

# THE OKLAHOMA Observer

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## Constitutional Rewrite

*Religion And Politics Spur Risky Drive  
To Overhaul State's Guiding Principles*



A Special Report, Pages 8-9



VOLUME 47, NO. 11

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To Comfort the Afflicted and Afflict the Comfortable.

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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

### Back To The Future

It wasn't so long ago that Oklahoma rejected a 10-year, one-cent gas tax hike that would have put the state on the cutting edge of clean, practical, futuristic transit – high-speed rail between Oklahoma City and Tulsa.

Today, the state remains behind the curve when it comes to smart transportation policy, a bystander as work begins in Texas on a \$10 billion, 240-mile high-speed Dallas-Houston rail line and in California on a \$35.5 billion, 800-mile bullet train initially linking San Francisco and Los Angeles.

Imagine if Oklahoma had embraced former Sen. David Herbert's gas tax proposal in the 1990s – the state already would have paid for and been enjoying the fruits of a high-speed train between the state's two largest downtowns.

For a small state like Oklahoma, leveraging assets is vital. Uniting the state's two major financial centers would pay huge dividends, not only helping attract new business but also grow those born here.

A quick 30-minute-or-so trip from downtown to downtown would make Oklahoma City-Tulsa the Plains equivalent of Minneapolis-St. Paul. Hop a train in Tulsa at 6 p.m. and be in your seat for 7 p.m. tipoff at Chesapeake Arena. Board at the same hour in OKC and be in Tulsa in time for dinner before an 8 p.m. show at the Brady Theater or BOK Center.

It was a year ago that passenger rail was supposed to begin between Tulsa [Sapulpa, actually] and Oklahoma City [OK, Del City] – but didn't. Now Oklahoma faces a billion-dollar-plus budget hole that threatens the future of the state's lone passenger rail service – the marvelous, but retro Heartland Flyer linking the capital and Fort Worth.

Anyone regularly driving the Turner Turnpike or Interstate 35 these days knows what a hassle it can be – too many trucks, not enough lanes, traffic flow ebbing between autobahn and urban rush hour.

Yet, too many of Oklahoma's policymakers fail to see the wisdom in

CONTINUED ON PAGE 43

## THE OKLAHOMA Observer



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# Observerscope



The Useless Clowns Party seeks recognition to place candidates on next year's Oklahoma presidential ballot. Why? Isn't it already represented in the GOP primary?

Dart: To Attorney General Scott Pruitt, wasting more precious taxpayer money by challenging Obama's Clean Power Plan. Pruitt isn't the people's lawyer – he's a wholly owned subsidiary of Big Oil.

Will the Corporation Commission do the right thing and reopen the 1989 Southwestern Bell case influenced by bribery? Or will it succumb to pressure from corporate giant and Bell successor AT&T which could be on hook to refund \$16 billion to customers? Stay tuned.

Laurel: To state senators and staff, raising \$13,477 last month as part of the United Way's annual State Charitable Campaign – up from \$10,500 last year.

One number highlights the Oklahoma teacher shortage crisis: 919. That's how many emergency-certified instructors were serving in state classrooms at October's end.

Dart: To Oklahoma County Sheriff John Whetsel, whining that an FCC rate cap on inmate phone calls could cost his office \$500,000 a year. Charging \$1.65 for a 15-minute call is highway robbery.

For the first time, women hold the top two positions in the Oklahoma Republican Party – Pam Pollard as chair and Estela Hernandez as vice chair. Pollard replaces former state Sen. Randy Brogdon, who resigned under fire.

Laurel: To our dear friend and Observer Advisory Board member Robyn Lemon Sellers, honored with Freedom Oklahoma's Lifetime Achievement Award for decades of unwavering support of LGBTQ causes.

Rep. Mark McCullough, R-Sapulpa, won't seek a sixth term in 2016, citing family consideration. A possible Democratic pickup?

We mourn the passing of our dear friend Bill Bross, retired executive director of Community Council of Central Oklahoma. He was a liberal's liberal and a true gentleman.

Dart: To Chad Warmington, Oklahoma Oil and Gas Association president, asserting state regulators have the state's injection well-earthquake problem "under control." Tell that to homeowners still enduring the shake, rattle and roll.

On the same day the Daily Disappointment praised Attorney General Scott Pruitt for "trying to pull back the curtains" on Oklahoma executions, it reported the AG asked a federal judge for secrecy in a lawsuit challenging the state's lethal injection protocol.

Laurel: To former Attorney General Drew Edmondson, set to be inducted into the Oklahoma Law Enforcement Hall of Fame next month. His combination of steady hand and common sense is sorely missed in state government.

Feb. 12 is deadline for graduating seniors to apply for two \$750 scholarships offered by Creek County Democrats. For details, email [creekcountymocratsscholarship@hotmail.com](mailto:creekcountymocratsscholarship@hotmail.com), visit Creek County Democrats Facebook page or call 918.227.1586.

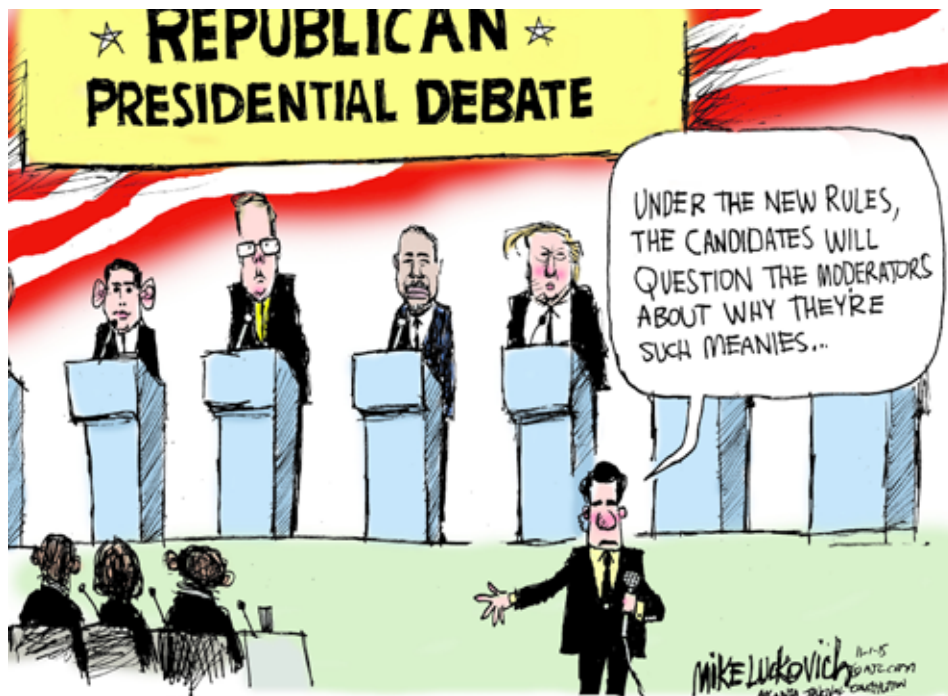
It's appropriate the new leader of the right-wing Oklahoma Council of Public Affairs is named Small – Jonathan Small clearly thinks small. He wants Oklahoma to be more like Kansas, which Tea Party Gov. Sam Brownback has driven into a ditch.

Dart: To Blue Cross Blue Shield of Oklahoma, exploiting declining in-state competition to jack rates an average 31% next year. A single payer health care option would temper the greed.

Still the frontier? Mass shootings – incidents involving four fatalities or more – claimed 174 lives in western states since 1982. – High Country News

CONTINUED ON PAGE 44

# Letters



Editor, The Observer:

The laurel given to former Oklahoma City Public Schools Superintendent Art Stellar [October Observer] should be retracted. Countless students, teachers, administrators and staff who suffered immeasurably during Stellar's "Reign of Terror" would genuinely appreciate a swift and immediate retraction.

Ronald King  
Norman

*Editor's Note: The author is a retired Oklahoma City Public Schools special education teacher.*

Editor, The Observer:

Only legislators with blinders on cannot see that lowering taxes in Oklahoma comes at a time when we need more money to manage our overflowing prisons. The proposed few dollars most of us would get by the upcoming tax decrease is desperately needed in the Oklahoma justice system to treat those who have mental or drug abuse problems.

In recent years, mental hospitals have been closed all over the state

while the number of private prisons increased. Therefore, many mental patients become victims of the prison system with no counseling available.

At the present time, Oklahoma taxpayers pay about \$19,000 per person a year to house prisoners. If more money were put into special mental health and substance abuse courts, costs would be reduced, and the incarceration rate would drop rapidly.

For \$2,150 a year per person, the Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services can help change lives of more people. Also, for \$5,000 a year per person for drug and alcohol addiction courts and \$5,400 a year per person for mental health courts, a great number of those convicted could face their problems and learn basic living skills without the stigma of a prison record that could prevent them from finding employment and leading productive lives.

Recently, someone said, "Most of those convicted and imprisoned are not bad people. They just made bad choices." Locking them up

without the benefit of counseling may only be a stop gap measure for more criminal activity and reincarceration once many are released.

At \$19,000 a year for their keep, Oklahomans pay dearly when legislators with "lock 'em up" attitudes do not look for alternative solutions for our increasing prison population.

Legislators could start by examining current sentencing laws to allow judges more discretion in sentencing convicted persons.

Nadine Jewell  
Norman

Editor, The Observer:

Nobody enjoys paying taxes. But we all appreciate having first responders to call when a fire or a burglary upsets our lives. We all want good schools that prepare our children to compete in the adult job market. We all like driving on well-maintained roads that don't shake our autos to bits with potholes. It's our taxes that pay for all these services.

The recent mania for cutting taxes, both in our country and our state, is damaging our ability to provide basic services to people here at home and to prepare our citizens to compete with those of other countries.

Several times in recent years we've tried "trickle-down economics," the idea being that if we cut taxes for wealthy people, they'll pass on their economic gains to those less fortunate and the economy as a whole will improve. That never works. We've seen the proof time and again.

Cutting taxes on wealthy people [as Gov. Mary Fallin and her Republican cohorts in the Oklahoma Legislature have been doing in recent years] doesn't make the state's economy better. It only reduces the amount of money available to fund needed services.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 45

## *A Colossal Failure Of Leadership*



**H**ow many wake up calls do Oklahoma lawmakers need?

It's not a rhetorical question or the set up for a punch line. It's a serious query in the wake of a trio of deadly incidents that spotlight policymakers' inability to help solve the state's mental health crisis.

We may never know what led Adacia Chambers to plow her car into spectators at Oklahoma State University's homecoming parade Oct. 24, but we do know she was treated previously for mental illness.

We also know that Christian Costello was diagnosed with psychosis and schizophrenia long before he fatally stabbed his father, state Labor Commissioner Mark Costello, last August – and that his family struggled mightily to get him help.

And we know that while a judge in late October ruled that Alton Nolen is legally competent to stand trial for the beheading of a former co-worker at a Moore food plant, the suspect's mental health – and possible mental retardation – still ignites debate.

What we also know – with certainty – is that policymakers long have turned a blind eye to mental illness, afflicting more than one in four Oklahoma adults – the nation's second highest rate.

Sadly, Oklahoma ranks 46th nationally in per capita mental health funding, resulting in this alarming fact: only about half receive the mental health treatment they need in any given year, according to experts.

This isn't a problem that sprouted overnight. Jails didn't suddenly become the state's largest mental health facilities. Desperate families scrambling to find help for troubled loved ones isn't a new phenomenon.

It reflects a colossal failure of leadership too-often preoccupied with whether the Ten Commandments can be located on state property or school-sanctioned prayers can be uttered at athletic contests.

As income tax cuts and corporate welfare yielded ever-tighter budgets in recent years, legislators slashed millions in appropriations or approved what amounts

to starvation budgets for the Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services.

How could they stick their heads in the sand as evidence of a mental health crisis mounted?

Well, some legislators viewed mental health as a criminal justice rather than a public health issue.

Others undoubtedly were influenced by campaign donors seeking to profit from private mental health treatment.

Most often, corporate special interests simply drowned out the voices of those desperate for help in treating their loved ones.

There is, at last, a glimmer of hope the state's elected elite recognizes the need to address the issue.

A Senate interim study – requested by Sen. Kim David, R-Porter – this month explored “assisted outpatient treatment and other strategies and tools to serve individuals living with mental illness who fail to engage in traditional outpatient treatment.”

Mark Costello's widow, Cathy, testified at the hearing, as did Ohio Sen. Dave Burke, who authored assisted outpatient treatment legislation in his state, and Terri White, Oklahoma's mental health and substance abuse services commissioner.

What comes out of the between-sessions deliberating remains to be seen, of course, but what I fear is inertia will set back in.

Think about what happens every time America endures a mass shooting. The debate about background checks and mental health services flares – briefly – then dies ... until the next tragedy.

As the days pass since the OSU, Costello and Vaughan Foods tragedies and as lawmakers begin grappling with a \$1 billion-plus budget hole, the elected ostriches may yet again stick their heads in the sand when it comes to mental health.

Too many potentially productive lives are being wasted for want of treatment. Too many innocents are casualties of a broken system that fails those in need of help.

Oklahoma cannot afford to wait any longer for action.



# STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

## *Why Unlikely Allies Want To Reform Oklahoma's Civil Asset Forfeiture Law*

BY GENE PERRY

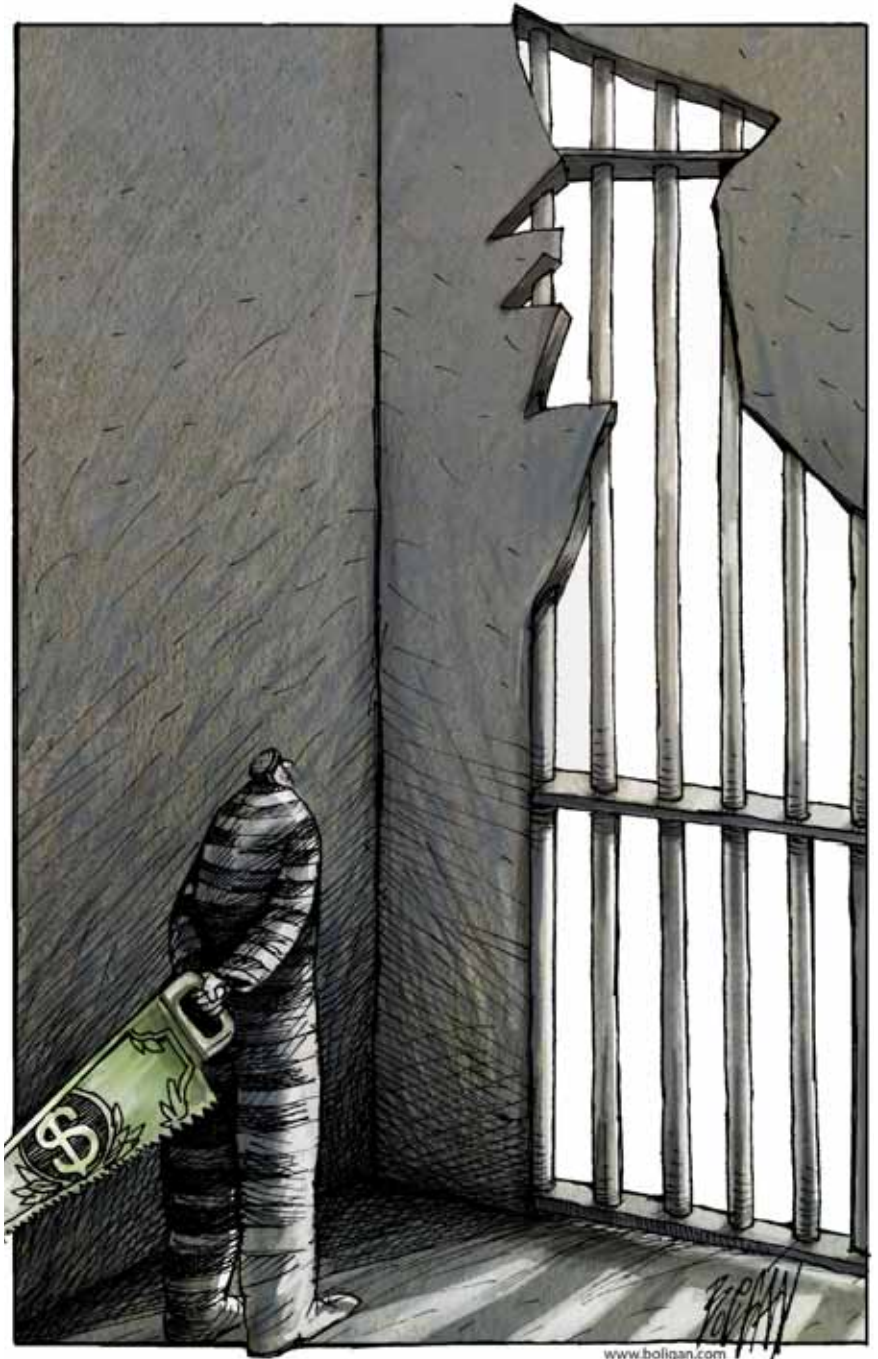
**T**he Oklahoma Policy Institute recently participated in a joint press conference with Sen. Kyle Loveless, the Oklahoma Council of Public Affairs [OCPA], and the American Civil Liberties Union of Oklahoma. The topic was a new poll jointly sponsored by OKPolicy and OCPA that found a large, bipartisan majority of Oklahomans favor reforming civil asset forfeiture laws to allow law enforcement to keep confiscated property only when a criminal conviction is achieved.

Sen. Loveless, an Oklahoma City Republican, is developing a bill to make this and other reforms to civil asset forfeiture in the coming legislative session.

This rare collaboration between OKPolicy and OCPA is just one instance of a coming together of many progressive and conservative groups on this issue. Nationally, civil asset forfeiture reforms have been endorsed by organizations ranging from The Heritage Foundation and The Charles Koch Institute to the American Civil Liberties Union [ACLU] and the Center for American Progress. John Oliver even dedicated an episode of his HBO series, *Last Week Tonight*, to the issue.

So why has this issue united groups that rarely agree? Here's some background on the civil asset forfeiture debate in Oklahoma.

Civil asset forfeiture is a legal tool that law enforcement can use to seize property suspected of being used in or resulting from criminal activity. Under current Oklahoma law, the process does not require the



property owner to be convicted or even charged with a crime for the property to be forfeited.

If law enforcement seizes property based on suspicion that it is in any way related to illicit drug activity, then the burden of proof is on the original property owner to show that the property was not related to drug activity.

The law enforcement agencies are then allowed to keep and use the vehicles, money, or other property that they have seized. Ownership is often transferred to the district attorney's office and then split between the district attorney and local law enforcement.

Proceeds from forfeited property are supposed to be spent on enforcement of drug laws and drug-abuse prevention, though audits have found several instances of missing funds and suspect usage of property by Oklahoma law enforcement.

Defenders of civil asset forfeiture say it is a necessary tool to combat large drug cartels. They point to examples where hundreds of thousands of dollars were found hidden behind firewalls or in hidden compartments within vehicles and claim that enhanced safeguards would prevent them from seizing this very suspicious money.

However, an Oklahoma Watch investigation found that out of 8,480 cash forfeiture cases in 70 Oklahoma counties, “59% sought amounts of under \$1,000, and 88% sought amounts under \$10,000. The median

times as likely to be searched during a traffic stop compared to white drivers.

