blunt accusation: Federal regulators were grossly overestimating the amount of air pollution caused by energy companies drilling new natural gas wells in his state."

Pruitt, of course, was elected to be the people's lawyer, not of-counsel for Devon Energy or other corporate interests. He is expected to be independent, pursuing the state's overall best interests, without fear or favor.

If Pruitt thoroughly studied the evidence about oil and gas drilling and its environmental impact ... if he weighed the potential jobs losses against the obvious human need for clean air and water ... if he fairly evaluated Environmental Protection Agency rules and concluded they did not work for Oklahoma ... then, by all means, he should have written a letter to the EPA detailing the state's position.

However, it's not as if the state doesn't provide Pruitt with the staff and resources necessary to make independent evaluations and write his own letters and legal briefs.

A college student would have been flunked for cribbing someone else's work. A journalist would have

been fired. But it can be argued that Pruitt is benefiting from his close ties to the state's top corporate interests.

Even though Pruitt didn't draw a re-election opponent, special interest dollars followed him to the Republican Attorney Generals Association, where he served as chair.

The Times reported energy interests poured \$16 million last year into GOP attorneys general candidates across the country – only \$3.5 million to Democrats. Devon also sponsored the Republican Attorney Generals Association's annual fall retreat at Miami's swank Fountainebleau hotel.

The reason is obvious: the nation's 27 GOP attorneys general have become a powerful fighting force against what the Times described as "the Obama regulatory agenda."

In the Watergate era, Pruitt's response to the Times' expose would have been considered a "non-denial

ministrative units for Washington, DC."

Pruitt is banking most Oklahomans will have forgotten about the Times' story before he next faces the voters. And even if they haven't, he's betting that many Oklahomans will dismiss it as an attack by a liberal rag.

The attorney general's cause was helped by the reliably far right Daily Disappointment which dismissed the Times' expose as "a case study in media bias and unthinking analysis." Seriously?

At best, Pruitt's actions reflect an appalling lack of personal ethics. At worst, it suggests a public official who's bought and paid for by the state's most powerful interests.

Liberal blogger Kurt Hochenauer captured the issue perfectly: "Why Devon? Can any company in the state give a letter to Pruitt promoting their interests and ask him to send it to a federal agency under his own name and office? If he refuses to do so, then is

"The puppeteer behind the stage is pulling the strings," former Oregon attorney general, Republican David B. Frohnmayer, told the New York Times, "and you can't see."

denial." He avoided addressing the article's specific points, emphasizing instead that he is but a valiant foot soldier in the war against federal over-reach.

In a smart political move, he quickly sought to change the story: He charged an abortion doctor with fraud. He signed Oklahoma onto a multistate lawsuit against President Obama over immigration policy. And he joined Nebraska in a lawsuit asking the U.S. Supreme Court to overturn Colorado's recreational marijuana law.

It looked like a trifecta for an ambitious politico like Pruitt – regarded as a 2018 gubernatorial contender or a 2020 U.S. Senate candidate if Jim Inhofe retires.

Abortion and ObamaCare, yes. Marijuana, not so much. It turns out other rightwingers are less concerned about Colorado legalizing pot than they are with the U.S. Supreme Court telling states what they can and can't do.

Seven state lawmakers, led by Rep. Mike Ritze, R-Broken Arrow, sent Pruitt a letter criticizing his action and urging he withdraw Oklahoma from the lawsuit.

"This is not about marijuana at its core – it is about the U.S. Constitution, the 10th Amendment, and the right of states to govern themselves as they see fit," Ritze said. "If the Supreme Court can force Colorado to criminalize a substance or activity and commandeer state resources to enforce extra-constitutional federal statutes and UN agreements, then it can essentially do anything, and states become mere ad-

ministrative units for Washington, DC." that an act of possible discrimination if not a form of harassment and favoritism? Isn't that legally actionable from companies that want the same treatment from Pruitt but can't get it?"

Interesting side note: The Oklahoman editorial didn't even mention Devon by name, referring instead to the Devon letter as "recycling material provided by private industry experts."

Hmmm. Wonder why? Surely it has nothing to do with the fact Devon is one of Oklahoma City's leading advertisers. Or that its chairman Larry Nichols wields arguably the biggest stick in the city?

Remember, when it comes to the Oklahoman, it's not what they tell you, it's what they don't.

Oklahomans, though, should not regard this as business as usual. After all, when sworn into office, Pruitt pledged he would "not, knowingly, receive, directly or indirectly, any money or other valuable thing, for the performance or nonperformance of any act or duty pertaining to my office, other than the compensation allowed by now."

Pruitt's official actions have helped him build a political empire that could prove vital to his electoral ambitions.

Thus, Oklahomans are left to wonder whose best interests Pruitt serves.

"The puppeteer behind the stage is pulling the strings," former Oregon attorney general, Republican David B. Frohnmayer, told the New York Times, "and you can't see."

With Tax Cuts And Oil Slump, State Faces Repeat Of Ugly History

BY ARNOLD HAMILTON

The grades are now official: Most of the state's elected leaders failed Oklahoma History 101 – badly.

It was only three decades ago the state faced a budget calamity of biblical proportions, the result of both outside forces [plunging energy prices] and self-inflicted wounds [23 politically pleasing but unsustainable tax cuts.]

The fiscal disaster forced the Democratic-controlled Legislature and Gov. George Nigh in 1985 to eat a lot of political crow and enact what was then a huge \$230 million tax hike just to preserve vital state services.

Fast forward to 2015: Gov. Mary Fallin and the Legislature's Republican majority are pursuing the same disastrous course, ignoring the unmistakable warnings that a similar fiscal disaster looms.

Fallin and Co. sealed their fate last spring when they approved a series of future income tax cuts that would kick in if revenues rose sufficiently. They did ... barely. Now the first quarter-percentage-point cut will take effect this July, just as the full impact of a year-long slide in oil prices is likely to be felt.

Already, the governor has warned state agencies that another year of budget cuts is probable, thanks to tax cuts – which she, of course, hailed – and slowing energy tax revenues.

David Blatt, executive director of the Oklahoma Policy Institute, decried the tax cut as “supremely irresponsible,” noting it “will do little to nothing for most Oklahoma families at the same time as we face a nearly \$300 million budget shortfall for next year. Under this tax cut, 41% of Oklahomans will not see any tax reduction, and the average tax cut for middle-income families will be just \$30.

“Between repeated tax cuts and ballooning tax breaks for businesses, Oklahoma has gutted services crucial for a good education system, public safety, and a strong economy. With the collapse of gas prices and a continuing drought threatening two of our state's major industries, now is exactly the wrong time to increase the size of our budget hole with a tax giveaway that will go mostly to the already wealthy.”

The current state budget was built on \$87 per barrel oil, a projection that appeared modest last June when benchmark U.S. crude hit \$107. In early January, however, oil dropped below \$50 a barrel – and some experts believe it could settle at \$40 a barrel for a prolonged period.

Given the cyclical nature of the energy industry, it's

hardly surprising that the long run of high prices has finally come to an end. Lawmakers were warned repeatedly that this day would come. But they ignored history, enacting a series of income tax cuts over the last decade that pandered both to their wealthy campaign donors [who benefitted most from the cuts] and rank-and-file citizens suspicious of government waste.

Now, just like the early 1980s, tax cuts and plunging oil prices threaten to deliver a double-whammy to vital state services that anti-government Republicans purposely have been starving since taking control of the state House in 2006 and the Senate in 2010.

Even as they approved the new round of tax cuts last spring, lawmakers were forced to resort to a shell game to meet their constitutional obligation to craft a balanced state budget.

In order to plug holes, they diverted millions of dollars from funds for uncompensated medical care and Oklahoma's Promise higher education scholarships – sleights-of-hand that violated the state Constitution, according to Attorney General Scott Pruitt.

What will lawmakers do if oil prices slump long-term? The state already scrapes the bottom of the barrel nationally in per pupil education spending. It also fails to keep pace with a crumbling infrastructure – roads, bridges and prisons. Physical and mental health care needs loom large.

Exacerbating the problem: The Legislature's long obsession with corporate welfare – doling out tax breaks, many of questionable merit, to politically powerful industries – threatens to swallow more and more of the state budget.

Oklahoma Watch recently reported that two-dozen business tax breaks cost the state treasury \$760 million last year – more than Oklahoma spends on prisons and public safety. Worse, the cost of those incentives is mushrooming – more than doubling in just four years.

Sen. Mike Mazzei, R-Tulsa, and Rep. David Dank, R-Oklahoma City, among others, have urged the Legislature in recent years to pore over the \$2 billion or so in “tax expenditures” on the books to determine if each is accomplishing what was intended.

They've met stiff resistance, not least because special interests feasting at the taxpayers' trough fear public scrutiny could end a beautiful thing – a means of enhancing profits and socializing losses.

There are hints the governor may be ready to weigh in on the problem. She is urging lawmakers to take a

closer look at policies that automatically steer money each year from the general fund into specific programs.

If she means corporate welfare – and not education – she is to be applauded. It won't be easy for her or lawmakers to look well-heeled, long-time supporters in the eye and tell them the taxpayers' trough is now closed to their pet tax breaks.

One statewide elected Republican seems keenly aware of the tax vs. spending double-speak. State Treasurer Ken Miller says legislators all too often want their “cake and eat it, too ... cut taxes and get the political points for that without making the difficult choices of either cutting the budget or eliminating one-time revenues.

“I don't think you can have it both ways.”

But here's the rub: The lawmakers making these fateful decisions likely won't be around when the state's fiscal crisis fully blooms. They will be back home – forced out of office by term limits. It won't be their problem, it'll be somebody else's, especially the taxpayers.

With history repeating itself, Oklahomans may not be able to say “thank God for Mississippi” much longer.

Why Good News At Pump Is Really Bad News

BY MARK MORFORD

Flush times! Economy fully recovered, unemployment down, jobs finally on the rise, housing crisis over, all wars sort of mostly concluded, Wall Street shamelessly gorging, racial tensions aflame, wealth more unevenly divided than ever, consumer spending up, that awful socialist Obama obviously hurling us deeper and deeper into a hellpit of, uh, shocking stability and [messy, flawed, still sort of miraculous success.

And wow, those gas prices! Well below \$3 a gallon in most areas, and dropping fast. For a variety of reasons – Libya, OPEC, record-high U.S. production [thanks again, hippie Obama, for encouraging so much new domestic oil output] – oil is right now so amazingly cheap as to be, well, sort of disastrous.

Is it not true? Let's just say it outright: There is nothing good about cheap gas in America. All the wrong corporations ultimately benefit: big oil [shares dip, but influence surges], big auto, plastic manufacturers, the same heartless PTB that have lorded over the American economy since just about forever.

Worse, all the right ideas – alternative energy, efficiency, conservation, the environment, the general social good – get re-shunned and scoffed at anew.

Automakers are, naturally, thrilled by tumbling oil prices. Cheap gas means not only are people driving more, it means fickle, short-term memory Americans are buying gas-guzzling SUVs and large trucks all over again [at a far higher profit margin for the automakers], and the pressure to produce really good small, efficient cars slackens – at least until 2025 [damn you yet again, Obama. Such a mixed blessing you are].

Do not misunderstand. When oil prices peaked in 2008, changing our car-obsessed culture was no fun, at first, especially during a recession. But we quickly got used to it, and we did what we always do in times of scarcity: We adapt. We change our wasteful behaviors. We pay more attention to how we [quite literally] move through the world. We get less lazy and more creative, plan more carefully, choose our travels more diligently, figured out what's really important.

In other words, when gas prices skyrocket, we adapt in all the right ways: Drive less, ride-share more, telecommute, walk to work, get out of our cars and back into the more connected social flow. Alternative transportation [bikes, buses, trains] gain tremendous support. People begin to think differently, for the better.

Of course, this current low-price blip will not, cannot last. Oil prices are not merely seasonal, viciously political and globally unpredictable, they are environmentally unsustainable. More so than ever.

Meanwhile, some suggest now would be a great time to increase the gas tax – which hasn't been touched in 20 years – by 15 cents or so, primarily to help the fiscally broke Highway Trust Fund.

But here's even more awesomely helpful and radical idea: a \$5 per gallon tax increase – hell, make it \$6 – all of it earmarked for alternative energy and transport, environmental protections, our busted educational system, our multi-trillion debt.

Can you imagine? The dramatic upheaval? The wild spurts of innovation? The furious new trends toward super efficiency? More public transport. Less sprawl. More efficient verticality. Local businesses flourish. Improved air quality. Electric mopeds and bikes and Harley Davidson LiveWires for all. And, as Tesla and BMW have already proved, “car culture” could adapt brilliantly. What's not to like?

Bonus: Less foreign oil. No Libya, Venezuela, Iraq, Saudi Arabia. A staggering cultural and political cataclysm in one fell and easy swoop.

Could it happen? Or course not – not via insane/brilliant tax hike, anyway. Few politicians have the nerve to propose even the 15-cent idea, much less push a \$5 tax though an oil-soaked, Exxon-beloved Republican Congress.

But Mother Nature? As always, all bets are off. And like it or not, she fixes everything, eventually.

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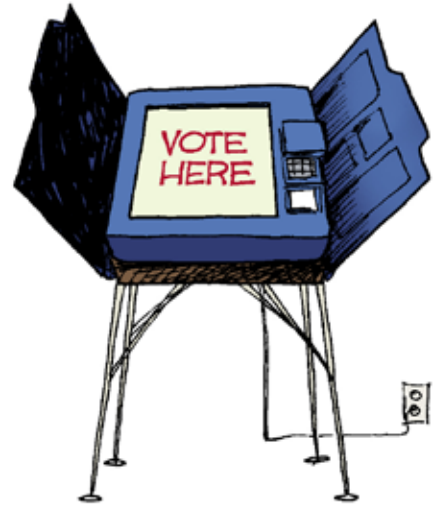
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Repairing Oklahoma's Broken Democracy

BY DAVID BLATT

Electoral participation is a cornerstone of our representative democracy. The vote allows citizens to participate freely and fairly in the political process and ensures that elected officials stay accountable to their constituents. Yet in Oklahoma we are seeing growing signs of the breakdown of electoral participation.

For example, in this year's midterm elections, less than 30% of eligible voters made it to the polls to cast a ballot for governor and other offices. This was the lowest turnout in at least 50 years and perhaps in state history. In 65 of 101 seats for the state House of Representatives, the winner was decided without voters casting a ballot in the general election.

In primary runoff elections this fall, average turn-

out was 18%, and for the two statewide Democratic runoff contests, barely one in 10 registered party members cast a ballot.

