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POWER PLAY

Keating Blueprint Helps Fallin, GOP Create CEO-Like Governor

BY ARNOLD HAMILTON

It was an eye-popping legislative proposal: The directors of 10 state agencies would be fired next January and the power to replace them handed to Gov. Mary Fallin.

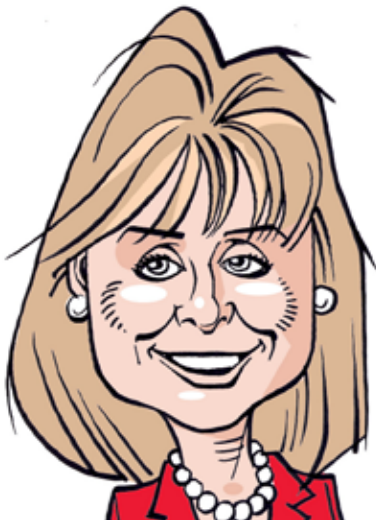
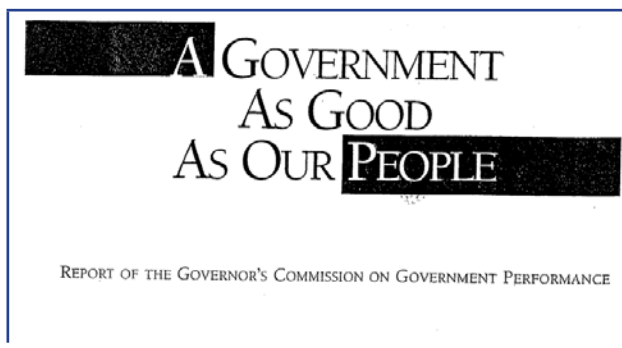
The bill's author, Republican Sen. Nathan Dahm of Broken Arrow, insisted he was merely seeking to jump-start a conversation about oversight and accountability in state government.

If past is prologue, however, this was no idle musing – it was another step in a radical remake of state government that is steadily transferring more power to the governor.

The blueprint to turn Oklahoma's historically weak governor into a strong chief executive was detailed in 1995's *A Government As Good As Our People: Report of the Governor's Commission on Government Performance*.

More accurately, the 69-page study was referred to as The Keating Report – as in then-GOP Gov. Frank Keating.

“... The two major obstacles standing in the way of improving the efficiency and quality of state



STATE OF OKLAHOMA

DECEMBER 1995



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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

Baja Kansas

What passes for Oklahoma's elected leadership simply refuses to accept reality: Supply Side economic theory doesn't work.

During Ronald Reagan's presidency, economist [?] Arthur Laffer's laughable construct yielded record budget deficits that could only be solved by record tax increases. Even Reagan's VP [and future president] George H.W. Bush derided the theory as "voodoo economics."

More recently, Kansas Gov. Sam Brownback revived the "trickle down" experiment with similarly disastrous results – draconian cuts in vital state services and a costly downgrade of the state's credit rating.

Oklahoma policymakers did not learn the lessons of history. Their politically pleasing but shortsighted strategy of cutting income taxes and expanding corporate welfare failed to fill state coffers to overflowing as Laffer's Alice in Wonderland-esque notion assured.

Now, with oil prices down and federal stimulus dollars dried up, Oklahoma is left to face an obvious reality: slashing revenue doesn't magically generate more. In fact, the state's budget hole for FY 2015-16 is \$611 million – and counting.

Lest you think the looming budget crisis, including deeper cuts to state agencies, keeps the state's elected elite awake at night, think again.

This is exactly what the Capitol's legion of trickle-downers has long dreamed of. This is Grover Norquist-style inanity, writ large – shrink government to the point where the rest can be drowned in the bathtub.

Actually, it was two armies that shared one goal – crippling government – but for different reasons.

Hoping to outsource as many services as possible to private, for-profit businesses, corporate interests worked overtime to create a mindset that government is incapable of delivering state services efficiently.

Their mantra begat a second brigade: religious zealots that regarded government as evil and oppressive and believe the church should be the

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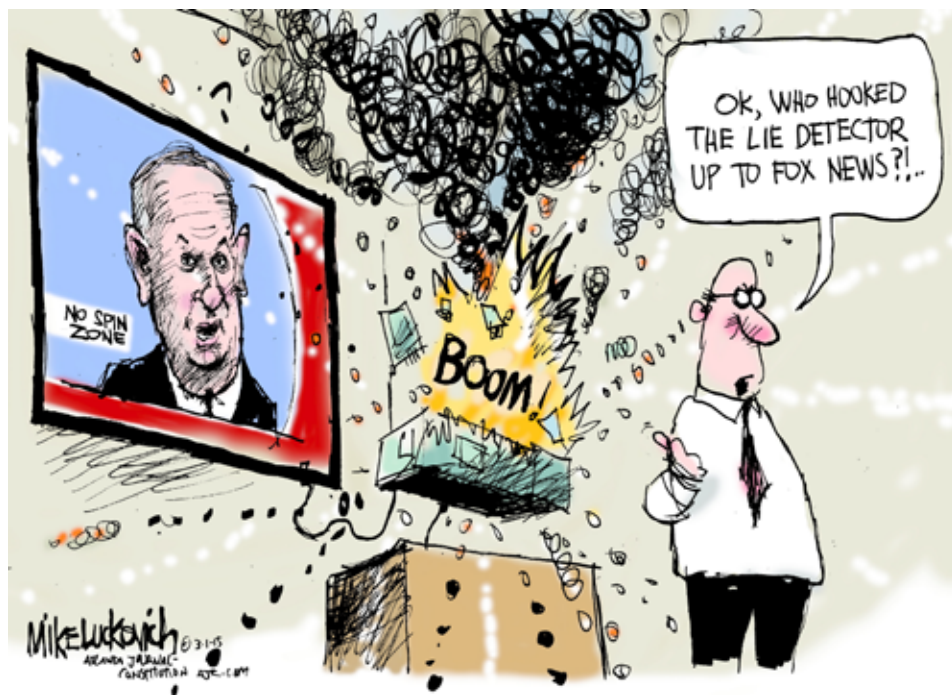
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Observerscope



Dart: To Sen. Clark Jolley, R-Edmond, the ex-teacher whose voucher bill, SB 609, would steal from already starving public schools. He's a lawyer sorely in need of remedial courses in constitutional law.

Former House Speaker Kris Steele headlines Mar. 11 Capitol rally aimed at reforming Oklahoma's punitive, costly criminal justice system. Visit okcure.org for event details.

Laurel: To President Obama, keeping his promise to veto the environmentally disastrous Keystone XL pipeline. Even oilies no longer contend it's vital for America's energy security.

Whew! Science trumped ideology when Sen. Josh Brecheen's creationism bill [SB 665] and Rep. Todd Thomsen's effort to dismantle new science teaching standards [HB 1537] died in committee.

Dart: To the Republican-dominated Legislature, starving the state's crown jewel, OETA – now the lowest-funded public television network in America.

Our condolences to friend and colleague Ben Blackstock, former Oklahoma Press Association executive, on the recent loss of his wife of 60 years, Bonnie. She was 89.

Laurel: To new state Superintendent Joy Hofmeister, seizing the mantle as the state's public education champion. She's mended fences faster than Janet Barresi knocked them down, no small feat.

Turn the other cheek? One in six Oklahomans has a felony record – a Scarlett Letter that all but ensures second chances fail.

Dart: To Sen. Marty Quinn, R-Claremore, whose SB 298 would hamper efforts to help thousands collect unclaimed life insurance benefits. Quinn is a walking conflict of interest – an insurance agent carrying water for Big Insurance.

Owen Canfield is the Oklahoman's new opinion editor, succeeding the retiring J.E. McReynolds. The new chief editorial writer is Ray Carter, former mouthpiece for state House Republicans.

Laurel: To new Oklahoma City Superintendent Rob Neu, who accurately – and very publicly – declared the biggest threat to the state's public schools isn't poverty, it's state lawmakers. *Grande cojones!*

Former New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani “has all the public stature of Donald Trump – minus the hair and a prime-time television show.” – New York Magazine's Frank Rich

Dart: To Oklahoma's Third World approach to crime and punishment, locking up nearly 60% more people per capita than Cuba. *Cuba!* Oklahoma prisons also record nation's highest homicide rate – more than three times the U.S. average.

“Times have changed since I first sat behind this desk. For example, I used to be the only pretty blond woman reading the fake news. Now there's an entire network devoted to that.” – Actress Jane Curtin, returning to the Weekend Update news desk for Saturday Night Live's 40th Anniversary

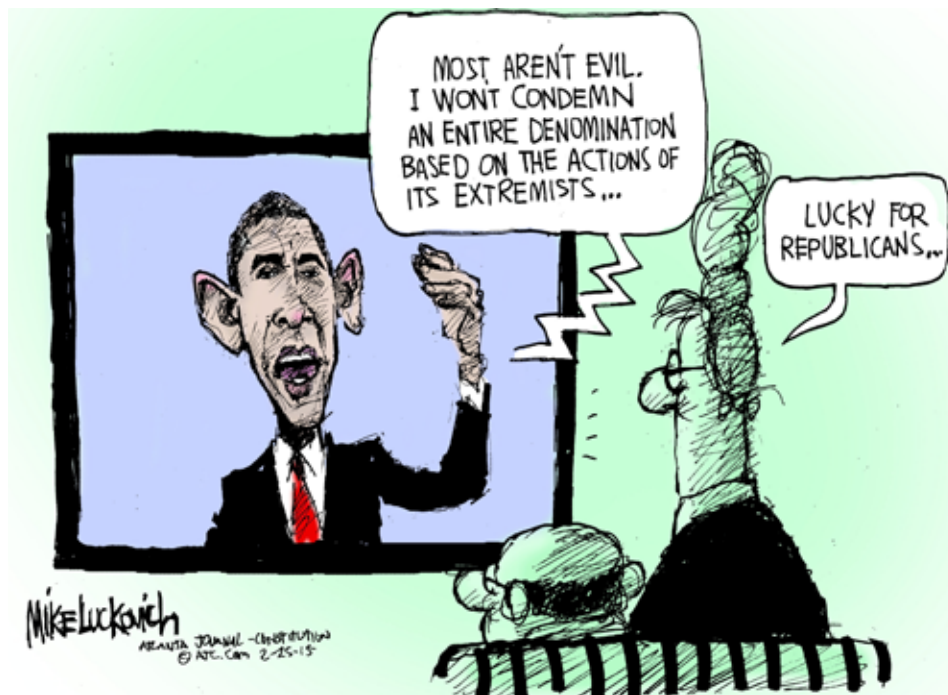
Laurel: To Oklahoma tribes, working to solve the state's Medicaid crisis while Gov. Mary Fallin and state lawmakers fiddle. Tribal leaders hope to expand Insure Oklahoma to cover as many as 80,000 Native Americans without health insurance.

Are House Speaker Jeff Hickman and Senate President Brian Bingman serious about tackling corporate welfare? Not likely. The hundreds of millions in tax dollars doled out annually go disproportionately to GOP fat cats.

GOP lawmakers blather incessantly about “trusting the voters.” Yet they refused to let voters decide Rep. Paul Wesselhoft's sensible plan to expand term limits from 12 to 16 years.

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Letters



Editor, The Observer:

It is amazing to watch state legislators introducing bills that would eliminate tax incentives that foster growth of clean, renewable wind energy, which provides 15% of the state's electricity and between 1,000 and 2,000 Oklahoma jobs.

Rep. Earl Sears, R-Bartlesville, has proposed unreasonable setbacks intended to destroy this industry – one mile from occupied structures and three miles from any town with five or more residential structures, for example.

Why all this opposition to wind energy that doesn't contaminate water or air, and has never been linked to increased earthquakes? It's time for the oil and gas industry to pay their fair share of taxes. Reasonable regulation is the right thing to do to protect citizens' health, safety, property values and tax dollars.

The projected state budget shortfall has increased from \$300 million to \$600 million.

Rather than picking on wind, now would be a good time to recall tax breaks to the oil and gas industry expected to cost \$516.7 million in 2015.

Legislators and Gov. Fal-lin should also support HB 1107, which would establish the first ever setback distances between oil and gas wells and your home, your child's school and drinking water wells. Currently, none exist.

Tim Wagner
Yukon

Editor, The Observer:

I retired from Douglass High School [teacher, coach, athletic bus driver]. We were cheated regularly.

The OSSAA, after cheating Douglass out of the football state championship, now plans to cheat them out of their football coach.

Coach Willis Alexander is from a family of top-of-the-line coaches. He was a good student and now a good coach at Douglass. No one at OSSAA is better for athletics than he.

The Oklahoma Legislature cancelled affirmative action in Oklahoma. They said racial discrimination was gone in Oklahoma! What a joke! Racial discrimination is alive and well, regrettably.

Al Engel
Oklahoma City

Editor, The Observer:

Even though we moved from Oklahoma in 1994, we still keep up on what is happening in the state, especially through *The Observer*. Since we left, it seems like Oklahoma has gone more and more rightwing.

The vote by an Oklahoma House committee to ban the AP History course seems totally in-line with all the rest of the wackiness emanating from your state. A school board here in Colorado tried a similar tactic and received much public scorn and derision.

Apparently, conservatives feel that the AP History course should be more positive about the American story. How ironic, as Oklahoma is the territory where so many Native Americans were relegated after white men stole their lands and slaughtered those who remained. How do you put a positive spin on that? Or the later swindling of Native Americans of tribal lands?

But I guess Oklahomans are used to looking at their history through rose-colored glasses. Why else would they call themselves the Sooner state?

Eileen McCarron
Denver

Editor, The Observer:

The movie *Unbroken* is worth seeing. It's not only fascinating, it's true. It reminded me of two important convictions of mine. First, why I had no compassion for the Japanese.

Secondly, the spectrum of bravery has two ends. Louis Zamperini represents the zenith and the worthy with all the attendant attributes of courage. At the opposite end are the reprehensible Cheney, Biden and Clinton.

Homer H. Hulme
Chickasha

Editor, The Observer:

Do unto others as you would

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Crickets

I haven't forgotten the Daily Disappointment's sordid history of page one editorials bludgeoning their enemies. Or the front-page "investigative" stories – many, hatchet jobs – that carried out the owner's personal vendettas.

But I always cautioned that the biggest problem with the state's largest newspaper was not what they told you – it was what they didn't.

There is no better recent example than the Oklahoman's failure to report on its own downsizing.

Eighteen more employees – about half from an already thin newsroom – were given pink slips, just as the paper was moving into its new downtown digs, its exterior adorned with a fancy Times Square-style message board.

The paper provided coverage of layoffs in an energy sector buffeted by plunging oil prices and stubbornly low natural gas prices. But nary a word that longtime sportswriter Mike Baldwin and energy reporter Jay Marks were axed.

Or that the newspaper was eliminating its stand-alone Metro/State section every day but Sunday.

Or that it was further reducing its comic strips – the one thing, sadly, that infuriated readers enough to force the Oklahoman to restore a full six pages of humor in the Sunday edition.

Newspaper readers are savvy news consumers. They know when they're getting less, but paying more. They deserve to know what is happening at the newspaper to which they subscribe, not to have the bad news hidden from them in hopes they won't notice and cancel their subscriptions.

At least the Oklahoman carried a farewell column from retiring editorial page editor J.E. McReynolds, alerting readers to the fact one less ideologue would be spewing far-right nonsense in the opinion columns.

But the paper's questionable ethics remain on full display, if you know what to look for. Have you noticed, for example, a "news" feature called Oklahoman BrandInsight?

For a price, it allows flacks to fill the news columns

with stories heaping praise on their employers and products.

Recently, for example, Canadian Valley Technology Center sponsored and wrote a "news" story promoting its health-related courses.

You have to look closely for the type that reads: "Connecting marketers to The Oklahoman reader."

For advertisers, it's potentially more effective than a traditional paid ad because it's presented in a way to make casual readers think it's a news story – and news stories, of course, typically carry more weight with readers than clearly identified advocacy messages.

Like most legacy print media, the Oklahoman is hurting in the Internet age, scrambling for new revenue streams to replace the old standbys: classified and display advertising.

But the opacity of the BrandInsight program, the incredible shrinking news hole, the failure to report fairly and accurately on itself, and an ever harder-right editorial bent turns off even those who know they should read the state's largest daily, no matter how much they revile it.

[For the record, I still scour its pages every day. My dentist, however, warns of the dangers of excessive teeth-grinding!]

A healthy body politic requires a raucous public square, full of credible, competing ideas. It would be bad news for our state's civic discourse and understanding if Phil Anschutz and Co. were to run the Oklahoman into the ground.

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Goodbye, Myth

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

There it was – another anti-public education myth exploded. A new comprehensive study shows that children in Catholic schools make no more progress in reading in the early grades than similar students in public schools and make even less progress in math.

“I was actually surprised to find the results that Catholic schools are worse in mathematics,” said Prof. Sean Reardon at Stanford University.

Reardon, the study’s lead author and an associate professor of education and sociology, said, “But, if Catholic schools aren’t subject to the same accountability requirements as public schools are, then they may not spend as much time on mathematics and literacy.”

The new findings run counter to decades of reports suggesting that Catholic schools have an educational

edge over public schools.

Most of that research has focused on Catholic high schools; few such studies have addressed Catholic schooling for younger students.

Nobody is higher on the fine job that Catholic schools do than I am. I’m tired of unfair comparisons.

When weighted for income, two-parent households and other demographics, public students do as well or better than their Catholic school counterparts.

The same was proven by researchers Christopher Lubienski and Sarah Thule Lubienski who leveled the playing field by taking into account family-income, race and gender.

Catholic school fourth and eighth graders scored lower than public school students on national math exams.

Let’s quit comparing apples to oranges. Our mantra: Public schools, public dollars. Private schools, private dollars.

Cluttering An Ocean

Iwas recently in Los Cabos, Mexico where I learned the location of the largest piles of waste in the world – in the Pacific Ocean.

More than 100 million tons are floating deep in the Pacific, monstrous miles of trash that are over twice the size of Texas – 90% of it is recyclable plastic.

Because the ocean currents collect it like bubbles in a hot tub, the two giant masses of garbage are located in the eastern and western Pacific.

It is estimated that every square mile of ocean has 46,000 pieces of plastic in it. Consequently, a million seabirds and over 100,000 sea mammals die needlessly every year.

More than 80% of the plastic in these floating garbage monstrosities come offshore where it could have been recycled.

More than 400 billion pounds of plastic trash is produced in the world each year – 60 pounds for each person on the planet [and we know millions don’t have access to it].

There’s been a 25% increase in the world’s garbage in just 15 years. More than 30% of landfills consist of paper which could be recycled.

It takes 50-plus years for paper to break down and decompose; aluminum 400-plus years; over 1,000 years for plastic.