Multiple reports have found that police often view carrying a few hundred or thousand dollars in cash as probable cause for seizure, even when no drugs are found and the driver has an explanation for the cash.

When money is seized from individuals who are predominately low-income and unbanked or underbanked, they are also unlikely to have the resources or knowledge to challenge the seizure.

Besides the damage to innocent Oklahomans who are the least able to defend their rights, our current civil asset forfeiture laws may also be distorting the priorities of law enforcement and damaging public safety.

“What began as a laudable means to an end has become the end in itself. Police, sheriff’s departments and prosecutors often end up having a significant budgetary stake in the outcome of forfeiture cases.” – John Malcolm, Heritage Foundation legal director.

amount was \$801.”

Another investigation by the ACLU of Oklahoma found that out of more than \$6 million in cash seized in 12 Oklahoma counties, almost \$4 million was taken without any criminal charges.

James Todd, a former Sand Springs police detective who is now an attorney in Oklahoma City, told Oklahoma Watch, “They aren’t taking drug dealers’ money ... It’s gotten so easy for them that they’re taking any money they come across.”

In a time when we are making more purchases using credit or debit cards or even with our smart phones, it still may seem strange for Oklahomans to be carrying around hundreds or thousands of dollars in cash that is not connected to a crime. However, Oklahoma has one of the highest percentages of unbanked households in that nation, meaning they do not have any checking or savings account at a traditional bank.

A 2013 FDIC survey found about one out of nine Oklahoma families [10.9%] were unbanked. Another 22.2% of Oklahoma families were underbanked, meaning they may have a bank account but still use alternative financial services like check-cashing services or payday lenders.

Among African-Americans in Oklahoma, more than one out of five families [20.9%] were unbanked, and another 46.3% were underbanked. In fact, just 30% percent of African-Americans in Oklahoma had full access to banking services, according to the FDIC.

That’s a serious concern when it comes to civil asset forfeiture, because black drivers are about three

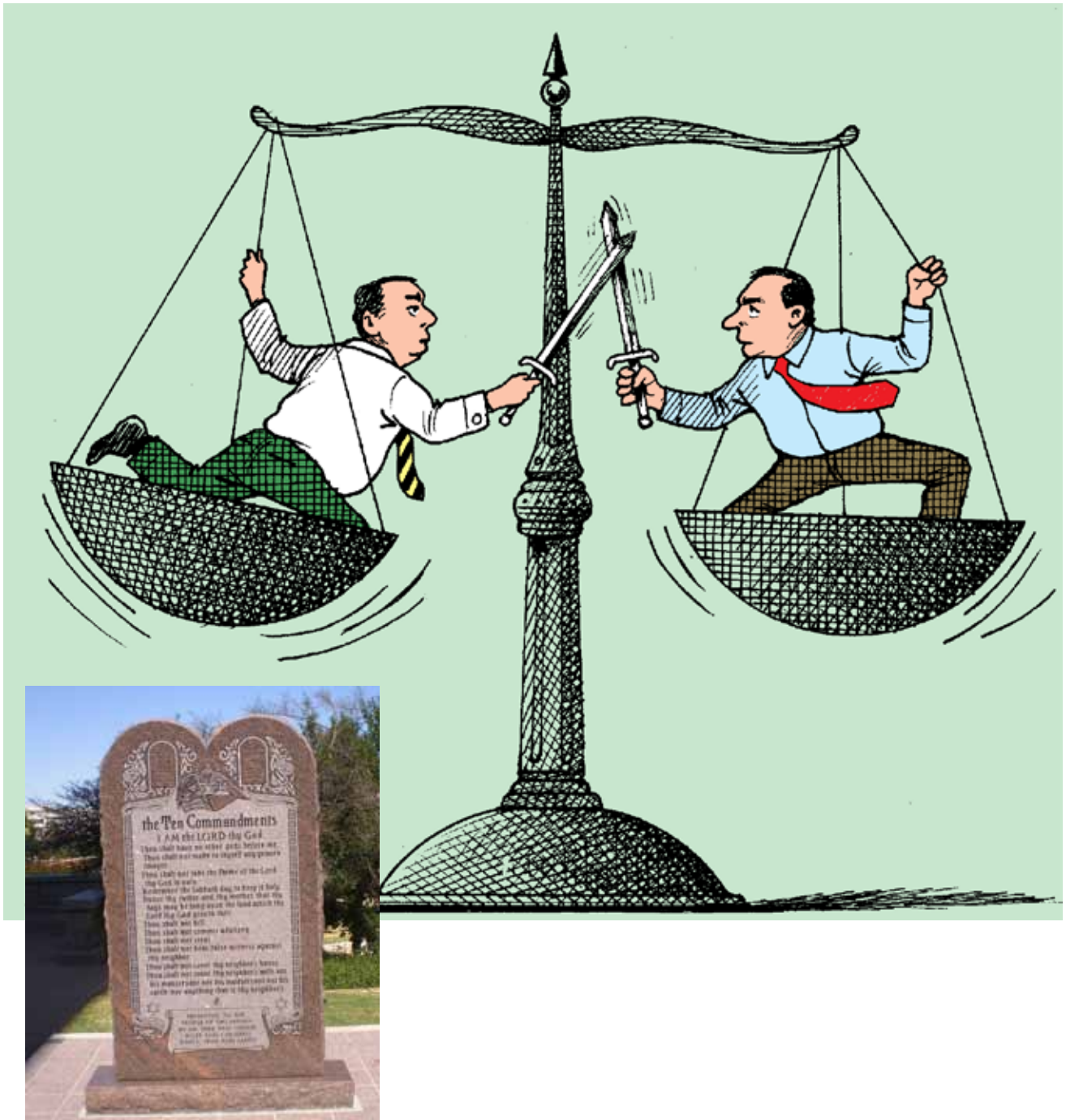
A local news investigation in Tennessee found that a drug interdiction task force was making 10 times as many stops on the westbound lanes of I-40 than the eastbound lanes. The reason? Drugs more often came up from Mexico and went east, while the money from drug sales returned going west. Rather than stopping the drugs from entering communities, law enforcement was concentrating on the money, which they were able to make a profit from confiscating.

As John Malcolm, legal director of the Heritage Foundation, said during Oklahoma’s recent legislative hearing on civil asset forfeiture, “What began as a laudable means to an end has become the end in itself. Police, sheriff’s departments and prosecutors often end up having a significant budgetary stake in the outcome of forfeiture cases.”

Defenders of civil asset forfeiture have argued that it is a necessary tool in cases where criminals abandon property to avoid going to prison. In some cases this is undoubtedly true, but as the use of forfeiture has expanded, so has the risk that law enforcement is taking property from innocent Oklahomans and leaving them little recourse to get it back.

The collaboration between groups with very different perspectives seeking to reform civil asset forfeiture has emerged because of the clear need for reforms to protect our rights as Americans.

*Gene Perry is policy director for the Oklahoma Policy Institute. An earlier version of this essay appeared on the OKPolicy blog. You can sign up for OKPolicy’s e-mail alerts and daily news digest at <http://okpolicy.org>.*



# *What's Really Behind The Drive To Rewrite Oklahoma's Constitution*



## BY ARNOLD HAMILTON

**A** year from now, barring a repeat of 2000, America will have a newly elected president. And Oklahoma's Legislature will have several new faces, either because of retirement or defeat.

But neither of these electoral certainties is destined necessarily to be the political topic du jour.

Oklahomans instead could be transfixed by a radical remake of the state Constitution – more than a century of pioneer era wisdom suddenly wiped away by 21st Century legislative actions and statewide voting.

At stake – among other things – is the Constitution's strict separation of church and state and judicial reforms approved by voters nearly a half-century ago in the wake of a Supreme Court bribery scandal.

The drive to revamp the state's guiding principles is fueled by an unholy alliance of elected religious zealots and unelected corporatists that believe they can benefit by politicizing the appellate courts.

For fundamentalists, the goal is to transform Oklahoma's public square into a Christian theocracy – Ten Commandments back on the Capitol grounds, officially-sanctioned prayer at public school athletic events, vouchers for private and parochial education.

For the state's monied elite, the prize is to tilt the judiciary, once and for all, in their favor – building on so-called tort reform that all but locks the courthouse door to individuals who've been wronged by big business.

How serious is the drive to revamp the Constitution?

Not only is Gov. Mary Fallin urging voters be given the right to repeal the church-state separation clause, but Speaker Jeff Hickman included judicial reform in a rare, full House interim study conducted earlier this month.

Other lawmakers are urging Oklahoma consider a constitutional convention to rewrite the document – a dangerous idea given that big money special interests likely would dominate the conclave.

Rep. Kevin Calvey, R-OKC, leads the charge in the Oklahoma Legislature to revamp the judiciary – displeasure born of his opposition to abortion.

Recall that last spring, in remarks on the House floor, Calvey declared, "If I were not a Christian and didn't have a prohibition against suicide, I would walk across the street, douse myself in gasoline, and set myself on fire to protest the evil" in the Judicial Center housing the state's appellate courts.

What's particularly interesting is that the Legislature's uber conservatives prattle endlessly about their fealty to the constitution and rule of law – until the courts adhere to the same when ruling on social issues such as abortion or separation of church and state. Then – suddenly – something must be done about "activist" judges!

Talk about throwing the baby out with the bathwa-

ter. Before 1967, all judges were elected – creating the opportunity for big money to influence decisions. After the Supreme Court bribery scandal, voters approved the so-called "modified Missouri" plan in which appellate judges are selected by a process that includes a Judicial Nominating Commission and the governor. The judges then periodically appear on a so-called "retention ballot" – voters decide whether to keep them for another term or boot them out.

The nearly half-century-old system has served the state well. Nearly all the proposals to change it – from partisan election of judges to giving the governor more power – would politicize the appellate courts, yet another case of Oklahoma's political leaders forgetting the lessons of history.

The campaign to eliminate the Oklahoma Constitution's strict church-state provision is portrayed as being about the Ten Commandments monument's return to the state Capitol grounds.

It was ordered removed earlier this year by the state Supreme Court, which correctly applied this constitutional provision, from Article 2, Section 5:

*No public money or property shall ever be appropriated, applied, donated, or used, directly or indirectly, for the use, benefit, or support of any sect, church, denomination, or system of religion, or for the use, benefit, or support of any priest, preacher, minister, or other religious teacher or dignitary, or sectarian institution as such.*

Fallin and other religious zealots want the monument returned – it's currently at the Oklahoma Council of Public Affairs' headquarters, just south of the Capitol – and they're willing to eliminate the constitutional provision the Supreme Court cited.

Of course, this really isn't about the Ten Commandments. It's about the desire to divert taxpayer dollars from public to private and parochial schools – vouchers – something the constitutional provision has thwarted.

It was only last year, for example, a state judge ruled the latest voucher scheme unconstitutional – the Lindsey Nicole Henry "scholarship" that would have allowed parents of special education students to use tax dollars to send their children to private schools.

Oklahomans strongly oppose vouchers – by a 2-1 margin in a statewide Public Opinion Strategies poll earlier this year. But if religious zealots could convince the voting public to tinker with the Constitution – believing it to be about the Ten Commandments – they could sneak vouchers into law.

Who else would benefit from such a scheme? Corporate interests that are all about monetizing public education.

Those who care about true religious liberty – freedom of and freedom from religion – and about public education have been warned. Next year's elections are likely to be about far more than the presidency or legislative majorities.



# *Feds Probe Hobby Lobby Owners Antiquities Acquisitions*

Did Hobby Lobby's high-profile Christian owners illegally import stolen artifacts for their forthcoming Museum of the Bible?

Authorities first became suspicious of the Green family in 2011 when U.S. customs agents intercepted up to 300 small clay tablets en route from Israel to the arts and crafts retailer's OKC headquarters.

According to an exclusive report by the online website The Daily Beast:

*The tablets were inscribed in cuneiform – the script of ancient Assyria and Babylonia, present-day Iraq – and were thousands of years old. Their destination was the compound of the Hobby Lobby corporation, which became famous last year for winning a landmark Supreme Court case on religious freedom and government mandates.*

*A senior law enforcement source with extensive knowledge of antiquities smuggling confirmed that these ancient artifacts had been purchased and*

*were being imported by the deeply-religious owners of the crafting giant, the Green family of Oklahoma City. For the last four years, law enforcement sources tell The Daily Beast, the Greens have been under federal investigation for the illicit importation of cultural heritage from Iraq.*

*These tablets, like the other 40,000 or so ancient artifacts owned by the Green family, were destined for the Museum of the Bible, the giant new museum funded by the Greens, slated to open in Washington, DC, in 2017.*

*Both the seizure of the cuneiform tablets and the subsequent federal investigation were confirmed to us by Cary Summers, the president of the Museum of the Bible.*

*Summers, though, portrayed the problem as a mere paperwork error.*

*“There was a shipment and it had improper paperwork – incomplete paperwork that was attached to*

it,” he said, suggesting the artifacts were simply held up in customs by foot-dragging bureaucrats.

But a source familiar with the Hobby Lobby investigation told The Daily Beast that the clay tablets were described on their FedEx shipping labels as “hand-crafted clay tiles” worth about \$300 each – far less than their true worth – and does not indicate they are part of the cultural heritage of Iraq.

Steve Green, the Hobby Lobby CEO, admitted that his family’s collection might contain some illegally acquired artifacts but denies that he had knowingly done anything wrong.

However, the Greens met privately in 2010 with Patty Gerstenblith, a DePaul University law professor who is an expert on cultural heritage, to discuss legal complications in purchasing antiquities.

It’s not clear what could happen at the conclusion of the investigation.

At least 15,000 items were looted from the national museum in Baghdad after the U.S. invasion more than a decade ago, along with thousands of other artifacts from elsewhere in Iraq.

More than 1,000 stolen artifacts were returned to Iraq in 2008, after federal officials discovered them in the U.S., but experts say only one American has been prosecuted for smuggling looted items since the invasion.

Author Joseph Braude, a Middle East expert who had previously assisted the FBI and CIA, pleaded guilty to smuggling three ancient marble and alabaster seals from Iraq in 2004 and was sentenced to six months of house arrest.

Gerstenblith, the legal expert, said law enforcement and courts are generally unwilling to prosecute U.S. troops and defense contractors caught smuggling artifacts out of Iraq but instead are satisfied with making them turn over the illicit items.

She doesn’t think that’s enough: “Just giving the object up is not a deterrent.”

From its founding in 1970, the Greens’ Hobby Lobby chain has been more than simply a suite of craft stores. The Greens have used it as a model of a business run on Christian values. Stores are closed on Sundays in order to give employees time to attend church. The company employs four chaplains, and offered a free health clinic to staff at its headquarters long before free health care came into political vogue.

The Greens have also used the Hobby Lobby platform to spread their Christian message far and wide: The company annually places full-page ads celebrating – in their words – “the real meaning of Christmas, Easter, and Independence Day” in newspapers across the country.

But the Greens went from evangelical players to bona fide Christian celebrities in June 2014 when they won a Supreme Court case, *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby*. It granted them exemption from the ObamaCare mandate to provide certain forms of contraception to their employees; forcing the company to do so, the Supreme Court ruled, would have violated the

Greens’ deeply-held Christian beliefs.

The Greens also tried last year, but failed to get a Museum of the Bible-developed elective course into Mustang schools, just a few miles from the Hobby Lobby headquarters.

At first, the Mustang school board adopted the curriculum. But Green backed off his plans after 220 pages of the textbook – *The Book: The Bible’s History, Narrative and Impact* – were made public.

Church-state experts contended the material unconstitutionally taught the Bible from a particular religious perspective – hardly surprising given the Green’s devotion to fundamentalism.

As Mark Chancey, a religion professor at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, put it, “In its current form, sectarian bias, including the principle that the Bible is inerrant, is built into the structure.”

The Museum of the Bible is another Green effort to rewrite American history. Rather than a nation founded on freedom of and freedom from religion, Green emphasizes a false narrative repeated endlessly by fundamentalist ideologues – that America is, in fact, a Christian nation.

As he told the Washington Post in 2014, “I think seeing the biblical foundations of our nation – for our legislators to see that, that a lot of that was biblically based, that we have religious freedoms today, which are a biblical concept, it can’t hurt being [two blocks from the National Mall].”

According to The Daily Beast report, Green “admitted that among his family’s extensive collection they might have some illegally-acquired antiquities, though he denied having ever knowingly done anything wrong.”

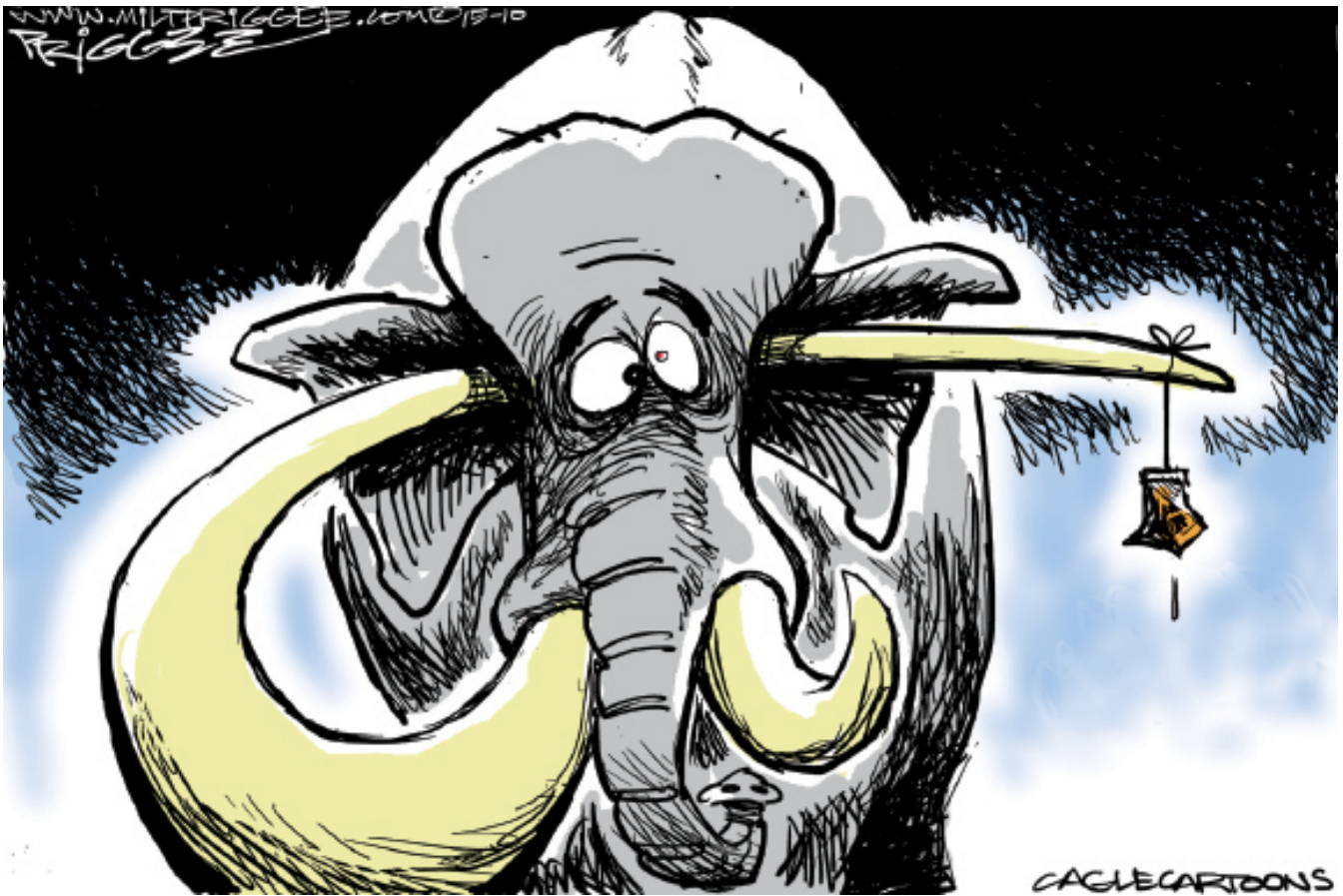
*“Is it possible that we have some illicit [artifacts]? That’s possible,” he told us for a story slated to appear in a forthcoming issue of The Atlantic. It seems unlikely that this case, however, is one of simply misunderstanding the relevant laws. The paperwork misidentifying the antiquities as “tile samples” certainly suggests otherwise.*

*What’s more, however, in the summer of 2010 ... Gerstenblith ... met privately with the Greens in order to explain to them precisely these issues: how to do due diligence with regard to provenance and how to watch out for legal complications with regard to antiquities sales. It cannot be said that the Greens were totally ignorant of the world in which they were engaging. And a year later, the Greens imported the tablets that have now become the subject of the federal investigation.*

*The Greens are worth \$4.5 billion or so. If they are indeed prosecuted, no fine could make a significant dent in their financial well-being. But for a company and a family that have built their reputation on a particular set of Christian values, this investigation may hurt more than any financial penalty could.*

This essay was compiled from reporting by The Daily Beast, Raw Story, the Washington Post and Observer Editor Arnold Hamilton.