In the 2012 November presidential election, Oklahoma's voter turnout was just 52.4%, third worst in the nation. Only 66% of voting-age citizens in Oklahoma are even registered to vote, the nation's eighth lowest registration rate.

It hasn't always been like this. As late as 2004, Oklahoma's voter registration rate and turnout rate remained on a par with or just above the national average.

Many voices have lamented Oklahoma's declining electoral participation, but often the only solution offered is to urge our friends, neighbors, and col-

leagues to be better citizens. But in reality, the electoral rules and practices established by Oklahoma's state lawmakers and officials are part of the reason why electoral participation is so low. And there are many reforms Oklahoma could adopt that would help repair our broken democracy by boosting voter turnout and electoral competition.

A new Oklahoma Policy Institute issue brief reviews the numerous signs of weakening electoral participation in Oklahoma and considers some of the factors that may be hindering Oklahomans from fuller participation. We then lay out a broad range of possible reforms, which include:

VOTER INFORMATION PAMPHLETS

In at least 16 states, state law require that election officials publish and distribute a voter information pamphlet. These pamphlets, which can include information on state questions, sample ballots, absentee ballot information, candidate information and more, help voters be more informed about the issues and candidates they are voting on.

ONLINE VOTER REGISTRATION

At least 13 states allow voters to complete a voter registration application entirely online. Online registration saves money, increases the accuracy of voter lists, is easier for voters, and reduces the chances of Election Day mix-ups.

EXTEND MAIL-IN VOTING

Three states – Colorado, Oregon and Washington – now conduct all elections entirely by mail, while almost 20 others allow at least some all-mail elections. Mail-in elections are less expensive and administratively simpler to operate, and eliminate a host of problems associated with voters not being able to get to the polls or not knowing where to vote. Alternately, seven states currently allow voters to opt for “permanent absentee status,” which means that they will automatically be mailed an absentee ballot for each election.

BALLOT ACCESS REFORM

Oklahoma has the nation's most restrictive ballot access laws, which gives voter fewer choices and discourages participation among those who don't identify with the two major parties. Lowering the threshold for political parties and independent presidential candidates to get on the ballot, as well as reducing the signature threshold for initiative petitions, would give Oklahoma a fuller range of choices.

OPEN PRIMARIES

In Oklahoma, all primary elections are restricted to registered party voters, which leaves the growing number of political independents with no voice in selecting which candidate will appear on the general election ballot. A majority of states operate some form of open primary system.

INSTANT RUN-OFF PRIMARIES

Instant Run-off Primaries: Oklahoma's current primary run-off system consistently has been shown to depress voter turnout. An alternative is the instant

run-off, or preferential ballot, where voters rank candidates in order of preference and the votes of losing candidates are transferred up to second- and third-choices until one candidate gains a majority. The instant run-off allows voters to more fully express their electoral preferences and encourages candidates to engage a broader range of voters.

Together, these reforms, along with others that are discussed in our full election brief, have the potential to create a better informed and more highly engaged electorate and to reverse the state's trends towards declining electoral participation.

More important than the adoption of any particular reform identified here is simply that more policymakers and opinion leaders acknowledge the seriousness of declining political participation in Oklahoma and work to address the problem.

Unless Oklahoma can find a way to reinvigorate our democracy and get more citizens engaged in the political process, we will have little chance of solving the great substantive challenges we face as a state.

You can download OK Policy's full report and recommendations at www.okpolicy.org/brokendemocracy.

David Blatt is executive director of the Oklahoma Policy Institute. An earlier version of this essay appeared on the OKPolicy blog. You can sign up for OK Policy's e-mail alerts and daily news digest at <http://okpolicy.org>

The ‘Work Requirement’ That Wasn’t

BY KATE RICHEY

Welfare as it exists in the minds of many Americans bears little resemblance to welfare as it exists in reality.

The nation's “welfare” cash assistance program was functionally dismantled in the mid-1990s, but especially in Oklahoma, leaders still lean heavily on the specter of nanny state budget bloat and the work-shy freeloader.

Even some 20 years after welfare was gutted, most voters either don't know that the program was essentially eliminated or they have long since forgotten. This has made it easy for ambitious politicians to campaign on an “anti-welfare” agenda while their actual proposals receive little scrutiny.

Oklahoma legislators recently targeted a nutrition assistance program called SNAP [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program], formerly food stamps,

citing a disdain for “welfare” and a commitment to the value of hard work.

Oklahoma’s former House Speaker, T.W. Shannon, introduced HB 1909 in 2013 with a familiar refrain. He said, “Unfortunately, some believe compassion is measured by how many people you can keep on a government aid program. We must change the paradigm to how many people we can get off government assistance. We must encourage able-bodied people to break their addiction to government subsidies and gain self-sufficiency.”

However, comments like these – made before and after the passage of HB 1909 – aren’t consistent with what the bill actually accomplished. To be eligible for SNAP, you must either be working or be exempt from work. Most of those that are exempt from work are children, adults who are physically or cognitively unable to work, or older Oklahomans who have a lifetime of work behind them.

So SNAP is for parents who don’t earn enough through work to make ends meet or for those Oklahomans who are not in a position to earn at all, e.g. children, seniors, or people with disabilities. SNAP

with employment demands in industries that require a specialized skill.

Except that when House staff put the cost of expanding work opportunities at \$18.9 million, Shannon stripped the bill of reforms and reduced it to one-sentence that prohibited the state from applying for a temporary waiver of the federal work requirement that was only available to states with exceptionally high unemployment.

Since Oklahoma was already ineligible to apply for that waiver as of September 2013, a bill that barred Oklahoma from applying functionally accomplished nothing.

SNAP rules still plainly state that: “Oklahoma has declined to provide participation/work requirements for able-bodied adults without dependents.” But that didn’t stop Speaker Shannon from touting his success at welfare reform and bragging that he’d helped “able-bodied people break their addiction to government subsidies and let them focus on building a career as opposed to continually suffering under the wheel of poverty.”

It’s quite clear that, in reality, HB 1909 did nothing

It’s quite clear that, in reality, HB 1909 did nothing at all. Rather than enabling struggling workers to avoid government dependency by investing in their future, Shannon opted for a meaningless reform that imposed no additional work requirements but proved useful as a campaign talking point.

keeps hundreds of thousands of Oklahomans from going hungry by providing a modest monthly allowance to help with the cost of groceries.

Work is already a requirement of SNAP eligibility under federal law, but states are permitted to impose some of the strictest work rules on able-bodied adults without dependents [ABAWDs]. They must be actively looking for work, must accept a suitable job if offered one, and must comply with any job search and training requirements that a state imposes. Compared to other states, Oklahoma doesn’t require much of ABAWDs, nor do we provide them with any real job training or placement assistance. And that’s the key to the “work requirement” that wasn’t.

Although Shannon and other supporters of his bill promised that HB 1909 would strengthen work requirements for able-bodied adults without dependents – it didn’t even come close.

Shannon’s bill as originally proposed would have opened the door for much-needed case-management and work readiness resources for chronically under- and unemployed childless workers applying for SNAP. It could have expanded literacy classes for those who can’t read, GED classes for those without a diploma, and targeted job training for those living in regions

ing at all. Rather than enabling struggling workers to avoid government dependency by investing in their future, Shannon opted for a meaningless reform that imposed no additional work requirements but proved useful as a campaign talking point.

The real challenge for Oklahomans “continually suffering under the wheel of poverty” is not government dependence – it’s the low wages they’re paid for their work. Nearly one in three jobs in Oklahoma [30.5%] are in occupations where median annual pay is below poverty level. And nearly half of the state’s households [49.1%] can’t accumulate enough savings to prepare for emergencies, leaving them in a perpetual state of financial instability.

Poverty is a persistent problem for Oklahoma, and it requires serious solutions. We can only hope that T.W. Shannon’s successors in the Legislature will resist the temptation moving forward to use low-income working families as fodder for their political campaigns.

Kate Richey is Oklahoma Assets Network [OAN] coordinator at the Oklahoma Policy Institute. An earlier version of this essay appeared on the OKPolicy blog. You can sign up for OK Policy’s e-mail alerts and daily news digest at <http://okpolicy.org>.

Iran And U.S. – Choosing Commonality

BY HAL SPAKE

With the recent extension of the nuclear enrichment talks between the U.S. and Iran, there has been a rising crescendo of calls for a military response, mostly from the same camp that gave us the gift of war in Iraq.

The talks between the two countries are complicated by long-standing resentments on both sides. Americans remember the 1979 Iran Embassy hostage crisis during the Carter Administration. Iranians' remember 1953, when the CIA's Middle East Bureau Chief engineered a coup deposing Iran's democratically elected prime minister. The popular Mohammed Mossadegh was replaced with the Shah and his brutal enforcers, the Savak. This was done because Britain wanted to reclaim Iran's oil.

Unfortunately, many Americans don't know this history. News production in the U.S. is by an industry that profits from entertaining or scaring people, and providing little content or historical information. This failure to inform the populous is a betrayal of our heritage. The results are ever-increasing levels of national anxiety and anger.

Not one national news program reminds us that, of the 51 predominately Muslim nations, over half are democracies. Eight of those countries have had female leaders. Few media outlets reported the spontaneous candlelight vigils in Iran after the 9/11 terrorist attacks on America. More than 10,000 people gathered in Tehran to express sympathy and support for the American people. Such events seldom make the news because reporters must report stories about tragedies, outrages, and celebrities.

Today offers a turning point in our history. We can begin sweeping away the CIA's "Legacy of Ashes" in the Middle East. The people of Iran are unabashedly pro-American. The majority of Iran's population was born after the ascent of the Ayatollah Khomeini, and most wish for a more representative government.

The current government of Iran helped the U.S. in



Hal Spake at the annual Oklahoma City Peace Festival. Photo Courtesy of Darla Shelden

organizing the Northern Alliance and Pashtun tribal leaders that overthrew the Taliban in Afghanistan. When the U.S. decided to overthrow Saddam Hussein, Iranians again offered aid and intelligence services. The U.S. declined.

Normalizing relations with Iran is a win/win for the U.S. It redefines our apparent destructive role in the area and demonstrates our willingness to lead toward improved relations. It gives us an ally in the area that understands the culture as we engage ISIS.

We must also look at the bigger picture. If peace is to be achieved in the Middle East, the recurring conflicts must be resolved between Jews, Christians and Muslims – the three Abrahamic religions. As Jonathan Sachs, Chief Rabbi of London, said, "Religion ... is like fire, and like fire it warms but also burns. And we are the guardians of the flame."

The Hebrew Bible, in Genesis 12:1-3, teaches that God told Abraham, "I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless you and those who bless you and those who curse you I will curse."

Jews believe this covenant was passed to Isaac, Abraham's youngest son. As the founder of their tribe they believe the covenant was in turn passed to them. What is rarely taught is that Ishmael, Isaac's older brother, was also told by God that he, too, would be the father of a great nation [Genesis 17:20].

Muslims believe this covenant was passed to the followers of the prophet Mohammed as revealed in the Quran. Both brothers and their descendants were blessed by God, and those who curse them are cursed by God. Christians believe this blessing was passed

to them through Jesus.

So the stage is set for Iran and the U.S. to establish a mutually beneficial future.

If we are to be warmed and comforted by our various religious beliefs, rather than consumed by their excesses, religious leaders, ministers, priests, rabbis and imams must teach how each of the Abrahamic

traditions received God's blessing and how each, when they heap curses on the others, are cursing themselves.

Norman resident Hal Spake has worked for the National Security Agency and is a retired U.S. diplomat. He is chairman of Common Cause Oklahoma and a board member of Americans Against the Next War.



Drug War Charade Endures

BY CLINTON WILES

I recently attended a hearing at the Capitol concerning CBD [Cannabidiol] oil as a treatment for seizure disorders.

It included testimony from medical specialists, family members of those struggling with the relevant disorders, and Darrell Weaver, director of the OBNDD. He praised democracy, stated that there was no chance of allowing Oklahomans to have CBD with any noticeable concentration of THC, that he was not a medical doctor, and that he was protecting Oklahomans.

It is this last assertion I will disagree with. The OK-

BNDD, through its prosecution of the Drug War, does no more to protect Oklahomans from the effects of drugs than Prohibition did to protect Oklahomans from the effects of alcohol.

As a review, while Prohibition may have reduced the number of alcohol consumers by about 20%, it brought us such medical impacts as Jake Leg and blindness, the crime of competing gangs, corruption at the level that some towns were controlled by gangs, and filled the prisons that Prohibition was supposed to empty. The legacy of Prohibition was such that, though alcohol is implicated in more interpersonal

crime than all other drugs combined, there is no interest in bringing it back.

The differences between Prohibition and our current Drug War are mostly superficial. We have overdose deaths, high levels of dental damage, paralysis from drugs designed to circumvent the laws, and other ailments due to criminals manufacturing drugs in a criminally negligent manner. We have more individual crime from addicts trying to finance habits at black market price levels, gangs with different names, and lower visible levels of corruption; though we are largely responsible for Mexican gangs taking control of various areas in their country.

Common to both periods is the attitude expressed by one grandfather from the appropriate time: "Prohibition was a way for the little guy to make some money." A lot of the little guys in the Drug War have tried this path to success with many of them, along with many who are merely drug consumers, getting caught up the legal system with we taxpayers footing the bill for their incarceration along with the less ob-

vious hit as their potential lifetime earnings and tax contributions are reduced as a result of the fallout from their legal experiences. Other common points with Prohibition and the Drug War are that the people who want the drugs are getting them and very few who want drugs are deterred by the legal sanctions.

The OKBNDD and Darrell Weaver do not protect Oklahomans from drugs. They merely identify those who will bear the burden of the outrageous costs of this social policy. To get any net protection from our drug policy, we need to do with the drugs just as we did with alcohol and tobacco.

Let licensed business take care of manufacturing, distribution, and tax collection for our bad habits while we give Darrell Weaver and his group the honorable job of determining whether the contents match the ingredients list on drug packages, that the relevant warning labels are attached, and that the assessed excise taxes have been collected.

OKC resident Clinton Wiles is treasurer of the Drug Policy Reform Network of Oklahoma.

Walking AG Pruitt Trail

BY JOHN FERRELL

Oklahoma Attorney General Scott Pruitt is contributing to our understanding about critical activities of his office. Which public sector officials concerned with environmental regulations have either abused their power or have not been responsive to the needs of ordinary people? What existing environmental laws should be repealed or modified? Is any environmental legislation and regulation even necessary?