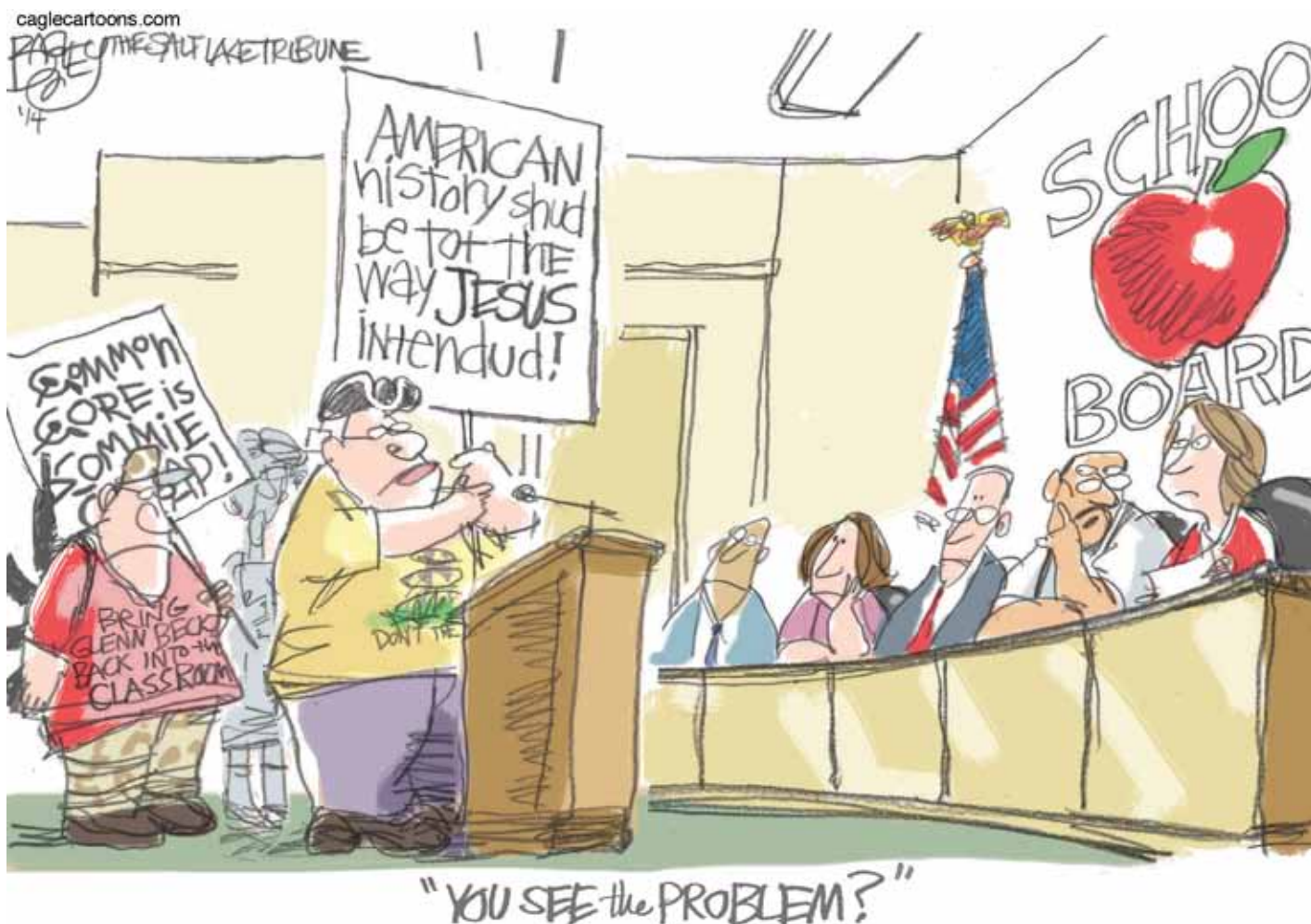
A mere 34 pounds of trash can do the energy job of a pound of coal so why don’t we put it to use?

I decided when I left those beautiful Mexican beaches to become part of the solution, no longer part of the problem. I just say no to plastic and I take my paper to a recycle bin at a neighboring elementary school.

Pass it on.

– From Frosty’s Notebook, Dec. 10, 2008

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"YOU SEE the PROBLEM?"

Battle To Rewrite History Moves North Of Red River

BY JOHN WOOD

The Oklahoma House Education Committee approved HB 1380 strictly on partisan lines, 11-4, recently with the intent to eliminate advanced placement U.S. History classes.

Why?

Well, after a nationwide media blowback, Rep. Dan Fisher, R-Yukon, tried to save face by saying that he didn't really intend to eliminate AP classes in the first place, pointing out that these classes paint our country in too negative a light. He instead prefers AP History texts be rewritten, promoting such things as American Exceptionalism, Ronald Reagan, and the Ten Commandments.

Rep. Fisher recommends that the State Education Board take this issue up. In response, state Superintendent Joy Hofmeister said she is "partnering" with the representative to revise the textbooks but that her

current priorities are math and English standards.

Following Rep. Fisher, Rep. Sally Kern wants to get rid of all AP classes because she says that they are all based on Common Core – you know, the curriculum that the Republicans already took out of K-12 in Oklahoma to shore up math and science standards. The same Common Core that Gov. Mary Fallin pushed as chair of the National Governors Association, but later distanced herself from at election time. Unlike former State Superintendent Janet Barresi who ultimately became the fall guy, losing her job.

TEXTBOOKS

This fight might seem familiar to you. Just four years ago, the Texas School Board rewrote their state's textbooks with nearly 1,000 edits by the board. *The Revisionaries* [2012] is a quality documentary on this fight, winning the 2013 PBS Independent Lens

Audience Award as well as the 2014 duPont Award for excellence in broadcast journalism.

The film focuses on Don McLeroy, a dentist, who was the Texas State Education Board chair. Outside the board, the camera follows McLeroy, a devout creationist, as he brings his children to a field near his house marked with orange cones in order to measure out the size of the real Noah's Ark, demonstrating that all the world's animals could actually fit.

Otherwise, he sits in his chair and the audience watches as the entire school board methodically, line-by-line, edits the state's adopted history text. They didn't do it all by themselves. In fact, the board members admitted that they are not qualified to make such decisions, so the minority of moderates on the board found professors at Texas universities to help out.

However, the Texas conservatives brought in Peter Marshall Ministries, an organization whose stated mission is to "reclaim America for Christ." In addition, they brought in self-described "historian" and former Texas GOP Vice Chair David Barton, who is also interestingly enough founder of the Black Robe Regiment, the philosophical home of Oklahoma's own Rep. Fisher.



– Rep. Dan Fisher

The Black Robe Regiment is made up of "concerned patriots" whose goal is to "restore the American Church in her capacity as the Body of Christ, ambassador for Christ, moral teacher of America and the world, and overseer of all principalities and governing officials, as was rightfully established long ago."

The film notes that all of the history textbook edits passed in 2010 seemed to fall in line with Marshall and Barton's "expertise."

In response, the Rev. Dr. C. Welton Gaddy, president of Interfaith Alliance, wrote a press release:

"We understand that textbooks will not be uniform, but it simply is incorrect to state we are a Christian

nation founded upon and governed by Christian beliefs. Unfortunately, this is just one of multiple inaccuracies that will now be included in Texas textbooks."

WALL OF SEPARATION

What is really at issue here is the separation of church and state. The Texas State Board specifically took out of their history text Thomas Jefferson's 1802 letter addressed to the Danbury Baptist Association in Connecticut, and published in a Massachusetts newspaper. In his letter, he wrote:

I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should "make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof," thus building a wall of separation between Church & State."

Before the Constitution, most of the colonies had been established whereby churches could restrict voting and property rights and even eligibility to run for office. For example, the Congregational Church was established by the Puritans in Connecticut, New Hampshire, and Massachusetts. The Quakers ran Pennsylvania, and the Anglican Church ran most other states. In these colonies, church laws governed most colonial activity, and those laws were upheld by the courts.

To illustrate, one of these laws tried to make sure Sabbath was observed through prohibiting any shaving, cooking, cutting of hair, or bed making from Saturday afternoon all the way to Sunday evening. Also, blue laws kept stores and businesses from opening on Sunday. Sound familiar?

Flash forward to the 20th Century in the Supreme Court precedent *Everson v. Board of Education of the Township Ewing* [1947]: Jefferson's "Wall of Separation" was upheld. The justices said the law was meant "to erect a wall of separation between church and state," requiring government impartiality between religion and non-religion as well as between different religions and denominations. In 1962's *Engle v. Vitale*, the court held that an establishment of religion goes hand in hand with persecution. Meaning that establishing, or favoring one denomination of religion, means others will be not favored, and may even be excluded.

PLURAL WORLD

What is important to remember is that we have a very complex and diverse world, one in which the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life finds that there are nearly 41,000 Christian denominations worldwide. They are so varied because they do not exactly agree with each other – each with its own history and unique cherished worldview.

When we establish, or favor one point of view, it means one denomination dictates the rules to 40,999 others, or to whatever minority Christian denominations or other religions exist in Oklahoma. Here, Buddhists are the second biggest religion due to the state's large Vietnamese population.

With this complexity, Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, says there should be an “all or nothing rule. Separation of church and state means the government doesn’t pick the most popular religious group and honor them in a specific way.”

Establishment is favoritism of one view. In Oklahoma it may not be official doctrine, but we still have the aforementioned blue laws [limiting alcohol consumption], prayer before city meetings upheld now by the Supreme Court, a protestant Ten Commandments monument on the Capitol lawn, and others.

It’s not that these are bad things in themselves – it’s that you either need to allow all points of view, or go neutral. This is what public schools have had to do, walk a tight rope between free exercise and establishment, i.e. moment of silence.

All taxpayers, regardless of religious denomination, race or creed contribute to our schools. To introduce a specific point of view, especially one like the Black Robe Regiment with its narrow evangelical focus, subverts freedom of religion. With 41,000 Christian denominations, which one becomes law? Which ones do we ignore? By adopting one point of view, we trounce on most people’s freedom of religion in Oklahoma.

While it’s slim, a majority of Americans do think we need a separation of church and state – for example, in a Washington Post poll July 2012, 55% of Americans said “there should be a high degree of separation between church and state.”

AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

Rep. Fisher’s HB 1380 also pushes the need to have a positive outlook on American’s so-called Excep-

tionalism. However, from the history teachers I have talked with, it already is being taught – warts and all.

Fisher’s take on exceptionalism is likely an oversimplification. In Fisher’s view, if America does something, it is by definition right and justified. But is that not the way of a school-ground bully? He is big and brutish so don’t question him?

To err is human, right? The best way to teach history is to acknowledge our forefathers’ and mothers’ mistakes. From those stories we learn and, hopefully, we advance and do better. We ignore history at our peril.

By ignoring our country’s historical stumbles, how do we deal with future catastrophes? How do we learn from our mistakes and make a better future for our kids? Forcing students to explore both the good and bad ensures history reflects our humanity, who we really are, not what we would like to have been.

Some members of our Oklahoma Legislature seem to exhibit a paternalistic disdain for Oklahomans. They believe that our children can’t handle the truth and instead they must be coddled with super patriotism. In reality, teaching all aspects of history promotes critical thinking, which facilitates problem solving, something we need more of these days, not less. However, with our education system ranked only 48th in the nation due to constant underfunding, maybe our legislators’ real agenda is that they do not want students to realize they have been under resourced all these years.

John Wood, PhD, is an assistant professor of political science at the University of Central Oklahoma and a frequent contributor to The Oklahoma Observer.

Critical Thinking, Dog Whistle Politics, And The Fear Of Getting Better

BY CHRISTIAAN MITCHELL

Oklahoma is once again making the rounds in the national news because of a move to protect our education system from the black tentacles of wicked liberalism. But this time, rather than shooting ourselves in the foot by rejecting millions of dollars of education funding because of “Obama,” we’re now moving to reject the AP History curriculum because it sheds too much light on the not-always-pleasant facts of American history.

Why is it that when we say “freedom isn’t free” we always seem to mean that we have to pay for it with [other people’s] blood? The maintenance of a free society takes more than a strong military. It requires an active and engaged citizenry working to improve society and advance the cause of freedom.

And so you can imagine my shock at seeing Rep. Dan Fisher’s comments calling for our history curriculum “not just to make students critical thinkers so that they can right injustices.”

An education system that produced people capable of thinking for themselves and dedicated to creating a more just society? What an unmitigated nightmare!

The very thought that someone could be opposed to training students to think for themselves and stand up for justice is enough to make your head spin. But, of course, Rep. Fisher is simply engaging in dog-whistle politics.

I honestly doubt that Rep. Fisher is actually opposed to citizens being able to think critically or righting injustices. But those words, like “sustainability,” are simply signals that point to an

imagined liberal conspiracy that's trying to destroy America through – I don't know – municipal zoning ordinances or something.

There's nothing wrong with dog-whistle politics in and of itself: every secret club worth its salt has its own code words. But it's a particular problem here because it's symptomatic of the nonsense that has taken hold of our political dialogue.

And if there's anything that is truly threatened by critical thinkers, it's the rigid, mindless, ideology-driven politics that has turned a world leader and one of history's greatest experiments in self-governance into a media circus.

Once upon a time, great leaders like Teddy Roosevelt called men and women to lead the "strenuous life" dedicated to building a stronger and more just nation. The goal was not to bask in

the glory of those who came before, but to turn our hands to the real work of bettering our world.

As Roosevelt put it, "A mere life of ease is not in the end a very satisfactory life, and, above all, it is a life which ultimately unfits those who follow it for serious work in the world ...

"Let us therefore boldly face the life of strife ... resolute to be both honest and brave ... for it is only through strife, through hard and dangerous endeavor, that we shall ultimately win the goal of national greatness."

We should be so lucky that our schools would actually produce critical thinkers who strive to right injustices. After all, what use is freedom if it is not the freedom to get better?

Christiaan Mitchell, a former Oklahoma, is a lawyer and writer now living in Albuquerque.

Urban School Solutions Won't Be Easy – Or Cheap

BY JOHN THOMPSON

Istrongly support the work of the Center for Civil Rights Remedies to close the racial "discipline gap." I want to be clear in my agreement with "Are We Closing the School Discipline Gap?" by Daniel Losen, et al.

Although I intensively studied nearly 15 years of Oklahoma City suspension data, and taught at the state's lowest performing high school, I am surprised that in the two years after I left the classroom that the Oklahoma City Public Schools became "one of the Top 10 highest-suspending districts at the secondary level for all students, and is the highest suspending district in the nation for black secondary students," according to a recent report in the Oklahoma Gazette. Moreover, between 2010 and 2012, "overall suspension rates at the high school level also increased from 24.7% to 45.2% during the same period."

The latest database shows that at the secondary school level, OKCPS "suspension rates for black students climbed dramatically from 36.3% to 64.2%." [I have my own theories on why, at a time when education funding was dramatically cut, the rate ballooned, but I will limit myself to what I witnessed and studied.]

I support the efforts of Losen and the Center for Civil Rights Remedies. Students can't learn if they are not in class and we need to invest in Restorative Justice, and other alternatives to suspensions. Neither do I claim that educators are blameless or that we don't need to invest heavily in professional development. I just worry that systems will, once again,

take the cheap and easy approach of claiming that better classroom instruction is enough to reduce suspensions.

For that reason, I will recount some of my experiences. I am not offering excuses for schools or blaming the problem solely on the history of out-of-school oppression. I'm merely placing today's problems in a context.

'I WAS PUNCHED TWICE'

Reformers tend to blame teachers' "Low Expectations" for chronic disorder. But I was punched twice before clocking in for my first day in a neighborhood school. The assailants in the two-on-one gang-related fight I broke up were sent off, without consequences, by an overburdened assistant principal.

When I entered the classroom as a 39-year-old rookie, I already had nearly a decade of wonderful experiences nurturing poor children of color. Some of my first freshmen students and I had spent the summer in a camp for low-income kids.

As always, the rural white people who ran the camp spoke effusively about the self-control and wonderful manners of the campers, who often were out of control in school.

When I saw the deplorable behavior of so many of my young friends as they walked into the school, I realized that a situation this surprising and acute must be the legacy of a decades-long history. Teens, who were so responsible on the job or in church, would not be behaving this way unless it was the result of a complex and engrained set of dynamics.

In a system that only invested \$1,875 per student, the job of principals was to “just keep the plate spinning until June.” It was understood that violence could only be shunted off to the edges of the school property.

A decade later, No Child Left Behind [NCLB] helped increase funding, but the new resources were directed towards tested subjects, meaning that students and teachers didn’t see a meaningful increase in spending that would have made a real difference.

Much of our problem is that when teachers call for “discipline,” non-educators hear a request for punishment. Teachers tend to be so frustrated with the lack of disciplinary consequences that our complaints sound like demands for “law and order.” We cannot punish our way to safe and orderly schools. But neither can we continue to turn a blind eye to behavior that undermines instruction and teaches children the worst possible lessons about functioning in the adult world.

THE RESPECT ‘PROBLEM’

I was often told that students behaved well for me because I had earned their respect. Since those observations were meant as a compliment, my response took administrators aback. “That’s the problem,” I would say, teachers shouldn’t have to go to such extraordinary lengths to prove themselves to their students.

The Center for Civil Rights Remedies reports on the disparate suspensions of Oklahoma City secondary schools in 2009-10, my last year in the classroom. That year, our 100% low-income sixth to 12th grade school became the state’s lowest-performing high school. We began the year with 764 students. Our school assessed 955 in- and out- of school suspensions. As usual, our suspension rate was virtually identical with that of the other neighborhood high schools.

Students would arrive at the building arguing over disputes that they brought to school. Within an hour, our halls would be clear and high-quality instruction was being conducted in many or most classes. It was not the fault of our teachers and students that about three hours into each day, our kids started to be overwhelmed.

By fourth period, unresolved disputes from previous days and nights would take priority, and there would be a surge of students cutting class to track down and settle “beefs” with other students. Then, lunch became the venue for more conflicts.

If and when the more troubled students came to afternoon classes, often they would be visibly trembling, clearly preoccupied by “he said, she said” conflicts that spun out of control when they left the structure of the first few hours of classes. The hard truth was that many of our students could be best served in a regular school, but they needed more interventions than could be provided by classroom teachers.

CODE OF CONDUCT

I have also seen firsthand the difficulty of the pol-

icy issues that make it so difficult to create orderly schools. On the eve of the 2002 passage of NCLB, I helped plan and implement policies promised by MAPS for KIDS.

During that process, the chief of staff of a major urban school district warned us that the mayhem and violence which was the norm in so many high-poverty schools is a “predicament” that has no solution, as opposed to a “problem” that could be tackled and, perhaps, solved. No urban district, he predicted, would seriously attempt to enforce its code of conduct.

The seemingly impossible challenge of addressing discipline, however, was not just due to a single wrongheaded policy. The predicament was a result of the interaction of policies that evolved over decades.

Arguing that “no child should perpetually disrupt class simply because alternative schools were full,” MAPS promised “Rolls Royce-quality” alternative school slots.

Later, I participated in a Code of Conduct Committee where we tried to set an expectation that disciplinary consequences would be assessed in a consistent manner, as we contracted with the highly-respected Comer Schools to teach teachers how to be more sensitive and responsive to their students’ needs.

I must emphasize that, with one exception, OKCPS leaders were professional and sincere in working with teachers on this problem that turned out to be a predicament. The hard fact is that it was impossible to afford the interventions that would have been necessary to create safe and orderly schools.

RESPECTFUL, SAFE SCHOOLS

That is not to say, however, that inner city schools can’t turn themselves around and create learning cultures where everyone can teach and learn for mastery. To improve our schools, we must first make a major priority out of nurturing respectful and safe school environments.