# *Oklahoma's Economic Deja Vu Is Anything But A 'Laffer'*

BY CAL HOBSON

**T**he month was April, the year was 1981 and the location was Room 432-A in the state Capitol. As a recently elected member of the House of Representatives I happily occupied a seat at the conference table.

The subject under discussion was and still is of great importance to everyone in Oklahoma: energy production and prices. The encouraging and upbeat testimony offered that afternoon remains vividly etched in my mind.

A panel of esteemed economists, led by Dr. Willis Wheat, who also was a powerful banker and respected university professor, had been invited by Appropriations and Budget Chairwoman Cleta Deatherage, D-Norman, [yes, that Cleta] to deliver a much anticipated presentation.

Lawmakers desperately needed their expertise because over 30% of the state's revenue came from a 7% severance tax on the value of oil and natural gas extracted at the wellhead. What we heard from Wheat and Co. was music to our ears.

Those forecasters of the future confidently predicted that the price of crude oil, already at a record high of \$35 per barrel, would nevertheless soar to \$50 in 1985 and \$100 by 1990. These projections were unanimously submitted and our much respected experts doubled down by also urging numerous tax cuts be implemented immediately.

The already booming economy would soon glow even brighter, making Oklahoma the envy of the nation. Bumper stickers were proudly being displayed across our plains that urged, "Drive 90 miles an hour and freeze a Yankee."

Talk about having your cake and eating, too!

In response to such sage and comforting advice, the Legislature quickly passed and Gov. George Nigh, D-McAlester, signed 23 different revenue-reducing measures. Most sailed through without a single negative vote cast or voice in opposition heard, with the notable exception of former House Speaker Bill Willis, D-Tahlequah, a 30-year veteran of Oklahoma politics.

Willis was no mathematical theorist, but he could

add and subtract and was also imbued with a very rare trait at the Capitol: common sense.

As a new member of the House and one of only three freshmen selected by then-Speaker Dan Draper, D-Stillwater, for inclusion on the budget writing committee, I was greatly impressed with the wisdom, experience, and optimism displayed by our panelists.

Yet, at the conclusion of their briefing, I probably understood only two things, but they were important: First, these gentlemen were smart and knowledgeable. Second, I wasn't.

However, and surprising to all who were mesmerized by their information, the price projections for both oil and natural gas turned out to be tragically and profoundly wrong. Therefore, among my many pursuits over the last 30 years, I have searched the world for that most rare of all persons – a one-armed economist.

I have done so to insure that I might never have to endure again a phrase uttered over and over that fateful day in April 1981. It was, "On the one hand ... but on the other hand ..." Just fill in the blanks.

Oil prices plunged in the 1980s, hitting a bottom of \$9 a barrel in 1985 and never rose above \$20 for the entire decade. Natural gas, once calculated to be depleted in my lifetime, stayed under \$1 per thousand cubic feet.

While most of America recovered from a recession, energy producing states fell into depression.

Locally, Penn Square Bank imploded, 167 other institutions failed, including seven of eight lenders in Norman, and the drilling rig count in Oklahoma descended from a record 995 in the early '80s to 90 a decade later.

Taxes were raised, Nigh's popularity spiraled downward like a disabled drone, and a Republican – yes, a Republican – named Henry Bellmon was elected governor in 1986. And just like thousands of other Sooners, many lawmakers lost their jobs – and rightfully so.

By shredding the tax base and staking our future heavily in the volatile oil sector, we proved unworthy of our titles. Hmmm ... does this remind you of anyone?

This decade was the worst in Oklahoma's history, save the Dust Bowl of the Dirty Thirties.

Fast forward to 2015 and it's beginning to look like *deja vu* all over again.

The current budget year was only balanced by filling a \$611 million shortfall with one time funds, emptying agency reserve accounts and imposing a few more fee increases here and there. That's child's play compared to what awaits the Legislature in February 2016.

Economists [uh-oh, here we go again]

predict another cash chasm exceeding *one billion bucks*, caused primarily by two things – the first, of course, being painfully low oil and natural gas prices.

Gov. Mary Fallin and her troops in the House and Senate can't do a thing about that. Frankly, no one can – even Harold Hamm, honcho at Continental Resources and the very embodiment of optimism.

The other contributor to this crisis was man-made over the last 10 years, as numerous personal income tax cuts have been passed with the net effect being a revenue loss of something slightly north of – *Surprise! Surprise!* – that same *billion bucks*.

Another additional plundering of the state's shrinking general fund will trigger in 60 days, deepening the financial crater by \$157 million.

Common sense pleas to delay it have been rejected out of hand, but why?

The fiscally conservative Republicans, who are making ruinous policy with our money, mostly worship at an altar known as the Laffer Curve which, in its simplest terms, preaches that tax cuts are the salvation to everything that ails us. As they are implemented, the result is revenue will flow toward state coffers like milk and honey in the Promised Land.



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This economic theory is the creation of a discredited California professor, Dr. Arthur Laffer, and is the gold standard for Tea Party adherents, flat tax advocates, apparently our legislative budget writers and others who still believe in the Easter Bunny, Santa Claus and a recurring myth that the Chicago Cubs will someday win the World Series.

Oklahoma is in big trouble, not just because economists, like weathermen, sometimes get it wrong. The larger failure is that apparently nobody in the Legislature ever took an Oklahoma history course or, if

they did, it was taught by a moonlighting Art Laffer.

Tragically, no Sooner should be laughing now because the joke is on us – and consequently there is a new bumper sticker being slathered over the old one. It reads, “Dear God: Give me another oil boom, I won’t --- this one away!”

Wanna bet?

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

# *Better Tools Needed To Meet Budget Challenges*

BY DAVID BLATT

**A**s Oklahoma grapples with a deepening budget crisis, one of the greatest challenges policymakers face is the absence of a full and forward-looking picture of the state’s financial situation to help guide tax and spending decisions.

Year after year, policymakers make short-term de-

isions, like approving tax cuts that take years to go into full effect and using cash reserves to balance the budget, without a clear sense of what they will mean for our longer-term outlook.

The dearth of long-term thinking contributes to our large and growing structural budget deficit, where our tax system is incapable

of generating the revenues needed to pay for the ongoing cost of providing core services like education, roads and bridges, and public safety.

A new report from the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities makes a strong case that states, including Oklahoma, can do a much better job of budget planning by adopting some well-established best practices. Unfortunately, Oklahoma ranks among the worst states in the nation for adopting these best practices.

The report states, “A few improvements to state budget processes would make considerably more information available to policymakers and the public for budget debates. This would increase states’ ability to plan for the future, boosting the chances they will have the resources to invest in schools and other building blocks of strong economic growth and widespread prosperity. Better planning also can reduce uncertainty about future funding levels and tax rates, improving a state’s business climate.”

The report recommends two key budgeting practices, currently used in many states but not in Oklahoma.

First, it recommends improving revenue forecasts by using a longer horizon and reaching consensus. Revenue forecasts should not just be for the current and upcoming fiscal year but at least five years, so that policymakers and the public can see how tax and spending proposals will affect future revenues. The report also recommends using a consensus forecasting process which means that the executive and legislative branches jointly produce a single revenue estimate.

Last year, the Oklahoma Tax Commission prepared a report that analyzed Oklahoma’s revenue forecasting failures and made recommendations for what the state might do to avoid similar problems in the future. The state has since enacted several reforms, including collecting additional data and bringing in more economists and industry experts to evaluate its



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revenue forecasting assumptions.

But the state still fails to conduct any serious revenue forecasting beyond the next fiscal year.

Another recommendation by the report is preparing multi-year forecasts of the cost of existing programs and services.

Known as a “current services budget,” this measures how much it would cost the state to continue delivering the same services to residents over the next budget period. Knowing the cost of maintaining the current level of services for a given program or agency in the years ahead by adjusting for inflation and population changes can help policymakers make informed choices about taxes and the budget.

The absence of a current services budget in Oklahoma was seen last year whenever policymakers and observers spoke of a \$611 million budget shortfall. This often-cited figure measured the gap between certified revenues for the upcoming budget year [FY 2016] compared to current year appropriations [FY 2015]. But in reality the gap was bigger because policymakers were wrongly assuming that agencies simply needed the same amount of money next year as this year to avoid cuts to services. Over time, as agencies face rising operating costs, growing caseloads and enrollment, and reduced funding from other sources, they often need additional funding just to maintain services at existing levels.

A current services budget can provide a fairer and more realistic assessment of budget needs to guide policy choices.

Putting it all together, the report notes that “[b]y preparing high-quality, multi-year revenue forecasts and multi-year expenditure forecasts on a current services basis, a state can give policymakers and residents the best possible information to debate potential policies.”

Oklahoma is among 26 states that currently lacks both multi-year revenue forecasts and current-services budgets. Twenty-two states currently employ one or the other of these budgeting tools, while three states – New York, Washington, and Alaska – use both.

A third promising budgeting tool, which builds on the first two but is more far-reaching, would be to adopt a “pay-as-you-go” [PAYGO] policy requiring any program increase or tax cuts be fully paid for to achieve budget neutrality. PAYGO holds policymakers accountable for the long-term impacts of revenue and spending decisions. When effectively implemented, it prevents decisions that harm the state’s long-term fiscal position.

Treasurer Ken Miller endorsed a pay-as-we-go approach to reducing taxes several years ago, arguing that it could “be accomplished with fiscal discipline, better spending prioritization and a refined approach to budgeting.”

No state has officially implemented PAYGO, but it is not technically difficult or expensive to implement.

The common thread to all these proposals is that they would provide policymakers with more and better long-term information about the state’s finances, encouraging them to make wiser decisions for the state.

Now that we’ve seen a state budget crisis that has lasted through a full economic cycle of recession and recovery, with no real hope of subsiding in the future, it is urgent that policymakers adopt better budgeting tools to navigate the difficult route ahead.

*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 OKPolicy’s e-mail alerts and daily news digest at <http://okpolicy.org>*

# Who You Gonna Call?

BY DAVID PERRYMAN

**I**n the 1984 film, *Ghostbusters*, Dan Aykroyd introduced the world to the Ecto-1, a 1959 Cadillac “combination car” that was large enough to carry the ghostbusters and their “proton packs.”

Ecto-1 was called a combination car because it and other like vehicles were long, high-roofed “professional cars” that doubled as hearses and ambulances. In fact, until about 45 years ago, many “ambulances” were operated by local funeral homes in communities where people would joke about the “conflict of interest” posed by an ambulance driving undertaker!

With the advance of medical science and the recognition that minutes matter when patients are experiencing heart attacks and strokes, communities in all areas of the state focused on ways to couple qualified emergency medical personnel with well-equipped ambulances that would respond to a medical crisis on a

moment’s notice.

It soon became apparent that while urban ambulance services readily cash-flowed, ambulance services in areas of sparse populations could not exist solely on ambulance service billings and receipts. Population was not the only problem; higher poverty rates in rural areas meant that a large number of users of rural ambulance services were Medicare and Medicaid patients and many could not pay at all even though the law required the services to be rendered.

In 1976, the citizens of Oklahoma passed SQ 522 by a vote of 54% to 46%, authorizing the creation of Ambulance Districts. The constitutional amendment allowed a community or a group of communities to levy a three mill ad valorem tax to help fund an ambulance service. The millage was never intended to provide enough money to equip, man and operate an

ambulance service. Instead, it was intended to subsidize the ambulance service billing revenues to keep the service in the black.

Today, the cost of operating an ambulance service continues to rise as equipment is more expensive and there is a shortage of trained EMTs.

Also detrimental is the phenomenon of “uncompensated care” – care that is provided to those persons who do not have insurance and are not covered by Medicare or Medicaid.

Rural ambulances are required to care for all patients in their times of crisis and, therefore, they encounter a few patients who can pay the full rate in cash; a few who are insured and the insurance company has negotiated a relatively low rate; a number of Medicare and Medicaid patients that are not liable for anything above the deeply discounted reimbursement rate set by the federal government; and those who have no insurance and cannot pay any amount.

Rural ambulance services that do not have dedicated sales taxes or other tax revenues to further subsidize the system are closing their ambulance services at an alarming rate. More than 50 rural ambulance

services have shut down in the past 12 years, two as recently as last month.

Gov. Brad Henry's 2007 task force recommended that the three mill cap on levies for ambulance operations be raised. No action has been taken on that or any of the other suggestions made by the task force.

Today, in the absence of help from the state, cash-strapped communities that are already subsidizing ambulances are forced to increase sales taxes to keep ambulances rolling.

There is a solution. If Gov. Mary Fallin would accept federal Medicaid funds, \$2.3 million *per day* would go to Oklahoma hospitals and ambulances and prevent hundreds of Oklahoma EMTs, nurses and medical personnel from losing their jobs. It would not only sustain medical care in rural areas but also roll those dollars many times over through Oklahoma's depressed economy.

Without your ambulance service, it doesn't matter who you're gonna call. It matters how far they have to drive to get there.

*David Perryman, a Chickasha Democrat, serves District 56 in the Oklahoma House of Representatives.*

# Look Closely At Their Hands

BY BO COX

**A**ldous Huxley said that facts do not cease to exist just because they are ignored. This was in 1927 and Huxley was in England.

Little did he know that across the Atlantic Ocean, otherwise well-intentioned Americans were ignoring facts and plowing up the prairie with reckless abandon – all in the name of progress. What we know as the Dust Bowl – the worst man-made disaster of history – was the result of this undisciplined and unregulated farming.

Almost a century later and we're again proving Huxley's adage to be correct in states like California, where unmanageable water management – mostly in conjunction with corporate farming – has decimated California's water supply to levels that are unheard of. We're not talking unsustainable; we're talking all the way to unrecoverable.

What does this have to do with Oklahoma? The same corporate farmer mindset that pushed California over the edge is at it in Oklahoma, lobbying with all the might of wealthy corporations, to hoodwink Oklahomans – hardworking and honest folks; many of them real farmers – into passing the erroneously-named Right to Farm bill, otherwise known as HJR 1006. It has been repackaged as SQ 777 and will be on the ballot in 2016.

The first thing I noticed was the hands of the men talking about why we needed this new bill; they were smooth.

I grew up in southeastern Oklahoma. My grandpa

ranch. My dad ranches. I raised hogs and rode horses. I went to school with kids whose families farmed. Their hands weren't like that.

Farmer's hands are etched, calloused, weather-worn, many telling the stories of the land they care for and the generations of their family that have practiced good stewardship with that land.

People with farmer's hands have a kinship with the land and our natural resources that goes far deeper than corporate greed and its slash and burn tactics which, ultimately, benefit a select few while taking from the many.

Real farmers – because they come from long lines of farmers – know history and know that it has shown us, again and again – and is showing us right now in California – that unregulated use of resources ends in ruin.

Yet, those same corporations, working with the Oklahoma Farm Bureau, want us to listen to them about farming. They're using politics as usual, trying to spin this bill into it being about keeping Washington, DC out of Oklahoma.

This isn't about Washington, DC. This is a bill sponsored by lobbyists, corporate farmers and corporations like Farm Bureau, positioning themselves to get in line for their share of what they hope to be big profits. The Farm Bureau also is currently considering removing language from their bylaws that opposed the sale of Oklahoma water.

SQ 777 asks Oklahomans to look the other way and

keep an eye on Washington, DC while the suits open the coffers of Oklahoma's rich natural resources and start us down the same road that took California to where it is today.

I trust Oklahomans – people who are generationally connected with the land, whether it be surviving tornadoes, floods and drought or farming and ranching – will not let people with soft hands, expensive suits and corporate interests tell them how to manage their relationship to the land we call home.

We should ask real farmers. We should look at their hands.

If that doesn't do it for you, ask California how this deal worked out for them.

*Bo Cox spends his time at a state-run psychiatric hospital where he leads recreational activities and is a therapy dog handler. He is the author of God is Not in the Thesaurus; Stories From an Oklahoma Prison and I Will, With God's Help, from Forward Movement Publications.*

# A Chance At Redemption

BY DAVID SLANE

**J**eff Young was a young man when he served as the getaway driver in a robbery. He and his co-defendant were in their early 20s, but Young was handed a lengthy prison sentence. Earlier this year, the Oklahoma Pardon and Parole Board, which is comprised mostly of former prosecutors, police officers and judges, granted my client parole.

He will soon have his freedom because of the second chance the board members and Oklahoma Gov. Mary Fallin gave him. This is a story of true reform, a story of a young man who changed his life and was rewarded with redemption, mercy and forgiveness.

Soon, more state inmates, particularly the non-violent offenders, will have a chance at freedom thanks to new policies adopted by the pardon and parole board. They have created four classes of inmates and specific eligibility for each.

For instance, nonviolent offenders will be required to serve the first 36 months of their sentence. Violent offenders will be required to serve half of the 85% of their sentence. In Oklahoma, as with the federal government, certain crimes require a convicted offender serve 85% of the sentence before parole can be considered.

Other guidelines require nonviolent offenders serving life without parole to spend 22 years in prison. In addition, violent offenders serving life without parole must spend 38 years in prison before parole consideration.

Gov. Fallin requested the pardon and parole board examine ways to reduce prison overcrowding and the guidelines I mentioned were the result of their diligent work.

Something had to be done. Oklahoma has the highest incarceration rate among women and one of the highest rates for men. As more states are discovering on their own, it is less expensive to reform people out of prison than to incarcerate nonviolent offenders, especially those who have been convicted of drug related crimes, such as marijuana possession.

We should make use of drug courts, community service and probation in lieu of incarceration. State figures show Oklahoma spends an average of \$23,000 on each inmate. Placing an offender through drug courts or community service costs about \$9,000 a year, which saves the state \$14,000 for each nonviolent offender that is released.