Each of us is obligated to see through the lifted fog around AG Pruitt's office. We need to walk together on a cleared off Pruitt trail while determining proper course of actions. Maybe it's best to just follow the advice of Robert Fulghum: "As the wagon driver said when they came to a long, hard hill, 'Them that's going on with us, get out and push. Them that ain't get out of the way.'"

Oklahomans, you've got to start pushin', hard!

Recent articles in the New York Times and Washington Post, with comments from others, are tutorials on the fractious activism in AG Pruitt's office. Oklahoma's and other state Republican attorneys general are working closely with energy companies and allied power elites in a massive campaign to legally influence regulatory policy, to repeal existing environmental laws, to destroy the credibility and effectiveness of the environmental movement.

There are multiple "egregious examples of how partisan and special interest-driven these theoretically

For more on Attorney General Scott Pruitt's outrageous conduct, see Ideologue-In-Chief, our January cover story "Ideologue-In-Chief."

independent elected officials have been," Anastasia Pentsios said.

Pruitt's tactics and his responses to the public revelations of his office practices are deeply disturbing. Whatever your own position, it is important to understand the legal and political tactics being used.

They are determined to ensure that certain special interests will be allowed to continue to pollute and exploit public resources for private profit, Jay Hair said.

The basic principles are: "If it grows, cut it; if it flows, dam it; if it's underground, extract it; if it's swampy, fill it; if it moves, kill it," B. J. Bergman said.

Juxtapose this with our Oklahoma heritage. Trace the messages of Robert Kerr and Don McBride, with their land, wood and water ethics' themes. Reflect on those numerous instances of political cooperation and collaboration that led to the Clean Water Act of 1965 and the follow-on environmental package.

They brought about tremendous improvements to your quality of life in Oklahoma, added economic vitality to the nation and broadened our local, regional

and national interests in international markets.

They did this under the same separation-of-powers federalism model that the Pruitt-style Republicans are fragmenting and weakening in both theory and practice.

AG Pruitt's style of activism is not necessary. Arnold Hamilton cut to the marrow of this odious matter in a controlled, reasoned response. "It's one thing if Pruitt thoroughly studied evidence about oil and gas drilling and its environmental effects ... or weighed the potential jobs losses against the obvious human need for clean air and water ... or fairly evaluated Environmental Protection Agency rules and concluded they did not work for Oklahoma. Then, by all means, write a letter to the EPA detailing the state's position."

But to replace Devon Energy letterhead with official Oklahoma State stationary and sign it as the legal officer of Oklahoma, makes you want to pray for him, for each of us and for our political system.

There's a lot of speculation as to why AG Pruitt would do such a thing. If the special interest predators can chase prey unchallenged in the public commons and other open ranges then the title AG might mean Aspiring Governor, as Colin Provost suggests.

Just take a lesson from Missouri where the AG's office, situated at the intersection of law and politics, is a historic springboard to higher elected office. According to attorneys general scholar Paul Nolette, they are pursuing legal changes seemingly masked from politics.

The reality is these state attorneys general offices, created to assist in the delivery of high quality legal services to the states, pursued the public interest by seeking injunctions against business and even corporate dissolution.

State Republican attorneys general have moved from that role, Nolette finds, and now crimes are actually venues of political conflict, with constitutional principles and major dollars at stake.

We have stepped in something on AG Pruitt's trail. It smells like a spoiled power packet. It makes us really uncomfortable.

"Dirty energy money corrodes American political life," Andy Rowell writes from Oil Change International. Oklahomans envision the Osage oil crimes of the Bloodland era. They see AG Pruitt's hand in a money bag labeled "energy companies' special fund" and feel noxious.

The Washington Post's take on this theme is that the oil and gas and coal interests are spending millions of dollars to expand GOP power to thwart environmental rules. The Post's Tom Hamburger's focus is on the American Legislative Exchange Council [ALEC], an industry-financed conservative state policy group with extensive influence in Oklahoma.

There is an escalating conflict with environmental

advocacy groups attempting to counter the fossil-fuel and other special interests who are designing conservative legislation and pursuing environmental legal actions. Multiple measures are being fought over in multiple venues to undercut the credibility and dismantle the environmental movement.

The heart of the problem, as stated by Hugh Kaufman, is that citizens are armed with water pistols and engaged with mundane matters of life; they are up against, and even employed by, major polluters armed with the most sophisticated weaponry and expensive personnel that they pay for with tax breaks.

"It ain't a fair fight," Kaufman blurts out.

But think about it. We've been there. Oklahoma is an archetypical example of overcoming just such adversity. Our people have cultivated pro-earth environmentalism in support of water and land. We have improved on what we have been given, what Kerr and McBride and so many others worked so hard to achieve.

Without all that effort, the air you breathe and the water you drink would be much more polluted, and much of our remaining diversity and future prosperity would have been destroyed.

Oklahomans saw Kerr's inspiring vision translated into changes that empower our own lives. They witnessed environmentalists as dedicated and caring people willing to work with them to find solutions to environmental issues.

Oklahomans know that governmental regulation did not just fall out of the sky. It was painstakingly created, piece by piece, to deal with the damages caused by an unrestrained property rights and unregulated free-market system. As William Ashworth said, "We do not need to deconstruct regulation, but to reconstruct it."

Here is the way Jim Hightower puts it: "To move America from greed to greatness we must once again tap into the genius and gumption of the ... workaday majority of Americans who sweat, plow, invent, repair, teach construct, nurse, and do the myriad other productive tasks that sustain society from the bottom up."

Hightower says that what we want is "a government that is us," not one that does things for us. We want, he says, a government that "involves us and empowers us so we can do for ourselves and do for the country."

Now is the time for Oklahomans to once again push that wagon up the hill, to challenge and influence the Republican strategy and change government. This means participating in grassroots activities to enforce existing laws and regulations and to bring about some needed change.

Oklahomans acknowledge that their environmental trail has some damage and is in need of repair, but it does not need to be abandoned. AG Pruitt should

be invited to take the walk with us. He will enjoy the companionship, the clean air and water.

I am grateful to G. Tyler Miller Jr. and his editions of *Living In the Environment* for thoughts expressed in this commentary.

John Ferrell lives in Tulsa

Hate For Hate's Sake

BY BOB BEARDEN

They just won't go away or tone down their bigotry or racism.

If Ronald Reagan had reduced the deficit, lowered gas prices, increased oil production to where America is now the leading oil producer in the world, gotten Osama bin Laden, brought unemployment down to less than 6%, increased the economy by 5%, helped 10 million more Americans get health insurance [many millions who have never had it before], added 11 million jobs, wound down two wars and crashed North Korea's Internet [again no credit as to whom], well let's just say he would have been on Mount Rushmore right next to Teddy by now.

But Obama? No he gets absolutely no credit for all of that. The only president who never gets any credit for anything good, but gets hammered over any slight misstep even if it's not his fault. And because they can't really dis him for being black they use all manner of euphemisms to describe him and all of them lean towards being racist in nature and meaning. But you can't argue with entrenched bigots because they simply by their rhetoric make your case for you. Forrest Gump had it right when he said, "Stupid is as stupid does." And the better things get the more dumbed down they get in their harangue.

I suppose God loves them anyway. As I was taught in Sunday school God loves all sinners, no matter who they are or what they say. And I, too, adhere to that philosophy, because otherwise I would go nuts trying to make sense of people who have degrees, good paying jobs, appear outwardly sane and yet who are clueless as to how to be disagreeable and who try desperately to remain in the closet when it comes to pouting racism and bigotry.

Obama isn't perfect; no president has ever been perfect – not even the Demi-God of Conservatism Ronald Reagan. Even the great ones had their flaws. For gosh sake George Washington had wooden teeth [there is some question about that, actually], and cut down his father's cherry tree [again some speculation

now as to that ever having happened]. Thomas Jefferson kept slaves and fathered children by his slave mistress. Teddy Roosevelt chased demons all his life of one kind or another. Franklin Roosevelt had a mistress among other things. But they all should be remembered for the good things they did and their many great things they did for their country and Americans. And that they were living breathing human beings not Gods on pedestals.

Barack Hussein Obama is no different. Oh, wait, yes he is. He had the misfortune of being born half-black so whatever he does or whatever he accomplishes is always suspect. But, of course, those who hate him and the American people who voted for him [because we went to the polls and elected him – twice], can't come out and openly hurl racist and bigoted words at him that would prove the point that they hate him because he is black, not because of what he has accomplished. So they use slur words and phrases [well, except for those openly racist like rocker Ted Nugent] and refuse to even accept that he has accomplished a lot of great things in his six years in office.

No, hate rules their minds, thoughts and bodies and the media for the most part refuse to call them out. His legacy will be left to the ages, and I may not live to see it, but what he has done will one day place him high on the list among the best of those who have held the highest office in our land. And of all the presidents in my memory, he is a warm caring decent family man like none other. Only Harry S. Truman and Jimmy Carter even come close.

Hate him all you want to if it feeds your egos and makes you feel like a human to do that. But to those of you that hate for the sake of hating, I can only wish that someday you will look at yourself and realize how much your hatred and bigotry ate at your heart and soul! God and Allah forgives even bigots and racists when they realize their folly. I am also forgiving, but to a much lesser degree, because I too am human and although I hate no one I still struggle with forgiveness of those who preach bigotry and hatred. To paraphrase an old movie title we must of necessity *Leave Them to Heaven!*

Bob Bearden is a member of Mayflower Congregational Church, UCC and a trustee with the Central Oklahoma Labor Federation



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TORTURE REPORT



How 'Awesome' Is America?

BY ROBERT PARRY

Fox News host Andrea Tantaros is facing some well-deserved ridicule for refuting the stomach-turning Senate Intelligence Committee report on torture by declaring that "The United States is awesome. We are awesome" and claiming that the Democrats and President Barack Obama released the report because they want "to show us how we're not awesome."

Tantaros's rant did have the feel of a Saturday Night Live satire, but her upbeat jingoism was only a slight exaggeration of what Americans have been hearing from much of their media and politicians for decades.

At least since the presidency of Ronald Reagan, any substantive criticism of the United States has been treated as unpatriotic.

Indeed, a journalist or a politician who dares point out any fundamental flaws in the country or even its actual history can expect to have his or her patriotism challenged. That is how debate over "how we're not awesome" is silenced.

Fox News may be the poster child of this infantile anti-intellectualism but the same sentiments can be found on the Washington Post's neocon editorial pages or in the higher-brow New Republic. If you dare

point out that America or one of its favored “allies” has done some wrong around the world, you’re an enemy “apologist.” If you regularly adopt a critical stance, you will be marginalized.

That’s why so many serious national problems have lingered or gotten worse. If we don’t kill the messenger, we denounce him or her as un-American.

For instance, the data on racial disparities in police killings and prison incarcerations have long been available, but the vast majority of whites seem oblivious to these continued injustices. To point out that the United States has still not done the necessary hard work to correct these history-based imbalances makes you seem out of step amid the happy-face belief that whatever racism there was is now gone. We have a black president, you know.

So, when white police shoot or otherwise apply excessive violence against blacks at a wildly disproportionate rate to whites, many white Americans just shrug. They even get annoyed if black athletes join in some symbolic protests like raising their hands as Michael Brown did before he was shot to death in Ferguson, MO. Many people hate to have the real world intrude on their sports entertainment.

In reaction to such events, Fox News and much of talk radio find reasons to ridicule the victims and the protesters rather than address the real problems. The unwelcome evidence of racism is just another excuse to roll the eyes and infuse the voice with dripping sarcasm.

MUNDANE NEGLECT

On a more mundane level in Arlington County, VA, where I live, many whites simply don’t see the racial disparities though they are all around. While overwhelmingly white North Arlington benefits from all manner of public investments, including a state-of-the-art subway system which cost billions upon billions of dollars and amenities like a \$2 million “dog park renovation,” racially diverse South Arlington, the historic home of the county’s black population, is systematically shortchanged, except when it comes to expanding the sewage treatment plant.

When the county board finally approved a much cheaper light-rail mass-transit plan for South Arlington’s Columbia Pike and voted for a public pool complex in another South Arlington neighborhood, North Arlington residents rose up in fury. The local newspaper, the Sun-Gazette, which doesn’t even distribute in much of South Arlington – due to the demographics – rallied the political opposition.

Before long, the county board was in retreat, killing both the public pools and the light-rail plan, all the better to free up taxpayer money for more North Arlington projects. Yet, when I have noted the racial component to how the two halves of the county are treated, many Arlington whites get furious. They simply don’t see the residual racism or don’t want to see it. They view themselves as enlightened even as they favor neglecting their black and brown neighbors.

After I wrote a column about the history of Colum-

bia Pike, which became an African-American freedom trail after President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation and ex-slaves escaped up the roadway toward Washington, one reader complained that I had slighted Robert E. Lee by saying he had “deserted” the U.S. Army when his fans prefer saying that he “resigned his commission,” which sounds so much more proper.

The point is interesting not only because the commenter didn’t seem nearly as concerned about the fate of the African-Americans, some of whom joined the U.S. Colored Troops to fight for the final defeat of slavery. And not only because General Lee violated his oath as a U.S. officer in which he swore to “bear true allegiance to the United States of America” and to “serve them honestly and faithfully against all their enemies or opposers whatsoever, and observe and obey the orders of the President of the United States.”

But the commenter’s point is also interesting because it underscores how white Americans have excused and even glorified the Confederate “heroes” who were fighting to protect a system based on the ownership of other human beings. If you have any doubt about the glorification, just visit Monument Avenue in Richmond, VA, where towering statues of Confederate generals dominate the skyline.

Or, if you’re in Arlington and driving on Route One, you might notice that it is still named in honor of Jefferson Davis, the president of the Confederacy who was a fervent white supremacist and a major slaveholder. And, if President Davis and General Lee had been successful in their war of secession, it could have meant that slavery might never have ended. Yet, these protectors of slavery are treated with the utmost respect and any slight toward them requires a protest.

CRUDE RACISM

My writings about Thomas Jefferson also have

CONTINUED ON PAGE 31



AS 2015 BEGINS ...



And Now, On To The Future

BY HARRY T. COOK

The tree is dropping its needles. The presents and the wrapping papers have been packed off to where they belong. The solstice just past means that the days are edging on toward a later sunset. Our attention shifts now from the nostalgia that Christmas invites toward the new year with new problems, challenges and work to do.

My future at 75 is spelled this way: Alyssa, Cameron, Grace, Julien and Evelyn. These – at 16, 16, 14, 13 and four months – are my grandchildren. They and those of their generation are on my mind as I look out on the world for which my own generation and others before mine must accept responsibility.