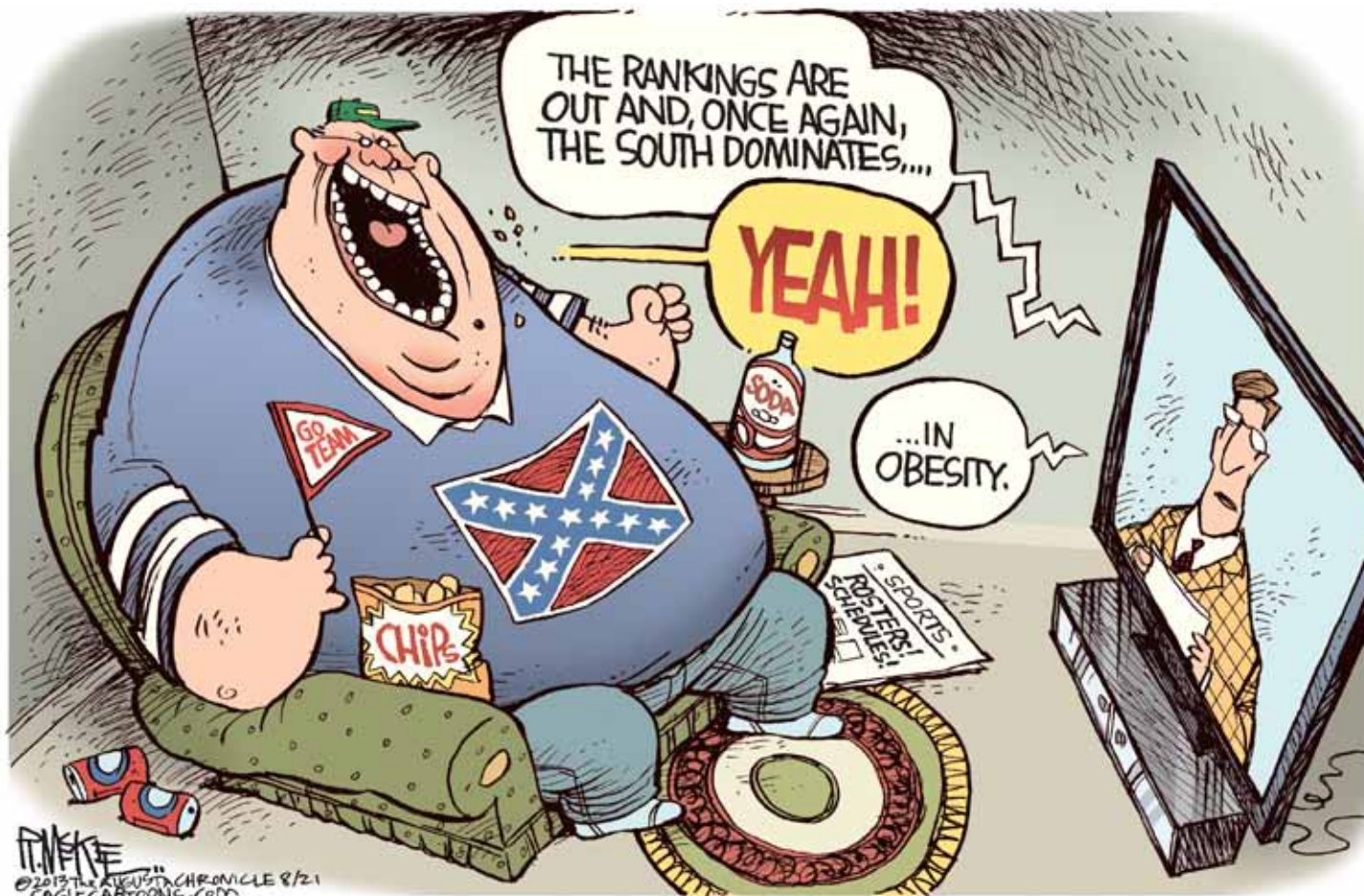
The Center for Civil Rights Remedies has done us a great service by highlighting the discipline gap in Oklahoma City, but I hope we will not conclude that solutions will be easy or cheap.

I would now urge the OKCPS to invest in programs like “Restorative Justice” and bring a second shift of counselors to help students work through their problems and thus head off anarchy and violence.

Given our recent 23% cut in education spending, Oklahomans can’t expect new money for improving school climates.

So, we need to set new priorities. If we can do so, “Are We Closing the School Discipline Gap?” will have performed a great service.

Dr. John Thompson, an education writer whose essays appear regularly at The Huffington Post and in The Observer, currently is working on a book about his experiences teaching for two decades in the inner city of OKC. He has a doctorate from Rutgers University and is the author of Closing the Frontier: Radical Responses in Oklahoma Politics



State's Lousy Health Ranking: Same Song, Another Verse

BY CARLY PUTNAM

The latest nationwide health ranking is out, and Oklahoma is in its customary trailing position on national comparisons. United Health Foundation's annual America's Health Rankings report placed Oklahoma 46th in the U.S. for the health of our people.

This continues the state's steady march downward since the group began compiling and releasing rankings. Since the rankings were first released in 1990, we've fallen to 46th from a solid 32nd.

So what's going on? United Health Foundation bases the ranking on a wide range of variables, from prevalence of smoking to high school graduation rates. While Oklahoma's indicators generally ranked badly, the report identified three primary areas of concern:

PHYSICAL INACTIVITY

While Oklahoma requires physical education [PE] in schools, we don't require two important compo-

nents necessary to make those classes effective: daily physical activity and health education.

While physical education might be one or two classes in a high schooler's career, a physical activity requirement would make sure students were active for a minimum amount of time every day. Some evidence even suggests it would boost students' ability to learn.

Similarly, a health education requirement would take the knowledge from the PE curriculum and apply that information to a broader understanding of a "culture of health," including nutrition and preventive care.

Oklahoma is one of only two states that doesn't require health education. [The other is Colorado].

CHILDHOOD IMMUNIZATIONS

Over one-third of Oklahoma children aged 19-35 months don't receive all their recommended immu-

nizations [DTaP, polio, MMR, Hib, Hepatitis B, chickenpox, PCV].

Following a decade of steady progress, the immunization rate has cratered: the annual State of the State's Health report awarded the state's immunization rate a "D" in 2000, a "C" in 2005, a "B" in 2010, and an "F" in 2012.

It's not clear why: whether parents are choosing not to vaccinate their children for medical, religious or philosophical reasons; because rising costs of vaccines mean parents have difficulty locating a doctor who provides immunizations; or because parents are simply unaware of the immunizations' importance.

But immunizations keep kids from catching, spreading, and dying of everything from the measles to pneumonia. Whatever the reason, increasing numbers of unvaccinated kids place many more at risk.

PHYSICIAN SHORTAGE

Oklahoma's primary care shortage isn't a new issue, and we know of several potential solutions.

Continuing to invest in the next generation of primary care physicians would build a better health care provider supply.

More responsible fiscal planning could create a more stable state budget, which in turn would lessen

the likelihood of further provider cuts.

Finally, accepting federal funds to expand health coverage to low-income Oklahomans would be a net savings to the state and would inject billions in federal funds into our health care system.

But policymakers haven't instituted needed change, and so the problem persists.

All is not entirely gloomy: binge drinking and pertussis [whooping cough] are less prevalent here than in many other states, and the report noted the state's relatively low prevalence of low birth weight babies [although the rate has worsened over the last decade].

But by and large, America's Health Rankings is a strong reminder that from smoking rates to preventable hospitalizations to high school graduation rates, Oklahomans are faring worse than most other Americans.

We need to recognize that while our health rankings can't get much worse, our health outcomes can – and without intervention, almost certainly will.

Carly Putnam is a policy analyst for 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>.

Which Political Path Awaits: Phony Platitudes Or Positive Policies?

BY CAL HOBSON

Well, well. Now comes the Honorable Mary Fallin, newly re-elected governor of the potentially great state of Oklahoma. Her appearance before a joint session of the Legislature in February, where she presented her annual state of the state address, was encouraging.

To her credit she emphasized three overarching challenges: education, health care and public safety. Thankfully she avoided more tax cut pandering and did not join in the easy but ignorant legislative dialogue concerning our racial, gender, nation of origin or religious differences.

Since Fallin loves the A-F grading system for our schools, let's award her an A for identifying the endemic and longstanding problems that plague us.

Now, however, comes the hard part. It's one thing for Her Eminence to describe the societal deficiencies that envelop us – it's entirely different to offer meaningful solutions to fix them. On that score, our CEO earns a low D – therefore, budgetary remediation and prioritization homework is necessary for her.

In order to not just criticize the administration but to sincerely suggest imminently do-able legislative initiatives that will begin the hard process of fundamentally reversing the downward spiral of the state

we all love, allow me to offer a comprehensive plan of action concerning education, health care and public safety.

EDUCATION

Appropriately, Gov. Fallin has finally declared her top issue is education. Enhanced compensation for educators as well as a reduction in meaningless testing highlight her "to do" list but missing as usual is the source of money for serious salary improvements. Making the financial picture more difficult was the mid-February announcement that the fiscal year 2016 deficit has more than doubled to \$611.3 million. The oil price plummet is the main short-term culprit but the counter-productive tax cut makes the hole deeper by over \$100 million per year.

Chance of the legislature repealing or at least delaying this downright foolish law? Zero. Chance of me suggesting a way to provide at least a \$1,500 dollar annual pay increase for all of our teachers effective July 1, 2015? One hundred percent.

Here's how. Extract immediately the available \$132 million dollars from our overflowing Rainy Day Fund [RDF] to provide a one-time bonus for educators. This will stem the outward flow of our best and brightest professionals to other states, will boost morale with-

in our families and schools and will send the message to all America that our elected leadership gives more than a hoot about our kids' futures. I was in the Legislature in 1985 when the RDF concept was created to deal with emergencies.

After years of benign, or more likely purposeful neglect, by Fallin and her hapless legislative followers [education has been cut more deeply here than in any other state], our schools are in daily crisis. And contrary to the vacuous and sometimes vicious opinions blathered endlessly by outfits like the Oklahoma Council of Public Affairs [OCPA] *money does matter*. Lead propagandist for this crew, Brandon Dutcher, endlessly denigrates the public schools where 95% of our kids are enrolled while he has paid big tuition in private schools for his progeny. Do as I say not ... never mind.

HEALTH CARE

Nearly 100 years ago that great philosopher H.L. Mencken opined that for every difficult, complex and intricate problem there is a simple, easy and wrong answer. Currently our state's system of delivering, or not, health services to hundreds of thousands of our citizens is dysfunctional, downright dangerous and it is anything but simple. Rules, laws, regulations, forms, confusing concepts, conflicting counseling, contrary financial and eligibility advice. So what is one to do?

Well, The One who could do something immediately on health care is – you know who – our governor. Through the stroke of a pen, preceded by modest personal lobbying of a few legislative leaders, approximately 150,000 of our most vulnerable fellow residents would immediately receive health care insurance and its accompanying health care services. Exit the emergency room. Enter the doctor's office. Get preventative care, not emergency services. Live healthier longer, not die sooner sicker.

Message to Gov. Fallin and legislators: All of you and your family members enjoy gold-plated, reasonably-priced health insurance, courtesy of us taxpayers. The federal Affordable Care Act is the law of the land as passed years ago in Congress and affirmed by the conservative U.S. Supreme Court. In understandable terms it would extend similar private sector health insurance to thousands upon thousands of your constituents – and, remember, over 150,000 of us have already voluntarily signed up for coverage. If our well-compensated and fully-insured Attorney General Scott Pruitt had spent just a tiny bit of time and resources making the ACA functional rather than spending untold sums ideologically litigating against it, so many would have already benefitted.

I've known Scott for decades and all I can say about him is he must read a different Bible than I do [you know the part about the Ten Commandments, etc.] and apparently he was in the room when the Founding Fathers wrote our Constitution. In June the current Supremes will do again what they've already done: Uphold the ACA and Pruitt will continue to do

what he does best: Waste your tax money.

In summary, when it comes to health, Mencken's axiom is wrong. There is a simple easy answer to our difficult, complex, and intricate health care mess. Accept our own \$8 billion of tax money available over the next decade, spend it in this state on our own friends and neighbors, and place them on a path to healthier, happier, and longer lives.

THE CORRECTIONS CRISIS

Over four decades ago Oklahoma's penal colony was under federal supervision in the person of Judge Luther Bohanon. After the Oklahoma State Penitentiary almost burned to the ground in 1974, the courageous but soon-to-be most hated man in Oklahoma, Judge Bohanon, was forced into this unpleasant situation by a nonchalant and wholly distracted Legislature.

No one then, and few now, in powerful elected positions gave or give anything more than lip service to the men and women who work in the Department of Corrections, let alone the thousands of felons they supervise.

Examples abound of their total disregard for and zero knowledge of how to operate a safe and constitutional corrections system. In February, Rep. Bobby Cleveland, R-Slaughterville, presented reasonable legislation designed to alleviate inmate overcrowding currently pegged at 114% of capacity and the highest in the history of this state. His draft proposal was modest, its impact on public safety negligible, and was supported by district attorneys, judges and the Fallin Administration.

However, that didn't keep second-term legislator Scott Biggs, R-Chickasha, from declaring that the obvious culprit causing all our criminal justice nightmares was, of course, "the leadership of the department." This from a guy who serves on all of the germane committees that impact DOC. He is also a lawyer, former assistant district attorney and otherwise known to have a modicum of commonsense.

Newbie Biggs, like so many before him, arrived for duty at the Capitol willing to immerse himself in most all of the complex issues of our time. However, just like me 36 years earlier, Biggs took his first oath of office already knowing everything to be known under the Oklahoma sun on two subjects. They are: [1] The criminal justice system inside out from crime committed to incarceration, and [2] What the length of the quail season should be! Quit laughing because I'm not kidding.

THREE NEW LAWS

Notwithstanding these political challenges, let me suggest three meaningful yet undoubtedly unpopular new laws that will, if adopted, immediately bring the prison population in line with prison capacity, will bring our prison inmate-on-inmate murder rate down dramatically [Oklahoma currently ranks No. 1 nationally], will reduce by 20% the \$500 million DOC budget and, best of all for legislators, *not cause the defeat of any one of them at the polls!*

1. Authorize a one-time commutation docket made

up of currently incarcerated non-violent offenders who have maintained a clean record and positive attitude while in custody. Appropriate supervision, continued educational improvement, victim compensation and meaningful work performance should be required where appropriate. This one step would do more than any other to finally, at long last, make sense of our nonsensical, budget busting, murderous and, by most any template, 19th Century gulag.

2. Pass Rep. Cleveland's thoughtful proposal dealing with our mandatory 85% time-to-serve law. He suggests certain good time credits, if earned, for the thousands upon thousands sentenced since this constitutional amendment was passed in 1989. Obviously, many of these offenders are now old, some infirm, and most have been model prisoners for decades.

However, one amendment should be added to limit the draconian 85% consequence to just the original 10 heinous felonies enumerated, not the 15 more that have been added since. Limited resources mean limited government even when the spending is on locking up more folks.

3. And, finally, fund and implement former House Speaker Kris Steele's wise and courageous Justice Reinvestment Act of 2010. Its many smart and positive elements, combined with proposed laws found in points one and two above, will make Oklahoma a leader nationally in forging a safe, affordable, well-staffed and constitutional criminal justice system.

Oh, and by the way, the reason I know Okie legislators will not lose their jobs if they finally do their jobs on this difficult topic is that their even more right-wing Republican colleagues in hang 'em high Texas passed similar 21st Century concepts in – *drumroll* – 2007! No legislator that voted for them got beat. In fact, the elephant party gained seats in both houses and every statewide elected official south of the Red River has an R behind his or her name.

Also, there is now excess bed-space south of the border, corrections spending is down not up and – get this – the crime rate has dropped, not increased. The opposite is true in every category north of the Red and south of Kansas ... meaning us.

So there you are. Workable, money saving and passable proposals that offer real solutions to the governor's stated Big Three priorities of education, health care, and criminal justice reform.

By any measure of meaningful progress, her first term had little to show for it in these categories. Actually things got worse – much worse – on her watch. The deepest education cuts in America, second sick-est population thanks only to Mississippi's morass, and home to the most dangerous, overcrowded prison environment anywhere in the civilized world. Those are the facts.

Even as to our positively performing economy and low unemployment rate the credit goes not to the endlessly touted quarter percent tax cut since *it is yet to be implemented* nor will it be until calendar

year 2016. Rather kudos are due to oil and natural gas producers who, through their ingenuity, guile, personal investment and plain old hard work have their products flowing in record amounts from thousands of new well sites.

Private sector leaders, generous and caring folks, educators, conceptual thinkers and inventors, religious motivators, senior citizens, workers of all stripes and our family members love Oklahoma. As I pointed out last month, this state is the luckiest in the nation when it comes to abundant natural resources as well as our prime location at the physical crossroads of this country.

What remains sorely missing are public sector risk-takers who fit the description so wisely offered by President Teddy Roosevelt. He said something to the effect that it is not the man in the stands that matters, one who only criticizes and complains. Rather it is the person in the arena, with grime and sweat on his brow who fails, gets back up and tries again and again until success is the reward.

That's who I and probably thousands of my friends and neighbors are looking for but so far to no avail.

Exceptional lawmakers are out there. Will you stand up, speak out, and lead this potentially great state forward even at some personal political peril? Or is our former motto emblazoned for decades on car tags – Oklahoma is OK – good enough for you?

It's surely not for us.

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

State Song's New Lyrics

After the brutal February, Oklahoma is changing the words to the state song. It now goes like this:

SNOW ... klahoma

Where the cold front's sweepin' down the plain
And the piles of sleet, beneath your feet
Follow right behind the freezing rain.

SNOW ... klahoma

Ev'ry night my honey lamb and I
Travel home from work and hope some jerk
Doesn't wreck our car when passing by!