Yes, it's a monetary issue, but it's also a plan to rehabilitate people who make mistakes and help them become productive citizens in a world that gave up on them. We want these people to work, pay taxes and become law-abiding residents who will contribute to their communities in a positive way.

Like my client, many people are convicted of violent crimes when no violence actually occurred. In my client's case, he and his partner used only a note and claimed to be listening to a police scanner. No one was hurt but they were arrested and convicted of a violent crime.

The last thing I want to do is advocate for people who might hurt my children or my neighbors. At the same time, too many nonviolent offenders have been placed in a barbaric system that says "throw away the key." The new plan by the pardon and parole board is a major step helping these convicts take steps toward redemption and a new life.

I'm sure this plan is not popular in many circles, but it is likely a solution to a long-term problem of prison overcrowding in Oklahoma.

As for Jeff Young, he'll soon be free to move forward with his life, which is ripe with endless possibilities. The same can be said for many other offenders like Young, people who made a mistake but need only one second chance to turn things around.

*David Slane is an Oklahoma City criminal defense attorney who has practiced law for more than 20 years.*

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# *The Millennials' Cathedral: Education Policy Reform*

BY CHRISTIAAN MITCHELL

This essay is adapted from a six-part series on American politics in the Millennial Age published at The Observer's web site, [www.okobserver.net](http://www.okobserver.net), between Oct. 4 and Nov. 8. Millennials also are known as Generation Y, those born between the early 1980s and the early 2000s.

**I**t is clear we Millennials must lose our self-defeating cynicism about politics and getting more involved, particularly at the state and local level. But simply having more people involved in the process can't be all that we're after. We need people who are willing and able to learn the details of the policy conversation and to understand the processes of change.

For us, this will mean learning these things on our own. But it shouldn't have to be that way. And it is precisely here that we can see an opportunity for us to make a lasting contribution to our community.

Comprehensive education reform can become the

centerpiece of a New Infrastructure. But this reform cannot just be a matter of tinkering around the edges. We need to construct an education reform movement that will strike at the very heart of our education system.

## *Education for Economic Growth*

There is perhaps no idea more universally accepted in American politics than that more and better education is our best hope for addressing social problems. Insofar as many of the defining features of the Bait-and-Switch Generation are economic, education presents itself as the way to fix this mess. That has been the story we've been told our entire lives. In fact, I would argue that education sits at the center of the Great Bait-and-Switch: it was the price we were to pay to get the world we were promised.

Our national faith in education is grounded in the well-documented effect that educational attainment has on individual income. A 2014 Pew study found

that the median annual earnings of college graduates aged 25–32 were on average \$17,500 per year more than that of a high school graduate in the same age bracket.

However, we are left with a troubling trend: while educational attainment levels have grown consistently in recent decades, poverty rates have barely fluctuated by more than a few percentage points and wealth inequality has skyrocketed.

What's more, rising levels of average education may actually work to increase economic difficulties. As education becomes more accessible and widespread, the cost of not being educated increases dramatically.

In 1965, median income [in 2012 dollars] for a college graduate was \$38,833 while that for a high school graduate was \$31,384 – a difference of \$7,449 per year. In 2013, the median income for a high school graduate [in 2012 dollars] had fallen to \$28,000, while that for a college graduate had climbed to \$45,500. That same year, the poverty rate among Millennials with only a high school education was 22%, while among college graduates it was only 6%.

This has led many of us to seek higher levels of education simply to remain competitive. We are then often forced to take on student loan burdens to meet the ever-increasing costs of a college education. Combined with large-scale wage stagnation, it's little wonder that students with the lowest levels of educational attainment [and therefore student loan burdens] are those most likely to default on their student loan obligations.

To understand why education has this mixed effect, we need to see why increased access to educational resources at the individual level does not translate into access to economic goods at the societal level.

#### *Underlying Structural Factors Are More Important*

Over 40 years ago, the philosopher of education Thomas Green theorized that increased education [in our type of education system] was ill-suited to addressing our economic problems. His basic argument was this: As a given level of education becomes more widespread, its value as a way to choose between individuals decreases. By the time the last group of people achieves that level of education, it no longer has any economic value. He called this the “group of last entry.”

Because access to wealth almost always means increased access to the highest levels of education, lower socioeconomic groups don't reach a given level until it has been saturated by the upper and middle classes. The lowest socioeconomic groups are always the group of last entry, and so never get the relative benefits from getting there.

This stems from the basic fact that education, in and of itself, is fundamentally unrelated to economic basics. If everyone in the country got a PhD, it would not eliminate the need for janitors and fry cooks, those jobs would be filled from the same populations that they are now, and they would still be making minimum wage.

There's nothing wrong with being a janitor or a fry cook. However, this does show that in the presence of other factors, education alone cannot solve our fundamental economic problems. As long as the underlying political factors that have led to our economic woes remain, we shouldn't expect a more educated and efficient workforce to solve that problem.

But in this last observation we can see a ray of hope for education as a tool for addressing our economic and political problems. Education can be a powerful tool for promoting greater and more sophisticated civic engagement, and thereby bring greater attention and energy to solving our structural problems. However, we are mistaken if we expect business-as-usual education to do the work for us. Instead, we are going to have to fundamentally rethink why we educate.

#### *The Root Of The Problem*

That education is the route to solving all of our problems is plausible precisely because education touches the basic foundations of everything that we do in society. Our education teaches us how to think, how to behave, what attitudes are appropriate, etc. It is the principal organ through which our society reproduces itself.

However, because we view everything through the lens of economic productivity, education's power to address our social problems has been significantly hindered. For the past 30 years we have been obsessively focused on Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics [STEM] education. As a result, all of our effort, money, and resources are directed away from other parts of the curriculum. We end up producing people steeped in the workings of the universe, but with little to no understanding of the workings of public life; people who know how to operate business technology, but not the technologies of our democracy.

Our generation's entire educational experience has been wrapped in the push for STEM supremacy while neglecting virtually every other sphere of education. And throughout, we have been subjected to one of the largest and most profoundly failed experiments in education history: No Child Left Behind and it's progeny [Race to the Top, high-stakes testing, etc.]. It's frankly a miracle we're as politically active and engaged as we are, and speaks volumes to the courage and skill of our teachers.

#### *Where Do We Go From Here?*

In [re]building our education system, we have to return to the question of what kinds of people we want to produce. That can sound scary, but it means nothing more than this: do we want to produce people who are effective and qualified workers and business leaders, or do we want to produce people who are effective and qualified citizens? Importantly, we have to reject the century-old habit of policy thinking that those two are necessarily the same.

Here again, I am reluctant to be much more specific because education policy is extraordinarily complicated. But at a minimum, there are a few things that

plainly have to change.

First, refocusing our educational mission on developing citizenship entails a rebalancing of the curriculum. Not only would we have to place greater emphasis on social studies, but we would have to severely rethink what we teach as a part of that curriculum. Many of us share the experience of graduating high school being able to name Revolutionary War battles and Civil War generals, but without even a basic knowledge of how laws get made [beyond what we learned from *Schoolhouse Rock*], or of how to process basic social science statistics.

Secondly, it would require us to stop being so worried that our children might form an opinion at school. As it is, our education is so sanitized of controversy that it can't connect to issues directly relevant to students' lives. We can make schools a forum where students can engage in the life of the community and develop a robust sense that, as citizens, they have the right, the power, and the obligation to inform how that community develops.

Wherever we end up on curriculum, the most vital and fundamental shift we have to make is to return teachers to their appropriate place in this conversation. Even in the depth of our current educational dysfunction, teachers perform one of the most profoundly important jobs in our society. The teaching profession is the bedrock of our status as a free society, and the way that we treat teachers – low pay, public scorn, perpetual interference, etc. – is a disgrace.

But even more stupefying, we hardly pay any attention to them when we talk about education reform. Education is the only sphere of public life where we feel entitled to speak as experts by virtue of having gone through the system once. Policymakers without any training or experience as educators design reforms with little more than pro forma consultation with educators.

It's rather like a car company CEO deciding to design a car without speaking with any mechanical engineers or auto mechanics. With something as profoundly important as education, this is as dangerous as it is stupid.

Because education forms the habits of mind and action that shape who we are as people, it touches every aspect of our lives. Committing ourselves to fundamental education reform calls us to rethink our fundamental aspirations as a society, and to focus our attention on the institution that should rightly occupy the center of public life. To the extent that we can construct an education policy that is explicitly focused on improving our capacity as democratic citizens, we can permanently alter the trajectory of American politics for the better.

The solutions to our generational crisis are there, and they're within our reach. But all of this is will come to naught if we don't take action and soon.

*Christiaan Mitchell is a lawyer who holds master's degrees in philosophy and education. He lives in Bartlesville.*

# *Gates' Education Plan Failed In Tulsa – Now What?*

BY JOHN THOMPSON

I don't speak billionaire-ese, but Bill Gates' 15th Anniversary presentation on his foundation's education investments seemed to be inching towards a non-apology, concession of sorts.

The weird concept of using test score growth to hold individual educators accountable was apparently born behind closed doors; the seed was supposedly planted by an economist and a bureaucrat who wowed Gates with their claim that test scores could be used in a statistical model that would drive the making of better teachers.

Apparently, Gates was not briefed on the overwhelming body of social science that argued against this hypothesis as a real-world policy.

Gates apparently was unaware that so-called value-added models [VAMs] were "junk science," at least in terms of evaluating individuals, and they weren't intended to make a direct educational contribution to school improvement. He might not have fully un-

derstood that VAMs were a political club to intimidate teachers and unions into accepting market-driven reforms.

The value-added portion of teacher evaluations was no different than *Waiting for Superman*, the teacher-bashing propaganda film promoted by Gates. Corporate reformers used top-dollar public relations campaigns and testing regimes to treat educators like the metaphoric mule – busting us upside the head in order to get our attention.

Now, Gates says, "The early days almost went too well for us. ... There was adoption, everything seemed to be on track. ... We didn't realize the issue would be confounded with what is the appropriate role of the federal and state government, we didn't think it would be confounded with questions about are there too many tests" and other controversies.

Gates complains that school reform is harder than his global health initiatives because "when we come



up with a new malaria vaccine, nobody votes to undo our malaria vaccine.”

Gates, however, would have never tried to invent a malaria vaccine without consulting with doctors and scientists, would he? Even if the goal is creating his vaccine, it would have been subject to objective evaluation using the scientific method.

So, unlike his teacher evaluations, his vaccines aren’t rejected because they haven’t been an expensive failure.

I’ve spent a lot of time – probably too much – analyzing the ways that the quantitative portions of teacher evaluations are invalid and unreliable for the purposes sought by the Gates Foundation, and trying to communicate with Gates scholars. To their credit, Gates-funded reformers typically acknowledged that they promoted the test-driven part of evaluations while being unaware of the way that schools actually function.

In private conversations, I hear that many Gates people now know they were wrong to ignore warnings by social scientists against his VAMs for individuals. They often voice disappointment and regret for their hurried overreach. But they refuse to admit that it was a bad idea to start down the VAM brick-up-the-side-of-the-teachers’-heads road.

My sense is that a primary issue today is the Billionaires Boys Club’s egos, and reformers won’t pull the plug on the high stakes testing until Gates, et al allow them to do so. The recent Bill Gates speech nods in that direction, but it shows that he still hopes to stay the course because ... ???

Gates now says, “Because of its complexity, the relationship to management, how labor is one, you can introduce a system ... and people say, ‘No, we’d rather have no system at all, completely leave us alone.’” While acknowledging that the mass rejection of his evaluations is “a real possibility,” he still wants to “nurture these systems and get it so there’s critical mass” of systems that implement the Gates policies the way that he wants them to be implemented.

As explained by Lyndsey Layton in the Washington Post, Gates said that “too many school systems are using teacher evaluations as merely a tool for personnel decisions, not helping teachers get better. ... ‘Many systems today are about hiring and firing, not a tool for learning.’” He says “the danger is that teachers will reject evaluations altogether,” and “if we don’t get this right ... [there will be] cases where teachers prefer to get no feedback at all, which is what they had a decade ago.”

The big problem with imposing Gates’ ill-informed opinion on schools was foreshadowed by his language. After more than two-thirds of states were coerced into enshrining his risky and untested policies into law, the foundation’s Measures of Effective Teaching [MET] belatedly concluded that effective teaching can be measured.

Of, course, that is irrelevant for policy purposes. The question they should have asked was how will

those measurements be used? Will they undermine the effectiveness of the majority of teachers? Will VAMs drive good teachers out of urban districts, as they also encourage teach-to-the-test malpractice?

I was in the room for several low-level discussions in 2009 and 2010 when Oklahoma was basically coerced into adopting the federal Gates/Obama agenda. I don’t believe I encountered a single educator – then or subsequently – who has classroom experience and who favored the quantitative portion of the system.

We had no choice but to accept the Teacher and Leader Effectiveness system [TLE] which essentially imposed the Colorado teacher evaluation law on Oklahoma. Teachers and administrators recognized the danger of adopting the test-driven portion of the model that could not control for the essential factor of peer pressure.

It was inherently biased against teachers in high-poverty schools, with large numbers of special education students and English Language Learners, and magnet schools where students’ scores have less room to grow. And the idea that Common Core or any college-readiness curriculum could be adopted while holding individuals accountable for test score growth was obviously nutty!

Gates and Arne Duncan gave educators an offer we couldn’t refuse. The best we could do was to kick the value-added can down the road. After other states found themselves bogged down in lawsuits and as it proved to be impossible to fund a program that would cost 2% of the entire school budget, we hoped the TLE’s quantitative portion would be quietly abandoned.

Oklahoma’s Teacher and Leader Effectiveness Commission is now asking the questions that Gates and Arne Duncan should have asked years ago.

The Tulsa World’s Andrea Eger reports that State Superintendent Joy Hofmeister “questioned whether the state can even afford the scheme [the quantitative portion of the TLE]. Secondly, she said she doesn’t want to undermine the success of the statewide system for qualitative measures of public school educators.”

Similarly, Sen. John Ford, the local sponsor of the TLE legislation, is asking the question that Gates should now consider. I strongly believe Ford was misinformed when he was originally told that TLE-type evaluations weren’t “designed as a ‘gotcha’ system.”

But I’m impressed by the senator’s statement, “Things have changed. We have learned. ... We are truly learning, and I don’t think we’re there yet.”

On the other hand, the one Oklahoma district which tried to remain on schedule in implementing the TLE is Tulsa which, of course, received a Gates Foundation “teacher quality” grant. The World’s Eger notes that it “has been credited for helping the district release hundreds of ineffective teachers and identify many more to receive additional support and training.”

Tulsa’s administrator who oversees evaluations,

Jana Burk, echoes Gates's spin: "We don't want quantitative measures to be the fear factor of bringing somebody's [evaluation] score down ... Principal feedback and support and decision-making is ultimately the foundation, but those quantitative measures need to inform principals' next steps with teachers and certainly are supposed to be drivers of improvement and reflection, not a hammer of adverse employment decisions in and of themselves."

So, the Tulsa TLE is a tool for getting rid of hundreds of teachers, i.e. "a tool for personnel decisions." Those released teachers may or may not have been deemed ineffective under the quantitative portion of the TLE, and they may or may not be ineffective in the real world.

Perhaps, in some schools, the value-added portion can be a tool that doesn't interfere with the qualitative portion of the TLE but, in many or most schools, they will be the death of the beneficial part of the evaluation system.

I hope the commission will ask some follow-up questions. Just a couple of months ago, Tulsa's struggle to find and keep teachers was in the headlines. Despite \$28 million of edu-philanthropy in the last seven years, Tulsa's student performance seems to lag behind that of Oklahoma City, where we face bigger challenges with less money.

Moreover, Tulsa was the epicenter of Oklahoma's Opt Out movement, where two highly respected teachers sacrificed their jobs to protest the excessive testing.

Since Tulsa was ranked sixth in the nation in terms of receiving Gates Foundation grants, why haven't the Gates' millions worked?

Tulsa's dubious record should now be studied in an effort to verify Gates' claim that his measures can be implemented constructively. We should ask how many "ineffective" teachers have been subject to termination due to their failure to meet test score targets?

Conversely, how many were flagged by the qualitative portion? How many "exited" teachers were actually ineffective and how many were good and effective teachers who were fed up with the system? Also, how many educators believe that feedback driven by those quantitative measures is actually better than traditional professional development?

Whether we are talking about Gates' teacher training or his malaria vaccine, if they work then they won't be rejected. Why won't Gates look objectively at the evidence about the failure of the quantitative portions of teacher evaluations, and the damage they cause?

*Dr. John Thompson, an education writer whose essays appear regularly in The Oklahoma Observer, has a doctorate from Rutgers University. His latest book, about his experiences teaching for two decades in the inner city of OKC, is titled A Teacher's Tale: Learning, Loving and Listening to Our Kids, and is available through Tate Publishing.*

## PUBLIC FORUM

# *These Things Need To Change*

**BY BILL MOORER**

**I** was born in Oklahoma in the midst of the Great Depression and have observed a panoply of political, social, economic, racial, and religious behavior in these 80 years.

My parents taught me to look for the best in people, and always contribute to improving our common life. I noticed very soon that these values weren't shared by everybody.

So, while still of sound mind and body, I want to put some things on the record which we need to change in our "common life."

- Political lobbying and buying elected officials will be recognized as bribery and will be outlawed. A system for individual citizens to contribute up to \$500 per candidate per election cycle will be in place. No individual businesses may contribute. U.S. congresspersons may serve in appointed government positions after their term of office with no compensation.

- Control of media outlets by just a few corporations will be recognized as a threat to democratic values, and will be carefully regulated to permit many perspectives. The "Fairness Doctrine" will return, and the Federal Communications Commission will have the authority to fine or discipline [or both] any media corporation which permits systematic lying about any person or entity.

- Defense contractors will be recognized as one of the chief influences fostering warfare, and will be closely monitored. The International Court of Justice at The Hague, Netherlands, will monitor and indict warmongers and human rights abusers.

- Apportionment of voting districts in every state will be based solely on equivalent population clusters, not on political party strength or weakness, except for the U.S. Senate, which has two for each state. Any attempt to limit or suppress any voting population or fair election procedure shall be brought to trial.

- Persons found to have contributed to financial and economic recessions shall be brought to trial.

- In the states, legislator compensation shall be tied to that of public school teachers. The names of investors in Charter Schools shall be a matter of public record.

- Religion will no longer be used as a weapon to divide, demean, or discriminate against any believer or non-believer.

- The notion that same-sex marriage harms the tra-

dition of one man-one woman marriage shall no longer have credibility.

- Climate change denial will not be allowed to be used as a cover for corporate air, water or other environmental pollution.

*Bill Moorer served as a United Methodist minister for 41 years across Oklahoma, including five years as executive director of the Oklahoma Conference of Churches with its 16 Christian denominations. He and his wife, Helen, live in Tulsa.*

# Feed My Children

BY SHARON MARTIN

In a free and wealthy country, there should be no pockets of hunger.

In an age of enlightenment, food should provide nourishment, not just taste and calories.

And if we want to survive as modern humans, we should be prepared for whatever the natural world and international politics throws at us.

We shouldn't be dependent on corporations for our daily bread, and we should be prepared if a climate catastrophe occurs. Local food is essential to homeland security.