No one at my level can do much about the mess in Syria or Iraq or Iran. I can do nothing to make Vladimir Putin put aside his Stalinesque ways. I cannot make China stop burning bituminous coal. I am powerless before the onslaught of the raging bulls of the incoming Congress, even as I fear what they may do or try to do. They may think themselves patriots, but if what they are saying comes from love of country, I'd be better off living in another one.

Based on what we know now, it is probable that my five grandchildren and their eventual children will live

and move and have their being in a nation that will be more and more an economic oligarchy. Its elite think already that they are above the rest of us and therefore deserve their billions merely by the fact of their existence – kind of like the divine right of kings.

My progenies' progeny will breath air that is not as unpolluted as I breathed at their age. They will inherit a world that will be warmer in all the wrong places – that will be scorched when it should be rained upon, and rained upon when it should be dry, causing major environmental and societal problems. Unlike my two younger children who twice in their childhood saw the great ice fields of Glacier National Park, the grandchildren likely will not. The melt is on there with a vengeance.

Hope for a definite international agreement to reduce carbon emissions and to pursue renewable energy sources is fading – or at best on hold – even as the fracking business is a 24/7/365 affair and the infamous Keystone pipeline is about to be approved by the new Congress. This, too, I am powerless to prevent on behalf of my kids and their kids.

These younger ones know or eventually will learn about Ferguson, Staten Island and Trayvon Martin.

When they digest those stories, surely they will wonder why my generation put up with it, why a half-century after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., the dream he talked so much about has yet to be realized. In some ways, it has turned into a nightmare.

At the pace we're going, when the American grandchild contingent reaches adulthood, it will have found an undergraduate – never mind a graduate – education almost impossible to pay for absent a lot of parental aid. Even with such educational credentials, some may find it difficult to find a decent paying job. Those who wish to pursue the arts or give themselves to altruistic endeavor at some point may have to resort to food stamps for sustenance – if such government aid has not been withdrawn due to the perceived need a) to cut taxes for the wealthy and b) to teach a Sunday school lesson to the famed 47% about pulling themselves up by the straps of boots they may not have.

And must my grandchildren be citizens of a country that tortures people to obtain information, of a country that uses drones to bomb other nations into submission, of a country that seems to preach profit *über alles*, of a country that seems satisfied with substandard education and inadequate care of the mentally ill, of a country that fills up its prisons with scarcely an attempt at rehabilitation, of a country that lets its infrastructure go to hell? Unacceptable!

As one of their antecedents among many, I cannot let being almost 76 years old hold me back from advocating and working for the realization of the more perfect union about which our Constitution speaks.

Franklin D. Roosevelt had it right 70 years ago when in an address to Congress he proposed a "Second Bill of Rights" that included:

- The right to earn enough to provide adequate food and clothing and recreation;
- The right of every family to a decent home;
- The right to adequate medical care and the opportunity to achieve and enjoy good health;
- The right to adequate protection from the economic fears of old age, sickness, accident, and unemployment; and
- The right to a good education.

Some of that vision has been fulfilled, thanks in great part to Roosevelt himself and to the 36th president of the United States, the late Lyndon Baines Johnson, who gave the nation Medicare. Long may it live. Much, as is evident, is left to be done.

So, grandchildren of mine: *Speramus meliora*. When you study Latin, which I hope you will, you'll learn that the phrase means "we hope for better things."

For now, you do the hoping and count on us gray heads to work for them on your behalf. Soon enough, you will attain adulthood. When you do, take up the task in our place and make the best of it. For your kids and theirs.

Harry T. Cook is an Episcopal priest, journalist and author living in Michigan.

Hope And Resolutions

BY SHARON MARTIN

Writers write. If we had to give a story the test of family or societal agreement, nothing would ever be published. This year, I resolve to speak up, to tell the truth as I see it, unafraid of opposing opinions.

My truth may not be your truth. The country is divided. My family is divided. The world is chopped up into chunks of hate and optimism. This year, no matter your political leanings, let optimism prevail.

Let's start at home. Parents, spend time with your children. Talk to them. Read to them. Play with them. Be active together.

Eighty percent of a child's brain is developed by the age of three. As a reading teacher, I can tell pretty quickly which children have adults who take an active role in their lives. Talking to your children is an act of love.

On the national level, let's tackle income inequality. Until we get big money out of politics, we cannot begin to help the poor and middle class families get back on their feet.

A solid majority of people polled, both Democrats and Republicans, believe that current campaign finance laws are unfair. Legislators don't listen to people; they listen to money. Big money spends big sums to motivate voters with propaganda and half-truths. The motivated vote; the rest stay home.

What if every single one of us registered to vote? What if we all challenged the unfair system?

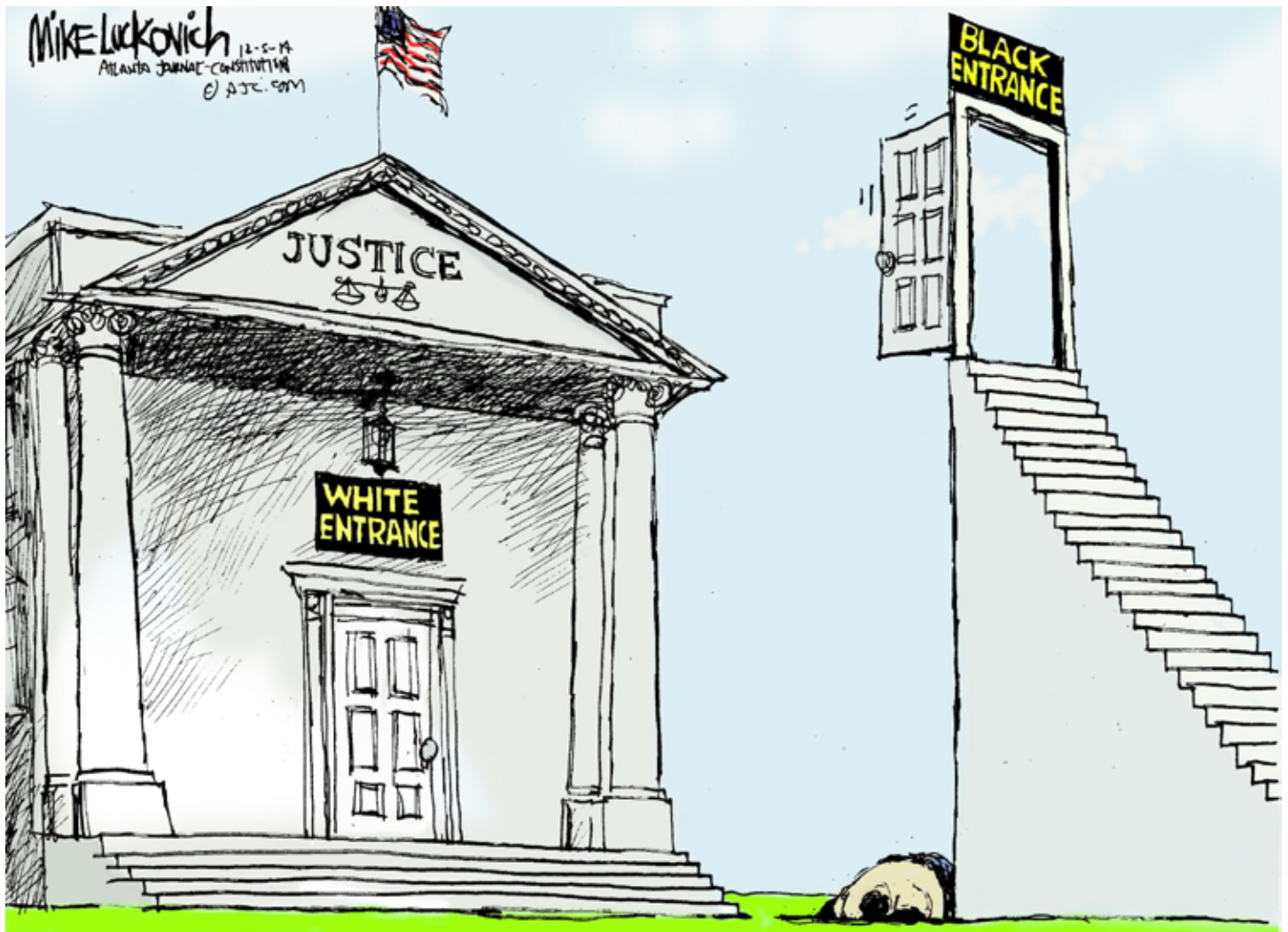
This year, let's band together and ask for publicly funded elections. This requires activism from the majority. I resolve to be an activist.

Until we can change the system that favors corporations and wealth over people, let us each do what we can to address immediate needs in our community. Buy an extra box of cereal or can of meat each month for a local food pantry. If you can afford it, buy more. Grow a garden and share the bounty. Volunteer where you are needed.

As the earth turns, be the change in your family, your community, and your nation. Talk to a child. Smile at a stranger. Write a letter to your Congressperson. Vote in city elections. Be kind. Do what you are able to do.

All of us working together can make 2015 a very good year. All of us working together can change the world.

Sharon Martin lives in Oilton and is a regular contributor to The Oklahoma Observer



‘Progressive ALEC’ Seeks Police Reform At Municipal Level

BY CANDICE BERND

As the conservative American Legislative Exchange Council [ALEC] begins its expansion into local municipalities and counties with its new arm, the American City County Exchange [ACCE], another group is working to provide the progressive counter to ACCE – and one of its main policy goals for cities and counties across the United States is police reform.

Local Progress, a network of hundreds of local elected officials from around the nation, held a competing convention in New York City, hosted by Mayor Bill de Blasio only a day last month after ACCE’s own winter conference.

Local leaders shared ideas and experiences about progressive policies being advanced in municipalities around the country to promote sustainability, economic justice, strong public education, immigrant

rights and affordable housing, among others.

Local Progress is led by a board of elected officials from cities including Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, Seattle, San Diego and San Francisco, among others, and by the staffs of SEIU International, the Center for Popular Democracy [CPD] and the Public Leadership Institute.

Robin Kniech, a Local Progress board member and Denver City Council member, told Truthout the network is helpful because local elected officials don’t have the same kinds of caucus opportunities that state and nationally elected officials have, but she cautioned the network isn’t only for elected leaders.

“We don’t exist in a vacuum just for elected officials; we really do recognize that locally, where these [policies] are achieved, they’re achieved in partnership with coalitions that we want to be involved in

our work, and our ideas are accountable to those folks who are experts,” Kniech told Truthout.

With congressional gridlock becoming the new normal in Washington and state legislatures increasingly focused on preemption, progressive policies are becoming more and more viable at the local level, say the network’s board members.

Local Progress members share model legislation and best practices for implementing progressive policies in municipalities and counties throughout the United States. Board members say the model legislation isn’t simply handed out to be advanced in localities, but rather, developed organically in a bottom-up fashion.

The organization was started in 2012 and has grown to include more than 300 local leaders from 40 states, representing hundreds of local governments. During the past two years, the network has accomplished a number of progressive victories in cities across the United States, including raising the minimum wage in Philadelphia and enacting paid sick leave in Portland.

ALEC created a local incarnation when its image took a hard hit this year after several public relations blunders. Several ALEC corporate members, including Google, Microsoft, Facebook and Yahoo, announced that they were dropping their memberships in the free-market policy group after they were successfully pressured to cut ties. The tech companies joined dozens of other corporations who dropped ALEC due to the group’s opposition to government action on climate change. But ALEC may have become empowered again by Republican midterm victories.

Progressives, on the other hand, saw midterm victories in many municipalities where Americans voted against corporate power in local ballot initiatives and local elections, and local leaders are hoping to use that momentum to advance 15 progressive policy areas in 2015.

During the convention in New York City, Local Progress members discussed policies including those focused on protecting residents from deportation and providing services to undocumented immigrants; prohibiting discriminatory policing and reforming police practices; and supporting alternatives to incarceration and decriminalization measures.

“There’s a whole host of ways we can dismantle the criminal justice system which incarcerates people based on their race and destroys so many families,” says Ady Barkan, a senior attorney at CPD. “And a lot of these policies are being innovated in the cities around the country.”

Specifically, the group hopes to require body-worn and dashboard cameras for police officers; require written records of consent in consensual searches; require officers to identify themselves and explain the reason for a stop or detainment; improve officer training; expand over-

sight of police departments by empowering civilian review boards; and end stop-and-frisk policing and racial profiling, among other police reforms.

“Seattle has created a citizens police commission, and it looks like it may be a good model for other cities to follow. That’s the kind of thing that Local Progress is about, showing, basically what’s working in cities and if it can provide a path or a model for other cities to adjust to their own community,” says Nick Lacata, a Seattle City Council member and Local Progress chair.

The Department of Justice [DOJ] found in December 2011 that the Seattle Police Department engaged in a pattern or practice of excessive force that violates the Constitution and federal law, resulting in a consent decree between the city and federal authorities. Seattle is one of more than 20 U.S. cities under federal monitoring after a DOJ civil rights investigation found systemic violations. Under the terms of the consent decree, city leaders established the Community Police Commission, one of the only civilian commissions in the United States with a specific mandate to develop reform recommendations based on community input.

The Local Progress convention included a panel on police reforms, with representatives from Cincinnati, Seattle and New York, who spoke about police reforms effective in their respective cities.

Brad Lander, a New York City Council member and Local Progress board member, recently called on Mayor de Blasio to establish the state’s attorney general as the special prosecutor for cases of police brutality in which an unarmed civilian is killed, but he warned these kind of fixes are only one small part the much larger, systemic change that is still needed.

“We’re talking about a set of injustices rooted in the deep history of racial inequality in this country, and you can’t undo that with a clever local law,” Lander told Truthout.

Members of the New York City Council are weighing various bills aimed at reforming the way police treat civilians like Eric Garner, an unarmed African American who died shortly after he was put in a chokehold by a New York City police officer in July. A grand jury recently decided not to indict the officers who killed Garner.

The New York City Council is weighing bills aimed making chokeholds illegal, changing use-of-force policies and instituting additional reporting requirements on use-of-force incidents, some of which have been previously proposed but have failed passage.

Lander hopes the council will pass the Right to Know Act, which is comprised of two bills that were originally part of the Community Safety Act, but which failed passage last term.

The two bills would require NYPD officers to identify themselves when stopping or detaining someone and explain the reason for the stop. The bill would also require that officers let people know they have a

constitutional right to refuse a search.

Lander hopes other cities will look at aspects of New York's Community Safety Act, which was passed last year, as model legislation.