We know we belong to the land

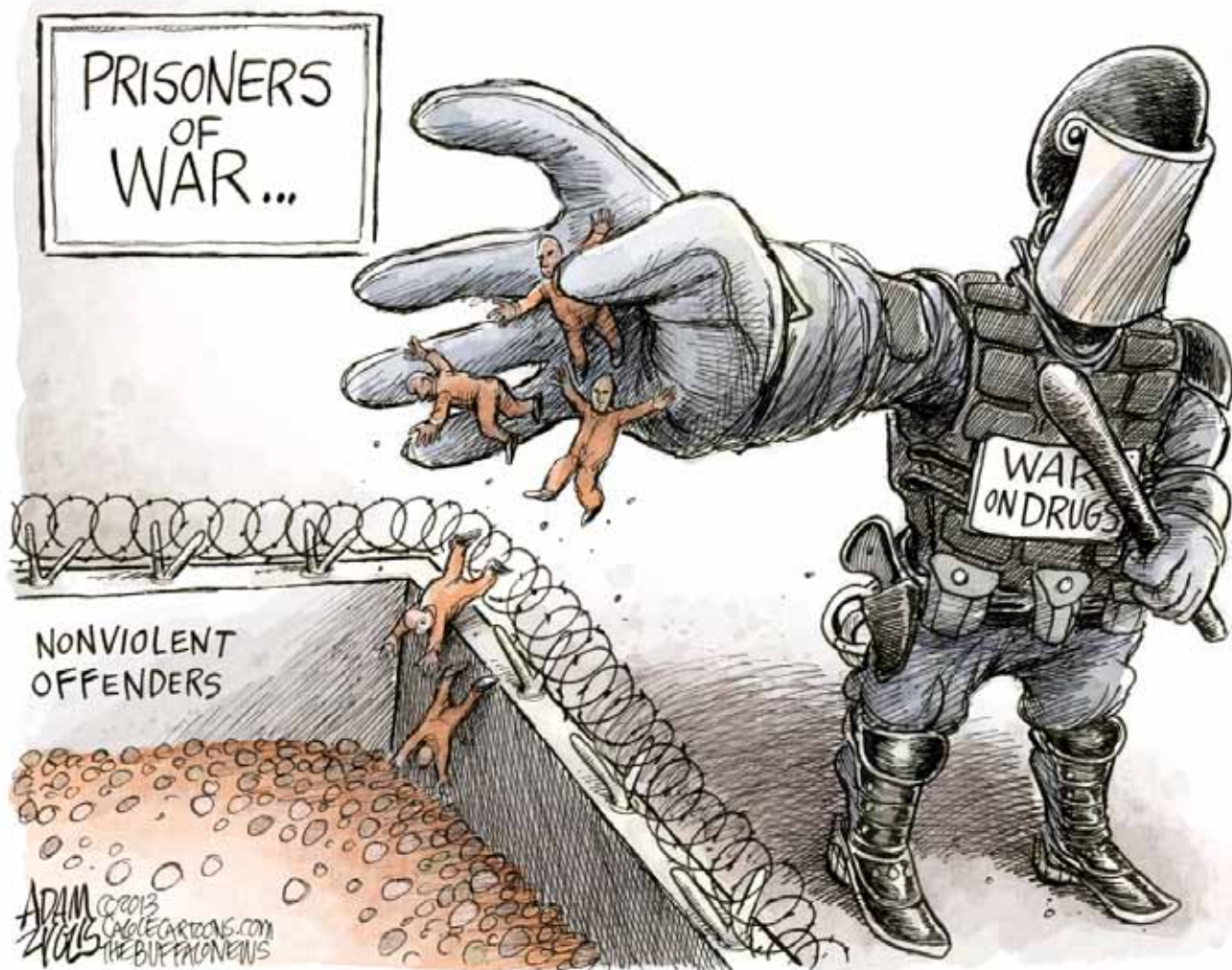
But it sure could use some more salt and sand
That's why we say ... WHOA! We're sliding the
other way ... YIKES!

We're only sayin' You're slick as snot SNOWkla-
homa

SNOWklahoma

SNOW-K-L-A-H-O-M-A

SNOWklahoma, SNOW-K!



The War On Our Neighbors

BY HAL SPAKE

The recent spate of killings of black men and failure to prosecute policemen who used deadly force where none was required has sparked protest and led to an unending discussion by TV talking heads.

Police brutality is historically well documented and the cause is always the same. A community decides to criminalize the perceived behavior of a minority and then uses the force of the state to impose its will. Violence against protestors and workers on strike is widely known.

The war on drugs is a perfect example of a racially motivated police action against people the community doesn't like. In 1875, there were no legal restrictions on the use of opium and it was widely used by women to treat menstrual cramps. The world's greatest fictional detective, Sherlock Holmes, was a frequent user of opium. It was legal everywhere in the U.S. until 1905 when San Francisco banned opium dens, a move largely fueled by anti-Chinese senti-

ment.

Beginning in 1910, in response to the swell of refugees fleeing the violence of the Mexican Revolution, several states passed laws targeting Mexican use of marijuana. Two large industries, the lumber/paper and cotton industries, also joined the fray, because hemp threatened their bottom lines and in 1937 the marijuana tax act was passed.

The War on Drugs began on June 18, 1971, when President Richard Nixon decided to punish the pot-smoking, LSD-tripping hippies who he believed led the anti-war movement.

During Prohibition, it was not illegal to drink. The War on Drugs is different. It is essentially a war on an innate human desire to have a transcendental experience. We now imprison record numbers of our citizens because they feed a hunger that makes some people uncomfortable. While we don't imprison diabetics or those with cancer for being sick, we do punish the mentally ill, especially when they self medi-

cate.

As marijuana was driven underground, organized crime moved in and criminals don't limit themselves to one product. Once the routes are established they are used to move everything – hard drugs, counterfeit goods and people. All the war has done is create a giant criminal network that has led to increased levels of brutality both here and in the countries along its trade routes.

Laws are so arbitrary that recently a community in Florida jailed a priest who was feeding the homeless. They seem to have forgotten that charity is a cornerstone of our culture. Given that mind-set, its safe to imagine that if elderly white men were using crack and young black men were using Viagra, it would be Viagra that was illegal.

Three factors are converging that will force lawmakers to rethink the use of force while attempting to regulate non-violent behavior.

First, media attention given to the tolerance of police brutality and the killings of a growing list of both the mentally ill and black men and a black child has focused American's attention on the symptoms of a society that criminalizes the presence of people they don't like or fear.

Second, as so clearly articulated by several Oklahoma legislators and the governor, our current incarceration rates are straining our state's budget. Subsequently, many laws criminalizing mental illness and the accompanying drug use need to be repealed.

Third, the Justice Department has changed many policies on marijuana. The announcement that Indian tribes can grow, market and regulate marijuana [and hemp] on tribal lands will force states to end their war on marijuana. If we don't, what is already a \$2 billion annual cash crop in eastern Oklahoma will legally expand and the state will miss out on a substantial revenue source.

Marijuana is now legal in nearly half of the nation and in many states is their largest cash crop. Its medical benefits are widely recognized.

It's time to end the war on drugs. Once we do, and start treating the mentally ill, our prison populations will shrink, organized crime will be significantly defunded and many deadly confrontations with citizens will cease.

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.

Sleeping Dogs Of The 2015 Session

BY DAVID BLATT

The 2015 session is now underway and it's clear that this year, as always, will feature heated debates on a multitude of contentious issues, from proposals to expand school choice through vouchers and charter schools to efforts to rein in tax credits to hot-button social issues, such as guns, abortion, and same-sex marriage.

Less noted, but perhaps equally significant, is the low profile of several issues that have been highly contentious in recent years and that many expected to see back on the agenda in 2015.

Here's a review of four issues on which few, if any, bills have been filed and it now appears that minimal legislative action is likely this session:

PENSION REFORM

For the past several years, Republican leaders have strongly promoted shifting Oklahoma's public pension systems away from traditional defined benefit plans to 401[k]-style defined contribution plans. Last year, legislation was approved creating a new defined contribution system for all new employees in the Oklahoma Public Employees Retirement System [OPERS], over the strenuous opposition of a coalition of labor groups defending traditional pensions. It was widely expected that this year would see similar proposals affecting teachers and the Oklahoma Teachers Retirement System [OTRS], and perhaps attempts to consolidate various public pension plans under a

single board.

To the surprise of many, no major pension overhaul legislation affecting OTRS or the other systems was filed this year. There are several bills to make minor changes in the membership of pensions and a slew of bills that would make it easier for retired teachers to return to the classroom, but nothing fundamental. Advocates are keeping a close eye, however, on multiple "shell bills" that could take on a different form as session unfolds.

MEDICAID REFORM

Among national and local critics of Medicaid, the health care program for low-income Oklahomans, a major push in recent years has been to privatize the program by moving the Medicaid population into capitated managed care plans, or HMOs, run by private insurance companies. A bill to move all Medicaid recipients into HMOs, including those receiving long-term care services, was passed by the House in 2013, and several measures were introduced in 2014. While supported by some health insurance companies, opposition to Medicaid privatization has been fierce from hospitals and other providers, especially those familiar with Oklahoma's failed effort at Medicaid managed care in the 1990s.

This year, there is only one Medicaid managed care bill, HB 1566, which simply directs the Medicaid agency to develop "a pilot program to evaluate the

potential use of a patient-centered, integrated managed care system.” A bill by Sen. Rob Standridge, SB 228, would create a Medicaid Reform Advisory Group, but expressly prohibits the group from “considering reforms using out-of-state contractors for managed care models of health care delivery.”

IMMIGRATION

It’s now been eight years since passage of HB 1804, the immigration bill authored by Rep. Randy Terrill that was widely seen as among the toughest state laws aimed at clamping down on undocumented immigrants.

In 2011, following Arizona’s passage of an even more restrictive immigration bill, over two dozen immigration proposals were introduced in Oklahoma addressing such subjects as local law enforcement practices, human smuggling, school enrollment, and bilingual services.

Ultimately, opposition from a broad range of immigrant advocates and business groups helped ensure that none of those measures passed.

Since then, the immigration issue has been increasingly quiet, with fewer bills introduced and moved through the process.

This year, three bills that have raised concerns from immigrant advocates were introduced: SB 522 limits official use of languages other than English; SB 523 expands law enforcement powers associated with suspected human trafficking; and HB 1093 gives law enforcement officials authority to ask all occupants of a vehicle for identification during a traffic stop. None of these bills seems likely to be heard.

Meanwhile, several measures supportive of undocumented residents, including ones to enable some to get a driver’s license, were also introduced.

SOCIAL SAFETY NET

Two years ago, legislators introduced a slew of bills to tighten eligibility guidelines and impose new controls on various social safety net programs, many of which had a decidedly punitive bent.

The most drastic bills would have barred ex-felons from receiving SNAP [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program] benefits and imposed new asset limits on the program. Several bills passed, including one authored by then-Speaker T.W. Shannon that supposedly tightened work requirements on certain SNAP applicants that he touted prominently in his run for U.S. Senate. A year earlier, the Legislature required drug-screening of applicants for cash assistance benefits.

This session, only one bill aims at limiting safety net benefits – SB 74, by Sen. Rob Standridge, would deny cash assistance benefits to individuals with a prior drug-related felony conviction unless they’ve completed drug treatment. Another Standridge bill, SB 643, proposes a pilot program for married cash assistance recipients that would consolidate various benefits into lump-sum payments.

It’s unlikely that any of these issues are off the table for good. Most are likely to rear up again in the future, and could even become more prominent as session unfolds.

But for now at least, these four dogs that have bitten and growled in recent years seem to be enjoying some peaceful sleep.

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>

When Oklahoma Viewed Higher Ed As An Investment, Not A Cost

BY JOSEPH H. CARTER SR.

The concept of taxpayer-financed kindergarten through 14th grade now sought by President Obama is a concept born during last century’s space age when employers discovered that 12-year graduates lacked ample schooling to fill modern jobs and new challenges.

Over decades beyond 1907 when Oklahoma became a state, an eighth grade education was deemed sufficient for most occupations. In those early days, only the gifted, fortunate or elite youngsters from wealthy families could attend the six compass-point colleges or two public universities.

As the 20th Century advanced, technology exploded and industry needed better-trained workers. High schools were injected or radically expanded follow-

ing World War I. The Great Depression and Dust Bowl were perilous for all aspects of society including schools.

The GI Bill following World War II funded a major boom for higher education and trained a generation of business and national leaders who assured America’s world leadership in industry and political affairs.

Under the “Great Society” of President Johnson during the mid-’60s, federal money finally was authorized and sent to public schools and colleges faced with overwhelming demands on local and state resources.

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 – passed with “yes” votes by most Oklahoma congressmen – sharply fueled educational opportuni-

ties that had been ignited by the World War II “GI Bill of Rights” of the 1950s.

In 1973, Gov. David Hall’s budget message declared that his proposed new state funding “virtually guarantees that every Oklahoma child can easily complete 15 years of formal education – kindergarten through the sophomore year of college – with the ease that our forefathers completed the eighth grade.”

Following avid legislative support, Hall was able to announce in 1974 that “for the first time in Oklahoma history, statewide kindergarten will be mandatory ...” But the enrichment of junior colleges was equally telling although funding faded as a “conservative” movement swelled across Oklahoma.

Help arrived in January 2015. Using federal dollars to fully fund junior colleges [grades 14 and 15]

is essentially what President Obama’s State of the Union requested from the Republican-controlled Congress.

Unfortunate but expected and traditional, the request was blasted by both senators and the five congressmen from Oklahoma – all rightwing, Tea Party Republicans determined to turn America into a church state.

In 1971, at the expense of under-taxed rich folks and fiercely opposed by Republican legislators, Hall’s progressive tax program funded landmark educational benefits that resonate through Oklahoma’s economy even today.

With strong legislative leaders, Hall’s tax reform eliminated abusive loopholes such as one allowing owners of Oklahoma-based corporations to draw tax-exempt dividends instead of taxable salaries.

Hall, with only two Democrats in the Legislature voting “no,” including then-state Rep. David Boren, also raised taxes on oil and gas – taxing didn’t even faintly dent the industry.

Audits showed that spending of the new tax revenues truly reflected the governor’s pledge that half of the money would go to public schools and 25% to higher education. The rest was for highways, roads, health and police.

With this critical new cash, state-funded junior colleges were empowered to offer grades 13 and 14 to all high school graduates and schooling for older folks needing to upgrade skills – virtually free of tuition or fees.

As conservatives won elections in subsequent years, the burden of junior college tuition has fallen increasingly on students who must borrow money



"HIGHER EDUCATION"

and amass debts unless their families are sufficiently rich to pay the tabs.

At colleges and universities, one of the four budget messages that I had drafted said, “tuition rose an average of 10% each year during the 1960s” but during Gov. Hall’s 1971-75 term “tuition and fees remain stable and frozen into their fourth year.”

While Hall called 1974 “a year of fiscal plenty” – still he urged “prudent spending and wise allocation” of monies and praised the Democratic-controlled Legislature for practicing conservative economics.

While Hall’s budgets included first funding of the new Tulsa school for osteopathic physicians, in 1972 it also called for a 22,000-student lid on “public universities” thus adding “to the responsibilities of other campuses, strengthen small colleges and diversify educational facilities.”

In 2015, enrollment at OU and OSU exceeds 46,000.

Also in 2015, Oklahoma’s state-level appropriations and new federal funding of vital public education are responsibilities resting in the consciences and votes of Republican officials overwhelmingly elected by Oklahoma people.

Will state legislative history write the outcome as a bright moment for Oklahoma?

Will Oklahoma delegates to Congress vote to boost education?

Will civilization, equity and prosperity be judged as akin to the brave action of governments of nearly one-half century ago?

Time will tell.

Joseph H. Carter Sr. was a speech writer, press secretary then executive assistant to Gov. Hall and a speech writer for President Johnson.



It's In America's DNA To Clash Over Climate Change

BY JOHN WOOD

Climate change, also known as global warming, is one of the most contentious of today's debates. So it's not surprising that Oklahoma's U.S. Sen. James Inhofe wrote *The Greatest Hoax: How the Global Warming Conspiracy Threatens Your Future*, which argues that human influenced climate change is merely a hoax and ridiculous because "God's still up there" and it is "outrageous" and arrogant for people to believe human beings are "able to change what He is doing in the climate."

On the other hand, Chris Mooney's *The Republican War on Science*, argues that Inhofe "politicizes and misuses the science of climate change." Mooney says of Republicans, "Refusal to consider mainstream scientific opinion fuels an atmosphere of policy gridlock

that could cost our children dearly."

You should know that polarization in Congress and in society is as voracious today as it was more than 200 years ago and as it was in George Washington's time, making difficult the development of consensus on how to address issues that threaten our country.

Are we doomed to constant political gridlock?

Unless we deal with what deeply divides us in the context of certainly a very complicated world, then maybe so!

A WICKED PROBLEM

Climate change is a wicked problem. Issues earn the label "wicked problem" through generating sufficient controversy that groups with disparate explanations for the causes and solutions to the problem are unable to forge consensus necessary for democracy

to proactively address an issue.

Our nation has always been divided over various issues and nothing is different today, especially in the face of incredibly complex “wicked” problems, such as drugs, poverty, and climate change.

The National Research Council [NRC] in 2010 described climate change as a “change in the statistical distribution of weather patterns” over an extended period of time, whether decades or even millions of years. The NRC finds that causes, such as the Earth’s varying solar radiation, volcanic eruptions, and also plate tectonics influence climate change.

The 2010 report, called *America’s Climate Choices: Panel on Advancing the Science of Climate Change*, finds that specific human activities are also considered significant in causing climate change, also known as “global warming.”

Many scientists say that the consequences might be melting ice caps, rising water, eroding shoreline, a shift in the “bread basket” where important food crops such as wheat, corn, and soy grow, and major weather changes.

Wicked Problems thrive when people disagree about not only what is the problem itself, but also its solution.

In 2007, the Australian Public Service Commission described a “wicked problem” as one “not in the sense of evil, but rather as an issue highly resistant to resolution.” It is most problematic, or even impossible, to solve because of contradictory, incomplete, and changing conditions, which are often difficult to recognize. What’s more, due to its often complex and interdependent nature, efforts to solve an aspect of a problem may actually create even more problems.

“Climate change is an issue that presents great scientific and economic complexity, some very deep uncertainties, profound ethical issues, and even lack of agreement on what the problem is,” said Michael Toman, research manager in the World Bank’s research department.

Wicked problems, such as poverty, drugs, crime, and climate change seem to defy solutions as people struggle to define the real problem to these issues. For example, is poverty about being lazy or about a mental illness? Is climate change man-made, or natural? Or, even, is climate change really happening or just a hoax?

It is differing perspectives that drive ambiguity on problems and solutions in choosing the road forward.

THE BASIS FOR OUR CONSTITUTION

The father of our Constitution, James Madison, assumed that factions – simply groups of citizens who



Oklahoma Sen. Jim Inhofe wielded a snowball on the Senate floor in late February to yet again make his case climate change is a hoax. “In case we have forgotten, because we keep hearing that 2014 has been the warmest year on record, I ask the chair, ‘You know what this is?’ It’s a snowball, from outside here. So it’s very, very cold out. Very unseasonable.”

unite with a common goal in mind – are purely natural in human nature. However, he lamented that these factions can often counter other factions, sometimes even violently, and can hurt society as a whole.

Madison says further in the Federalist Papers, No. 10, “[S]o strong is the propensity to fall into mutual animosities that where no substantial occasion presents itself, the most frivolous and fanciful distinctions have been sufficient to kindle their unfriendly passions and excite their most violent conflicts”

These factions appeared quite rapidly in our country.

Just a dozen years after the Constitution was signed, President Washington grumbled in 1798 “that you could as soon scrub the blackamoor white, as to change the principles of a professed Democrat; and that he will leave nothing unattempted to overturn the Government of this Country.” The Democratic-Republicans, in turn, angrily accused Federalists of destroying America’s value with the Alien and Sedition Acts. The Federalists in the 1780s were roughly a version of today’s conservatives and the Democrats-Republicans were the liberals.

Today, conservatives and liberals are still divided, but on very different issues – abortion, same-sex marriage, gun control, and climate change, to name a few.

FACTIONS IN OUR DNA

In their book *Predisposed: Liberals, Conservatives, and the Biology of Political Differences*, John Hibbing, Kevin Smith and John Alford find that “pretending that some middle-ground nirvana can be reached if only we listen to the other side is counterproductive and a source of endless frustration.” They explain that both sides of the spectrum see the world very differently, arguing that such differences are based on

differences in our DNA.