During World War II, folks at home aided the war effort by raising chickens and growing gardens. This let food manufacturers concentrate on feeding our troops around the world.

There was a reservoir of knowledge about food production and preparation. Cooks may not have had their choice of a dozen cooking shows, but they had mothers, social clubs, and neighbors who taught them what they needed to know.

Every food had a season. Homemakers put away strawberries in spring and dug potatoes in early summer. They canned peaches, tomatoes, and green beans when they came ripe. Fall was for applesauce and cider, for sweet potatoes and winter squashes that would last the winter.

A core of citizens interested in the local economy and whole foods are bringing back some of these skills. Families are gardening with their children. Cooks are filling family pantries. But we need to do more to be sure that everyone is included in this food revolution.

Weather is unpredictable, but climate has patterns. The average date for the last spring freeze in my area is mid-April. Two of the last three years have seen no freeze past mid-March. These two warm springs and mild summers were separated by a May snow and early fall frost.

As a long-time gardener, I see the swings of unpredictability getting wilder.

Now, past the average date for the first frost in my zone, I'm keeping an eye on tomato plants loaded with fruit and think that, in these unpredictable times, when commercial agriculture depends on patterns and abundant resources, we need to make sure we have safeguards in place. Every person needs to know how to feed himself.

If schools are to really address the needs of learners, gardening, hunter safety, conservation, and nutrition should be part of the school curriculum.

As the climate changes, education may save our country as surely as the victory gardens, backyard chickens, and common knowledge helped save the world in the 1940s.

We have to start now.

*Sharon Martin lives in Oilton and is a regular contributor to The Oklahoma Observer. More of her essays can be read at [www.okobsever.net](http://www.okobsever.net).*



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# *The Economic Theory From Hell*

BY VERN TURNER

**N**etflix recently produced a violent series called *Narcos*. It attempted to chronicle the Colombian drug history in a partially fictionalized story about the infamous Pablo Escobar, the man who would assume to be president of Colombia. Not only was it violent in the sense of people shooting other people as if they were midway games at the county fair, but it showed how close violence is to the surface of otherwise decent people.

The rise of the Medellin and Cali drug cartels was rapid and stunning in its breadth as was the control those cartels had over the government of that incredibly beautiful country. Things began to get serious when a Chilean ex-patriot fled the Pinochet purges and set up shop in the jungles of Colombia making powder cocaine from the readily available coca plants growing on the eastern slopes of the Andes Mountains.

Escobar was an itinerant smuggler of anything and everything including marijuana. There was no route or method he didn't know, no official he couldn't bribe to look the other way and no depth of depravity he wouldn't sink to in order to keep the product flowing. Additionally, in the '60s and '70s there was much

less interdiction of smuggled weapons, drugs or other contraband into the United States. What cocaine provided to the smugglers was a whole new economy that dwarfed the previous smuggling activities. How did this come to pass?

The Colombians discovered that the United States provided a virtually unlimited demand for cocaine by a people with plenty of disposable income and a penchant for getting high on a drug that had a stronger kick than marijuana and was somewhat less dangerous than heroine ... or so they thought. Nevertheless, for as much weight as the Escobar operation could deliver to Miami, the demand from the dealers was always for *more*.

More is what they got. Escobar, being an industrious sort, streamlined the cocaine process, upgraded the factories and labs while moving some of them into the city of Medellin itself. He was literally running these labs at 24/7 rates and shipping hundreds of kilograms [Kilos] per week to the United States. A kilogram, by the way, weighs about 2.21 pounds. Not only did the manufacturing of the drug become more efficient and wider spread, the methods of transport had to keep pace with the demand too as well as the

by the late wake-up calls by interdiction agencies in the U.S.

The "War on Drugs" began in earnest in the U.S. and billions of dollars were poured into interdiction and arrests. It was the smugglers at the tip of the spear that received the most attention and endured the most risk. Still, an estimated 90% of the smuggled product made it to the nostrils of American children and adults.

The methods of transport became ingenious and even macabre with women swallowing condoms filled with cocaine before boarding flights to Miami or other American cities from Columbia. Sometimes those "mules" had their cargo burst inside them and killed them in short order. This shocking discovery led to even more attempts to interdict and stop the drug flowing into the country.

The smuggling race was much like an arms race as competing technologies kept leaping past one another. The product, however, just kept flowing.

Many of us have heard about undercover DEA agent Kiki Camarena's torture death while exposing the cartel's operations in Mexico. Rooms filled with American currency shrink-wrapped on pallets showed our government and citizens how large the demand really was.

Escobar, at one time, probably had enough money to run the budget of the entire nation of Colombia ... in cash, billions of dollars in American greenbacks. This was what some cynics called our illegal foreign aid to Third World nations.

The thing is, they were right. The growing of coca became the crop second only to coffee in Colombia. Entire regions were financially and economically dependent on the American demand for cocaine. This demand spread to Europe and Asia as well, but it was the U.S. leading the league in white nostrils per capita.

Rhetorical questions were asked then, and are being asked now, that sound silly and sophomoric. Why do Americans demand so many drugs for "recreational" use? Our kids and adults have more distractions, sports and games to play than any nation on Earth. We lead the league in video games, computer games, professional sports, amateur sports, school sports, school clubs, country clubs, clubs for this and clubs for that. We also lead the league in length of work year. Most other countries allow employees up to six weeks in vacation. We do not. Our people are, on a per capital basis, not that well paid, yet have enough disposable income for games, booze, gambling and drugs.

Why the drugs? Why the need to "escape"? Is just plain reality too much [or too little] to handle? Must we feel out of ourselves to feel whole?

With all the available distractions at virtually everyone's fingertips, why do Americans need to snort cocaine, shoot heroine or deep-fry their brains with methamphetamine? Is it boredom? Are the games too hard to play? Are our people too illiterate to read the

rules and instructions for video games?

Yes, yes, humans have always looked for mind-altering assistance from nature. From mushrooms to peyote to beer to liquor to cannabinoids, humans have looked to mother nature to provide a basis for mind alteration. As we became more sophisticated and knowledgeable, our mind drug inventions followed suit, with concentrated LSD being one of the pinnacles of those discoveries.

The recurring rhetorical question is why? I'm guessing it's all of the above. We are who and what we are, after all. Maybe we see drug-induced trips as mind quests ... or something.

The thing is, most of these drugs can be lethal. The infamous story of the great basketball prospect Len Bias is a perfect example. After being drafted by the Boston Celtics, he celebrated with friends who gave him his first dose of cocaine. It killed him on the spot. Some of these chemicals are not for everyone. Are we trying another experiment in Darwinism to see who can survive them?

Meanwhile, our American drug habit fuels and feeds Third World economies on a basic supply and demand basis. That's the theory of Adam Smith from long ago and it still works today.

The difference is these products are lethal and illegal and the humans manufacturing and transporting and using these products don't seem to care that lives are being ruined or ended because of those economic imperatives.

Would less lives be lost from illegal drug trafficking if we made all this stuff legal? What would happen to demand then? Has legalizing marijuana chilled demand? Nope. What has happened instead is that the government is becoming rich, fewer drug traffickers are dying, the MJ cash cow for drug traffickers is drying up and alcohol abuse is dropping.

Alcohol, one might remember, is legal. It is also involved with over 70% of our traffic and gun deaths in the United States. No such data relates to marijuana use. We might want to re-examine our views on that plant's value to the human condition, before mislabeling it yet again.

If it's about the economics, consider how many billions of dollars are wasted on a failed drug war, and how it could be better used for education, rehab and providing jobs for the poor people who are more susceptible to knock-off drugs that are even more dangerous than cocaine.

Another consideration is the number of generations of our young people who have seen the drug culture become the normal lifestyle in our cities and suburbs and are forever affected by it.

If they think it's "normal" to have thugs, guns and dope around, how will they behave in parts of life where these things aren't the primary environment? Will these kids even know how to trust anyone at all? How will they parent their kids if their own parents were or are part of the drug culture? Is that how de-



# MURDOCH'S ETHICS

## *Secret Records Reveal How Media Magnate Collaborated With Ronald Reagan On U.S. Propaganda Operations*

BY ROBERT PARRY

**I**n February 1983, global media magnate Rupert Murdoch volunteered to help the Reagan Administration's propaganda strategy for deploying U.S. mid-range nuclear missiles in Europe by using his newspapers to exacerbate public fears about the Soviet Union, according to a recently declassified "secret" letter.

Murdoch, then an Australian citizen with major newspaper holdings in Great Britain and some in the United States, had already established close political ties with British Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and was developing them with President Ronald Reagan, partly through one of Murdoch's

lawyers, the infamous Red-baiter Roy Cohn, who had served as counsel to Sen. Joe McCarthy's investigations in the 1950s.

By February 1983, Cohn had already arranged a face-to-face meeting between Reagan and Murdoch [on Jan. 18, 1983] and had brokered a collaborative relationship between Murdoch and Charles Z. Wick, director of the U.S. Information Agency who oversaw U.S. propaganda operations worldwide.

On Feb. 14, 1983, in a "secret" letter to Reagan's National Security Advisor William P. Clark, USIA Director Wick described a phone call from Murdoch in which they discussed ways to heighten European



and American fears about Soviet SS-20 intermediate-range missiles and thus undermine activists pushing for nuclear disarmament. Murdoch said his comments reflected the views of high-ranking British officials with whom Murdoch had talked.

In the letter, Wick told Clark that CIA Director William J. Casey was eager to help Murdoch's efforts by releasing classified satellite photos of the Soviet missiles in Eastern Europe but was confronting resistance from the spy agency's professional analysts.

"Rupert Murdoch ... called me on Feb. 9 [1983]," Wick told Clark. "Senior British officials have been telling him of their increasing concern with the rapid progress being made by the unilateralists," a reference to the anti-nuclear activists who were rallying millions of Europeans to the cause of nuclear disarmament.

"According to Murdoch, the majority of the people just do not understand the SS-20 threat. He asked if we could release satellite photographs of Soviet SS-20s to dramatically stem the rising opposition to GLCM [U.S. ground-launched cruise missiles] and Pershing II deployment. He felt that the delineation of the SS-20 threat graphically could be very persuasive. It would give the press – the friendly press in particular – an opportunity to counter the growing wave of unilateralism.

"I pointed out to Murdoch that I had seen these photographs and they are not comprehensible to the lay person. Murdoch responded that he would commission credible analysts to be briefed here. They could make the photographs understandable to the average individual with circles, arrows, and other enhancements." The next section of Wick's letter remains classified – more than three decades later – on national security grounds.

On the letter's second page, Wick describes his contact with CIA Director Casey regarding Murdoch's phone call to seek the CIA's cooperation in releasing the satellite photographs and making other public relations moves to influence domestic and international public opinion, including "a presidential press conference similar to President Kennedy's during the Cuban missile crisis."

Wick said President Reagan "could present large blow-ups while experts would be on hand to provide explanations in greater detail. Bill Casey agreed to recheck the objections raised by his people when we initially discussed release of the photographs last year. Bill's people still oppose release of the photographs for 'legal and security considerations.' However, Bill said we do not want to be too rigid and protective, given Murdoch's observations and with so much hanging in the balance on the upcoming German elections."

Wick added that he and Casey wanted NSC Advisor Clark to take this "major public diplomacy question" to the Senior Policy Group [SPG] to consider overriding the CIA staff's objections. [Wick's letter was declassified in September by the National Archives

in response to a Freedom of Information Act request that I filed in 2013.]

## **DANGEROUS TENSIONS**

In 1983, the escalating tensions with the Soviet Union over the SS-20s and the deployment of U.S. cruise missiles in Europe led to what became known as "the New Cold War," with Reagan rapidly expanding the U.S. military budget and engaging in extreme anti-Soviet rhetoric.

In a March 23, 1983 speech to the nation about the supposed Soviet threat, Reagan did release a few satellite images but they were of facilities in Cuba and Central America, not eastern Europe and the SS-20s. "I wish I could show you more without compromising our most sensitive intelligence sources and methods," Reagan said.

A CIA historical review in 2007 revealed that the Reagan Administration in the early 1980s was intentionally raising tensions with the Soviet Union, in part, by mounting provocative military exercises near its borders. In response, Moscow raised its nuclear alert levels fearing a possible U.S. first strike, a hair-trigger risk for an accidental nuclear conflict that was not well understood in Washington at the time.

The CIA study reported: "New information suggests that Moscow ... was reacting to U.S.-led naval and air operations, including psychological warfare missions conducted close to the Soviet Union. These operations employed sophisticated concealment and deception measures to thwart Soviet early warning systems and to offset the Soviets' ability ... to read U.S. naval communications."

The Soviets were also spooked by Reagan's harsh "evil empire" rhetoric and weapons build-up, prompting "Soviet officials and much of the populace to voice concern over the prospect of a U.S. nuclear attack," the CIA study said. "Moscow's threat perceptions and Operation RYAN [a special intelligence operation to collect data on the U.S. threat] were influenced by memories of Hitler's 1941 surprise attack on the USSR [Operation BARBAROSSA]."

As a major global publisher with close ties to Thatcher's government, Murdoch saw himself as part of this ideological struggle and volunteered his news outlets to support hardline Thatcher-Reagan policies against the Soviets. Documents previously released by Reagan's presidential library in Simi Valley, CA, revealed the key role played by Cohn in connecting Murdoch with the top echelon of the Reagan Administration.

Both Roy Cohn and Ronald Reagan got their starts in politics during the anti-communist purges in the 1950s, Cohn as Sen. Joe McCarthy's chief counsel and Reagan as a witness against alleged communists in Hollywood. Cohn, a hardball political player, built his reputation as both an anti-communist and anti-gay crusader who aggressively interrogated witnesses during the Red Scare and the Lavender Scare, claiming that the U.S. government was infiltrated by communists and homosexuals who threatened the

nation's security.

Cohn's high-profile role in the McCarthy hearings ultimately ended when he was forced to resign over charges that he targeted the U.S. Army for an anti-communist purge because it had refused to give preferential treatment to one of his close associates, G. David Shine. Though Cohn denied he was romantically involved with Shine – and a homosexual relationship was never proven – Cohn's own homosexuality became publicly known after he underwent treatment for AIDS in the 1980s, leading to his death in 1986.

However, in Cohn's final years, he enjoyed close personal ties to the Reagan Administration and exchanged warm notes with Reagan himself. But, more significantly, Cohn, as one of Murdoch's lawyers, brought the influential publisher into the Oval Office on Jan. 18, 1983, to meet with Reagan and Wick. A photograph of that meeting – also released by the Reagan library – shows Cohn leaning forward, speaking to Reagan who is seated next to Murdoch.

"I had one interest when Tom [Bolan, Cohn's law partner] and I first brought Rupert Murdoch and Gov. Reagan together – and that was that at least one major publisher in this country ... would become and remain pro-Reagan," Cohn wrote in a Jan. 27, 1983 letter to senior White House aides Edwin Meese, James Baker and Michael Deaver. "Mr. Murdoch has performed to the limit up through and including today."

The letter noted that Murdoch then owned the "New York Post – over one million, third largest and largest afternoon; New York Magazine; Village Voice; San Antonio Express; Houston Ring papers; and now the Boston Herald; and internationally influential London Times, etc."

### **FINANCING PROPAGANDA**

Following the Jan. 18, 1983 meeting, Murdoch became involved in a privately funded propaganda project to help sell Reagan's hardline Central American policies, according to other documents. That PR operation was overseen by senior CIA propaganda specialist Walter Raymond Jr. and CIA Director Casey.

By late 1982, the Reagan Administration was gearing up for an expanded propaganda push in support of the president's aggressive policies in Central America, including support for the Salvadoran and Guatemalan militaries – both notorious for their human rights violations – and for the Nicaraguan Contra rebels who also were gaining an unsavory reputation for acts of terrorism and brutality.

This PR campaign was spearheaded by CIA Director Casey and Raymond, one of the CIA's top covert operation specialists who was transferred to the National Security Council staff to minimize legal concerns about the CIA violating its charter which bars influencing the American public. To further shield the CIA from possible fallout from this domestic propaganda operation, Casey and Raymond sought to arrange private financing to pay for some activities.

On Jan. 13, 1983, NSC Advisor Clark noted in a memo to Reagan the need for non-governmental mon-

ey to advance the PR project. "We will develop a scenario for obtaining private funding," Clark wrote, as cited in an unpublished draft chapter of the congressional Iran-Contra investigation. Clark then told the president that "Charlie Wick has offered to take the lead. We may have to call on you to meet with a group of potential donors."

Five days later, on Jan. 18, 1983, Roy Cohn accompanied Rupert Murdoch into the Oval Office for a face-to-face meeting with President Reagan and USIA Director Wick. Nine days later, in the Jan. 27, 1983 letter to Meese, Baker and Deaver – written on the letterhead of the Saxe, Bacon & Bolan law firm – Cohn hailed the success of Murdoch's "warm meeting with the president and the goodwill created by Charlie Wick's dinner."

But Murdoch was also thin-skinned. Cohn complained about what Murdoch saw as a presidential snub when Reagan bypassed the Boston Herald during a late January 1983 trip to Boston. Michael McManus, the deputy assistant to the president, offered an effusive apology to Cohn: "We were all sorry about the confusion surrounding a possible presidential visit to the Boston Herald. ...

"I also called Mr. Murdoch as you suggested, explained the situation to him and apologized for any confusion. I am sure you are aware of our continued high regard for Mr. Murdoch personally and our appreciation of the importance of what he is doing."

Despite Cohn's complaint about the slight to Murdoch, the Australian media magnate appears to have pitched in to help the CIA-organized outreach program for Reagan's Central American policies. Now declassified documents indicate that Murdoch was soon viewed as a source for the private funding.

On May 20, 1983, longtime CIA propagandist Raymond, who was overseeing the "perception management" project aimed at both domestic and foreign audiences, wrote that \$400,000 had been raised from private donors brought to the White House by USIA Director Wick.

Raymond said the funds were divided among several organizations including Accuracy in Media, a right-wing group that attacked reporters who deviated from Reagan's propaganda themes, and the neoconservative Freedom House [which later denied receiving White House money, though it made little sense that Raymond would lie in an internal memo].

As the White House continued to cultivate its ties to Murdoch, Reagan held a second Oval Office meeting with the publisher – on July 7, 1983 – who was accompanied by Charles Douglas-Home, the editor of Murdoch's flagship UK newspaper, the London Times.

In an Aug. 9, 1983 memo summing up the results of a Casey-organized meeting with five leading ad executives regarding how to "sell" Reagan's policies in Central America, Raymond referred to Murdoch as if he were one of the benefactors helping out.

In a memo to Clark, Raymond said the project would involve a comprehensive approach aimed at persuad-

ing a majority of Americans to back Reagan's Central American policies. "We must move out into the middle sector of the American public and draw them into the 'support' column," Raymond wrote. "A second package of proposals deal with means to market the issue, largely considering steps utilizing public relations specialists – or similar professionals – to help transmit the message."

To improve the project's chances for success, Raymond wrote, "we recommended funding via Freedom House or some other structure that has credibility in the political center. Wick, via Murdoch, may be able to draw down added funds for this effort." Raymond included similar information in a separate memo to Wick in which Raymond noted that "via Murdock [sic] may be able to draw down added funds" to support the initiative. [Raymond later told me that he was referring to Rupert Murdoch.]