The act banned racial profiling by NYPD officers, included giving civilians the right to take legal action, and instituted an independent inspector general for the police department.

But Lander also believes a process in which communities come together with the department under a federal monitor is just as important as implementing local laws.

"Moving forward under the federal court order and federal mandate on stop-and-frisk, through a process that puts at the table the [police] department, the city council, the unions and the advocates ... what I learned from the Seattle and Cincinnati examples

is that that might be the most important thing for achieving a real durable change in culture and institutions," Lander said.

Local Progress also hopes to advance a number of alternatives to incarceration, including implementing pretrial diversion programs and alternative courts; prohibiting civil forfeiture; reducing fees imposed on offenders and probationers; and facilitating ex-offender re-entry.

But one of the group's main priorities in the coming year is enacting a living wage and paid sick leave in cities across the United States.

"I expect that as Local Progress grows, in 2015, we will see many more victories along the lines of what we saw this past year regarding minimum wage and paid sick leave," Seattle's Licata told Truthout.

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Climate Change's Health Dangers Elude Americans

BY ANASTASIA PANTSIOS

When the average American thinks about how climate change-caused global warming could affect their health, what do they think of?

Not much, apparently, according to a new study, *Public Perceptions of the Health Impacts of Global Warming*, released by the Yale Project on Climate Change Communication and the George Mason University Center for Climate Change Communication.

The study is based on the results of a survey, *Climate Change in the American Mind*. The researchers found that Americans largely haven't thought about the health impacts of global warming at all.

Americans are mostly unaware that climate change has vast global health impacts.

"Few Americans have thought much about the health consequences of global warming," they said. "Asked how often, if at all, before taking this survey they had thought about how global warming might affect people's health, six in 10 said they had given the issue little or no thought. Only one in 10 said they had given the issue a 'great deal' of thought and only about two in 10 [22%] said they had thought about it a 'moderate amount.'"

Asked "In your view, what health problems related to global warming are Americans experiencing, if any?," 43% offered no answer and 14% said they didn't know. Ten percent answered incorrectly that there are no problems, while 27% named one.

The respondents who correctly identified at least one health problem primarily mentioned either asthma and other lung diseases [14%] or the impacts of

extreme weather events [6%]. Fewer than 5% were able to name anything else, such as diseases carried by tainted water, food and ticks.

The study found on question after question that large numbers of respondents didn't know or were wrong.

Only one in three respondents [31%] thought global warming was impacting the health of Americans now, and only 17% thought it was affecting their own health or that of members of their household.

Only one in three respondents knew that some groups of people – including the elderly, children and the poor – were more likely to suffer health impacts than others [32%]; most were not sure [43%].

Needless to say, they were equally unaware of the health impacts of global warming worldwide. Most said they weren't sure how many people are impacted around the globe, and a third thought people would suffer no health consequences now or in the future.

Only 12% to 15% thought thousands or millions of people around the world are sickened, injured or die because of global warming. And only slightly more than a third thought smog, pollen-related allergies, asthma and other lung diseases, heat stroke and injuries from storms would become more common in their community in the next decade.

Still, almost half of Americans felt government agencies should do more to address such health-related issues, including federal agencies like the Centers for Disease Control [CDC], the National Institutes of Health [NIH], the Federal Emergency Management Agency [FEMA], Congress or their state government.

More support than oppose more funding for government agencies to deal with public health problems arising from global warming but about three in ten had no opinion.

The survey suggests an avenue for increasing public awareness. Nearly half [49%] said they are likely to trust their primary care doctor's opinion on the matter, while 41% said they would trust family or friends with a similar number saying they would trust the CDC.

They were least likely to trust the opinion of religious leaders and the military on the topic.

In an editorial published Dec. 14 in Bristol, VA's TriCities.com, as well as the Richmond Times-Dispatch, Virginia pediatrician Jerome A. Paulson, chairman of the American Academy of Pediatrics Council on Environmental Health, wrote, "As a pediatrician who cares for children from the tri-state area, I have witnessed the harmful effects of air pollution on children in our local communities, especially in the form

of exacerbated or new asthma symptoms. Without action, these cases will only become more frequent and more severe."

He strongly advocated for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency [EPA] proposed carbon emission reduction rule, saying, "Despite these alarming statistics and the imminent health effects of climate change, the public health perspective has been notably absent from discussions of the EPA's new rule to reduce carbon emission. Ignoring the impact of air pollution on public health is leaving out an important piece of the puzzle."

"Public health actions, especially preparedness and prevention, can do much to protect people from some of the impacts of climate change," said the Yale/George Mason University researchers. "Early action provides the largest health benefits. As threats increase, our ability to adapt to future changes may be limited."

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'Awesome'

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 25

elicited anger from some people who wish to idolize him as a noble philosopher/statesman when the reality was that he was a crude racist [see his Notes on the State of Virginia] who mistreated his Monticello slaves, including having boys as young as 10 whipped and raping one and likely other of his slave girls.

[See Consortiumnews.com's Thomas Jefferson: America's Founding Sociopath.]

Much like the defender of Robert E. Lee who preferred more polite phrasing about the general's betrayal of his oath, defenders of the Jefferson myth expressed much more outrage over my pointing out these inconvenient truths about their hero than they did about the victims of Jefferson's despicable behavior and stunning hypocrisies.

Which gets us back to Andrea Tantaros and how "awesome" America is. The context for her remarks was the release of the Senate Intelligence Committee's torture report which detailed what can no longer be euphemized away as "enhanced interrogation

techniques" or EITs as CIA officials prefer.

The only word that can now apply is torture, at least for anyone who has read the page-after-page of near drownings via waterboard, the hallucinatory effects of sleep deprivation, the pain inflicted by hanging people from ceilings, and the sexual sadism of keeping detainees naked and subjecting them to anal rape under the pretext of "rectal rehydration" and "rectal feeding."

The various apologists for this

torture – people like Tantaros, Vice President Dick Cheney and Washington Post columnist Charles Krauthammer – prefer to counterattack by questioning the patriotism or the intellectual consistency of those Americans who are outraged at these actions. The torture defenders excuse the behavior because we were scared after 9/11 and wanted the Bush Administration to do whatever it took to keep us safe.

All of these excuses are designed to prevent the sort of soul-searching that one should expect from a mature democratic Republic, a country that seeks to learn from its mistakes, not cover them up or forget them.

Instead of Americans confronting these dark realities of both their history and their present – and making whatever amends and adjustments are necessary – the torture apologists or those who don't see racism would simply have us wave the flag and declare how "awesome" we are.

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Oklahoma Friends Meetings (Quakers)

*Friends believe there is
that of God in everyone.
They cannot prove this,
but when they act as if
it were true, their trust
is justified.*

- Author unknown

MEETING FOR WORSHIP SCHEDULE AND CONTACTS

OKLAHOMA CITY: 333 SE 46th St, 73129. Worship Sunday evening at 7pm. FMI 405.632.7574)

<http://www.rsok-okc.com>

STILLWATER: Sunday morning. Call 405.372.4839

TULSA: Sunday afternoon. Call 918.743.6827

NORMAN: Sunday morning. Call 405.321.7971

KAIAMICHI WORSHIP GROUP (SE OK): Monthly. Call 918.569.4803.



Populist Proposals Won In 2014

There's no denying that Democrats took a drubbing at the polls in 2014. Running cautious campaigns and shying away from ObamaCare, Wall Street regulation, the anti-fracking movement, immigration reform and Obama himself – was not a winning strategy.

While the Democrats had a poor showing, populist and progressive ideas surged. Even in red states, pollsters find support for big progressive policy changes [such as living wage laws, Medicare for all, a national infrastructure jobs program, expanded Social Security benefits and free higher education] that would re-establish a vibrant middle-class America. While voters were tossing Democrats aside in this past election, bigger majorities of the same electorate leapt at the chance to say “YES” to an array of unabashedly populist ballot initiatives:

MINIMUM WAGE

Even though the crimson-red states of Alaska, Arkansas, Nebraska and South Dakota elected GOP Senate candidates, voters rejected the low-wage policies of the Republicans and their corporate backers by approving minimum wage increases. San Francisco voters also raised their wage floor to \$15 an hour, and Oakland went to \$12.25. In addition, non-binding referenda calling for raises to \$10 or more were approved by 65% of the voters in Illinois and by 13 Wisconsin cities and counties, where a whopping 70% to 83% of voters OK'd the increases.

FRACKING

While ExxonMobil, Halliburton and dozens of huge energy corporations are in a nationwide fracking frenzy – running roughshod over local citizens in the furious rush for fast profits – locals have begun pushing back against the gross pollution, health problems, infrastructure damage and even earthquakes caused by the inherently destructive and intrusive fracking process. Asserting their human and civic rights, local coalitions have, in the last few years, won several referendum fights to ban fracking in their communities.

This year's election saw four more victories added to the list. Bans were passed in Athens, OH [78% of

the vote], California's Mendocino County [67%] and San Benito County [57%] and even in Denton, TX [59%].

CORPORATE MONEY

In dozens of communities in five states, people went to the election polls and confirmed what opinion polls consistently report: The overwhelming majority of Americans want corporate money out of our elections. In the midst of the most money-soaked midterm election in global history, multi-partisan majorities said “enough!” They voted for initiatives that said [1] only humans have constitutional rights, [2] money is not speech and [3] “We the People” want to pass a 28th Amendment overturning the Supreme Court's corrosive Citizens United edict.

Ironically, even as the Koch-financed governor of Wisconsin, Scott Walker, pulled off a re-election victory, 12 local communities [including his home county of Milwaukee] voted between 70% and 80% for local initiatives that call for an amendment to overturn the court's terrible decision. Similar majorities were amassed in statewide in Florida, Illinois, Massachusetts and Ohio: As the national director of the Move to Amend Campaign put it: “The leaders of both parties need to realize that their voters are clamoring for this amendment, and we are only going to get louder.”

PAID SICK LEAVE

Poverty is sickening enough, but millions of people trying to live on poverty-level wages face a truly sickening choice when they fall ill: Stay at home and lose a few days' pay, or go to work sick, possibly spreading the illness to co-workers and customers. This year, there were four big victories for paid sick leave: Massachusetts [59% to 41%], Oakland, CA [81% to 19%], Montclair, NJ [74% to 26%] and Trenton, NJ [86% to 14%].

CONSERVATION

Three major conservation initiatives passed this year: Alaskans voted to prohibit future mining projects that would endanger wild salmon habitat; 75% of Florida voters approved a measure to dedicate \$1 billion a year in real estate taxes to the protection of

water in the endangered Everglades and other areas; and New Jerseyans OK'd an initiative that requires \$2 billion in corporate tax revenue be spent on land conservation.

MARIJUANA

This year both Alaskans and Oregonians voted for full legalization, while Washington, DC voted to decriminalize marijuana. And the U.S. territory of Guam approved marijuana use for medicinal purposes.

The day after the election, Obama said: "To the two-thirds of voters that chose not to participate in the process yesterday, I hear you." Fine. But will he and the other Democratic leaders make the giant leap from "hearing" to doing?

Taking bold, populist actions makes working stiff and average Americans excited about voting. We need more leaders to champion the populist cause.

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Citigroup Becomes Its Own Self-Serving Lawmaker

Congress, which has long been so tied up in a partisan knot by right-wing extremists that it has been unable to move, suddenly sprang loose at the end of the year and put on a phenomenal show of acrobatic lawmaking.

In one big, bipartisan spending bill, our legislative gymnasts pulled off a breathtaking, flat-footed backflip for Wall Street, and then set a dizzying new height record for the amount of money deep-pocketed donors can give to the two major political parties. It was the best scratch-my-back performance you never saw. You and I didn't see it – because it happened in secret.

The favor was huge – allowing Wall Street's most reckless speculators to have their losses on risky derivative deals insured by us taxpayers. Yes, such losses were a central cause of the 2008 financial crash and subsequent unholy bank bailout, which led to passage of the Dodd-Frank reform law, including a provision sparing taxpayers from covering future losses.

But with one, compact, 85-line provision inserted deep inside the 1,600-page, trillion-dollar spending bill, Congress did a dazzling flip-flop on that regulation, putting us taxpayers back on the hook for the bankers' high-risk speculation.

In this same spending bill, Congress also used its legislative athleticism to free rich donors [such as Wall Street bankers] from a limit of under \$100,000 on the donation that any one of them can give to political parties.

In a spectacular gravity-defying stunt, lawmakers flung the limit on these donations to a record-setting 15 times higher than before. So now bankers who are grateful to either party for being able to make a killing on taxpayer-backed deals can give \$1.5 million dollars each to the parties.

Perhaps you recall from your high school civics class that neat, one-page flow chart showing the perfectly logical, beautifully democratic process that

Congress must go through to pass our laws.

What a bunch of kidders those chart makers were! To see how the sausage is really made, let's take a look at that trillion-dollar budget bill that Congress squeezed out just before Christmas.

It was crammed with special corporate favors, such as: reinstating a Bush rule allowing mining giants to explode the tops off ancient Appalachian mountains and then bulldoze the rubble down into the valley below destroying pristine mountain streams; another letting long-haul trucking outfits require their drivers to be on the road more than 11 hours a day and up to 82 hours per week, filling our highways with highballing, sleep-deprived truckers; and cutting \$60 billion from the Environmental Protection Agency, freeing up polluters to go unpunished for polluting.

None of these favors had anything to do with that "how-a-bill-becomes-law" flow chart in our civics textbook. No bill was filed, no public hearings, no debate, no vote.

Just – BAM! – there they were, a thicket of benefits secretly slipped into the 1,600-page budget bill by ... well, by whom? Largely by corporate lobbyists, though they get one of their for-hire Congress critters to do the actual dirty deed.

The taxpayer subsidy for Wall Street, for example, was written by Citigroup. The bank's lobbyists then handed the provision to Kansas Republican Kevin Yoder, who slipped it into the bill. Thus, the Wall Street conglomerate that took a \$50 billion bailout from us taxpayers just seven years ago to save itself from its own bad deals essentially was allowed to become an unelected, self-serving, do-it-yourself, backroom "lawmaker" to make sure that your and my tax dollars will be there to cover its next mess-up.

And that, boys and girls, is the real flow chart for making our laws. It's always an amazing sight when Wall Street and Congress get together, especially when they get together out of sight. – *Jim Hightower*

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Ending A 50-Year Policy Failure

BY JOE CONASON

Listen carefully to the Republican leaders and presidential hopefuls roaring with outrage over President Barack Obama's courageous decision to normalize relations with Cuba; listen very carefully, because no matter how long or how closely you listen to them, there is one thing you will surely never hear.