For example, on one hand, conservatives tend toward the status quo and tradition, back robust penalties on rule breakers and distrust outsiders. On the other hand, liberals favor experimentation, are open-minded about change, curious of outsiders and are more patient of rule breakers. Hibbing and Co. say these differences are not just partisan bickering over ObamaCare, abortion, climate change, or any other of today's issues. Instead, "they are bedrock social differences that have existed at least since Athens and Sparta."

And these bedrock differences, originating in our DNA, are manifested in the climate change controversy preventing the sort of consensus necessary to address societal problems.

For example, the World Bank's Toman says, "Economists will generally think about the trade-offs involved. Ecologists will talk about the idea that we're driving towards the edge of a cliff. I think both views are right. The question is, how you reconcile these two – if you can?"

Two different views, no less legitimate, that contribute to polarization on the issue of climate change.

When people do not agree, it is an indication of motivated reasoning. Essentially, rather than searching for information on both sides of an issue that may confirm or disconfirm their specific beliefs, people first seek information they believe. Drew Westen and his colleagues in a 2006 paper *Neural Bases of Motivated Reasoning* found motivated reasoning is "a form of implicit emotion regulation in which the brain converges on judgments that minimize negative and maximize positive affect states associated with threat to or attainment of motives." Motivated reasoning is deeply structured in our brains and often helps us get what we want, but also deeply divides us.

Madison was intuitively right: we are divided by factions. But it seems scientists are finding that such divisions originate deep in our brains. Lest we succumb to our fear that political consensus is impossible, let us remember that Madison and other framers of the Constitution provided means for us to overcome our natural DNA-laden tendency toward factions.

SCIENTIFIC CONSENSUS

The opinion of scientists in the scientific community is that the Earth's climate system is certainly warming, according to the 2010 NRC report. The report notes that there is a 95% probability that we, humans, are actually causing most of this warming through our activities that intensify concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere through mainly burning fossil fuel, aerosols, and deforestation.

Scientific papers also are at a consensus on climate change. In 2013, for example, a peer-reviewed scientific journal *Environmental Research Letters* reviewed nearly 12,000 scientific journal abstracts citing either "global climate change" or "global warming." The authors of the paper found that more than 4,000 of this group of papers directly examined the

causes of climate change, and of these 4,000 papers, more than 97% validated that climate change is real.

No national or international scientific body had rejected the human-induced effects on climate change stance until 2007, but the American Association of Petroleum Geologists [AAPG] revised their statement on climate change as non-committal and promoting a need for more research instead of acting on it now. This change in AAPG's stance certainly reflects the lack of consensus among citizens.

NO POPULAR CONSENSUS

In a 2003 peer-reviewed study called the *Media's Social Construction of Environmental Issues: Focus on Global Warming – A Comparative Study*, the authors found that the popular media coverage in the U.S. appeared different from other countries, where reporting is more in line with the scientific community.

For example, some journalists point to the fact that climate change denial is often being propagated in the U.S. by business-centered organizations employing tactics worked out previously by the U.S. tobacco lobby, according to an 2007 ABC News report by Clayton Sandell called *Big Money Confusing Public on Global Warming*.

Communication scholar Craig Trumbo found that stories on climate change in the 1980s were heavily reliant on scientific sources, but over time, economists and politicians seemed to have taken over as the dominant sources of news stories. By the early 1990s there was a growing concern over the costs associated with regulations, especially in opinion pieces where climate change skeptic views thrived.

A new phenomenon called the "dueling scientists scenario" gave even more credibility to skeptics in the media. This rise of skeptics coupled with the Bush Sr. Administration critiques of the science of global warming can create a lot of confusion and feeds on the distrust already present in the public's mind.

Trust in our mass media is important in how the public understands the issues and how to interpret their world. When issues, such as climate change, have complex causes and effects, uncertainty in the public can stall progress on such issues. A lack of trust can also create wider legitimacy problems for governing institutions. As a result, governments struggle in mobilizing resources to deal with citizen needs due to their lack of consent.

This lack of trust has made Americans more doubtful about climate change than other nations worldwide. People's concern over issues such as climate change corresponds with national crisis, such as 9/11, as well as economic downturns as Americans focus on national security and the economy over environmental concerns.

More than half [57%] of Americans in a 2013 Gallup poll think that climate change isn't as bad as portrayed in the media, but a third say the media have actually downplayed the topic, and nearly a quarter saying the coverage is accurate. However, Europeans

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STOP THE PRESSES!

On Gas Tax Increase, Obama Is Wrong – And [Some] Republicans Are Right

BY JOE CONASON

It doesn't happen often, but Washington is debating an important issue on which the United States Chamber of Commerce, Sen. James Inhofe, R-OK, Fox News pundit Charles Krauthammer, and a growing posse of assorted right-wingers are right – and President Barack Obama is wrong.

Those voices on the right, along with many on the left, are urging consideration of an increase in the federal gasoline tax, sorely needed both to maintain America's transportation infrastructure and to reduce greenhouse gases. Yet for reasons best known to him alone, the president is resisting that excellent idea.

As every sentient American adult knows, the price of gasoline at the pump has fallen precipitously in recent months. Filling a 20-gallon tank today costs about \$30 less than buying the same volume of gas cost last summer.

To raise the federal gas tax by 15 cents per gallon would only recoup 10% of that consumer bonanza – and would bring tax revenues roughly in line with inflation since the last time an increase passed in 1993.

Since then, of course, America's roads, bridges, tunnels and transit systems have continued to decay, without sufficient funding or will to keep them in decent condition.

Congressional revulsion at raising taxes, thanks to the mania enforced by Grover Norquist at the misnamed Americans for Tax Reform, has left the Highway Trust Fund on the brink of bankruptcy since last year.

A modest gas tax increase would begin to solve the problem, at least for the transportation sector. [The rest of the nation's infrastructure – everything from airports and dams to state universities, public buildings and water mains – is falling apart, too, but that will require bigger solutions.]

Were we inclined, as a nation, to consider what we owe both our ancestors and our descendants, Washington would have embarked on a program of national reconstruction years ago, to take advantage of negligible interest rates, an idled labor force and under-utilized capital.

No comparable opportunity to rebuild cheaply and efficiently, while creating the kinds of jobs that support families, has existed since the Great Depression.

And much of what we now take [and use] for granted was built in those years, and in the early postwar decades, when public works were widely seen as a public good.

But the ideologues that now dominate our politics under the rubric of “conservative” are not in the business of conserving anything – not our natural resources, not our environment and certainly not our infrastructure.

Their frothing opposition to government and taxation has actively encouraged decay.

Today, the radicals represented by the Tea Party and Americans for Prosperity [another misnomer] will seek to block even a very modest gas tax increase, as they are doing on the state level in Iowa – without any plausible proposal for essential infrastructure repair.

Ask for their alternative solution to financing infrastructure, and the geniuses at the Heritage Foundation, for instance, demand an end to transit spending and a cut in construction wages. Others on the right simply mumble about “reducing waste.”

What they don't propose is a plausible, equitable, sustainable way to rebuild.

These people shouldn't call themselves the Tea Party. With their strange urge to ruin the transportation systems that made this the strongest country in the world, they're more like a Termite Party. Termite is also the proper term for Republicans in the House of Representatives, where Speaker John Boehner brags that he has never, ever voted to increase the gas tax. [After all, it doesn't fund golf courses or tanning beds.]

The limits to such madness may be on the horizon, however. When a right-wing stalwart like Inhofe – a noted climate denier and stooge of the oil industry – acknowledges that a gas tax increase may be inevitable, then sanity could break out, even on Capitol Hill.

For President Obama to situate himself among irrational opponents of an increase is perplexing. Perhaps if enough Republicans and corporate leaders insist on a gas tax hike, he will abandon that position and join their ranks. And then at last, the “bipartisan” approach he still cherishes, against so much evidence, might produce something of value to this country.

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Power Play

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

services,” the 29-member, blue-ribbon panel wrote, “are a complex, out-of-date Constitution and a weak ‘chief executive officer.’”

“Until we change these basics, other reforms will have little impact on the operation of government.”

The Keating Report recommended myriad reforms in state government, ranging from consolidating information technology to reducing the number of statewide elected officials to even having the governor and lieutenant governor run as a team.

Many of the proposed changes would expand the governor’s authority, including power to appoint the state superintendent of public instruction, Corporation Commission members and the insurance commissioner.

Unlike many blue-ribbon studies, the Keating Report wasn’t tossed into history’s dustbin. It was kept in the Republican quiver until 2010 when Fallin’s election as governor completed the GOP takeover of the entire legislative process.

The first sign that the Keating Report was moving from theory to reality came after a dust-up at the first State Board of Education meeting under then-new Superintendent Janet Barresi in January 2011.

When the board, all appointees of former Democratic Gov. Brad Henry, rejected three of Barresi’s proposed staff hires – including her campaign manager in the department’s No. 2 position – Fallin and Republicans pounced.

Lawmakers not only neutered the board, giving nearly all decision-making authority to the superintendent, but also gave the governor the power to replace board members at her discretion – both actions that dovetailed with the Keating Report’s push to “re-engineer” the state’s common education structure.

As University of Central Oklahoma political science professor John Wood first noted in a paper presented to the Oklahoma Political Science Association in November 2013, the Legislature has repeatedly helped expand gubernatorial power for Fallin, often mirroring Keating Report proposals:

- The state’s Information Technology infrastructure was consolidated under control of a newly created Chief Information Officer – selected by the governor.
- The state Human Services Commission was abolished and the governor was given the authority to hire a CEO-like Department of Human Services director.
- The state’s Workers Compensation System was overhauled, shifting from a court to an administrative system, controlled by a three-member Workers Compensation Commission and a nine-member advisory council appointed by the governor.

The effort to create a chief executive officer-type governor wouldn’t please the framers of Oklahoma’s



Constitution and the state’s pioneer leaders who were generally suspicious of too much power concentrated in too few hands.

They set up the current system, for example, in which 11 statewide officeholders – from treasurer to labor commissioner – in effect report directly to the voters, not to an all-powerful gubernatorial CEO.

Arguing that such an approach was costly and inefficient, the Keating Report proposed making the state school superintendent, insurance commissioner, corporation commissioners, labor commissioner and state treasurer positions appointed by the governor.

“It may seem as though the more elected officials, the more voice the people have,” the report asserted. “The truth is that the large number of elected officials results in inconsistent public policy.

“... Reducing the number of elected officials will empower the governor to be accountable to the voters for management of the executive branch. In addition, this shift will minimize friction among elected officials and ensure that agencies’ public policies are consistent, effective and strategic.”

Of course, consolidating power in the hands of a CEO-style governor would make life easier for the state’s deep-pocketed special interests whose already out-size influence would be bolstered by having fewer state officials to persuade – or control.

It is notable that not all Keating Report proposals embraced by the Legislature have directly empowered the governor. For example, the much-debated A-F school grading system seems mirrors the Keating Report’s goal specifically – and the GOP’s goals gen-



erally – of bolstering the so-called “school choice” movement.

It is also true that lawmakers haven’t given Fallin carte blanche to seize as much power as possible, no doubt because Republicans recognize the dangers of consolidating too much power in an office that – odds are – Democrats eventually will regain control of.

So, for example, lawmakers rejected Fallin’s plan last year to create a super tourism agency by consolidating the Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma Arts Council and Oklahoma Department of Tourism.

Fallin hasn’t limited her governor-as-CEO vision to the Keating blueprint, either. She became the first governor to assert – and win state Supreme Court endorsement of – executive privilege to keep secret public policy advice she receives from “senior executive branch officials.”

The new power makes Fallin’s governorship the least transparent in state history – and violated her 2010 campaign promise to “support at every opportunity the public policy of the State of Oklahoma that the people are vested with the inherent right to know and be fully informed about their government so that they can efficiently and intelligently exercise their inherent political power.”

As Oklahoma State University journalism professor Joey Senat put it, in a Freedom of Information Oklahoma blog post, “If Oklahomans are to meaningfully participate in their government and understand the governmental decisions affecting their lives, they must be privy to the deliberative discussions revealing why officials chose one alternative and rejected

others.

“Knowing why action was taken or not taken is as important as knowing what the outcome is. The public is entitled to evaluate what was considered and why it was rejected. Was it for the best reasons, or just for politics?”

Sen. Dahm’s SB 829 would have afforded the governor sweeping new powers, forcing out 10 agency directors next Jan. 1 and allowing the governor to hire their replacements, with Senate approval.

The bill targeted the Oklahoma Health Care Authority, Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services, Board of Health, Office of Juvenile Affairs and state boards of pharmacy, medical licensure and supervision, osteopathic examiners, veterinary medical examiners, podiatric medical examiners and dentistry.

The Senate General Government Committee approved Dahm’s proposal in early March on a 5-4 vote, but he said he probably won’t push for a full Senate vote this year because the measure remains a work in progress.

Fallin’s spokesman Alex Weintz told the Associated Press the governor did not request the bill, but “has been generally supportive of any bill giving her the tools to more effectively govern the state.

“Oklahoma has more agencies and boards outside of the governor’s control than almost any other state. This makes it very difficult to achieve change or pursue improvements in state services.”

Not exactly. What the diffusion of power ensures is that governors cannot by fiat order what they think is best for Oklahoma. They must work with other elected leaders – both legislators and constitutional officeholders – and with the public to forge a consensus on important public policy matters.

It’s not a perfect system. All too often the political golden rule still prevails – he who has the gold rules. But it beats giving Fallin – or some future governor – Donald Trump-style, boardroom power to pick winners and losers or apprentices.





Why We're All Becoming Independent Contractors

BY ROBERT REICH

GM is worth around \$60 billion, and has over 200,000 employees. Its front-line workers earn from \$19 to \$28.50 an hour, with benefits.

Uber is estimated to be worth some \$40 billion, and has 850 employees. Uber also has over 163,000 drivers [as of December – the number is expected to double by June], who average \$17 an hour in Los Angeles and Washington, DC, and \$23 an hour in San Francisco and New York.

But Uber doesn't count these drivers as employees. Uber says they're "independent contractors."

What difference does it make?

For one thing, GM workers don't have to pay for the machines they use. But Uber drivers pay for their

cars – not just buying them but also their maintenance, insurance, gas, oil changes, tires, and cleaning. Subtract these costs and Uber drivers' hourly pay drops considerably.

For another, GM's employees get all the nation's labor protections.

These include Social Security, a 40-hour workweek with time-and-a-half for overtime, worker health and safety, worker's compensation if injured on the job, family and medical leave, minimum wage, pension protection, unemployment insurance, protection against racial or gender discrimination, and the right to bargain collectively.

Not to forget ObamaCare's mandate of employer-provided healthcare.

Uber workers don't get any of these things. They're outside the labor laws.

Uber workers aren't alone. There are millions just like them, also outside the labor laws – and their ranks are growing. Most aren't even part of the new Uberized “sharing” economy.

They're franchisees, consultants, and free-lancers.

They're also construction workers, restaurant workers, truck drivers, office technicians, even workers in hair salons.

What they all have in common is they're not considered “employees” of the companies they work for. They're “independent contractors” – which puts all of them outside the labor laws, too.

The rise of “independent contractors” is the most significant legal trend in the American workforce – contributing directly to low pay, irregular hours, and job insecurity.

What makes them “independent contractors” is mainly that the companies they work for say they are. So those companies don't have to pick up the costs of having full-time employees.

But are they really “independent”? Companies can manipulate their hours and expenses to make them seem so.

It's become a race to the bottom. Once one business cuts costs by making its workers “independent contractors,” every other business in that industry has to do the same – or face shrinking profits and a dwindling share of the market.

Some workers prefer to be independent contractors because that way they get paid in cash. Or they like deciding what hours they'll work.

Mostly, though, they take these jobs because they can't find better ones. And as the race to the bottom accelerates, they have fewer and fewer alternatives.

Fortunately, there are laws against this. Unfortunately, the laws are way too vague and not well-enforced.

For example, FedEx calls its drivers independent contractors.

Yet FedEx requires them to pay for the FedEx-branded trucks they drive, as well as the FedEx uniforms they wear, and FedEx scanners they use – along with insurance, fuel, tires, oil changes, meals on the road, maintenance, and workers compensation insurance. If they get sick or need a vacation, they have to hire their own replacements. They're even required to groom themselves according to FedEx standards.

FedEx doesn't tell its drivers what hours to work, but it tells them what packages to deliver and organizes their workloads to ensure they work between 9.5 and 11 hours every working day.

If this isn't “employment,” I don't know what the word means.

In 2005, thousands of FedEx drivers in California sued the company, alleging they were in fact employees and that FedEx owed them the money they shelled out, as well as wages for all the overtime work they put in.

Last summer, a federal appeals court agreed, finding that under California law – which looks at whether a company “controls” how a job is done along with a variety of other criteria to determine the real employment relationship – the FedEx drivers were indeed employees, not independent contractors.

Does that mean Uber drivers in California are also “employees”? That case is being considered right now.

What about FedEx drivers and Uber drivers in other states? Other truck drivers? Construction workers? Hair salon workers? The list goes on.

The law is still up in the air. Which means the race to the bottom is still on.

It's absurd to wait for the courts to decide all this case-by-case. We need a simpler test for determining who's an employer and employee.

I suggest this one: Any corporation that accounts for at least 80% or more of the pay someone gets, or receives from that worker at least 20% of his or her earnings, should be presumed to be that person's “employer.”

Congress doesn't have to pass a new law to make this the test of employment. Federal agencies such as the Labor Department and the IRS have the power to do this on their own, through their rule making authority.

They should do so. Now.

We Don't Need No Stinkin' Unions

BY BOB BEARDEN

There's a memorable line from one of my favorite movies, *Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, starring Humphrey Bogart, Tim Holt and Walter Huston, when the Mexican bandits confront Bogey and his donkeys laden down with gold and proceed to let the gold dust fly away in the wind. Bogey, trying to stop them, asks to see their badges. The bandit leader replies, “We don't need no stinkin' badges!”

And in a lot of unionized workplaces that line gets paraphrased a lot. We don't need no stinkin' union. We got all we need from the union and the boss will take care of us now. We don't need the union at our work place.

Really? And why is that? Because we have great bosses. That's nice, but it has nothing to do with whether or not you have or need the presence of a union in your work place. I guess people who say that

would not be part of the 58 million Americans who, if they could, would join a union.

Unions, it seems, work against themselves, because the more they get for their members, the less their members believe they need a union in their workplace and having a great boss seems to dull the members' senses and restrict their thought processes as to how they have what they have.

Good working conditions, good pay, great benefits and a safe and secure retirement. Union? Why do we need a stinkin' union?

It's always great to have great bosses at your workplace. As long as you do, things will go well for you and the rest of the employees who work there. Things go better when the work climate includes a boss who gets it.

But the problem with that is great bosses aren't always going to be around. And when they're gone – oops! – what do you do then? No stinkin' union? Well then you step back and punt and hope for the best.

Management at whatever workplace there is has a set of work rules to go by, and if you have a union at your workplace they can and will ensure that the work rules are followed. But when there is no union then management can follow their own work rules or they can ignore them and when they do it is always at the peril of the workers.

Individually a worker can't do squat about correcting that situation, because management will only correct it if they want to and if they don't, then tough.