In a March 7, 1984 memo about the "Private Funders' Project," Raymond referred to Murdoch again in discussing a request for money from longtime CIA-connected journalist Brian Crozier, who was "looking for private sector funding to work on

the question of 'anti-Americanism' overseas."

Raymond wrote: "I am persuaded [sic] it is a significant long term problem. It is also the kind of thing that Ruppert [sic] and Jimmy might respond positively to. Please look over the stack [of papers from Crozier] and lets [sic] discuss if and when there might be further discussion with our friends."

Murdoch's News Corp. has not responded to several requests for comment about the Reagan-era documents.

## MURDOCH'S RISE

With these close ties to Reagan's White House and Thatcher's 10 Downing Street, Murdoch's media empire continued to grow. To meet a regulatory requirement that U.S. TV stations must be owned by Americans, Murdoch became a naturalized citizen of the United States in 1985. Murdoch also benefited from the Reagan Administration's relaxation of media ownership rules which enabled him to buy more TV stations, which he then molded into the Fox Broadcasting Co., which was founded on Oct. 9, 1986.

In 1987, the "Fairness Doctrine," which required political balance in broadcasting, was eliminated,

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OFTENTIMES TRIBUNE  
SOPHANTON, PA  
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which let Murdoch pioneer a more aggressive conservatism on his TV network. In the mid-1990s, Murdoch expanded his political reach by founding the neoconservative Weekly Standard in 1995 and Fox News on cable in 1996. At Fox News, Murdoch hired scores of prominent politicians, mostly Republicans, putting them on his payroll as commentators.

Last decade, Murdoch continued to expand his reach into U.S. mass media, acquiring DirecTV and the financial news giant Dow Jones, which included The Wall Street Journal, America's leading business news journal.

As his empire grew, Murdoch parlayed his extraordinary media power into the ability to make or break political leaders, especially in the United States and the United Kingdom. In December 2014, the UK's Independent reported that Ed Richards, the retiring head of the British media regulatory agency Ofcom, accused British government representatives of showing favoritism to Murdoch's companies.

Richards said he was "surprised" by the informality, closeness and frequency of contact between executives and ministers during the failed bid by Murdoch's News Corp. for the satellite network BSkyB in 2011. The deal was abandoned when it was discovered that journalists at Murdoch's News of the World

tabloid had hacked the phone of murdered schoolgirl Milly Dowler and others.

"What surprised everyone about it – not just me – was quite how close it was and the informality of it," Richards said, confirming what had been widely reported regarding Murdoch's access to powerful British politicians dating back at least to the reign of Prime Minister Thatcher in the 1980s. The Reagan documents suggest that Murdoch built similarly close ties to leading U.S. politicians in the same era.

These glimpses behind the curtain also reveal how these symbiotic – or some might say incestuous – relationships have developed between media magnates and likeminded politicians. Though Murdoch might argue that he was simply following his ideological beliefs – and putting his news outlets behind his political goals – it's also clear that his commitment to right-wing causes proved very profitable as well.

*Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. His latest book, America's Stolen Narrative, can be purchased online from either Amazon or Barnes and Noble. Parry's trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives is available at Consortium-news.com.*

# *Monsanto And Its Promoters Vs. Freedom Of Information*

BY RALPH NADER

**N**ext year, the federal Freedom of Information Act [FOIA] will celebrate its 50th anniversary as one of the finest laws our Congress has ever passed. It is a vital investigative tool for exposing government and corporate wrongdoing.

The FOIA was championed by Congressman John E. Moss, D-CA, who strove to "guarantee the right of every citizen to know the facts of his government." Moss, with whom I worked closely as an outside citizen advocate, said that "without the fullest possible access to government information, it is impossible to gain the knowledge necessary to discharge the responsibilities of citizenship."

All 50 states have adopted FOIA statutes.

As the FOIA approaches its 50th year, it faces a disturbing backlash from scientists tied to the agricultural company Monsanto and its allies. Here are some examples.

On March 9, three former presidents of the American Association for the Advancement of Science – all with ties to Monsanto or the biotech industry – wrote in the pages of the Guardian to criticize the use of the

state FOIA laws to investigate taxpayer-funded scientists who vocally defend Monsanto, the agricultural industry, their pesticides, and genetically engineered food. They called the FOIAs an "organized attack on science."

The super-secretive Monsanto has stated, regarding the FOIAs, that "agenda-driven groups often take individual documents or quotes out of context in an attempt to distort the facts, advance their agenda, and stop legitimate research."

Advocates with the venerable Union of Concerned Scientists [UCS] do worry that the FOIA can be abused to harass scientists for ideological reasons. This is true; for example, human-caused global warming deniers have abused the FOIA against climate scientists working at state universities, like Michael Mann of Pennsylvania State University.

Among other suggestions, UCS recommends the following:

"Universities should clarify their policies and procedures with regard to open records requests, ensure that their employees understand these policies, and

make sure they have considered how they will respond when overly broad requests are used to harass their researchers ...

Legislators should examine their open records laws and ensure that they include appropriate exemptions that will protect privacy and academic freedom without compromising accountability.

"The National Academy of Sciences and other research organizations should provide guidance to legislators and universities on what should be disclosed and what should be protected...."

For more on the UCS positions see <http://www.uc-susa.org/center-science-and-democracy/protecting-scientists-harassment/freedom-bully-how-laws>.

The proper response to abuses of the FOIA is not, however, to advocate blocking citizens or reporters from using the FOIA.

There are countless government and corporate scandals that have been revealed by the FOIA, but here are just two from this year.

In February, Justin Gillis and John Schwartz of the New York Times used documents obtained by the Greenpeace and the Climate Investigations Center through the FOIA to expose the corporate ties of the climate-change-denying scientist Wei-Hock "Willie" Soon, who received over \$1.2 million in contributions from the fossil fuel industry over the last ten years. Soon even called his scientific papers "deliverables" to his corporate donors.

Another area of risk to food and health was revealed by FOIA requests. There are legitimate concerns about the health and environmental perils of genetically engineered crops and food. And the

concerns are mounting. For example, in March, the World Health Organization's International Agency for Research on Cancer [IARC] classified the herbicide glyphosate – which is sprayed as Roundup on many genetically engineered crops – as "probably carcinogenic to humans."

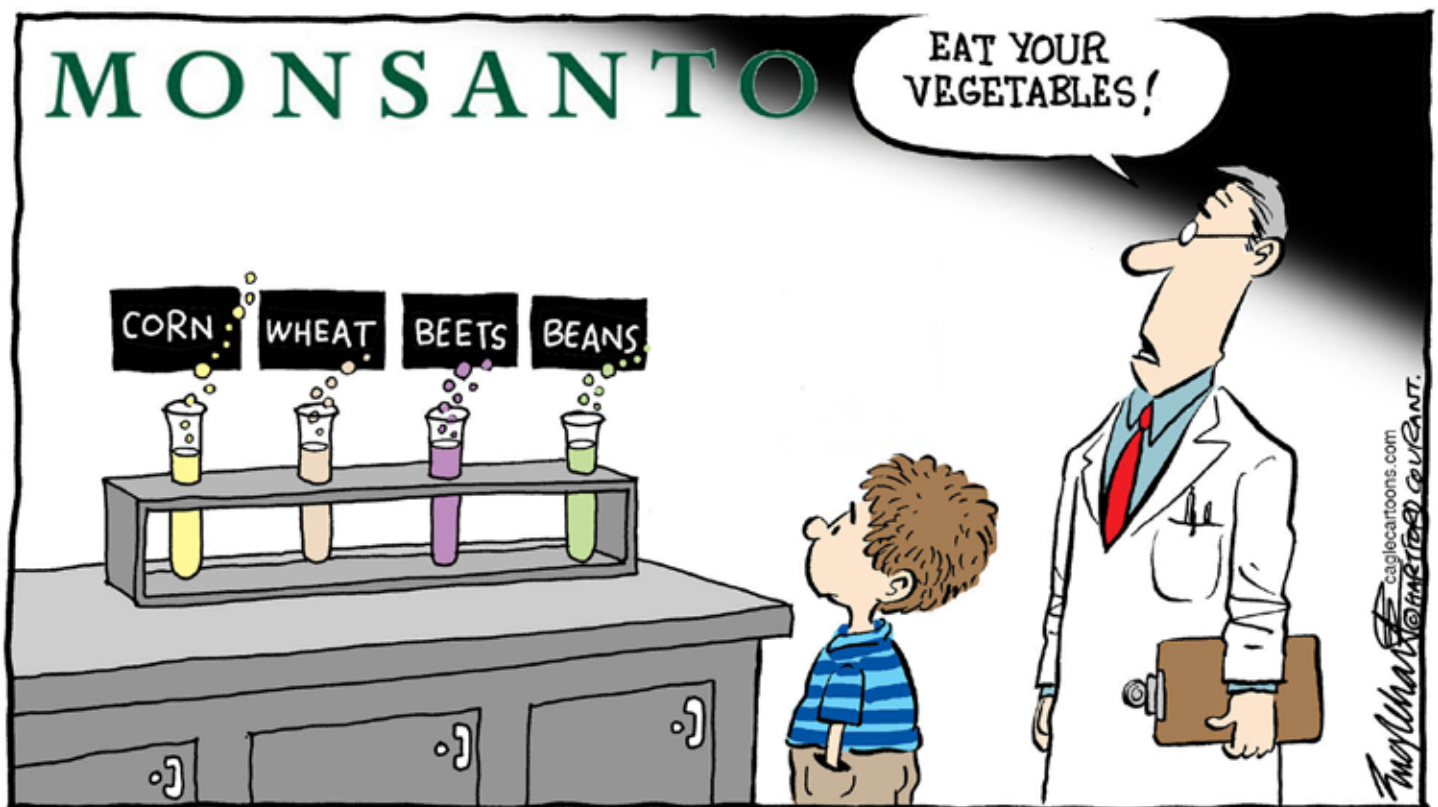
On August 20, in the New England Journal of Medicine, Philip J. Landrigan and Charles Benbrook wrote that "the argument that there is nothing new about genetic rearrangement misses the point that GM crops are now the agricultural products most heavily treated with herbicides and that two of these herbicides may pose risks of cancer."

Another study published on August 25 in the journal Environmental Health suggests that very low levels of exposure to Roundup "can result in liver and kidney damage" in rats, "with potential significant health implications for animal and human populations."

U.S. Right to Know, a nonprofit consumer group staffed by consumer advocates, is conducting an investigation of the food and agricultural industries, including companies like Monsanto, and how they use front groups and taxpayer-funded professors at public universities to advance their claims that processed foods, artificial additives, and GMOs are safe, wholesome, and beyond reproach.

Based on documents that U.S. Right to Know obtained through the FOIA, two-time Pulitzer Prize winner Eric Lipton wrote a front page New York Times article about how Monsanto and the agricultural industry use publically-funded scientists to lobby and

CONTINUED ON PAGE 38



## *What's The Price On Jeb Bush's Integrity?*



**I**f you are a presidential aspirant and you have to tell people that you are a person of integrity – there's a very good chance that you are not.

And those odds at least quadruple if you have to hire a talking head to attest to your honor; how intriguing, then, that a spokeswoman for the Bush campaign was recently trotted out to tell us that, “Jeb’s record, both in office as Florida’s governor and in the private sector as a successful businessman, is one of integrity.”

The testimonial from his paid mouthpiece was necessitated by the still-evolving news story that, after leaving the Florida governorship in 2007, he immediately cashed in on his name, state government knowledge, and contacts. Bush became a richly paid legislative consultant and board member to major corporations that had received lucrative benefits from Florida’s government while he was at the helm of it.

With cynical chutzpah, Jeb, the presidential wannabe, now campaigns as an ethics reformer, piously preaching against the corrupt coziness between money interests and government officials. But in the last eight years, Preacher Bush has pocketed at least \$18 million in personal payment from his own quiet spins through the revolving door of government-corporate corruption.

For example, Jeb was only out of government office for four months when he got a nice sinecure as a board member of the insurance giant, Tenet Healthcare [which just happened to run several of Florida’s private hospitals under Florida’s Medicare program]. In 2006, Tenet was found to have cheated patients and taxpayers with more than a billion dollars in overcharges. To settle this malfeasance, the corporation paid only \$7 million.

Meanwhile, Tenet has gushed in recent financial reports that it has “benefited greatly from Mr. Bush’s extensive background in government service, his perspectives on public policy and social issues.” In heartfelt gratitude, during the past eight years, this one corporation alone has put more than \$2 million in Bush’s pocket.

The Tenet case clearly shows that Bush suffers from a total lack of integrity, but poor ‘ol Jeb seems to also have a terminal case of “Mitt Romney disease” – he just keeps blurting out asinine comments that reveal the fact that, in heart, soul, and political mindset, he is yet another “son of a Bush.”

His inner-bigotry against the poor, coupled with his cartoonish concept of the black community’s political motivation, was outed recently when he was asked how he planned to win the votes of African-Americans.

“Our message is one of hope and aspiration,” he responded. OK, Jeb, go positive, so far so good! But then the deep prejudice derived from his narrow upbringing as a child of privilege surfaced.

His campaign message “isn’t one of division and get in line and we’ll take care of you with free stuff,” he asserted with a sneer. Then, to punctuate his little lecture on how to appeal to low-income black families, the multimillionaire heir to the Bush fortune said he would tell them: “You can achieve earned success.”

Yes, Jeb – instead of hard-hit people lining up to get what you call “free stuff” [like unemployment compensation and health care] – thinks it better to challenge them to “earn” success. Tell them to have the same gumption you did – to be born to rich parents, to be welcomed as “legacy” applicants into the most prestigious schools, and to have their fathers open the doors for them to “achieve” financial and political success.

Yet the former “shoo-in” for the GOP presidential nomination can’t figure out why he’s running fifth in New Hampshire and fifth in Iowa, even after pouring millions into a month-long blitz of TV ads to goose up his appeal.

Such shallowness, callousness, and condescension expose an ingrained contempt for all who don’t live in Bush’s elite zip code. No one but his fellow “one-percenters” wants someone like that in the White House.

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# *How Much 'Free Speech' Can You Buy?*

**I**n today's so-called "democratic" election process, Big Money doesn't talk, it roars – usually drowning out the people's voice.

Bizarrely, the Supreme Court decreed in its 2010 Citizens United ruling that money is a form of "free speech." Thus, declared the learned justices, people and corporations are henceforth allowed to spend unlimited sums of their money to "speak" in election campaigns.

But wait – if political speech is measured by money then by definition speech is not free. It can be bought, thereby giving the most speech to the few with the most money. That's plutocracy, not democracy.

Sure enough, in the first six months of this presidential election cycle, more than half of the record-setting \$300 million given to the various candidates came from only 358 mega-rich families and the corporations they control. The top 158 of them totaled \$176 million in political spending, meaning that, on average, each one of them bought more than a million dollars' worth of "free" speech.

Nearly all of their money is backing Republican presidential hopefuls who promise: [1] to cut taxes on the rich; [2] cut regulations that protect us from corporate pollution and other abuses of the common good; and [3] to cut Social Security, food stamps and other safety-net programs that we un-rich people need.

The great majority of Americans adamantly oppose all of those cuts – but none of us has a million bucks to buy an equivalent amount of political "free" speech.

It's not just cuts to taxes, regulations and some good public programs that are endangered by the court's ridiculous ruling, but democracy itself. That's why a new poll by Bloomberg Politics found that 78% of the American people – including 80% of Republicans – want to overturn Citizens United.

But those 358 families, corporations and Big Money politicians will have none of it. In fact, America's inane, Big Money politics have become so prevalent in this election cycle that – believe it or not – candidates have found a need for yet another campaign consultant.

Already, candidates are walled off from people, reality and any honesty about themselves by a battalion of highly specialized consultants controlling everything from stances to hairstyle. But now comes a whole new category of staff to add to the menagerie: "donor maintenance manager."

The Supreme Court's malevolent Citizens United decision has produced an insidious platinum class of mega-donors and corporate super PACs, each pumping \$500,000, \$5 million, \$50 million – or even more – into campaigns.

These elites are not silent donors, but boisterous, very special interests who are playing in the new, court-created political money game for their own gain. Having paid to play, they feel entitled to tell candidates what to say and do, what to support and oppose.

A Jeb Bush insider confirms that mega-donors have this attitude: "Donors consider a contribution like, 'Well, wait, I just invested in you. Now I need to have my say; you need to answer to me.'"

Thus, campaigns are assigning donor maintenance managers to be personal concierges to meet every need and whim of these special ones. This subservience institutionalizes the plutocratic corruption of our democratic elections, allowing a handful of super-rich interests to buy positions of overbearing influence directly inside campaigns.

Donors at the million-dollar-and-up level are expecting much more than a tote bag for their "generous gifts" of "free speech."

Of course, candidates piously proclaim, "I'm not for sale." But politicians are just the delivery service. The actual products being bought through the Supreme Court's Money-O-Rama political bazaar are our government's policies, tax breaks and other goodies – as well as the integrity of America's democratic process.

To help fight the injustice of the Supreme Court's Citizen United ruling and get Big Money out of our political system, go to [www.FreeSpeechForPeople.org](http://www.FreeSpeechForPeople.org). – *Jim Hightower*

## *Who's Writing The Rules?*

**T**he negotiations and the sales push behind Washington's latest [and biggest] "free trade" agreement amounts to Kabuki theater.

What theater? Kabuki. It's a 17th Century form of Japanese drama, featuring elaborate sets and costuming, rhythmic dialogue and stylized acting and dancing.

That does, indeed, nicely sum up the White House's production of the Trans-Pacific Partnership: Its negotiations have been set in luxury resorts around the world, covered by elaborate secrecy; insiders wear the costumes of global corporate power; trade officials parrot rhythmic dialogue about high standards and incredible benefits for all.

And the president himself is the main actor, dramatically proclaiming that TPP is "the most progres-

sive” trade deal ever, and now he’s doing a stylized political dance in hopes of winning congressional approval.

What a phenomenal show!

But it doesn’t seem to be selling. Recent polls show broad public opposition to any more of these same old trade schemes, not only among Democrats, but independents and Republicans, too.

Ten of the 2016 presidential candidates are against the deal. The counter movement is led by Democratic contender Bernie Sanders, who calls it flat-out “disastrous,” and by GOP frontrunner Donnie Trump who dubs it “a horrible deal.” Even corporate darling Carly Fiorina is “very uncomfortable with this deal.”

Congressional opposition is strong, and even Ford Motor Co. – which was one of the corporate giants allowed inside the negotiations – has blasted it, calling on Congress to vote no.

Inexplicably, Obama views passage of this democracy-strangling corporate boondoggle as his “legacy-making” achievement, even though the only real support he has for it are Republican congressional leaders and the global corporate establishment. That’s not just Kabuki; it’s kooky.

As the old aphorism puts it: “Tell me with whom you walk, and I’ll tell you who you are.”

In Obama’s pitch to get the public and Congress to swallow the glob of global corporate greed known as the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the president has resorted to a tacky bit of China bashing. He recently crowed that, “Under this agreement we, rather than countries like China, are writing the rules for the global economy.”

This bizarre backhanded slap at a major trading partner is meant to tell us that Big Bad China

would’ve written global trade rules to hurt the American people.