You will never hear a new idea – or any idea – about bringing liberty, democracy and prosperity to the suffering Cuban people.

Instead, the furious denunciations of the president's initiative from his adversaries reveal only an intellectual void on Capitol Hill, where the imperatives remain partisan and cynical. Everyone paying attention has known for decades that the frozen relationship between the United States and Cuba has accomplished nothing – except possibly the prolongation of the Castro regime, which has long considered the embargo a plausible excuse for its own economic failures and viewed the United States as a politically

convenient enemy.

Anyone who has visited the island knows that the Cubans wish nothing more than to see the embargo lifted because they know it has done nothing to advance their liberty or prosperity – just the opposite.

As Bill Clinton likes to say, the definition of insanity is to keep doing the same thing and expect a different result. [He wanted to normalize relations as president, but the Cuban government clearly didn't.] The U.S. government has been doing the same thing in Cuba for nearly 54 years, yet the Republicans still don't think that's been long enough. They haven't explained how or why – or when – their policy will achieve a different result.

Opponents of change have also failed to justify why we've treated Cuba so differently than we treat other – and, in various respects, worse – authoritarian regimes with which we maintain not only vigorous diplomatic relations but massive trading partnerships and even military cooperation. The conduct of those

governments is arguably more repressive in important ways; there is, for instance, less religious freedom in China and Saudi Arabia than Pope Francis found in Cuba.

To browse human rights findings from the State Department's annual reports or the online files maintained by groups such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International is to find at least a dozen countries with atrocious human rights records, from Chad to Turkmenistan. But the United States maintains diplomatic and trade relations with all of them.

Indeed, Republican leaders and businessmen – notably including members of the Bush family – have profited handsomely from investment in countries such as China and Saudi Arabia for many years, with scarcely a peep about human rights violations in those places.

It is impossible to forget how the first President Bush toasted the Chinese regime immediately after the massacre in Tiananmen Square – and how his opportunistic family members showed up in Beijing and Shanghai looking for a deal.

With the liberation of more than 50 political prisoners – along with American aid worker Alan Gross and an unnamed American spy – the Cubans have suddenly improved their human rights performance, while the Chinese continue to inflict horrendous repression and even torture on Tibetans, Uighurs and Han Chinese who dare to dissent. [Many of our leading Republicans don't object to torture, of course,

unless it is perpetrated in foreign countries. Sometimes.]

House Speaker John Boehner accused the president of making “another mindless concession to a dictatorship.” What seems truly mindless, however, is his insistence that we dare not abandon an unworkable and destructive strategy. No trade and diplomatic boycott observed and enforced by one country alone – even a powerful country such as ours – is ever going to prevail.

That is among the reasons international human rights organizations, always the most consistent and implacable critics of the Castros' abuses, have long advocated engagement rather than embargo. As Human Rights Watch notes on Web pages devoted to detailing those abuses, U.S. policy has imposed “indiscriminate hardship on the Cuban people” since 1961 “and has done nothing to improve the country's human rights.”

And not long after the president concluded his historic speech – among the most lucid, logical and inspiring delivered since he was re-elected – a spokeswoman for Amnesty International called his new approach “the best opportunity in [a] half-century for human rights change in Cuba.”

Designed to quarantine the Cuban government, the policy that has failed for five decades has only succeeded in isolating the United States from the rest of the world. Its end is long overdue.

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GOP Now David Duke's Party

BY ZAID JILANI

Republican Congressman and House Majority Whip Steve Scalise, R-LA, has been in hot water since news broke he once spoke at an event organized by a white nationalist group associated with former Louisiana Republican politician and Klan leader David Duke.

Scalise has done everything he can to claim he abhors Duke's politics. But that's not exactly what one Louisiana columnist says Scalise has always believed. Stephanie Grace of The New Orleans Advocate says Scalise told her he was “David Duke without the baggage” – in other words, he agreed with his policy worldview but did not have a history of open advocacy for the Ku Klux Klan and neo-Nazis.

Scalise has not commented on Grace's claim, but it's worth examining it on the facts. Did Duke run for governor in 1991 – as the official nominee of the Republican Party – on ideas that were outside the Republican mainstream today, with rhetoric outside the normal bounds? A look back

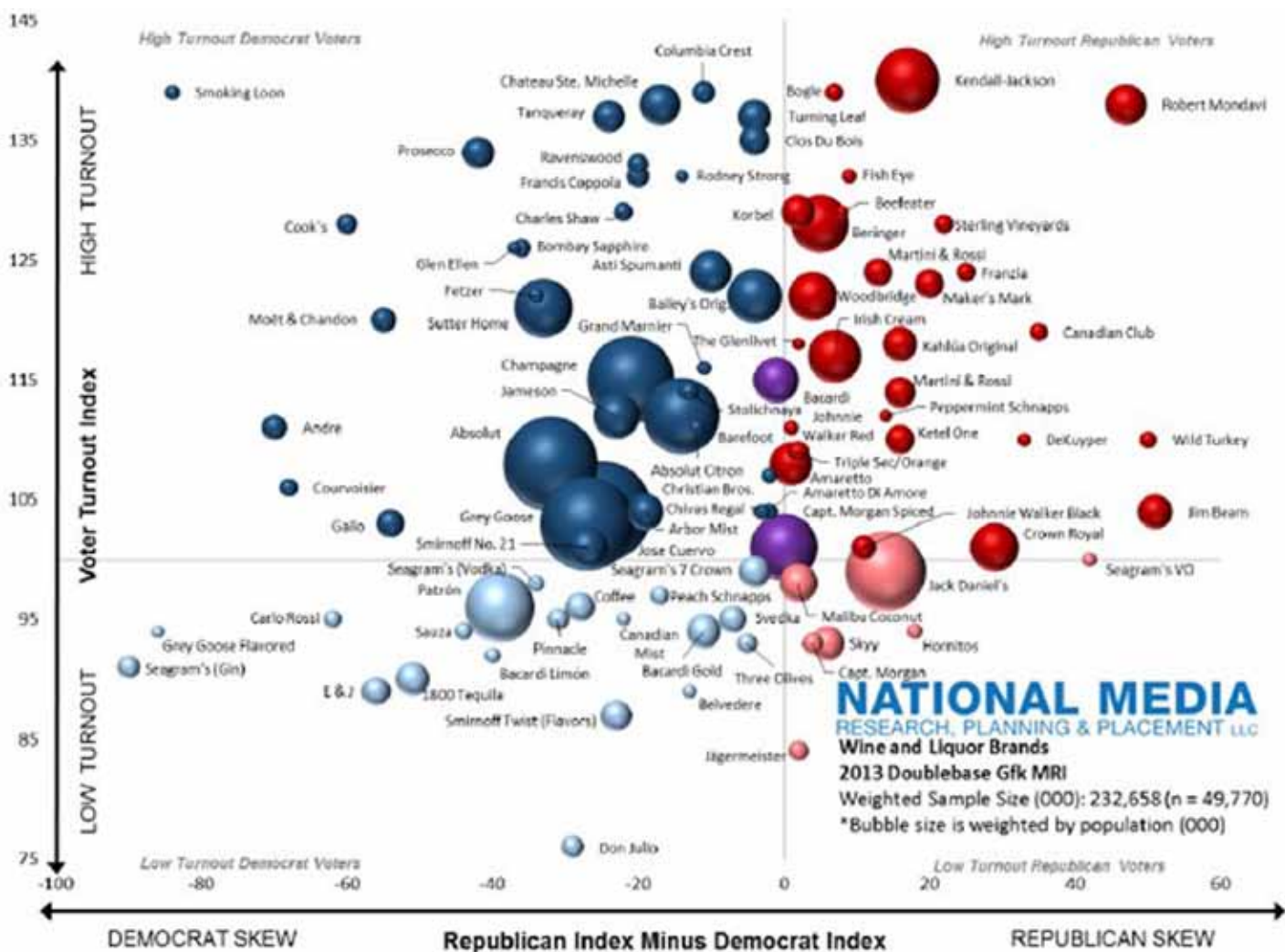
at his gubernatorial run seems to support Grace's comment.

While Duke dropped his openly racist rhetoric while running for governor, he won enough support to be the Republican Party's nominee by laying out a policy agenda aimed at accomplishing a lot of the same goals: punishing perceived ungrateful minorities and non-Christians who threaten the purity of our nation.

Duke ran on his “love for Western civilization. That's what I've always been about,” he said. He invoked Christian persecution in the same tones you see on Fox News today: “Our Christian values are under attack. In some places in this country, we can't even sing Christmas carols anymore. We're losing the values the nation was built upon.”

Years before Bill Clinton and Newt Gingrich would end welfare as we know it, Duke made it a centerpiece of his campaign, railing against the

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Do You Vote What You Drink?

BY FROMA HARROP

Did you know that Democrats drink more than Republicans? Or that they are likelier to choose clear liquors, whereas Republicans tend toward the darker ones? That voters who skew most Republican favor Jim Beam? That those who skew most Democratic go for Seagram's gin?

I didn't. And frankly, I'd take such findings with a long lost shaker of salt. You wonder how honest anyone would be with a stranger asking about drinking and politics in the same conversation. Also, the survey obviously leaves out voters who abstain from alcohol.

No matter. If you're feeling tongue-tied among people you barely know at an upcoming party, here's a subject that can serve as a safe icebreaker. It's amusing, spicy and political but not bitterly partisan.

The report is by National Media Research, Planning and Placement – a Republican consulting firm.

Its conclusions are based on a survey of over 50,000 consumers. More details in a minute.

First, let's put in a kind word for the cocktail party as a traditional no-fly zone for strife, including the partisan kind. In the age of Ronald Reagan, Republican and Democratic lawmakers would end their day socializing over drinks, often creating social bonds that facilitated cooperation later. Nowadays, each party retreats to its own bunker. For many on the hard right, especially, a Republican seen smiling within 10 feet of a Democrat might be accused of consorting with the enemy.

The cocktail party, born in the 1920s, was generally above politics – except perhaps the politics of Prohibition. It was highly unlikely – though not impossible – that those backing the ban on the sale and production of alcoholic beverages would be in attendance.

The policy disaster that was Prohibition [1920 to 1933] did advance the cause of gender equality. The

cocktail party became the place where women could drink and smoke with men – something not previously done in polite society.

Under Prohibition, drinking was still permitted in one's home – and that is where much of it moved. Women felt still freer to partake behind those protected walls.

Out of this swirl emerged a new language of dress for women, as described in *Cocktail Culture: Ritual and Invention in American Fashion, 1920-1980*. For women, the shorter cocktail dress became acceptable after-dark attire, with makeup and perfume adding to the intoxicating mix. Hollywood latched on to the trend, focusing on silk stockings and lacy lingerie.

Pollsters didn't call these sophisticated ladies and gentlemen and inquire into their political leanings. First off, polling back then was rather primitive, as well as less pervasive and invasive. But more to the point, with Prohibition in full force, telling a pollster what you drank, depending on where, could be an admission of criminal activity.

We are clearly in a post-dress-up era. So time to

end the chitchat on how people array themselves for social drinking and drill down to what they drink and what they think, politicswise.

Interestingly, voters with the highest turnout on both the Republican and Democratic sides tend to be wine drinkers.

There may be nothing to the following observation, but high-turnout Democrats tend to patronize Washington state vineyards Columbia Crest and Chateau Ste. Michelle, whereas high-turnout Republicans go for California wines Kendall-Jackson and Robert Mondavi.

Among voters with the lowest turnout, Democrats choose Don Julio tequila, and Republicans prefer Jagermeister, syrupy and brown. National Media says this is not surprising. Wish it would elaborate.

Oddly, the beverage for high-turnout voters who skew the most Democratic is something called Smoking Loon. What the heck is Smoking Loon? Oh, it's a winery. As already noted, the author of the report is Republican.

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It's Time Hillary, Jeb Declare Their Independence

BY JILL LAWRENCE

If you need proof that upward mobility in America is increasingly elusive, consider the prospect of a Hillary Clinton-Jeb Bush presidential race. A second President Clinton or a third President Bush would send the depressing message that Barack Obama's classic American Dream ascent was a fluke.

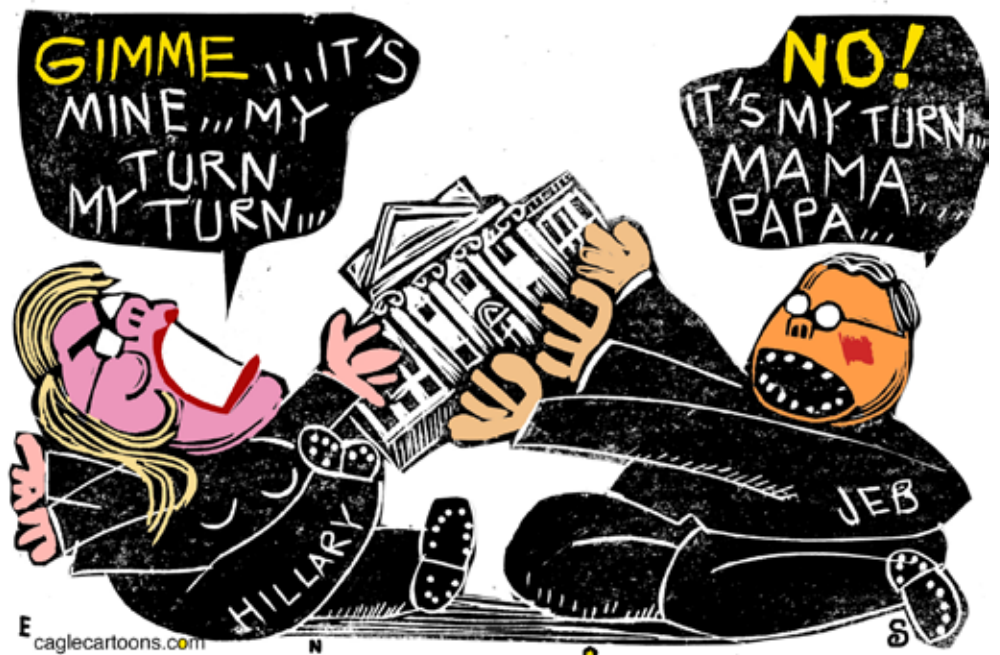
There's more to Clinton and Bush than their family names and financial networks, of course. They are both serious, experienced, credible leaders. But their advantages are also disadvantages. The downside of seasoning is that they have seemingly been on the scene forever. And notwithstanding Bill Clinton's solid economic record and the sturdiness of the Bush brand among some mainstream Republicans, their names evoke weariness among voters who lived through Bill's scandals and George W.'s wars, and anyone who believes that dynasties and democracy are in-

compatible.