It has been 49 years since I became a union member and I've been a union steward/officer for 43 years and it never ceases to amaze me how many union members will say, "Oh, we got everything we want and need so now we don't need a union." Ah, yes, it might seem that way until you don't have a union and then try to make things happen by individual osmosis. Doesn't work too well. In fact, it usually doesn't work at all.

And just because you once had a union and a union contract or agreement, once you don't have that, your bosses are under no obligation to honor any previous contract or agreement you might have had when there was a union presence.

And unions do a lot more than just get you better pay, good benefits, a secure retirement and settle disputes.

The part unions do that most employees never seem to grasp is that they not only make sure management follows and enforces its own work rules, they also can and do negotiate work rules that make sense and help protect workers.

Seldom will you find a company such as Texas Instruments that takes care of its employees, has employee committees and works to ensure its employees have a safe working environment.

Laws are in place to make those things part of the workplace, but they are usually only enforced if the company does so or if there is a union in place to ensure that they do.

Yes, it is always great to have great bosses and they will take care of the people who work under them until, of course, they leave and are replaced. Then, you may get another great boss or you may not.

I carried mail in the postal service for 26 years before I went to work full-time for my local. I had a lot of bosses and even had several great bosses, a few good ones, a few so-so ones and a number of stinkers.

With the great bosses, we worked together, settled our differences and everyone was happy. With the good bosses, we most of the time worked together, often settled our differences and, for the most part, everyone was happy.

With the so-so bosses we worked together occasionally. We filed a lot of grievances and some of the workers were happy some of the time, some never were, and some only part of the time.

With the stinkers most of the workers were unhappy and productivity was lousy. I spent almost as much time in the boss's office as I did carrying mail, and the grievances piled up. And downtown settled some of them and some of them went up the line and often made it to an arbitrator. We won some and we lost some.

Do you need a union when you have a great boss? Probably not – at least not on the surface. But wait, there's more, as the old TV pitchman used to say.

What happens when you no longer have a great boss who's got your back and you have decided you don't need a union because the boss is so good to you? Then they leave and you get a boss who doesn't care about having your back, just about the numbers? Then, well, then you're just fresh out of luck.

Good luck with being able to have a work environment that doesn't suck!

Unions are the most democratic of institutions in America. But unions are only as good as their members.

Unless members realize that without unions they have only the say that management wants them to have, they will only be lucky and have a great place to work when they have a great boss. When that boss leaves or starts getting pushed around by those above them and they have a come-to-Jesus moment in which they have to decide it's either you or their job, guess which scenario is likely?

When push comes to shove, even the best of bosses want to keep their job and will most likely do whatever it takes to keep it. If they push back, they are usually left with two choices: get with the program or get the hell out of Dodge.

Unions aren't perfect, but then neither is there really a perfect boss. Unions are necessary because management won't always do the right thing.

When you don't think you need no stinkin' union that's when you need it the most!

Bob Bearden is a trustee of the Central Oklahoma Labor Federation, secretary of the Oklahoma State Association of Letter Carriers, and a 49-year union member.

The Way We Word

BY RICHARD LEDERER

Irecently illuminated old expressions that have become obsolete because of the inexorable march of technology. These phrases included don't touch that dial, carbon copy, you sound like a broken record and hung out to dry. A bevy of readers asked me to shine light on more faded words and expressions, and I am happy to oblige:

Back in the olden days we had a lot of moxie. We'd put on our best bib and tucker and straighten up and fly right. Hubba-hubba! We'd cut a rug in some juke joint and then go necking and petting and smooching and spooning and billing and cooing and pitching woo in hot rods and jalopies in some passion pit or lovers' lane. Heavens to Betsy! Gee whillikers! Jumpin' Jehoshaphat! Holy moley! We were in like Flynn and living the life of Riley, and even a regular guy couldn't accuse us of being a knucklehead, a nincompoop or a pill. Not for all the tea in China!

Back in the olden days, life used to be swell, but when's the last time anything was swell? Swell has gone the way of beehives, pageboys and the D.A.; of spats, knickers, fedoras, poodle skirts, saddle shoes and pedal pushers. Oh, my aching back. Kilroy was here, but he isn't anymore.

Like Washington Irving's Rip Van Winkle and Kurt Vonnegut's Billy Pilgrim, we have become unstuck in time. We wake up from what surely has been just a short nap, and before we can say, "I'll be a monkey's uncle!" or "This is a fine kettle of fish!" we discover that the words we grew up with, the words that seemed omnipresent as oxygen, have vanished with scarcely a notice from our tongues and our pens and our keyboards.

Poof, poof, poof go the words of our youth, the words we've left behind. We blink, and they're gone,

evanesced from the landscape and wordscape of our perception, like Mickey Mouse wristwatches, hula hoops, skate keys, candy cigarettes, little wax bottles of colored sugar water and an organ grinder's monkey.

Where have all those phrases gone? Long time passing. Where have all those phrases gone? Long time ago: Pshaw. The milkman did it. Think about the starving Armenians. Bigger than a bread box. Banned in Boston. The very idea! It's your nickel. Don't forget to pull the chain. Knee high to a grasshopper. Turn-of-the-century. Iron curtain. Domino theory. Fail safe. Civil defense. Fiddlesticks! You look like the wreck of the Hesperus. Cooties. Going like sixty. I'll see you in the funny papers. Don't take any wooden nickels. Heavens to Murgatroyd! And awa-a-ay we go!

Oh, my stars and garters! It turns out there are more of these lost words and expressions than Carter had liver pills.

This can be disturbing stuff, this winking out of the words of our youth, these words that lodge in our heart's deep core. But just as one never steps into the same river twice, one cannot step into the same language twice. Even as one enters, words are swept downstream into the past, forever making a different river.

We of a certain age have been blessed to live in changeful times. For a child each new word is like a shiny toy, a toy that has no age. We at the other end of the chronological arc have the advantage of remembering there are words that once did not exist and there were words that once strutted their hour upon the earthly stage and now are heard no more, except in our collective memory. It's one of the greatest advantages of aging. We can have archaic and eat it, too.

Senior Personals

You can say what you want about Florida, but you never hear of anyone retiring and moving north. These are actual ads seen in The Villages Florida newspaper.

MINT CONDITION: Male, 1932 model, high mileage, good condition, some hair, many new parts including hip, knee, cornea, valves. Isn't in running condition, but walks well.

FOXY LADY: Sexy, fashion-conscious blue-haired beauty, 80's, slim, 5'4" [used to be 5'6"]. Searching for sharp-looking, sharp-dressing companion. Matching white shoes and belt a plus.

LONG-TERM COMMITMENT: Recent widow who has just buried fourth husband, looking for someone to round out a six-unit plot. Dizziness, faint-

ing, shortness of breath not a problem.

SERENITY NOW: I am into solitude, long walks, sunrises, the ocean, yoga and meditation. If you are the silent type, let's get together, take our hearing aids out and enjoy quiet times.

BEATLES OR STONES? I still like to rock, still like to cruise in my Camaro on Saturday nights and still like to play the guitar. If you were a groovy chick, or are now a groovy hen, let's get together and listen to my eight-track tapes.

MEMORIES: I can usually remember Monday through Thursday. If you can remember Friday, Saturday and Sunday, let's put our two heads together.

- Thanks to Glenn Hightower for sharing.



Black Men Were Burned Alive In The Bible Belt

BY BILL MOYERS

They burned him alive in an iron cage, and as he screamed and writhed in the agony of hell they made a sport of his death.

After listening to one newscast after another rightly condemn the barbaric killing of that Jordanian air force pilot at the bloody hands of ISIS, I couldn't sleep. My mind kept roaming the past trying to retrieve a vaguely remembered photograph that I had seen long ago in the archives of a college library in Texas.

Suddenly, around two in the morning, the image materialized in my head. I made my way down the hall to my computer and typed in: "Waco, Texas. Lynching."

Sure enough, there it was: the charred corpse of a young black man, tied to a blistered tree in the heart

of the Texas Bible Belt. Next to the burned body, young white men can be seen smiling and grinning, seemingly jubilant at their front-row seats in a carnival of death. One of them sent a picture postcard home: "This is the barbeque we had last night. My picture is to the left with a cross over it. Your son, Joe."

The victim's name was Jesse Washington. The year was 1916. America would soon go to war in Europe "to make the world safe for democracy." My father was 12, my mother eight. I was born 18 years later, at a time, I would come to learn, when local white folks still talked about Washington's execution as if it were only yesterday. This was not medieval Europe. Not the Inquisition. Not a heretic burned at the stake by some ecclesiastical authority in the Old World. This

was Texas, and the white people in that photograph were farmers, laborers, shopkeepers, some of them respectable congregants from local churches in and around the growing town of Waco.

Here is the photograph. Take a good look at Jesse Washington's stiffened body tied to the tree. He had been sentenced to death for the murder of a white woman. No witnesses saw the crime; he allegedly confessed but the truth of the allegations would never be tested. The grand jury took just four minutes to return a guilty verdict, but there was no appeal, no review, no prison time. Instead, a courtroom mob



dragged him outside, pinned him to the ground, and cut off his testicles. A bonfire was quickly built and lit. For two hours, Jesse Washington – alive – was raised and lowered over the flames. Again and again. City officials and police stood by, approvingly. According to some estimates, the crowd grew to as many as 15,000. There were taunts, cheers and laughter. Reporters described hearing “shouts of delight.”

When the flames died away, Washington's body was torn apart and the pieces were sold as souvenirs. The party was over.

Many years later, as a young man, I visited Waco's Baylor University, often referred to as the Texas Baptist Vatican. I had been offered a teaching position there. I sat for a while in the school's Armstrong Browning Library, one of the most beautiful in America, containing not only the works of Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, the acclaimed Victorian poets, but also stained glass windows, marble columns, and elegant ceilings that bring to mind the gorgeous interior of Michelangelo's Laurentian library in Florence.

Sitting there, I found it hard to reconcile the beauty and quiet of that sanctuary with the photograph that I had been shown earlier by a man named Harry Provence, publisher of the local newspaper. Seeing it, I realized that as young Jesse Washington was being tortured, students his own age, some of them studying for the ministry, were just finishing their spring semester. In 1905, when another black man had been lynched in Waco, Baylor's president became a leader of the anti-lynching movement. But ugly memories still divided the town.

Jesse Washington was just one black man to die

horribly at the hands of white death squads. Between 1882 and 1968 – 1968! – there were 4,743 recorded lynchings in the U.S. About a quarter of them were white people, many of whom had been killed for sympathizing with black folks. My father, who was born in 1904 near Paris, TX, kept in a drawer that newspaper photograph from back when he was a boy of thousands of people gathered as if at a picnic to feast on the torture and hanging of a black man in the center of town. On a journey tracing our roots many years later, my father choked and grew silent as we stood near the spot where it had happened.

Yes, it was hard to get back to sleep the night we heard the news of the Jordanian pilot's horrendous end. ISIS be damned! I thought. But with the next breath I could only think that our own barbarians did not have to wait at any gate. They were insiders. Home grown. Godly. Our neighbors, friends, and kin. People like us.

© Reader Supported News

Nearly 4,000 African Americans were victims of “racial terror lynchings” in the South between 1877 and 1950, according to a new report by the Equal Justice Initiative. In all, EJI documented 3,959 lynchings of black people in 12 Southern states – at least 700 more than previously reported. More than half of the lynching victims were killed under accusation of committing murder or rape against white victims. “Of the hundreds of black people lynched under accusation of rape and murder, nearly all were killed without being legally convicted,” says the report.

© Alternet



Koch Party

Shouldn't America have at least one major party that isn't beholden to the corporate elite?

Well don't look now, but such a party has recently popped up, raring to roar into the 2016 presidential race. Called the KBParty, it has the funding, political network and expertise needed to bypass the establishment's control of the election system. But don't rush to sign up: KB stands for Koch Brothers.

Yes, Charlie and David – the multimillionaire, far-out, right-wing industrial barons who already own several congress critters, governors, political think tanks, PR outfits, academics, astroturf campaign machines, front groups, etc. – now have the equivalent of their very own, private political party.

And their party is not beholden to the corporate elite, since it is the elite. The Koch boys have rallied roughly 300 like-minded, superrich corporate oligarchs to their brotherhood of plutocrats, and this clique is intent on purchasing a president and congressional majority to impose their version of corporate rule over America.

Won't that be awfully pricey, you ask? Ha – that's not a question that acquisitive billionaires ever ask. For starters, at a secretive retreat in January for KBParty funders, the 300 barons ponied up some \$900 million for the campaign they are launching. That's nearly \$200 million more than the combined expenditures of the Republican and Democratic parties in last year's elections, and it's way more than either of those parties will have for 2016.

This means that, in our nation of 350 million people, a cabal of only 300 of America's wealthiest, self-serving corporatists will wield predominate power over the elections. This tiny club will have the wherewithal to narrow the choice of candidates presented to the rest of us, the range of policy ideas that are proposed to voters, the overall tone of the campaign year, and – most important – the governing agenda of those who get elected.

The KBParty of Plutocratic Rule is brought to you by the Supreme Court's disastrous Citizens United edict. After the court's 2010 democracy-mugging decree that corporations would henceforth be allowed to dump unlimited amounts of their shareholders'

money into our election campaigns, a guy named Larry sent a hot email to me that perfectly summed up what had just been done to us: "Big money has plucked our eagle!"

The black-robed corporatists' freakish Citizens United ruling has already let the KBParty amass their unprecedented electioneering fund, setting them up as the Godfathers of tea party Republicanism. Supposedly proud candidates for governor, Congress and even such presidential wannabes as Ted Cruz, Rand Paul, Marco Rubio and Scott Walker are shamelessly scurrying to the money throne to kiss the Koch ring, do a song-and-dance, grovel and pledge fealty to the brotherhood's extremist plutocratic agenda.

But big money is plucking our eagle not only because it corrupts candidates but also because it is used to deny crucial information to voters and greatly diminish their participation in what has become a farce.

First of all, the biggest chunk of cash spent by the KBParty will go right into a mindboggling squall of television ads, none of which will explain who they're for and why. Rather, they will be nauseatingly negative attack ads, brimming with optical trickery and outright lies to trash the candidates they're against. Worse, voters will not even be informed that the garbage they're watching is paid for by the Koch cabal, since another little favor the Supreme Court granted to the corporate plutocrats is that they can run secret campaigns, using their front groups as screens to keep voters from knowing what special interests are behind the ads – and why.

We saw the impact of secret, unrestricted corporate money in last year's midterm elections. It produced a blight of negativity, a failure of the system to address the people's real needs, an upchuck factor that kept nearly two-thirds of the people from voting, and a rising alienation of the many from the political process and government owned by the few. The Koch machine spent about \$400 million to get those results. This time, they'll spend more than twice that.

To help ban the corporate cash that's clogging America's democratic process and killing our people's right to self-government, go to www.Democracy-IsForPeople.org.

Aetna: Idealism In Action

BY JIM HIGHTOWER

Business schools and Wall Street banks preach a strict, anti-social doctrine of corporate management that comes down to this: CEO's must be idiots.

By that I mean the original Greek word "idiotes," which applied to people who care only about themselves and the prosperity of their immediate family, rejecting any responsibility to the larger society, civic affairs and the common good.

That selfish ethos is what prevails in today's corporate suites, where it's claimed that the only responsibility of executives is to maximize profits for the "family" – i.e., themselves and major shareholders. Idiotes are free to stiff workers, sidestep environmental rules, shaft consumers, etc.

But now comes an apostate to this doctrinal absolutism, asserting that corporate chiefs ought to jack-up the minimum wage to a level approaching minimal fairness. Mark Bertolini, corporate chief of Aetna, is this iconoclast, and he's not talking about \$9 or \$10 an hour, nor is he waiting on Congress – he took direct action, lifting Aetna's lowest wage to \$16, plus improved health benefits.

Beginning in April, some 6,000 Aetna employees – mostly working in customer-service and billing jobs – will find a boost of up to one-third in their paychecks. But wait, there's more! Aetna is also adjusting its company health plan so about 7,000 lower-income workers can get the same health coverage they now have, but pay some \$4,000 a year less for it.

Can you believe it? A health insurance break from an insurance company!

Like me, you're probably looking for the loophole in this deal. But, lo and behold, it seems to be on the up and up. Bertolini cast it as a common-sense business move – noting that paying fairer wages and benefits lifts morale, attracts more top-notch employees and helps reduce the \$120 million a year in costs that Aetna now shells out because of high employee turnover. It's true that all of these benefits will flow to the corporation, but there's also a deeper element of egalitarian idealism in Bertolini's moves.

"It's about the whole social compact," says this rare CEO.

He also later said at a J.P. Morgan conference that it's "really about inspiring our employees and paying it forward." Bertolini has also asked all Aetna

executives to read Thomas Piketty's landmark book, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, on the escalating price our society is paying for today's ever-widening economic inequality.

The chieftain even did the unthinkable by publicly revealing that these increases are not actually financially painful for corporations – total cost to Aetna will be about \$26 million a year – nothing for a giant with annual revenues of \$62 billion. The only pain Bertolini might feel is loneliness when he enters the CEO Club and sees other insurance chieftains turn their backs, shunning his leadership on the moral matter of shared prosperity.

CEOs of Humana, Anthem and other insurers say "NO" to raises, sniffing that they pay "competitive wages" – which is just a dishonest way of saying "low wages." "I don't think we're going to go where Aetna has gone to," said Humana CEO Bruce Broussard.

The most amazing thing about Bertolini's decision to invest in workers – and instill even a smidgen of democratic ethics in a corporate structure – is that it's considered amazing. After all, basic fairness is a core value that we're taught from the time we're toddlers.

As Aetna's chief puts it to the CEO class, "Why can't private industry step forward ... to do this?"

But whether those idiots like it or not, Aetna just lifted our national standard for competitive wages. Moreover, it has thrown open the doors of the executive suites to an honest public conversation about the morality of those inside jacking up their pay while holding down everyone else.

Courting Terror One Teenager At A Time

BY SUSAN ESTRICH

When I was 15, my mother let me take the bus to Lynn, a small city about five miles from our house and two blocks from my father's office. I was pretty pleased with myself because otherwise my independence was limited entirely by my leg strength.

This week, three girls that age – Amira Abase, 15, Shamima Begum, 15, and Kadiza Sultana, 16 – allegedly took a different kind of odyssey, buying tickets from London to Istanbul in what appears to be a successful attempt to cross over into Syria and join the radical terror group ISIS. The governments are fighting with each other about how this could happen, who knew what when, and the like. My question is simple: Why?

Babies aren't born to hate. If anything, as a mother, I would say there is an inherent sweetness in babies that touches our souls. Kids can be rough, but that's the stuff of bruises and broken bones, not terrorism and mass destruction.

How is it that these three young women, none of whom are from extremist homes, ended up on this perilous, dangerous journey?

News reports, of course, say it's the Internet. It's the Internet where young people gather to discuss ideas and presumably spout ideology. But we all know that much of what appears on the Internet bears no relationship to truth.

That's where parents come in. When I was raising my kids, there was a popular ethos that anything a child had to say had "value," that it was meaningful, that it was worthy of discussion.

You weren't supposed to just say "no"; you were supposed to discuss why "no" was a better answer. I'm sure I made these mistakes many times myself.

With the advent of the Internet, it is possible to sit at a table of four people, none of whom ever speak to each other, all faces buried in their smartphones. Some families eat this way.