Gosh, Americans don’t need enemies like China when we’ve got “protectors” like Obama. Aside from the fact that we and our allies would never agree to such biased rules, even if the Chinese were stupid enough to propose them, Obama’s deceitful assertion contains two self-destructive bombshells, both tucked inside the word “we.”

First, if OK’d by Congress, this TPP scam would offshore a whole new round of America’s middle-class jobs, hold down or even lower U.S. wages, flood our market with unsafe imported food, free Wall Street banksters from oversight and empower global corporations to use private “trade tribunals” of corporate lawyers to usurp our people’s sovereignty. In fact, only six of the 30 chapters of this so-called trade agreement even deal with trade.

How embarrassing that our own president would claim credit for doing such explosive damage to the American people! I’m guessing that even China would not have done worse.

Secondly, Obama’s entire TPP theater is blown to bits by his assertion that “we ... are writing the rules.” Who’s “we”? Were you consulted? Did you even know that a tiny group of unelected people has been meeting in secret for seven years to write “rules” for you, me and 330 million other Americans? In fact, only about 600 corporate executives and lobbyists were allowed to be at the table, writing rules to benefit themselves at our expense.

It’s a disgrace that Obama is acting and even lying for these self-serving kleptocratic corporate powers. To keep track of the TPP and get involved, go to [www.citizen.org/trade/](http://www.citizen.org/trade/). – Jim Hightower

## *Debate Mendacity Even Shocks Conservatives*

BY JOE CONASON

**F**or people who so often accuse Hillary Clinton of lying, the Republican presidential candidates seem to feel perfectly free to bend, twist and shred the truth at will.

Unsurprisingly, that is just what several of them were caught doing in their free-for-all CNBC debate. They prevaricated about themselves, their policies and their opponents, without blinking an eye – and for the most part, they got away with it.

Do nice people tell self-serving lies? Perhaps they do, because it was terribly nice Ben Carson who uttered one of the most blatant whoppers of the evening.

To loud booing from the partisan audience, moderator Carl Quintanilla asked the soft-spoken neurosur-

geon about his long and lucrative involvement with Mannatech, a nutritional supplement manufacturer that has been cited for false health claims for its “glyconutrients.” [How bad was Mannatech? Bad enough to provoke a fraud action brought by Greg Abbott, the former Texas attorney general who is now that state’s very conservative governor.]

“I didn’t have an involvement with [Mannatech],” retorted Carson. “That is total propaganda, and this is what happens in our society. Total propaganda.”

What Carson’s noisy fans probably didn’t know is that this was no “liberal media” setup. The doctor’s decade-long relationship with Mannatech – which turns out to have included a written contract, paid speeches, and a video endorsement on the company’s

website – was exposed earlier this year by Jim Geraghty of National Review, the flagship publication of American conservatism. Following the debate, Geraghty slammed Carson for “bald-faced lies” and “blatantly lying” about his relationship with the supplement firm.

Equally mendacious about his own personal history was Marco Rubio, who “won” the debate according to many observers. When Becky Quick of CNBC asked a predictable question about his checked financial affairs, which have included foreclosures, liquidations, phony expense accounts and other embarrassments, the Florida Senator shot back: “You just listed a litany of discredited attacks from Democrats and my political opponents, and I’m not gonna waste 60 seconds detailing them all.”

Discredited attacks? Actually, Quick’s question was premised on facts that are not in dispute – as even Rubio himself acknowledged in his own campaign book. So frontally deceptive was his response that an outraged Joe Scarborough, his fellow Florida Republican, called him out on MSNBC’s Morning Joe the next day.

“Marco just flat-out lied to the American people there,” Scarborough complained. “And I was stunned that the moderators didn’t stop there and go, ‘Wait a second, these are court records. What are you talking about? ... Becky was telling the truth, Marco was lying. And yet everybody’s going, ‘Oh, Marco was great.’ No, Marco lied about his financials.”

Not incidentally, Rubio also lied about the effects of his tax plan, claiming his tax cuts would mostly benefit lower-income families when in fact its biggest benefits would accrue to the top 1%, as Republican tax schemes almost always do.

Another brand of lie was pronounced by Carly Fiorina, who drew attention at the last GOP debate by insisting she had watched a grisly Planned Parenthood video that doesn’t exist. This time, she reached back to the 2012 Republican campaign to invent a factoid about women’s employment.

Fiorina tries to sell herself as the candidate tough enough to take down Clinton, and tries to prove it by making stuff up. At this debate, she huffed:

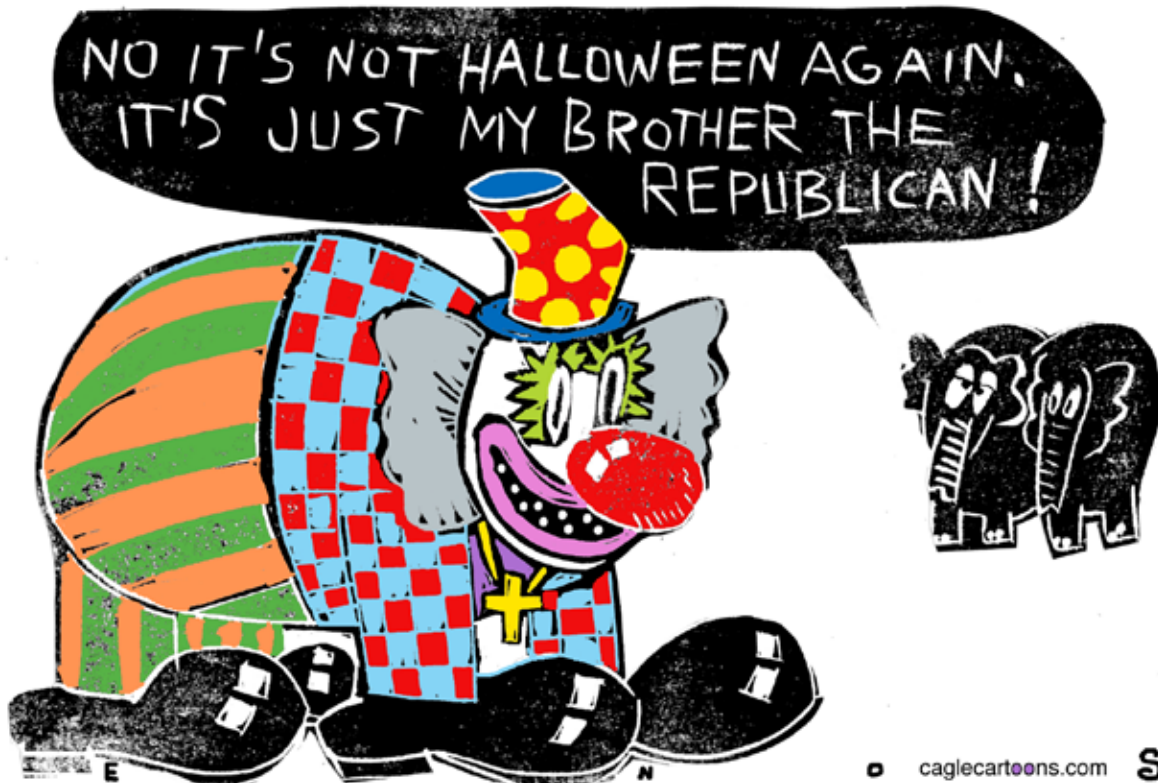
“It is the height of hypocrisy for Mrs. Clinton to talk about being the first woman president, when every single policy she espouses and every single policy of President Obama has been demonstratively bad for women. Ninety-two percent of the jobs lost during Barack Obama’s first term belonged to women.”

But as Politifact quickly established, that statement was false in every particular. Not only did women not lose “92%” of the jobs in Obama’s first term; the number of women employed during the period from January 2009 to January 2013 grew by 416,000. Naturally, as she did with Planned Parenthood, Fiorina angrily repeated the lie when challenged.

Fiorina isn’t the only Republican who doesn’t like being exposed. Rubio ridiculously claimed that the “mainstream media” is really a Democratic Super-PAC. And now RNC chair Reince Priebus has reneged on the party’s debate agreement with NBC News. He and his candidates just couldn’t handle two hours of sharp but thoroughly polite questioning.

They constantly insult Clinton, but how would any of these slippery blowhards survive something like the 11-hour Benghazi grilling she breezed through on Capitol Hill? If you want to understand who they are, just listen to them whine.

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WAYS to PROTEST RACISM and INEQUALITY...

Then



Now



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# BLACK PARENTING MATTERS

*Raising Children  
In A World Of Police Terror*

BY EISA NEFERTARI ULEN

*My child's breath is a freedom song. In. Out. In. Out. In. Out. The rhythmic pulse of air he powers is love, is life, is liberation. In. Out. In. Out. My child is breath. "I am here," his body says with each inhalation. "I am alive," his body offers with each exhalation. Each breath is a life force and each life force is a gift, is Holy. He is Divine.*

*He is more than mere existence. He is complex sinew, meat, blood, mind, matter, running, laughing, playing, smiling, healthy. He is boy in motion, chasing balls, jumping rivers, leaping meadows, climbing trees.*

*He is an idea made flesh.*

*He is a rebellion. A riot. A rage against the machine.*

**A**t a Black Lives Matter protest my son sounded a call: "What do we want?" He also sang the response: "Justice." The drum-beat of our fellow marchers punctuated this question: "When do we want it?" And he knew the answer: "Now." My son is The Revolution. This is why: Twelve million to 20 million African people were stolen across the Middle Passage. About half did not survive the journey.

From 1882 to 1968, there were 3,446 recorded lynchings of black people in the United States. That averages to about 40 people of African descent hanged, sliced, torched, drowned, beaten, hacked each year. That averages to about three to four lynchings per month, which averages to, every week or so, one black body lynched, one black body clawed by white mobs.

To survive this, is to be a revolution, the inheritor of revolution. We are the children of those who survived. My husband, my son and I are their promise song. Because of them, we are here, and our survival is a revolutionary act.

For white people, survival is a daily experience that is taken for granted. For African Americans, survival is a daily act of intentionality and purpose. Survival is a daily ritual black people must perform. Survival is item number one on a daily to-do list.

**I fear police violence, the merciless criminalization of brown boys.**

I am a black woman on a mission. I fear police violence, the merciless criminalization of brown boys. I fear the dehumanization of black people that makes the police so swift in their use of force.

From Jan. 1 to May 30, at least 385 people have been shot and killed by police in the United States. This does not include the numbers of Americans killed while in police custody. Of the victims who were unarmed, about two-thirds were black or Latino.

I fear more than police brutality. I also fear the lies that fuel police terror. I fear the systematic way stories about black people's encounters with the police are twisted and turned by the voice of the state. I fear the way the narrative is controlled by the state so that even our experiences do not belong to us.

I have experienced the terror of state forces circum-

scribing black life. I have witnessed the incrimination of black people, seen the state blame them for their marginalization. We have been kicked down and then blamed for being so low. This I have seen with my own eyes.

Rodney King deserved to be beaten, Trayvon Martin was not crying for help, Walter Scott was threatening the officer, Eric Garner could breathe, could breathe, could breathe ...

Cell phone cameras have offered a kind of counter-narrative to these tales. And we bear witness. We do. We black folk, we remember and tell the truth of what happened, what continues to happen, to us.

My husband and I continue to craft counter-narratives to the prevailing mythologies regarding Black life. My husband and I parent our child as a counter-narrative – as truth. He is brilliant, beautiful, precious, perfect. He is the embodiment of his parents' love. Our love is revolutionary, too. Every whisper I send across his brow tells him this. I tell him, we are descendants of those who chose to survive.

I must ensure that my son lives. Despite the terror that is this state, he must live.

Our ancestors made a choice. It was a decision. As they felt the liquid parts of their own bodies seep into dust, they must have considered taking the machete to their own beating heart, and slicing it. Blood is 7% of the human body. Water, 75%. Tears and sweat drip in droplets, like dew, into dust. Dust and soil and clay and loam. We are the worms turning the soil, churning earth above Earth. Drip. Drop. The self into the soil. Why not burrow underground, sleep, grow the land from the grave? Why not pour the liquid self, the essential self in? This dribble is a trick. Wouldn't the greatest trickster laugh at the sun, pound the chest to move the liquid inside, cut into the self and end this torture?

But my ancestors chose to survive. I know this, because I am here. Our charge from the ancients is transparent, explicit and plain: live.

**I must ensure that my son lives. Despite the terror that is this state, he must live.**

Do not reach into your pockets when stopped by police.

Do not flinch or swerve and do not ever, ever run.

When the police ask for your identification, ask them for permission to get it. Ask them for permission to reach into the exact pocket or bag before you get the very thing that they just told you to get.

Maintain your cool while all this is happening.

Politely say, "Please call my parents, and they can answer your questions."

They will continue to ask you questions. Do not answer their questions. Do not say, "Officer, I was coming from that location or going to that destination." Do not give them any information at all.

Get as much information as you can. Try to remember the officers' names, the street address or cross streets where you have been stopped. If you can, try to memorize badge numbers.

They will continue to ask you questions. Just tell them you cannot speak to them unless your parents are present.

The questions might continue. They might handcuff you and take you to a precinct. There, the questions will become an interrogation. You must only say, "I have to wait for my parents to come to me."

Your parents will come to you. We will find you. In the meantime, remain silent. Know this: We who love you are coming to you.

I do not want to instruct my son in this way. How do

Guiding our child to a freer way of being in the Black Lives Matter era is only the newest iteration of African-American survival. My husband and I refuse to allow anyone to dim our son's light. We refuse to allow the weight and woe of this world to wear him. We insist that he triumph. We insist on his victory. We advocate and challenge and we resist. We resist racist violence. This occupation of the black body will not be his experience.

Our ancestors stole time from their owners to teach young people how to survive. Our grandparents

**My husband and I refuse to allow anyone to dim our son's light. ... We advocate and challenge and we resist. We resist racist violence. This occupation of the black body will not be his experience.**

I free him from the shackles of psychological death, from the death of the mind, and from the shackles of emotional death, from the death of the spirit, as I free him from the oppressor looming all around?

The only antidote, really, is to give him the tools to be fully invested in his own liberation. This means showing him how to write protest banners and discussing the contributions to the freedom movement made by Ruby Bridges and Bayard Rustin, Fannie Lou Hamer and Frederick Douglass.

**Guiding our child to a freer way of being in the Black Lives Matter era is only the newest iteration of black survival.**

To enable his full investment in liberation, we also discuss his contributions to The Movement. We march with the masses in this Black Lives Matter era and show him the line he walks to move us closer to full recognition of our humanity. He is on a continuum, a path stretching through time. We pray that the same spirit that overcame the overseer will live in him and overcome the officers who act like overseers when they police black and brown bodies.

Enabling his full investment in liberation also means exposing him to the teachings and care of others who will not commit micro-aggressions, act on internalized white supremacy and undo our work. We have come this far and refuse to go back. We as a people have come so far.

I held fast to my belly the night Barack Obama became the first black president. Our son rested there, living inside me as we danced in the streets, celebrating. Later that night, my husband and I discussed the wonder of it all, that our child's first president would be a black man. That he would never know life without a black president. That a black president would be normal to him, that a white president would be a diversion from his norm. We became more intentional in our liberation parenting that night. We discussed ways we would parent to freedom.

snatched time from their employers to teach young people how to survive. We take time to do the same. We know saying Black Lives Matter is another way of saying Black is Beautiful. We know our beautiful black son matters.

*Eisa Nefertari Ulen is author of the novel Crystelle Mourning, a narrative that examines the effects of street violence on a young black woman.*

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## *Monsanto*

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 31

to promote its messages and products.

For example, Lipton reported on a \$25,000 grant from Monsanto to University of Florida Professor Kevin Folta, who had repeatedly denied having ties to Monsanto: "'This is a great 3rd-party approach to developing the advocacy that we're looking to develop,' Michael Lohuis, the director of crop biometrics at Monsanto, wrote last year in an email as the company considered giving Dr. Folta an unrestricted grant."

One thing is clear: food safety, public health, the commercialization of public universities, corporate control of science, and the research produced by taxpayer-funded scientists to promote commercial products are all appropriate subjects for FOIA requests.

The use of the FOIA by citizens, journalists, and others to expose scandals is essential to ensure honest scientific inquiry and is critical to developing protective public health and environmental standards. Scientific research should not be contaminated by the inevitable biases and secrecy that come with corporate contracts at public universities.

The FOIA is a valuable tool to help citizens uncover corruption and wrongdoing, and to vindicate our right to know what our own governments are doing.

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# *Are Conservatives Taking Hunters For Granted?*

**BY FROMA HARROP**

The Durfee Hills contain some of the finest elk hunting grounds in Montana. Some 2,700 acres of this majestic country is open to sportsmen, courtesy of the land's owner, the United States government.

But "no trespassing" signs could sprout if two rich Texans succeed in persuading the federal government to give them the hills in return for another chunk of land on their 360,000-acre spread – a parcel providing the only road access to 50,000 public acres along the Upper Missouri River. Both federal properties are overseen by the Bureau of Land Management.

If they prevailed, the Wilks brothers would create a world-class private hunting preserve the size of a small European country. This is not an isolated case. A lot of open space is closing around Montana, Wyoming and throughout rural parts of the West as billionaires and developers vie to shut out the public.

They are getting a helpful push from conservative politicians demanding that Washington dispose of the huge amount of federal land it owns, especially throughout the West. Though these politicians routinely declare love of hunting – all but posing with a moose draped over their shoulders – they are in effect calling for the closing of the land used by 72% of Western hunters.

Republicans in the U.S. Senate, meanwhile, recently passed a nonbinding budget resolution calling on the federal government to dispose of all its land other than national parks and monuments, which are almost entirely off-limits to hunting.

"A lot of politicians are making the claim that these lands are worthless, when in reality these are the lands that matter the most to the average sportsman," Joel Webster of the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership, a group of environmental-minded hunters and anglers, told me.

In a doubled double cross to hunters, the National Rifle Association backs the politicians wanting to close off the land to public sportsmen. Some hunters have told me that they refuse to be NRA members.

The Wilks brothers can play hardball. Their N Bar Ranch surrounds the Durfee Hills, so hunters must fly in, and they do. The brothers put a fence around the BLM land, depriving hunters of the elk that graze on their ranch property.

And they posted armed guards on the old road leading to the Missouri River, a road that was open until 2011. [They're now allowing temporary public access, perhaps to ease local anger.]

"If the BLM caves in," said Don Thomas, a Montana-

based outdoors writer, "it will establish a dangerous precedent that could eventually spell the end to public land hunting and fishing throughout the West."

Some of the politicians tell the sportsmen that federal land taken over by states would be kept open to hunting. That's nonsense, Webster said.

Most state constitutions require that state lands be managed for profit. In Colorado, for example, 80% of state land is closed to hunting. You can't even walk your dog there.

This is the scenario if the land were transferred to the states: The states would immediately complain that there's no money for maintaining it – and raising taxes is against their religion.

"What happens next," Webster said, "is the states identify which lands have the most industrial potential. Then they'll sell the prime real estate lands – the lands with lakefronts and mountain basins – to billionaires and developers. That's how you maximize profit, right?"

About 640 million acres – mostly BLM, U.S. Forest Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service land – is in the crosshairs. Western hunters had better counter this movement to curb federal land ownership – or they may no longer be Western hunters.

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## *Hell*

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 25

mand for a product is perpetuated?