Clinton and Bush need to find ways to convince the nation that they are turning the page – that they are the future, not the past. Bush furthermore needs to differentiate himself from his father

and brother. And Clinton needs to make clear she is not the same candidate she was in 2008. In short, these overly familiar figures need to surprise us.

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Bush's support for comprehensive immigration reform and the Common Core education standards puts him at odds with much of his party. His current plan is to persuade the severely conservative GOP primary electorate, as Mitt Romney might describe it, that he's right. "I'm not going to change what I believe. And my beliefs, I think, are good solid mainstream conservative thought," Bush said told WPLG-TV in Miami this month. He said he doesn't intend to repeat what he views as Romney's mistake in the 2012 primaries: "He got sucked into other people's agendas."

Running the way Bush proposes is no recipe for success in conservative early primary states, but it would make for a bracing and compelling campaign, if possibly a short one. Adding to the drama, and of keen interest to all voters, would be insight into where the former two-term Florida governor would break from his relatives.

He has indicated he would be more interventionist than President Obama, but would he, like his brother, have invaded Iraq? He has talked about limited government, so what does he think of his brother's Medicare prescription program paid for with borrowed money? When it comes to taxes, is he more like his brother [huge cuts that contributed to huge deficits] or his father [who closed deficits in part by going back on his word and raising taxes]? And what are his views on torture?

There's already been reporting on where Clinton plans to put her 2016 presidential campaign headquarters and even which states she thinks she could win in a general election. Such speculation underscores her twin hazards of overexposure and inevitability. If and when she decides to run, how could she spark our interest?

For a start, Clinton could make income inequality a central theme of her campaign and do it her way. She's no Elizabeth Warren and she shouldn't try to be. The Massachusetts senator, with her longstand-

ing attacks on a "rigged" system and the institutions that benefit from it, owns the firebrand populist niche. That's not Clinton's style or comfort zone, especially after her eight years representing Wall Street as a New York senator. When she lashes out at business, it doesn't go well, as in her mangled critique of trickle-down economics last fall: "Don't let anyone tell you that, um, you know, it's corporations and businesses that create jobs."

What fits Clinton better is an appeal to high moral ground. You could characterize this approach as "we're all in this together" or a form of tactful public shaming. Instead of attacking people who are benefiting from the rigged system, appeal to them on behalf of the common good and a healthier overall economy. Urge them to support a financial transactions tax and an end to ridiculously low tax rates for investment fund managers. Pick up on some of the ideas proposed by Washington Post columnist Harold Meyerson, such as lower taxes for corporations that cap CEO pay or raise worker wages to match productivity increases.

Clinton should also think carefully about whether to hire people on a listserv of some 150 Democratic operatives described as Clinton campaign aides in waiting. The e-mails, leaked to Rick Klein of ABC News and perfectly characterized as "bro-tastic" by The Washington Post's Aaron Blake, are classic frat boy towel-snapping. Her last campaign was marred by infighting and incompetence. This time around, she should hire adults who know what they're doing and won't embarrass her while they're doing it. That will not only yield a better campaign, it will show she learns from mistakes.

Hillary and Jeb will never be fresh faces. But they can minimize that handicap by running as creative, evolving leaders who are not captive to their family legacies.

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Duke

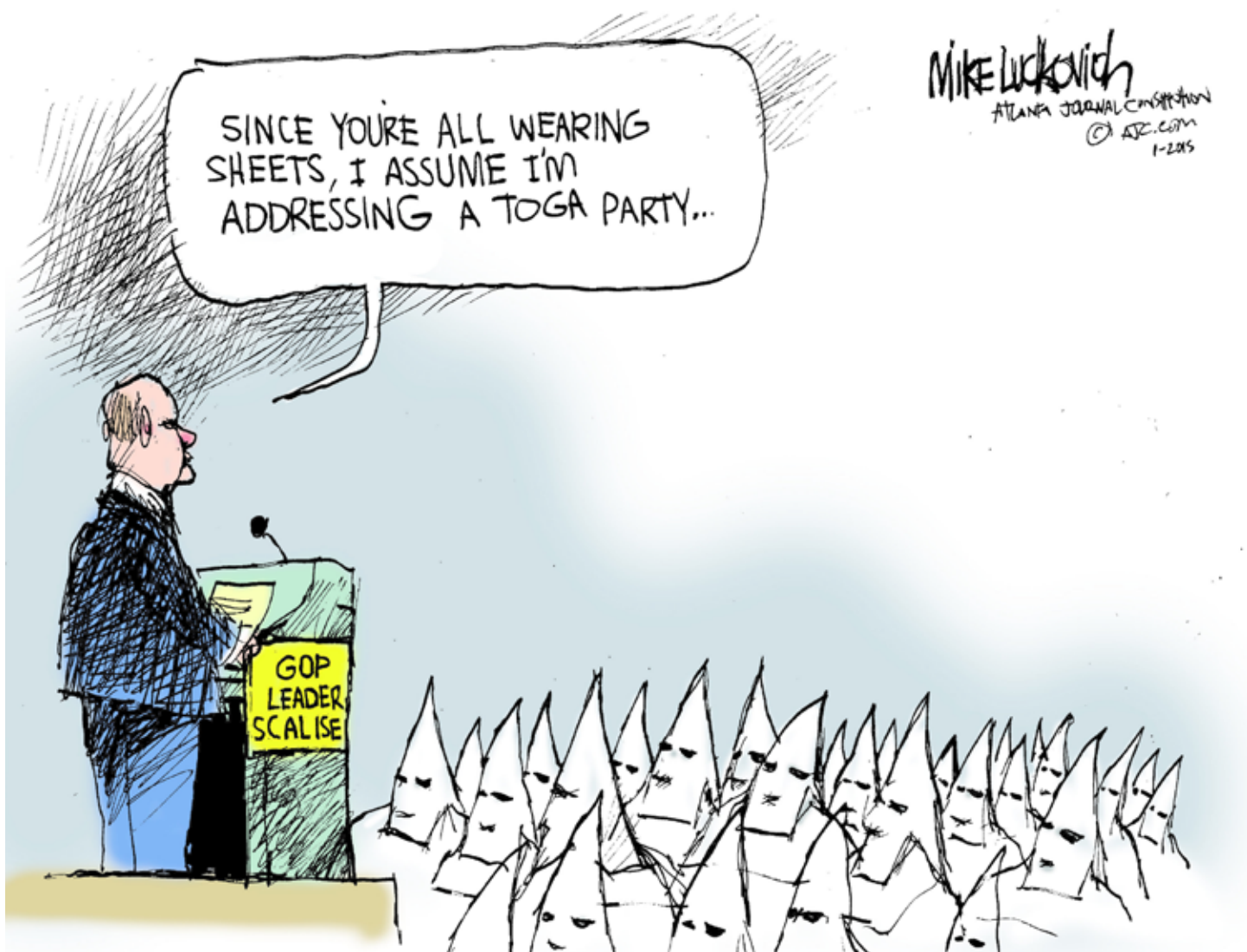
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"rising welfare underclass." He blamed the "liberal social welfare system" for encouraging "the rising illegitimate welfare birthrate"; this rhetoric was matched with concrete policy ideas, like paying mothers receiving Aid for Families With Dependent Children to use birth control, based on the theory these poor women were having too many children irresponsibly. In his introductory statement at the 1991 debate, Duke loudly complained about a "welfare system that's encouraged crime," while also railing against bus-ing and against the educational system. He also railed against welfare recipients buying "drugs" and "lotto tickets" – a precursor to today's GOP passing humiliating legislation forcing aid recipi-

ents to undergo drug testing.

A cause he carried in his campaigns for higher office and his time in the state legislature was to eliminate affirmative action programs, comparing them to Nazi programs of racial preference.

All of these policies and rhetoric are driven primarily by white racial animosity, and Duke was groundbreaking in his ability to shift them to the top of grassroots right-wing priorities. "By the time this race is over, regardless of who wins, Duke will become the uncontested leader of the racial right in America," explained Lance Hill, executive director of the Louisiana Coalition Against Racism and Nazism to The New York Times in 1991, as the gubernatorial election was ongoing.



"Not only that, but there will be a racial right in America. He is both ascending to that position while creating it. Prior to that, there was Reagan and Bush. There was nothing to the right of that. There will be now."

As Republicans continue to try to distance themselves from Duke, it's important to remember what they're doing. They are not condemning and separating themselves from hate or bigotry – they are trying to create space between themselves and one man who had publicly disgraced himself with his Klan and neo-Nazi advocacy.

The GOP is not, for example, ending its ties to the extremist group the Family Research Council [FRC], who Republican presidential candidates always address.

The FRC hosts speakers who tell their constituents that Muslims always lie to non-Muslims and have embedded themselves in the U.S. Government to take it over as part of a Muslim Brotherhood plot. How is this rhetoric any different than David Duke's claims of a Jewish-conspiracy running Washington?

FRC has also been a leader in promoting hate

against gay and lesbian Americans, with one of its spokespersons even refusing to condemn calls for putting them to death.

And it's worth pointing out that the GOP's single largest election financier behind the Koch Brothers is Sheldon Adelson, a notorious bigot who regularly defames Muslims and Arabs – and who says Israel doesn't need democracy for its non-Jewish citizens because democracy isn't in the Torah.

There is little, substantively, that separates the rhetoric of the bigots and extremists the modern GOP courts and the bigotry and extremism Duke represents. But Duke's 1991 campaign shows that even when you don't openly espouse hatred, you can still promote it by transitioning your incendiary rhetoric into a policy agenda. Duke's agenda then was banning affirmative action and getting welfare recipients to take birth control; today's GOP talks about stopping "Sharia law" and "defending marriage." At the end of the day, it's all rooted in the same hate. Whatever Scalise claims, it's David Duke's party now.

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‘Morality Binds And Blinds’

THE RIGHTEOUS MIND

Why Good People Are Divided

By Politics And Religion

By Jonathan Haidt

Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group

528 pages, \$16 [paperback]

BY JOHN WOOD

Jonathan Haidt, a social psychologist at the University of Virginia, considered himself a strong liberal before he researched his book *The Righteous Mind*. Today he is a moderate.

The goal of Haidt's compelling book seems to not only enhance the idea of liberalism, but political discourse itself, with an understanding of human nature through the lens of his Six Moral Foundations – care, fairness, liberty, loyalty, authority and sanctity.

Not unlike recent works such as Drew Weston's *Political Brain*, Dan Ariely's *Predictably Irrational*, and George Lakoff's *Political Mind*, Haidt argues that people are essentially intuitive, but not really as rational.

This important revelation goes against today's mainstream economists. The basic lesson is that in order for you to effectively persuade others, you really need to influence their emotions.

Therefore, politics is certainly not about rationally stating facts and presenting those facts to people with whom you disagree. Instead it is about learning how to understand others. What drives them? What do you have in common with them?

Haidt bases his work partly on Scottish philosopher David Hume, who argued that reason itself was fit only to be “the slave of the passions.” Likewise, he utilizes renowned ecologist E.O. Wilson, who focused on the biological origins of human behavior, albeit criticized for such views. He also commends Plato's older brother Glaucon, the lover of beauty and cynic in the Republic who conveys to Socrates that people only behave ethically if they know they are being watched.

Finally, he spotlights Emile Durkheim's theory that we are “homo duplex,” or a two-level man. We evolve

both as individuals and as groups to which we find allegiance. Therefore, we are emotional creatures who are very worried about impression management and cohesiveness within a group, all of which are biologically-based drivers for survival.

For example, religiosity is a biological adaptation that binds emotionally intense groups collectively, a strategy to endure competition with other groups.

Haidt asks: “Why doesn't the other side listen to reason?” He retorts our brains were never set up to do so in the first place. Brain scans reveal that when we moralize, we are able to reach conclusions in seconds, but if asked why we came to that conclusion, we will search for justifications, which is much harder for us and takes much more time. For humans, intuitions come first, strategic reasoning is secondary.

While people do reason, our argument's goal is to support our conclusions at any cost, not necessarily seek truth. Our reasoning is certainly not objective where we weigh both sides of an argument; instead we are much more like a press secretary or lawyer in justifying our actions to others regardless of their relation to reality.

The title of the book, *The Righteous Mind*, means, he says, we are “convinced of one's own righteousness, especially in contrast with the actions and beliefs in others.” We do this as we have evolved to create moral reasoning to further our social [moral] agenda, justify our own actions and defend our team.

This justifying is an evolutionary response to win out over others regardless of truth. Winning is winning! But, not just winning as individuals, but also as our team – Republican, Democrat, Libertarian, etc.

Even Darwin noted that the most cohesive and co-

operative groups generally beat the groups with purely selfish interests. Much of this process is unconscious, what Haidt describes as the elephant, who is boss, being ridden by our consciousness – the rider. To win an argument, the elephant [our unconscious] is what we appeal to, not the rider [our consciousness]. When we argue, we unconsciously appeal to the six aforementioned morals – care, fairness [proportionality], liberty, loyalty, authority and sanctity, which in combination make up the morality of a person.

For example, on the Right, social conservatives view feminists, gays, and the poor as threats to family stability [authority] and responsibility [fairness or proportionality or loyalty]. Libertarians are different, as they often get upset with the idea of redistribution, whether it is ObamaCare or taxes because it relates to a threat to liberty and a lack of proportionality. Proportionality is the idea that taxes are being unfairly taken from the people who earn them and is redistributed to those who do not deserve them.

When conservatives talk about issues revolving around patriotism, chastity, faith, law and order, and devotion to the group, these ideas relate to all six moral foundations.

However, Haidt claims that liberals tend to almost solely center their thinking on two morals – care and fighting oppression. Libertarians are even more narrowly focused on liberty/oppression.

This revelation is not what I expected in Haidt's book. While liberals and libertarians do consider the other moral foundations, they tend to emphasize some morals over others while conservatives are more likely to take all in consideration. These factions often fight because we fight over ideas, but place a different value on these six morals.

Liberals can learn to work with Conservatives by realizing that they frame their issues in terms of not only care and fairness, but also liberty, loyalty, authority and

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sanctity. Understanding this will create some peacemaking with two-way dialogue between ideologies, which seems to be a unifying theme in Haidt's book.

We are divided by polarized partisan politics, not because one side is good and the other evil, but

our minds are made in terms of "groupish righteousness." We are incredibly intuitive and our guts often drive our strategic reasoning, which makes it particularly tough to reach out and understand people who live in "matrices" or worldviews based on differing con-

figurations of moral foundations.