If the Internet is going to scream lies, and it is, then parents have a responsibility to counter with truth.

Little kids, little problems; big kids, big problems. Changing a diaper is easy. Getting your teenager to talk seriously is hard. I do not know these parents, and my sympathy goes out to them and to their family.

But for the rest of us, it's a stark warning that even though your kids know more about how to operate within the Internet technically, that doesn't mean they have the mature judgment to discern what is worth listening to and what is rubbish.

The First Amendment, with limited exceptions, prohibits the government from blocking communications. We like to believe that in the marketplace of ideas, the good ideas will triumph. But that's an ideal, not an answer to ISIS.

Some estimates say that around 3,400 people from Western countries have left their homes in an attempt to join ISIS, and approximately 150 of them are from the United States. This week the focus is on three girls from England. Next week, who knows?

In the meantime, every one of us should be as engaged with our own children about their political views, their angers and their frustrations as the clever and sophisticated ISIS recruiters they meet online are.

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The Smart Brother?

BY JOE CONASON

Being singled out as "the smart brother" in an American political and financial dynasty like the Bush family must be a heavy load. But Jeb Bush went far to dispel that burdensome description with his debut address on foreign policy.

With its melange of mispronunciations, mistakes and casually ignorant utterances, Bush's speech before the Chicago Council on Global Affairs instantly reminded listeners of the not-so-smart brother – the one who already became the second Bush president.

Such moments of recognition and remembrance are not auspicious for brother Jeb, whose burgeoning presidential ambition depends on persuading voters that he is emphatically not his brother George W. – or as he put it in an ad-libbed line: "I am my own man."

But his Chicago outing offered little to reassure Americans wary of the ruinous foreign policy record of the Bush-Cheney administration [an electoral subset that includes almost everyone].

Let's start with the funny parts: Hoping, presumably, to move briskly past a certain disastrous trillion-dollar war, Jeb allowed that "mistakes were made in Iraq, for sure," a remark so vague that even his brother, who once used a similar dodge in discussing torture at Abu Ghraib, would have to agree.

Striving to demonstrate his familiarity with the new

terror threats encircling the globe, he mentioned the Nigerian Islamist militants who call themselves "Boko Haram," except he called them something that sounded a lot like "Beaucoup Haram."

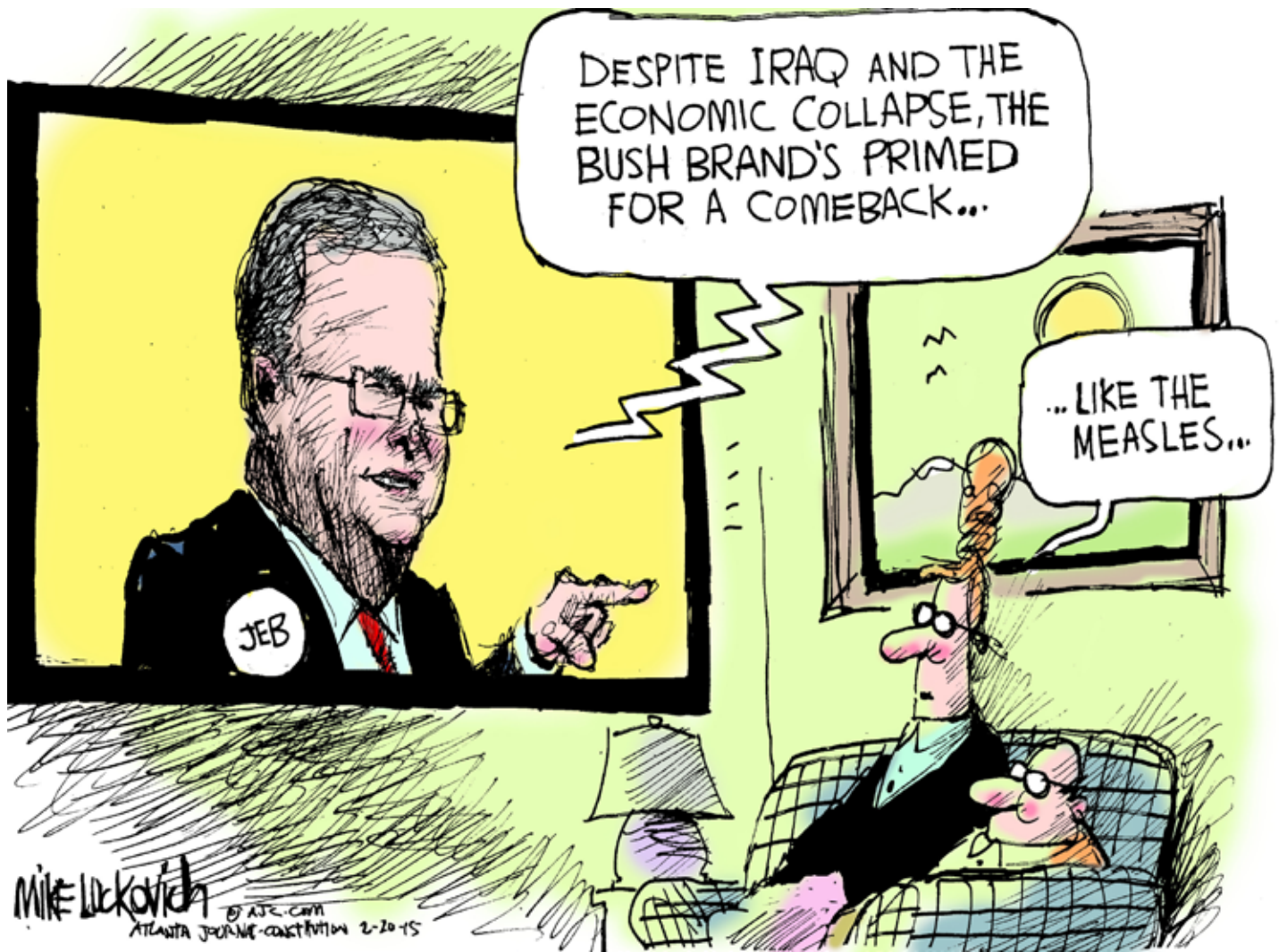
Speaking of ISIS, the Syrian terrorist movement, he referred to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as "the guy that's the supreme leader or whatever his new title is – head of the caliphate."

Overstating the military manpower of ISIS by a factor of 10, he said the group has 200,000 men under arms, when U.S. intelligence estimates no more than 20,000. [Before his spokesperson corrected that gaffe, it sounded as if he meant to instill fear with a mythical intelligence estimate – yet another *deja vu* moment.]

At another point, he confused Iraq with Iran, a mistake anybody can make – and in this instance, a metaphor for his brother's failed war, which vastly increased Iranian political, economic and military influence over Iraq.

What Bush failed to provide were specific policy ideas, sticking instead with platitudes about "strength" and "leadership."

Explaining how he would deal with ISIS, the former Florida governor kept it very simple: "We have to develop a strategy, that's global, that takes them out. First, the strategy, you know, needs to be restrain



them, tighten the noose, and then taking them out is the strategy.” Not much there for the Pentagon or the State Department, but at least he didn’t call it “strategy.”

The problem facing Jeb Bush is that to prove he is his own man in full, he must somehow erase many of his own previous positions and remarks.

Appearing on CNN in 2010, Jeb said of Dubya, “I have never disagreed with him ... till death do us part.” Speaking about Iraq three years later, he claimed, “The war has wound down now and it’s still way too early to judge what successes it had in providing some degree of stability in the region” [a statement that can only provoke bitter laughter today].

“During incredibly challenging times, he kept us safe,” he said in praise of Dubya at the 2012 Republican convention, as if 9/11 and that fateful Presidential Daily Briefing had never happened.

There are other clues to his policy predilections. For his entire career, Jeb has blindly advocated the Cuba sanctions policy that we have finally abandoned after 50 years of failure. That advocacy included a disgraceful episode in which he sought clemency from

his presidential father for a bloody anti-Castro terrorist pursued by the U.S. Justice Department.

In keeping with that same foolishness was his early backing of the Project for the New American Century, or PNAC, pulled together in 1997 by William Kristol, the Washington pundit best known for being wrong about everything – in particular the costs, difficulties and results of invading Iraq.

As the chief publicist for that war, Kristol told us it would be easy, cheap and hugely successful. Dubya believed him and evidently so did Jeb.

That is an old story – but the putative Republican frontrunner recently released a list of his foreign policy advisors, which bizarrely features Paul Wolfowitz, Dubya’s deputy defense secretary and another PNAC enthusiast.

Jeb’s campaign is proudly displaying the same old gang of advisors who turned the last Republican administration into wreckage.

Maybe Jeb really is the smart brother. So far, however, he shows no sign of being smart enough to avoid that other brother’s devastating mistakes.

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Arise, Daily Show Generation! *Your Nation Beckons*

BY MARK MORFORD

The clarion has been sounded. The Grand Shift is nigh. And you are just about ready.

I'm speaking to you, children born and adults who came of age on or about, oh, January of 1999, just before Y2K obliterated humanity and right around the launch of your generation's best and brightest engine of intelligent discord and sardonic resistance: The Daily Show with Jon Stewart.

Most of you are now what, about 16, 17 maybe? Just starting to feel the pangs of wild lust and feral curiosity, just noticing how vicious and dishonest are the various injustices of the world, realizing with a fast horror how your elders screwed up the planet even worse than the generation prior and if you want to make it to 30 you'd better wake the hell up and

step fearlessly into the fray, stat?

You are not alone.

If you were extraordinarily blessed, your parents did what millions of other awesome, like-minded parents did: they planted you right alongside them, four nights a week, from the day you were born, to absorb from Stewart and his roguish crew the essential skills required to navigate – or often, just tolerate – the modern madhouse we call life: wit, skepticism, thoughtfulness, self-deprecation, razor-sharp intelligence, a fearless gift for speaking truth to [often shockingly dumb] power, droll exasperation and, of course, joyfully mocking Fox News at every opportunity.

You see, Stewart, who recently announced his re-

tirement from the persistently brilliant, amazingly consistent, 18 Emmy-winning show he created from the fumes of Craig Kilborn's tacky pop culture-fest back in '99, is not merely signaling the end of an era with his retirement.

He is not merely making millions of fans weep and wonder who could possibly take his place [Amy Schumer please, please, please]. He's actually declaring you, the generation raised on his show's rare and sort of heroic cultural and political insight, fit for duty.

See, Stewart has been hosting TDS for nearly 17 years. That's a generation. That's your teenage niece who's never known a world without the Daily Show to help make it more bearable. That's millions of 30- and 40-something parents who may, in fact, have conceived their kids during one of TDS' early airings. Hey, what were you doing in 2001? Exactly. Same as me: Having lots of sex and freaking out over this dumbass Bush guy.

Rest assured: There will be [and already is] much mourning and hand-wringing over Stewart's imminent departure later this year. There will be analysis, retrospectives, best-of lists, clips of his most hilarious quotes, takedowns and eye-rolls. Not to mention all the other careers TDS helped launched [Carrell, Colbert, John Oliver, et al]. There will be repeated attention to Stewart's famous appearance on Crossfire, perhaps the most perfect summation of his anti-ideology to date.

But through it all, the realization that, if Stewart's smart, sly satire seeped into your soul and your brainstem just right, you have no excuse not to make the leap from surly, disaffected youth – or jaded 20-something – to sly warrior of middle-finger righteousness,

ready to take on the culture's staggering demons of apathy and humorlessness.

And oh, those demons. They are enormous, and they are pungent.

Here's the bad news, Daily Show Generation: There's another, far larger [but much, much dumber] segment of the population out there, a quivering army of twerp-dom that's been raised on the exact opposite of Stewart's sly wit and acumen. This group has been tricked, drowned and pummeled by a much nastier voice of ignominy, racism and outright bulls–t, a voice which began only a few years prior to TDS, in 1996. You may know it as Fox News, AKA the Death Star.

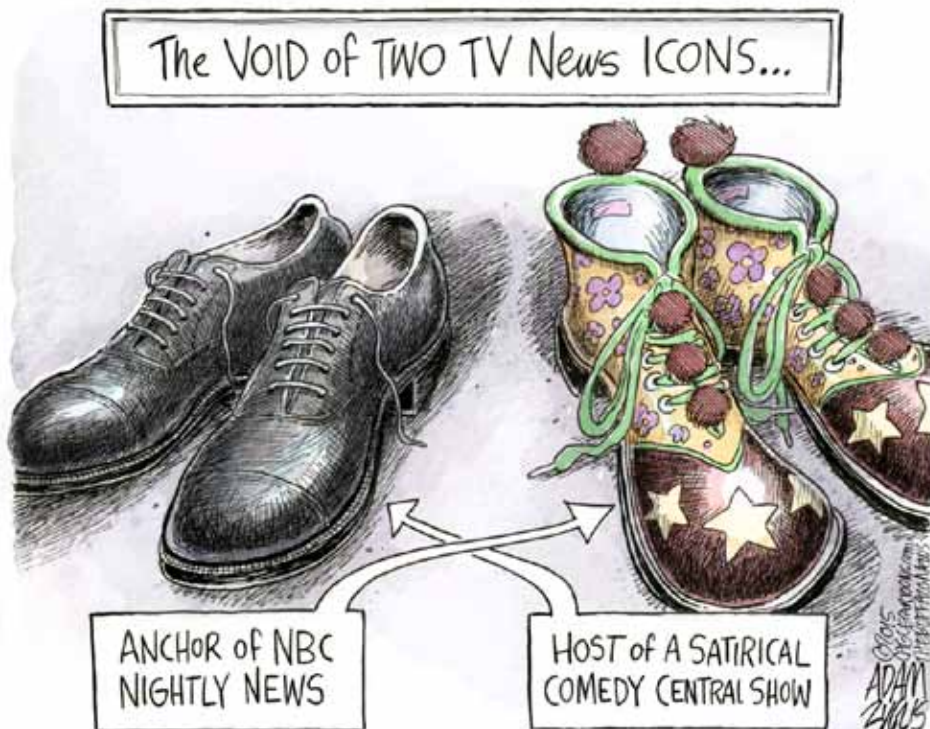
While Fox News' Army of Dumb is indeed much larger, it's also unable to form complete sentences, much less comprehend them. This is, as Stewart taught every single night, your secret weapon. It takes but a few minutes of research, a nimble mind, an untiring sense of humor and a well-honed BS-detector to reduce that bloviated demon to its original state of quivering, terrified termite dung.

Of course, it won't just be Fox News. It will be CNN. It will be MSNBC. It will be Republicans and Democrats alike, and the Tea Party, and anti-abortionists, and sexist white males, and rape culture, and the vile Koch brothers, Big Pharma and immigration and gun control and President Hillary, too, ad nauseam and on into the Void.

This is why you are so very needed. The fight is ongoing, endlessly worthy and ever in need of fresh energy. And, with a wink and a giant shrug, Stewart is hereby handing the power to you.

Time to get moving, no?

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Big Lies, Little Lies And Brian Williams

BY JOE CONASON

The harshest penalties usually tend to be brutal, vengeful and excessive – even when the offender is a celebrity journalist like Brian Williams. Suspended without pay from his post as the NBC Nightly News anchor for six months, Wil-

When Will Fox Fire Bill O'Reilly For Lying About Combat Duty?

Conservatives tenaciously sunk their fangs into the juicy scandal engulfing NBC News anchor Brian Williams. The fact that he admitted [and apologized for] some false statements he made several years ago regarding his experiences covering the war in Iraq is troubling and particularly so for people who make their living on their reputation for honesty.

However, the degree to which the right has gone overboard with their overt hostility is a spectacle that is worth watching for the sheer entertainment value. Although it's not as if they wouldn't be showering their hatred on Williams and the rest of the so-called "lamestream" media even if there weren't some budding scandal. For its part, Fox News has been exhibiting a Benghazi-like obsession with relentless coverage of the story.

What's missing from all of this is any sense of perspective or context. Has Fox given equal time to the false assertions by their own Geraldo Rivera who excused his lies as being the fault of the "fog of war?" Of course not. Neither do they make a distinction between the lies advanced by mis-remembering a distant event in the past in order to enhance one's own personal image, and the lies perpetrated deliberately by national leaders [i.e. George Bush, Dick Cheney, etc.] that resulted in the violent deaths of thousands of American soldiers and hundreds of thousands of innocent, non-combatant Iraqis.

Nearly every discussion about Williams in the Conservative Media Circus includes outright demands for his termination. Never mind that the false statements made over a decade ago were not made during a newscast or presented as part of his duties as a journalist. The wingnut brigade wants Williams fired for having said some things on David Letterman's late-night comedy program.

Well, if that's the standard they are embracing, then let them apply it to Bill O'Reilly as well. Back in 2006, O'Reilly took an extended book promotion tour to Kuwait where he visited with

soldiers and signed copies of his book. Reports at the time described how "servicemembers asked O'Reilly about his own tour of duty in Kuwait during Desert Storm." That might have been an interesting story except for the fact that O'Reilly never did a tour of duty in Kuwait during Desert Storm, or anywhere else since he never served in the military at all.

More recently, O'Reilly told his radio listeners about how he would have coaxed information out of an enemy soldier based on his personal experiences in combat:

"I tell you what, I've been in combat. I've seen it. I've been close to it. And if my unit is in danger and I got a captured guy and the guy knows where the enemy is and I'm looking him in the eye, the guy better tell me. That's all I'm gonna tell you. If it's life or death, he's going first."

As noted above, and contrary to his statement, O'Reilly has never been in combat. Consequently, he has never commanded a unit or had to contemplate how he would deal with an enemy prisoner. His pretend bluster and machismo is all just a bunch of fantasizing of himself as a hero. So how is that any different than the offenses for which Williams is being pilloried?

There are, however, some very real differences between Williams and O'Reilly. Williams has been found to be less than truthful on this one occasion. O'Reilly has lied repeatedly over his career at Fox News with plenty of documentation to prove it. What's more, O'Reilly has demonstrated himself to be an arrogant, rude, bully who shoves his usually inane opinions down the throats of his guests and his viewers. That's something that cannot be attributed to Williams.

So if anyone should lose their job over any of this, it would be most advantageous to the television viewing audience, and to society in general, if it is O'Reilly. But don't count on Fox News to do the right thing. It would be against everything they hold dear.

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Williams may be facing the end of his career in television news, which would be roughly equivalent to capital punishment.

Williams is in the public dock for telling a false story about his experiences covering the American invasion of Iraq; the disclosure humiliated him, his

colleagues and his network when exposed. For the time being, at least, he has lost the trust of many in his audience.

Enforced absence from the job he loves – and wanted all his life – is a sanction that will sting far more than the barbed jokes, ugly headlines and lost mil-

lions in salary. Off air, he may find time to engage in serious introspection, issue a forthright apology and hope for redemption.

Troubling as his transgression was, I nevertheless hope for his redemption, too.

No doubt my sympathy is spurred by the fact that I have known Williams for a long time, not as a friend or even a newsroom colleague, but as a frequent guest on a nightly cable news show he hosted and, years later, as the author of a magazine profile of him.

What I encountered then was a witty and unassuming guy from south Jersey who kept many of the same friends he had 30 years ago; an exceptionally hardworking correspondent who took reporting seriously; a history buff who avidly consumed books and newspapers to broaden his knowledge; and a dedicated professional who cherished the anchor position as a trust handed down across generations.