Obviously, there is more to discuss on this topic, but the economics from Hell can't be part of the conversation if humans are going to become worthy of one another in the 21st Century where eight to 12 billion of us will be clamoring for declining resources, food and clean water while our planet warms and fertile soil becomes more rare.

We may want to re-evaluate what our priorities are regarding our self-indulgence fueled by our self-absorption, self-pity and self-destruction.

*Vern Turner lives in Marble Falls, TX and is a regular contributor to The Oklahoma Observer. His latest book, Racing to the Brink: The End Game for Race and Capitalism, is available through Amazon.com.*

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## *When Facts Don't Matter*

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**THE REPUBLICAN BRAIN**  
*The Science Of Why They*  
*Deny Science – And Reality*  
By Chris Mooney  
Turner Publishing Co.  
336 pages, \$25.95

---

BY JOHN WOOD

**T**his book is a well-written manuscript that puts Republicans in the psychoanalyst's chair to fathom how conservatives think because liberals "fail to understand them." I agree with the Financial Times review of this book as an "intelligent, nuanced and persuasive account" of the psychological differences between liberals and, more specifically conservatives, on political behavior that seems poles apart.

Mooney first describes this vast difference between these two world views through *Conservapedia*, where you can find an alternative to *Wikipedia*. He notes that *Conservapedia* seems to reflect the need for Conservatives to have their own "facts."

Andrew Schlafly is the son of Phyllis Schlafly, the right-wing activist who successfully killed the Equal Rights Amendment. While his mother fought conservative battles door-to-door, through newspaper ads, and mailings, Andrew found *Wikipedia*. Andrew became rather incensed to find that *Wikipedia* used BCE ["Before Common Era"] instead of BC ["Before Christ"] to date events in history. He was determined to create his own clearinghouse of "facts," arguing that, "It's impossible for an encyclopedia to be neutral."

What's interesting to me is that because of or despite this debate over BCE, I found that there was a fierce debate among *Wikipedia* editors, who created a place to "tag an article" to debate controversial issues in "Wikipedia: Neutral point of view/BCE-CE Debate" where 63% of editors wanted to stay with BCE. However, if you go to "BCE," *Wikipedia* describes it as "the abbreviation for before the Common/Current/Christian Era [an alternative to Before Christ, abbreviated BC]."

So, there is a compromise favoring neutrality. How-

ever, not for the black-and-white *Conservapedia*, which criticizes *Wikipedia* as "anything goes," as opposed to "neutral" and "collaborative" for *Wikipedia*. *Conservapedia* certainly has a point of view as it is written from an "American conservative, creationist, and Christian Fundamentalist" point of view.

*The Republican Brain* goes further, noting that with nearly 40,000 pages of content, *Conservapedia* includes entries condemning evolution and global warming.

It also takes the contrarian view that homosexuality is merely a choice and associated with mental disorders, and even that Einstein's theory of relativity was hijacked by liberals, including, of course, "President Barack Obama, who [it is claimed] helped publish an article applying relativity in the legal sphere ..."

It seems that according to Mooney, conservatism itself, lacks a sense of openness and objective inquiry. I think this would be backed up by the Big Five Personality Traits test that find that while liberals are more likely to rate high in "Openness to experience," conservatives were more Conscientiousness, which is more of a reliability trait. This means conservatives tend to be a bit lower in "Openness to experience" and, therefore, less open and curious of other realities, possibilities, and alternatives.

This means that shallow explanations, such as those made by *What's the Matter With Kansas* by Thomas Frank, where the business conservatives used the religious conservatives to win elections, are more of the symptoms rather than the cause of the Republican cold.

Disagreements between the two ideologies are apparent today as you watch the 2016 Republican and Democratic debates, but the truth is much deeper with cognitive and psychological factors.

The implications are that if what is “true” is contested on philosophical grounds, it might be really unveiling our deeper needs. For example, conservatism, he argues, tends to focus on supporting political and social stability and resisting change. Conservatives may trace this psychological phenomenon to the fact they are more likely to subscribe to “automatic selective attention for negative stimuli,” according to researchers. This is a positive in detecting danger, but can also create hyper-vigilance.

Mooney finds that both liberals and conservatives have what is called “motivated reasoning.” For example, he elaborates: “We know conservatives tend to be more intense in their loyalty and dedication to their group. And if that group is the ‘Republicans,’ maybe this helps to explain their willingness to double down on certain wrong beliefs that are politically vital to the party. They’re defending their ‘band of brothers,’ so to speak.”

Motivated reasoning is a decision-making that is an emotional strategy to justify certain outcomes to avoid cognitive dissonance, which is where an individual feels discomfort when holding two or more contradictory beliefs at the same time. It can also be when a person is challenged with new information, conflicting with beliefs he or she clings to – even when false – despite overwhelming evidence. Climate change is a great example.

Mooney asserts that when liberals talk with conservatives, the Enlightenment approach of piling on the facts, that the marketplace of ideas will allow the correct ideas to surface, is not going to work with someone who doesn’t share these values. Instead, it is important to try to find common ground, to be respectful, and to understand from where he or she is coming.

We need to be open to being wrong to combat motivated reasoning. It reminds me of what you hear in Alcoholics Anonymous – the first step is to admit you are an alcoholic. You have to admit that

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you could be wrong.

Mooney says he combats motivated reasoning by checking his facts repeatedly, strives for accuracy, and is familiar with counter-arguments.

Mooney’s well-written book is a compelling one that examines

how and why Republicans can be so bewildering to liberals and vice versa.

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



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## PLENTY LADYLIKE

*A Memoir*

*By Claire McCaskill*

*Simon & Schuster*

*272 pages, \$26*

---

BY WANDA JO STAPLETON

**P**lenty *Ladylike* is a candid memoir in which U.S. Sen. Claire McCaskill, D-MO, tells her own story to “inspire other women and help women get comfortable with the rough and ugly side of modern political campaigns, to fight in the no-holds-barred races that will give them their fair share of power in our democracy.”

### EXCEPTIONAL PARENTS

For starters, Claire's parents encouraged her boundless ambition. Her father gave her permission to be bossy and opinionated. He also gave her a copy of John F. Kennedy's book *Profiles in Courage* for Christmas.

Her mother emphasized that women can do anything that men can. That belief encouraged her mom to campaign for the Equal Rights Amendment and to win a seat on the local City Council.

This background helped form Claire's character which comes across so clearly in this book.

### COMBATING SEXISM

Driven, Claire knocked on 11,432 doors in her zeal to become a state representative in Missouri. Along the way she encountered a middle-aged man, who said: “You're too young. Your hair is too long. You're a girl. No way are you tough enough for politics. Go find yourself a husband.” Then he slammed the door in her face.

Undaunted, she won the race and became a state representative.

After her third term as a state representative, she quit and got a job in the Jackson County prosecuting attorney's office, where she was again subjected to sexist behavior from men with whom she worked.

Her well-known and very powerful opponent in a major trial coming up in six weeks was seated in a conference room of the courthouse one day when Claire walked in to take a deposition from one of her witnesses.

This powerful opponent said, “Honey, get me two yellow pads, a pencil, pen, and a red marker. Also get me a cup of coffee while you're at it.” She graciously complied, but “worked her tail off” on that trial.

She became “a tiger in the courtroom” and got a guilty verdict. How sweet it was to prove that she was neither that guy's honey nor his secretary.

### 'LEGITIMATE' RAPE

U.S. Rep. Todd Akin was Claire's opponent in 2012. During the campaign, he said, “A woman who is legitimately raped generally does not become pregnant because her body shuts down.” This was his explanation about why he was against abortion, even for rape – in other words, against a woman's ability to control her own body and make her own choices.

Akin made other outrageous statements. For example, he said that Claire was more “ladylike” when she ran six years earlier against another guy. In contrast, she had been “very aggressive” with him in their debate.

“Unladylike” is just another word used to stifle, limit, or marginalize women, a slyer way to keep a woman in her place.

According to Claire, we must redefine “ladylike” to mean “speaking out, being strong, taking risks, taking charge, and changing the world.”

It is through the resulting power that we will be able to provide safe and affordable day care, achieve equal pay for equal work, provide preventive health care, make contraception available and affordable, and make sure we have a secure retirement.

What a remarkable woman who lives in our neighboring state of Missouri.

*Wanda Jo Stapleton represented south Oklahoma City in the state House from 1986-96.*

---

## 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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NORMAN: Sunday morning. Call 405.321.7971

KAIAMICHI WORSHIP GROUP (SE OK): Monthly.  
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what might be described as a Back to the Future strategy – exploiting environmentally friendly rail travel in a high-tech digital age. No doubt their views are skewed by the immense political power of the state's energy industry and highway contractors.

Oklahoma now must decide whether it's willing to make the investment now, when it's less expensive, or later, when construction and land acquisition costs will be higher.

There are leaders in Tulsa and Oklahoma City that get it. They know this could usher in a new, more prosperous economic age for Oklahoma, making the state even more attractive for investment and relocation.

At the moment, what's most important is to protect the Heartland Flyer, serving about 80,000 passengers a year. Texas and Oklahoma transportation officials already approved next year's operating agreement. The details aren't yet public, but it's expected Oklahoma's investment will be around \$6 million.

With our lawmakers in full panic mode about next year's budget – a \$1 billion-plus hole is projected – they undoubtedly will be tempted to cut things like the Flyer. They must not be allowed to do so.

## *Separation Anxiety*

Why do Gov. Mary Fallin and Attorney General Scott Pruitt refuse to grasp the genius of Thomas Jefferson's separation of church and state?

Fallin continues to wail over the court-ordered removal of the Ten Commandments from the state Capitol grounds, now urging the Oklahoma Constitution be rewritten to permit its return.

And Pruitt wastes time, ink and paper with an official opinion that sanctioned public prayer at high school sporting events is legal, despite U.S. Supreme Court rulings to the contrary.

This isn't simply politics as usual in a state that regards itself as a buckle on the Bible belt. This theocratic approach to governing threatens the very fabric of America's pluralistic society.

It's also opposite of what the Founding Fathers wanted for America – freedom *of* and *from* religion.

Fallin and Pruitt sing from the Faux News hymnal – that a War on Christianity rages across America.

"America will cease to be great if America continues to take God out of our country," Fallin declared at evangelist Franklin Graham's recent OKC crusade. "Christians are being persecuted, even when we want to put our own Ten Commandments at the state Capitol."

Persecuted? With thousands upon thousands of Christian churches operating freely in towns across

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## TOM AND SHERRI GOODWIN

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Oklahoma?

Fallin's rhetoric is inflammatory and unbecoming the state's chief executive.

Pruitt rejects the U.S. Supreme Court's ban on organized, official prayer at athletic contests, opining that students fairly selected to speak are free to include a prayer, if they so choose.

Imagine if a Muslim student handed the microphone suddenly veered into prayer. Or an atheist offered a homily on the inanity of religion. Pruitt's head would explode.

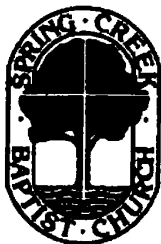
Despite what Fallin's and Pruitt's rhetoric suggests, Christianity is alive and well in the American public square. There is prayer each day when the Legislature convenes. Students often gather for prayer in public schools. And football players routinely kneel at midfield for prayer once the final horn sounds.

The Culture War is so yesterday. It is way past time Oklahoma's elected leaders devoted themselves to real, not contrived issues.

## Spring Creek Baptist Church

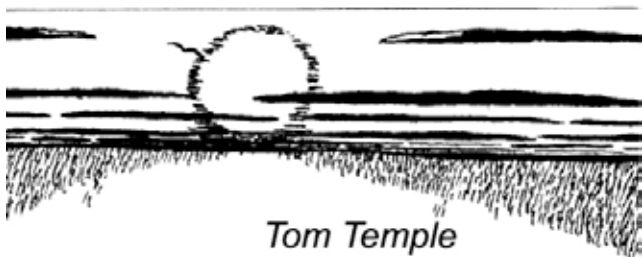
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Veterans who have  
served us well ...**

**... then take time to  
serve the Thanksgiving feast!**



## Observerscope



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

**Laurel:** To Senate President Brian Bingman and Sen. David Holt, promoting SJR 30 that would limit lawmakers to budget-only sessions in even-numbered years – a sure-fire way to limit “goofy ideas,” as Holt puts it.

Gov. Mary Fallin’s spokesman Alex Weintz is joining OKC-based FKG Consulting, a public affairs-government relations firm. He’s been part of Fallin’s team since 2007 when she served in Congress.

**Dart:** To U.S. Chamber President Tom Donohue, claiming Democrats are moving “to the far, far left.” Likely nominee Hillary Clinton is a centrist. It’s GOP presidential wannabes making a mad dash to the political fringe.

Two more high profile state government departures: Darrell Weaver is retiring as state narcotics bureau director and Anita Trammell as Oklahoma State Penitentiary warden.

Generosity rewarded: Profits and revenue growth jumped 100% in the six months after Gravity CEO Dan Price announced a \$70k base wage for his payments company’s workers. – Time

Hmmm. Sixty-five percent of Americans age 40-59 say they expect to be more active at 60-plus than their parents. Fifty percent of the respondents also say they are missing something in their lives. – AARP

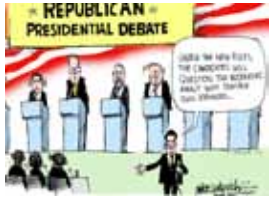
Higher education? A Cornell graduate student allowed bees to sting him 200 times to determine if stings hurt worse on some parts of the body than others. We could have saved him the pain – they all hurt!

**Quotable:** “I want young women to see themselves as candidates ... All you have to do is figure out what you’re going to run for first, and then what you’ll run for next, and then next, and then you’re president of the United States.” – Sen. Claire McCaskill, D-MO

The American Academy of Pediatrics won’t seek a ban on tackling in youth football, but urged players be taught to tackle with the shoulder, not the head. It also recommends zero tolerance for head-first hits. – Time



# Letters



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 4

Now we're experiencing low gas prices, which drivers certainly appreciate. But that also means that Oklahoma gets less revenue from oil production in the state than it did when prices were higher. So state lawmakers now have less money available to appropriate. In fact, we're now in a budget crisis.

Should that really have come as a surprise to anyone? Apparently Fallin and the other R's couldn't, and can't, make that simple connection.

It's time for Oklahomans to wake up. Let's vote out the tax-cutters-for-the-wealthy and vote in people who understand basic economics and have the courage to tell voters what we need to hear: that fairness in taxation [yes, even if that means raising some people's taxes] is essential to a healthy, thriving, successful state.

Elbert and Marion Hill  
Durant

Editor, The Observer:

Oklahoma Gas & Electric wants to stop the growth of solar and wind energy to protect its monopoly and stop homeowners from lowering their utility bills. The company's latest proposal to the Oklahoma Corporation Commission would unfairly add new demand charges – in addition to energy, fuel and customer charges – to the bills of customers who have distributed solar or wind installations.

OG&E wants to base charges on the highest level of use within a month, no matter how much energy the homeowner actually uses during that time period.

Families would face higher and more unpredictable utility bills. New fees would undermine any savings.

OG&E says its full service customers are subsidizing customers with rooftop solar panels or small wind turbines, but doesn't show any proof to back up that claim.

Actually, solar energy benefits all ratepayers by reducing the need for new power plants and other expensive infrastructure.

OG&E's proposed fees are discriminatory and intended to discourage homeowners from purchasing solar or wind systems.

Renewable wind and solar energy is homegrown. It creates steady jobs in our communities. It does not cause earthquakes, waste and pollute precious water, or make people sick with respiratory illnesses and other diseases.



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OCC should say no to OG&E's request for discriminatory fees. It's not fair to punish homeowners who generate their own clean energy by forcing them to buy dirty energy from a utility monopoly with no other competition in the free market.

Red Goldfarb  
Yukon

Editor, The Observer:

Republican leaders in Nebraska got legislation introduced and passed to abolish the death penalty there. They made three telling arguments against capital punishment.

- It wastes millions, because it costs more than life without parole.
- It risks executing innocent people, because convictions are rarely 100% certain.
- It violates pro-life principles, because pro-life advocates should not be about killing people.

Others assert that the death penalty is applied unfairly with regard to race and economic status. Only about one in 100 murders results in a death sentence, so those who get death are usually poor people or people of color.

Tell state senators and representatives that it's time to stop killing people who kill people to show people that killing people is wrong.

Nathaniel Batchelder  
Oklahoma City

Editor, The Observer:

In a front-page story, with picture, the Norman Transcript on Oct 26 featured state Rep. Scott Martin, R-Norman. In the story, Martin professed to be concerned about funding for education.

Let's look at the record. For the coming fiscal year, Oklahoma faces a large budget shortfall. Yet, a cut in the top personal income tax rate will continue.

This policy continues an effort by the Republican governor and the Republican Legislature to reduce taxes for the wealthy. Beginning in 2007, Oklahoma began the process of cutting personal income taxes. At that time, the top rate was 6.65%; it's now down to 5%.

The result, of course, is funding shortfalls for public services, including education. For example, between 2008 and 2015, Oklahoma cut funding per student K-12 by some 23.6%, one of the largest reductions in the country. In 2015, for the second year in a row, the state led the nation in the percentage of per-student spending cuts.

Despite paying lip service to the importance of education, the ongoing effort to cut taxes is a high priority of Republican legislators.

Rep. Martin certainly goes along for the ride. I have no data on Martin's voting record, but there seems little doubt that he voted for all the recent tax cuts. If not, he needs to make that clear.

Isn't hypocrisy the term for saying one thing while doing another?

It's time for those citizens who truly believe in education to reject these hypocrites who say they favor education but then vote to reduce the necessary funding.

David R. Morgan  
Norman

Editor, The Observer:

The Boren education tax would be a woolly-booger for this grandma, grandpa and our dog, Brownie.

We are living on our Social Security and Medicare with supplement plan F.

With his one-cent sales tax increase, University of Oklahoma President David Boren would raise the cost of everything we buy at Save-a-Lot.

Has Boren bought a dozen eggs lately?

Pish posh. Horsefeathers. Hogwash. Oklahoma is sixth highest nationally in combined average local and state sales tax rates, 8.77%.

Sitting on the board of a big oil and natural gas producer, Continental Resources, Boren has become too rich to remember what it was to be poor like Aunt Millie and Uncle John, a welfare couple from the forks of the creek.

I prefer the remedy for the state's education crisis proposed by Tulsa billionaire and philanthropist George Kaiser.

"Raise my taxes," says Kaiser.

"Oklahoma is in desperate financial circumstances. A higher tax on oil and gas production would help the state pay for education and much needed infrastructure improvements. I am one of the most significantly affected by higher Oklahoma energy taxes."

Since they are both in the oil business, Boren should take his cues from Kaiser instead of the J.R. Ewings.

Virginia Blue Jeans Jenner  
Wagoner



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homemade candles & soaps, African carving,  
Central American fabrics & goods, organic coffee,  
jewelry, T-shirts, bumper stickers, buttons

Booths and Tables of Social Justice Organizations

Live Music and Entertainment All Day

Supervised Children's Area



Sponsors include: The Peace House ☰ Bob Lemon ☰ Oklahoma Observer ☰ Kay Adair ☰  
Home Creations ☰ Social Justice Committee First Unitarian Church

MORE INFO: [PEACEHOUSEOK.ORG](http://PEACEHOUSEOK.ORG)