However, as Haidt says, “morality binds and blinds.” While it binds us ideologically and emotionally, it also “blinds us to understanding that each side is made up of good people who have something important to say.”

What is really interesting intellectually is that he says to be suspicious of “‘moral monists.’ Beware of anyone who insists that there is only true morality for all people, times, and places – particularly if that morality is founded on a single moral foundation.”

Haidt argues further that, not unlike John Stuart Mill, both liberals and conservatives are like yin and yang as both are “necessary elements of a healthy state of political life.”

Libertarians are right, he says, as markets are miraculous, but Liberals are right to say that governments should restrain corporate “superorganisms,” especially with pending market failures. Or, Social

Conservatives are right that there is a human need to have faith, but Liberals are right when they find that some people can be oppressed by religion.

I find that Haidt’s ideas are again intellectually stimulating, but also find that he makes me ask the question of how we deal with the conflicts that arise between ideologies, especially when they hurt people and/or interests in the long run?

How do we deal with those ideologies that bind but are blind to how their power focused on their needs, hurts others?

How we deal with these conflicts are not well developed in *The Righteous Mind*, but his book certainly provokes much thought. His book also gives me hope that we can get past polarization if we just try to understand each other and not be so righteous about everything.

John Wood is an assistant professor of political science at the University of Central Oklahoma.

From The Son Of Peasants To The Corridors Of Power

WORTHY FIGHTS

A Memoir Of Leadership In War And Peace

By Leon Panetta

Penguin Group USA

512 pages, \$36

BY WANDA JO STAPLETON

Leon Panetta’s book reviews his service to our country and is filled with behind-the-scenes information.

Panetta’s parents had no language skills when they emigrated from Italy. His father listed himself as a peasant with only \$25 in assets. They settled in Monterey, CA where Leon was born in 1938.

And to think: this son of peasants was to become the U.S. Secretary of Defense.

Along the way, he became a Republican and worked in the administration of President Richard Nixon. But in 1972, the moderate Republican Party of Eisenhower and Earl Warren had become the party of Nixon and Agnew. That’s when Panetta switched from Republican to Democrat.

As a Democratic U.S. Congressman from California, Panetta passed a law to prohibit oil exploration off the entire central coast of California. That prohibition is in effect today.

In June 1994, President Bill and Hillary Clinton were in Rome, Italy so that Clinton could meet with Pope John Paul II. The mayor of Rome had arranged to welcome the president to the city. The event was

to be held in Italian, so Panetta got to translate the mayor’s welcome and Clinton’s response. Soon after the episode in Rome, Clinton asked Panetta to be his chief of staff, and Panetta accepted.

Later, President Obama asked Panetta to be CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] Director because the CIA needed to regain credibility lost during the Bush years. Panetta’s job was to find and either kill or capture Osama bin Laden. Bin Laden was the founder of al-Qaeda, the militant organization that claimed responsibility for the Sept. 11 attacks on the United States that killed 3,000 Americans.

The CIA finally traced a courier, whom they thought might be working for bin Laden, to a fortress outside of Abbottabad, Pakistan. Under CIA leadership [with President Obama’s approval], Navy SEALs were brought in and trained for four weeks before entering the fortress and killing bin Laden.

Finally, President Obama nominated Panetta for Secretary of Defense. He was confirmed by the Senate, 100-0.

As Secretary of Defense, Panetta signed the memorandum implementing the changes that extended the same benefits to spouses of gay service members as the benefits to other military spouses. He did this just days before he concluded his time as Secretary of Defense.

After all these “worthy fights,” Panetta moved home to Monterey, California, where he lives with his wife Sylvia in the house his father built.

Wanda Jo Stapleton is a former Democratic state representative who served south Oklahoma City from 1986-96.

Opaque

Ever since last year's bungled execution of Clayton Lockett, state officials have circled the wagons and fought to make it more difficult for the public to know what is happening when government imposes its ultimate punishment.

While The Observer, the Guardian US and the ACLU joined forces in a lawsuit demanding more openness, the state cut the number of media witnesses at future executions by more than half – down to just five – and adopted new procedures that effectively permit it to close the death chamber curtain whenever it pleases.

As Ryan Kiesel, the Oklahoma ACLU's executive director, put it, "The government took a process already corrupted by secrecy and made it even more difficult for the public to know anything about it."

Clearly, Oklahoma's current leadership is hell-bent on cranking up the lethal injection conveyor belt, even though its death cocktail remains experimental at best and serious questions remain about whether innocents are being sent to the gallows.

A federal judge – a former GOP state lawmaker, incidentally – dismissed The Observer's case, paving the way for Charles Frederick Warner to be executed on Jan. 15 in a far less open process than Lockett's which ended with his death behind closed curtains.

Media accounts of the Lockett execution differed significantly from the official state version. The Observer, Guardian and ACLU sought to require the state to open the curtain as soon as the condemned inmate is wheeled into the death chamber – and before it inserts IVs for the lethal cocktail. It also demanded the state keep the curtain open until the condemned is declared dead or the execution is called off.

Despite the Lockett debacle, support for the death penalty remains strong in Oklahoma, according to public opinion surveys. But even capital punishment's most ardent advocates should be alarmed at the state's utter contempt for the public's right to know what is being done in its name.

Bravo!

Every seat on the state House floor was filled last month when the Oklahoma Universal Human Rights Alliance honored 16 groups and individuals for their efforts to advance human rights in the state.

The honorees were Dr. Bill Carmack, Norman; Adam Soltani, executive director of the Oklahoma chapter of CAIR [Council on American-Islamic Relations]; Mary and Sharon Bishop, Tulsa; "Yes All Daughters" of Norman; former Rep. Jeff Hamilton, Midwest City; Sonia Martinez, Yukon; Mohan Chandra, Shawnee;

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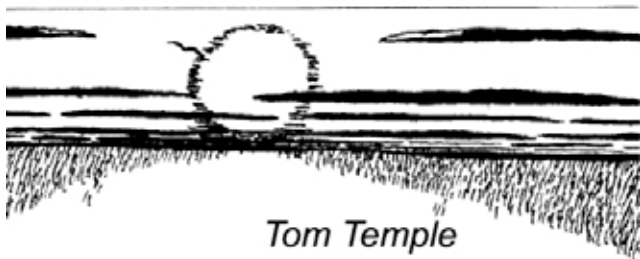
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and Christina Mizirl, Carlos Ortiz, Ahiezer Black, U.S. District Judge Vicki Miles-LaGrange, Robert D. Lemon, Santiaga Quinonez, Claudia Rassavic, Akash Patel and Carlos Tello, all of OKC.

At a time when hate and division dominate the news, it is encouraging to see the work being done across Oklahoma to advance justice and dignity for all.



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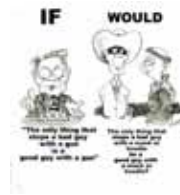
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Observerscope



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

How effective is the all-out far-right assault on Roe v. Wade? Only one in 10 U.S. counties now has a legal abortion provider.

Billionaire Charles Koch vows to intensify his efforts to reform a criminal justice system that often isn't fair and too often prosecutes non-violent offenders.

U.S. Rep Jim Bridenstine's 15 minutes of fame are over – a media splash over his refusal to vote for John Boehner's re-election as speaker. Now he returns to the back bench where he belongs.

Has anyone broken the news to Sen. Jim Inhofe that this is the early 21st Century, not the early 20th? He is vowing to pour more money into the military industrial complex even though 2015 defense challenges are night-and-day different than 1915.

Construction is complete on the new Oklahoma African American Educators Hall of Fame in the historically black town of Clearview. The non-profit center, though, needs your financial help. Contact Donnie or Shirley Nero at 918.260.8132 for details.

Gov. Mary Fallin will spend \$1 million on her second inauguration, financed entirely by well-heeled GOP donors and corporate bigwigs. It's always been done this way, but isn't it time for a change? This isn't a coronation, it's a second-term swearing in.

Oklahomans donated 3.94% of their adjusted 2012 gross income to charity, according to AARP.

Overdose deaths more than doubled in the U.S. between 1999-2012, from nearly 17,000 annually to more than 41,000. Fatalities tied to heroin nearly tripled. – Time

Yes, he actually said it: When asked if he would authorize post-9/11 torture, former Veep Dick Cheney said, "I'd do it again in a minute."

A Vatican report on American nuns found their numbers have dropped nearly 75% over the last half-century – average age: mid-70s.

Letters



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 4

the down side, masonry domes can be massive and exert large compressive forces, including base ring tension.

Our Capitol dome consisting of man-made precast concrete units [in compression] must contain a five million pound dead load in addition to wind, seismic, thermal and possibly settlement forces. Hopefully the engineering forensic team will determine the cause of the full penetration cracking with a solution.

So when is a dome not a dome but a veneer? Me thinks not.

Tom Birbilis
Tulsa

Editor, The Observer:

There is only one Okie in Congress worth listening to. There is only one Okie in Congress who gives a rat's patootie about the 99%. Too bad she is so much better than the Oklahoma delegation because they are all bought and paid for by "the most of these" and forget "the least of these."

Let's give her all the help we can and maybe some day she will be on the ballot in Oklahoma. Keep it up, Elizabeth Warren.

Karen Webb
Moore

Editor, The Observer:

Wayne Greene's "One of us: Value of a hometown senator" [Tulsa World, 12.14.14] pointed out that many of our more prominent politicians were born in other states, but had become "one of us." But his last sentence was perplexing and insulting. After pointing out that Elizabeth Warren, D-MA, currently is the only U.S. senator who was born and raised in Oklahoma, he ended with: "Well, so much for locals being one of us."

Where in the world did he get the idea that she is not "one of us?" Who does he think she is fighting for when she stands nose-to-nose with Citibank and other huge banking conglomerates, and tells them that Frank-Dodd bill should have shattered them into little pieces? When she calls out her own president about his cronyism with Wall Street? Is that not standing up for the overwhelming majority of Oklahomans who do not want to bail out big banks that lose billions in risky investments, leaving the taxpayer to



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pick up the tab?

Elizabeth Warren is certainly "one of us," in the finest tradition of Mike Synar and Mike Monroney. She has the guts to stand up for the little guy. You can't get more Okie than that!

Barbara Santee
Tulsa

Editor, The Observer:

The U.S. must not miss the opening right before us for agreements with Iran that would bring economic benefits to both nations. Such an alliance seems possible because the nuclear negotiations have been extended, and Iran is in compliance with dramatic demands for intrusive inspections by beefed up U.N. inspection teams.

The greatest benefit so far to the U.S. and Iran is that negotiations have forestalled military action advocated by hawks, which could have sparked a regional war. The U.S. has far more to gain with Iran as an ally than an adversary.

Iran's population of 60 million people is a huge untapped market that is not yet open to U.S. businesses, although European industries are moving in to establish trade. America's ranchers and farmers would benefit from trade with Iran, because that country will buy meat and wheat, as well as other products

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common in our society.

Despite the historic tensions between our countries, the Iranian people remain pro-U.S. and pro-western. On the evening of the 9/11 terrorist attack on the U.S., a candlelight vigil in Tehran, Iran, gathered some 10,000 participants in a spontaneous outpouring of sympathy for the death and destruction caused by the attacks.

Iran is not only the oldest culture in the world, it is also the most sophisticated and western in the Middle East. Education and literacy rates in Iran are the highest in the Middle East, and the education of women is not controversial. Iran's universities currently graduate more women than men.

Iran's formidable size, population, regional influence, as well as common interests with the U.S. in stability in the region, make an alliance with Iran a step beneficial to both nations.

Nathaniel Batchelder
Oklahoma City

Editor's Note: Nathaniel Batchelder is director of the Oklahoma City Peace House and a member of Americans Against the Next War [AANW].

Editor, The Observer:

Brittany Maynard, 29, ended her terminal illness on her own terms thanks to Oregon's aid-in-dying law. Maynard had brain cancer and was part of the "death with dignity" movement.

Death with dignity often means ending one's life before illness causes life to present such indignities as bowel and bladder incontinence, with a brain that only functions well enough to feel disgraced by having had someone else clean up after them. Or it might be before vomiting and diarrhea becomes a problem to where appetite is all gone. In any case, it gives the patient control over something that has controlled him.

Without aid-in-dying laws, people either suffer through the rigors of the illness, or they resort to outlandish, violent, often painful ways to hasten their deaths. With a physician's prescription, they have a choice for a peaceful death that most of us hope for. It's painless, quick, peaceful; and when one feels it's time to go to whatever waits for us ... it's a matter of choice.

Aid-in-dying is not currently legal in Oklahoma. However, end-of-life consultations are available at 800.247.7421, or for more information go to www.compassionandchoices.org.

Jean Marie Finley
Midwest City

Editor, The Observer:

Retribution can be a good thing. It was, in fact, at the recent OSU-OU football game. All those poor fans suffered who boo even outclassed teams Saturday after Saturday and even desecrate the National Anthem.

Homer H. Hulme
Chickasha

Editor, The Observer:

A certain myth has been dispelled in my mind lately regarding homeless people with addiction problems. The “chicken-or-egg” question arises as to which came first – the addiction or the homelessness?

Recently I read James Bowen’s book *A Street Cat Named Bob* in which he narrates various situations and escapades of his personal experiences in climbing out of homelessness and addiction. Before reading this book, I’d assumed that, by and large, these sorts became homeless as a result of their addictions.

While perhaps it’s not always one way or another – and it would hard to tell or assume how these very unique and complex, highly individualistic cycles begin – James Bowen tells of becoming an addict in order to numb the pain of being one of society’s throw-away, homeless people.

One wonders if perhaps some of these are people who just don’t fit in a world that seems to be incessantly more and more all about commercialism, 24/7.

It’s been said that no one person or group of people has a monopoly on either good or evil. It’s pos-

sible that every one of us over the age of three can think of various situations in our lives in which we’ve “served” as either predator or prey – perhaps both, at different times.

We all seem to be stuck in our more or less flawed, human conditions and tendencies with which we must deal and cope, somehow or other.

I’m no expert on psychological or sociological reasons of how and why people’s lives become bleak, hopeless, or pathetic – dynamics which must be very intricate and individually unique anyway – even to any “experts” in this area. Any time we see another person, there’s a very complex combination of personality and history of events and days making up that person’s “life,” all under the surface of what is readily observable.

So let’s not be too quick to assume anything about anyone. We live in a world in which we meet or come across strangers daily. Perhaps we could consider all of them as some aspect of the image of God Himself. Let’s at least keep it respectful.

Stephanie Hershberger
Oklahoma City

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