He always knew how lucky he was, and he certainly knows how badly he has stumbled. Whether he eventually can regain what he has lost is a matter for him and the suits at NBC to sort out. Inevitably, their calculations will include commercial as well as journalistic values – and a thorough report by the network's own investigative unit.

While that process unfolds, however, he deserves a few words of defense against the eager mob of executioners now swinging the ax with such gusto.

It is ironic, to put it very mildly, that more than a decade after the Iraq invasion, which resulted from official and journalistic deceptions on a vast scale, the only individual deemed worthy of punishment is a TV newsman who inflated a war story on a talk show. And it is irritating, too, that so many of the NBC anchor's harshest critics are heard on Fox News Channel, where lying is a way of life, as Leonard Pitts Jr., noted recently.

To recall just one especially pertinent example: Fox host Sean Hannity, who now demands Williams' head on a stick, repeatedly told TV and radio audiences that "every penny" from his Freedom Alliance concerts would benefit the children of deceased veterans. It was a lie, because huge amounts of the proceeds were squandered on "conferences" and other dubious expenses. But Hannity got away with it because he evidently hadn't violated any laws.

All the wing nuts ceaselessly barking about how Williams betrayed the vets could not have cared less.

Indeed, it is puzzling that Williams has excited so much frothing anger on the right, where lying and deception are routinely excused, especially about military service. [George W. Bush prevaricated blatantly about his brief stint in the Texas Air National Guard, and Ronald Reagan lied about "liberating" a Nazi death camp – but nobody on the right cared much about that, ei-

ther.]

If anything, Williams is resolutely nonpartisan, and when I profiled him in 2008, he seemed slightly more enthusiastic about John McCain than Barack Obama. The son of a World War II Army captain, he idolized his father and has always venerated Americans in uniform – which may help to explain, along with a muddled memory and an apparent urge to embellish, how he fell into this current difficulty.

So far as anyone has determined, Williams is not guilty of the ultimate crime, which would be filing a false news report. His exaggerations all seem to have occurred on platforms other than Nightly News.

Widely repeated accusations by a far-right blogger that he puffed his award-winning Hurricane Katrina coverage with anecdotes about flooding and floating bodies remain unproven – and there is persuasive evidence supporting his remarks.

It was during Katrina's aftermath that Williams memorably demonstrated how well he does his work. Vanity Fair was not alone in praising his performance, noting that he "exhibited unfaltering composure, compassion, and grit," the culmination of decades in broadcast journalism.

Today's anchors are overpaid superstars, fighting for attention in a world no longer dominated by network news, but none of that is his fault. And in contrast to many of the charming faces on television news programs, he is an actual journalist with a long record of unblemished reporting.

So unless something worse emerges from NBC's investigation, I share the view of Joe Summerlin, one of the brave veterans who really did survive that Chinook shoot-down in 2003, and publicly refuted Williams' Iraq tale. His wording wasn't generous, but his attitude is.

"Everyone tells lies," the war veteran told the New York Times. "Every single one of us. The issue isn't whether or not you lie. It is how you deal with it once you are caught.

"I thank you for stepping down for a few nights, Mr. Williams. Now can you admit that you didn't 'misremember' and perform a real apology? I might even buy you a beer."

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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

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Submission And Surrender

AGE OF ACQUIESCENCE

The Life and Death of American Resistance to Organized Wealth and Power
By Steve Fraser
Little, Brown
480 pages, \$28

BY JON WIENER

Remember Occupy Wall Street? Steve Fraser does – he opens his book on our current state of popular political paralysis by recalling the “millions of ‘occupiers’ in a thousand cities” who in fall 2011 chanted, “We are the 99%.”

His question is not what Occupy wanted or why it disappeared so completely after its brief flowering; instead he asks why it didn’t start sooner – why it came three years after the Great Recession of October 2008, why popular resistance to Wall Street’s “greed and arrogance,” “incompetence and larceny” took so long to develop.

For Fraser, who has written award-winning books on labor and American politics, Occupy Wall Street is the exception that proves the rule: we live in an “age of acquiescence,” marked by an absence of organized popular challenge to economic inequalities and exploitation.

Republicans condemn Obama for “class warfare,” but the charge is laughable if you know anything about the American past.

Fraser does know a lot about that – his purpose here first of all is to recall the way class warfare was commonplace in America from the 1790s through the 1930s. He focuses especially on the Gilded Age that followed the Civil War, when the plutocracy was challenged regularly and revolt was in the air. He brings those decades to life with wonderfully vivid writing and rich historical detail.

In New York City in 1874, for example, unemployed women and their children marched on City Hall demanding “Bread or Blood.” Police on horseback attacked and dispersed the marchers, and the police commissioner called the assault “the most glorious sight I ever saw.”

Fraser comments that the local elite was fearful of a version of the Paris commune three years earlier, of “Amazonian women, their hair streaming wantonly behind them in the wind, armed with the 19th Century’s version of the Molotov cocktail, setting Paris aflame.”

The first Gilded Age occupies the first half of Fraser’s book; the second half examines our present situation, which he calls “America’s second Gilded Age.” The similarities are obvious: the reign of plutocracy, government in the hands of the bankers and the corporations, and ordinary people suffering. The differences are equally striking, however: the first Gilded Age was an era of challenge and turmoil; the second is not.

What happened? Why did people revolt then – and why do they submit now?

In the first Gilded Age, it was not hard to imagine alternatives to rule by industrial and financial capital, because that economic system was so new and strange – and thus, perhaps, only temporary. What marks the present Gilded Age is our sense of its permanence.

Fraser is particularly passionate and penetrating in his analysis of our present state of submission and surrender. His intention is not just to chronicle the change but to explain why it happened, how we got here. Thus the second half of the book is a history of America since World War II, with a particularly brilliant exploration of the ‘70s, when so much turned sour in America, when the postwar boom came to an end.

Fraser explains the economics of decline effectively. The working class may have abandoned Marxian “class struggle,” but, he says, the capitalists haven’t;

they have pretty much won the class conflict by destroying labor unions. But the problem for him goes beyond economics; the disappearance of the left-wing political imagination is his real concern. His analysis thus focuses mostly on the cultural and ideological.

He points to the distractions offered by consumer culture, "an emancipation of the imaginary and the libidinal whose thrills and dreaminess are prefabricated." Consumerism and mass media offer pleasures that are private, that take people away from the political and social and economic grievances they share with others.

He emphasizes the particular idea of "freedom" that provides the heart of Republican Party ideology: Freedom in America is the freedom to succeed through individual initiative [rather than cooperative effort]. Our heroes are the entrepreneurs, the "job creators," and the enemies of freedom are the government regulations and taxes that shackle their creativity and energy [and which otherwise might go to serve social needs and the public good].

The '60s maxim "the personal is political" meant that issues that seemed private – above all, women's oppression – were in fact widely shared and required collective action to bring change. Fraser argues that what began as a call for liberation has today become a justification for avoiding the political, for substituting personal solutions for political ones: eat organic food, drive a Prius, send your kids to charter schools.

And, finally, he points to the manipulation of fear: "state-sponsored paranoia" about terrorists who are said to be everywhere. This fear induces submission to the powers that be as our protectors whose power should not be undermined.

Of course there are some pretty big exceptions to the acquiescence he identifies: the civil rights movement, the feminist movement, the gay rights movement; and, of course, the election of a black president in 2008. The straight

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white men whose rule was unquestioned for centuries have, in the last 40 years, "acquiesced" in sharing power with women, minorities and gays. Fraser, of course, knows that, but his concern is the underlying structure of wealth and

power.

The forces he sees perpetuating the age of acquiescence seem irresistible today – but then, briefly, there was Occupy Wall Street. So you can't be sure; you never know.

© Los Angeles Times

have another view: In a 2009 Eurobarometer survey, pollsters found that surveyors rate climate change as the second most important problem facing the world today. An overwhelming number [87%] of Europeans say climate change is a “serious” or “very serious” problem.

These dueling perspectives can create a fight over the direction of how to deal with climate change. But it is not just a problem – it is a “Wicked Problem.”

MOVING FORWARD?

Madison and other framers of the Constitution gave us a means to overcome wicked problems: our political institutions. They were intentionally designed to force compromise among factions and to prevent factional strife through representatives, checks and balances, and separation of powers.

Wicked problems, such as climate change, beg for institutional direction to deal with our current divisions.

Three solutions are proposed by Department of Defense Analyst Nancy Roberts: authoritative, competitive, or collaborative.

If we as a society decide to tame climate change by vesting the solution in a few hands, the reduction in decision-makers may simplify things greatly, but such experts are not likely to properly take into consideration the range of perspectives needed to tackle the problem.

This authoritative direction is certainly in the Madisonian direction: The Environmental Protection Agency is this authority that guides the U.S. in climate change matters. Its command and control philosophy may be partly why it has struggled in implementing policy.

A competitive strategy would pit opposing viewpoints against each other. This can mean market solutions. In 2007, President George W. Bush said that while he thought climate change was a natural phenomenon and not man made, he said it was inevitable so we might as well adapt and make money off it. However, the Inhofe faction in Congress challenged even the existence of climate change, routinely stalling progress.

Competition can also come from the marketplace of ideas. While this would force differing views to confront each other to weigh the best idea, it creates confrontation where knowledge sharing will not be as forthcoming and the best solution is likely to be silenced. This means that Congress needs to find ways to start working together again and hear all sides in this pluralistic world of ours where different viewpoints clash.

A collaborative solution is where all stakeholders are part of the dialogue, but such a process is very time consuming.

Let us hope that congressional leaders listen to the American people as a whole, instead of basically focusing on their particular core constituencies, whether exclusively on the Right or the Left. Congress’ spiraling polarization is clearly turning Americans off. Through stakeholder, or citizen, engagement, Congress can be forced to govern more effectively. Congress members often look for direction – but when citizens are turned off, interest groups dominate the dialogue.

By hearing all factions, their needs, desires, how they define the problem, and their proposed solutions, we can find ways forward. Citizens need facts from all sides – and they need to educate themselves on the issues. Unfortunately, most are low information voters, distracted from complex issues that seem far off.

While factions are seated deep in us, wicked problems call for greater collaboration that institutions balance with an engaged public. While the reality of an engaged public and a collaborative Congress seems unlikely today, it is still an important goal that we need push for because citizens are the source of life in a representative democracy.

John Wood, PhD, is an assistant professor of political science at the University of Central Oklahoma and a frequent contributor to The Oklahoma Observer.



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Observations

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 2

ultimate authority over civil society. [Whose “church” is a question that never gets answered.]

Sadly, there isn’t much political will to do anything other than what has enabled Republicans to seize control of and dominate state government. Do you think for a moment the GOP’s donors will tolerate a significant change in course? They benefit the most from personal income tax cuts, from corporate tax breaks that enhance profits and socialize losses, and from policies that privatize traditional state services.

What would be in it for Gov. Mary Fallin, Senate President Brian Bingman and House Speaker Jeff Hickman, all of whom are term-limited? The House speaker and Senate president both will be forced from office after next year. The governor can’t serve beyond 2018. The next couple of years might be uncomfortable but, frankly, they’re politically bulletproof.

There is scant reason to believe statesmanship will trump spin. When Hickman says “all options are on the table,” it doesn’t really mean “all options are on the table.”

If they were, Fallin and Co. would embrace Medicaid expansion, delay the quarter-percent personal income tax cut scheduled to kick in next fiscal year, systematically review all tax breaks and incentives, and engineer serious criminal justice reform – all of which would be smart, prudent and in the best long-term interests of rank-and-file Oklahomans.

Smart Politics

Without fanfare, House Speaker Jeff Hickman recently excised a cancerous tumor on Oklahoma’s body politic: He changed the name of the States’ Rights Committee to the State and Federal Relations Committee.

It was a mostly symbolic gesture, of course. The standing committee still stands. But the change suggests Hickman is keenly aware that “States’ Rights” is a hyper-charged phrase that all too often evokes Old South bigotry and injustice.

Hickman inherited the wholly unnecessary committee from ex-Speaker T.W. Shannon, who created it as a payoff to the Republican caucus’ far right for supporting him in the 2013 speaker’s race against Hickman.

It was populated with assorted wingnuts who helped produce much comedy but little substance as they debated what they viewed as threats to Oklahoma sovereignty from United Nations’ One World Government scheming and from Chairman Obama’s socialist agenda.

Somewhere John Birch grinned ear-to-ear.

It might have stirred an uprising from Hickman’s

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right flank had he abolished the committee altogether, so he did the smart thing politically: He cut its membership in half and made sure it has only a handful of minor bills to consider.

He also kept in place a committee that confers constituent-pleasing titles on two Republican House members – a committee chair for Rep. Lewis Moore and vice chair for Rep. Dan Fisher.

One could argue, of course, that adding the new committee in 2013 was growing government – something Republicans who dominate the Legislature claim to oppose.

But Hickman, at least, responded to 21st Century sensibilities and modified the committee title so it wouldn’t give the appearance Oklahoma had again hoisted the stars and bars on the Capitol grounds.

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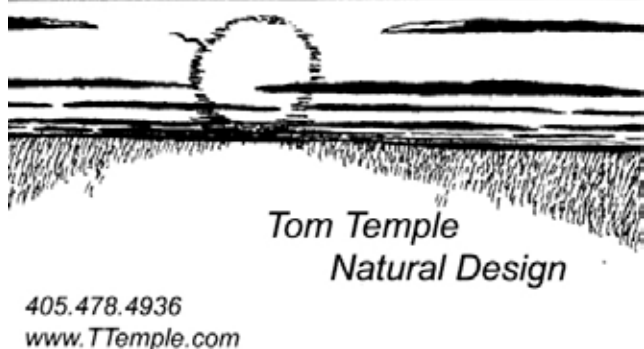
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Observerscope



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

Dart: To Sen. Anthony Sykes, R-Moore, who insists on poking around in people's bedrooms. There's little doubt who he targeted with his SB 733 requiring pre-marital blood tests for syphilis and other diseases: same-sex couples.

Attorney General Scott Pruitt is failing his clients. As he squanders tax dollars on an ideological war against the Affordable Care Act, Oklahomans are embracing ObamaCare – nearly twice as many signed up this year on the federal exchange as last, nearly 125,000.

First, Mustang schools tried to sneak in Hobby Lobby's Bible course. Now, they're offering a dubious abstinence-only course. What's next? Outlawing AP History?

Laurel: To Rep. Richard Morrisette, whose "Right To Try" bill, HB 1074, would give the terminally ill access to investigational meds not yet fully approved by FDA. Five states already allow it.

Random Fact: It takes about 2,500 licks to get to the center of a Tootsie Roll Pop, according to a New York University scientist.

Dart: To state Rep. Josh Cockroft, R-Tecumseh, pointing his 3,164 Facebook friends to his and wife Jessica's baby registry at Target and Babies R Us. He claims he was only kidding. Sure he was ... and not a single lobbyist has checked out the registries.

Attention, Republicans: 68% percent of Americans believe wealthy households pay too little in federal taxes. – AP/GfK Poll

Since 2010, ObamaCare has saved Oklahomans nearly \$191 million on health care, including an average \$925 per Medicare beneficiary in 2014 because the Part D prescription donut hole was closed. – U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

It's been a long, hard winter – and now this? Time magazine reports Girl Scout cookie shipments have been delayed because of soaring demand for thin mints.

Letters



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 4

have them do unto you ...

The tragic story about Oklahoma refusing to expand Medicaid is well known. This has left hundreds of thousands of Oklahomans without lifesaving health insurance. The tragedy continues with the attack by Oklahoma elected officials on the Affordable Care Act [they like to call it ObamaCare with a healthy dose of hatred in their voices]. The ACA gives low and middle class Americans an affordable alternative in their quest for health care coverage.

Oklahoma's "leaders" are working hard to yank coverage away from the 106,000+ Oklahomans who have already purchased 2015 coverage under the federal exchange [the same "leaders" refused to set up a state exchange]. Oklahoma's Attorney General Scott Pruitt has sued to disallow the current 106,000-plus Oklahomans covered under the ACA, from receiving tax credits, based on their income level, to reduce their monthly health care coverage premiums, and make the premiums affordable. Seventy-nine percent of Oklahomans who currently have coverage for 2015 under the federal exchange, receive an average \$208 each month to reduce their premiums.

A case out of Virginia, where the previous attorney general sued to stop the subsidies of Virginians under the federal exchange, is similar to Pruitt's lawsuit. The Virginia case is currently before the U.S. Supreme Court. The Supreme Court will decide if Oklahomans and Virginians and all affected Americans who are eligible for the subsidies under the ACA if they bought their insurance through the federal exchange, are the intended recipients of these subsidies.

The legal actions in Virginia and Oklahoma are harsh and shameful. Often these mean-spirited actions are done in the name of the Great Healer Jesus Christ. Talk about taking the name of the Lord in vain. This smacks of ideological rigidity and is done with the hardest and meanest of hearts.

It will be an interesting future discussion with Jesus for these folks who don't want to heal the poor and middle classes, but want to heel them and make their lives more difficult and less healthy. How sad for all involved.

Tom Guild
Edmond

Editor's Note: Tom Guild was the 2012 Democratic nominee for Congress in Oklahoma's 5th District

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Editor, The Observer:

Re: On Tulsa's New Superintendent, Oklahoma Observer blog, 2.6.15

Thanks so much for this article! Deborah Gist's successes didn't seem realistic to me when I read about her. I've been trying to find evidence online for several hours today, trying to find evidence to the contrary. It's a shame for Tulsa Public Schools that the board made no effort to include the community in its decision. Unfortunately, I help campaigned for one of TPS Board members, a Democrat and teacher, who was eager to hire Gist!

I have lived and taught in the Union School District with grandchildren attending there and a daughter teaching in the district. This is a good lesson to learn to be alert to people such as Gist, who will probably cause much heartache for Tulsa teachers, children, and parents alike. Such a shame.

Ann Kent
Tulsa

Editor, The Observer:

Who will be Hillary's Sarah Palin? To add a little color to his game, 2008 presidential nominee John McCain chose Alaska Gov. Palin for his running mate.

Hillary Clinton needs to jazz up her White House ticket with a "purple cow," too. Her critics say she kowtows too much to the rich and powerful.

Nevertheless, the bible of American business, the Wall Street Journal, gave her the moniker "Hillary Rodham Warren."

So, maybe, Clinton should cotton to the idea of running with Wall Street's No. 1 watchdog, Massachusetts Sen. Elizabeth Warren, an Okie born and bred.

In the war of words, her insults are fired with the safety off, the No. 1 requirement for Veep candidates:

"I kept my clothes on [to her opponent, Sen. Scott Brown, who posed nude for a magazine]."

"The system is rigged to work for those with money and power."

"There is nobody in this country who got rich on his own. Nobody."

"Billionaires pay lower taxes than secretaries."

"Big corporations pay an average tax of 12.6% on their profits and middle class families pick up the tab."

"We need bankruptcy laws to protect consumers from predatory bankers."

"Name the last time you took a big bank all the way to trial."

"Let's break up the big banks."

"I've declared war on the rich."

Unless Clinton dares to be great by putting Warren on her "Girls Rule!" ticket, she runs the risk of being defeated for turning our Democratic club into a second Republican Party.

Virginia Blue Jeans Jenner
Wagoner

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