

THE OKLAHOMA Observer

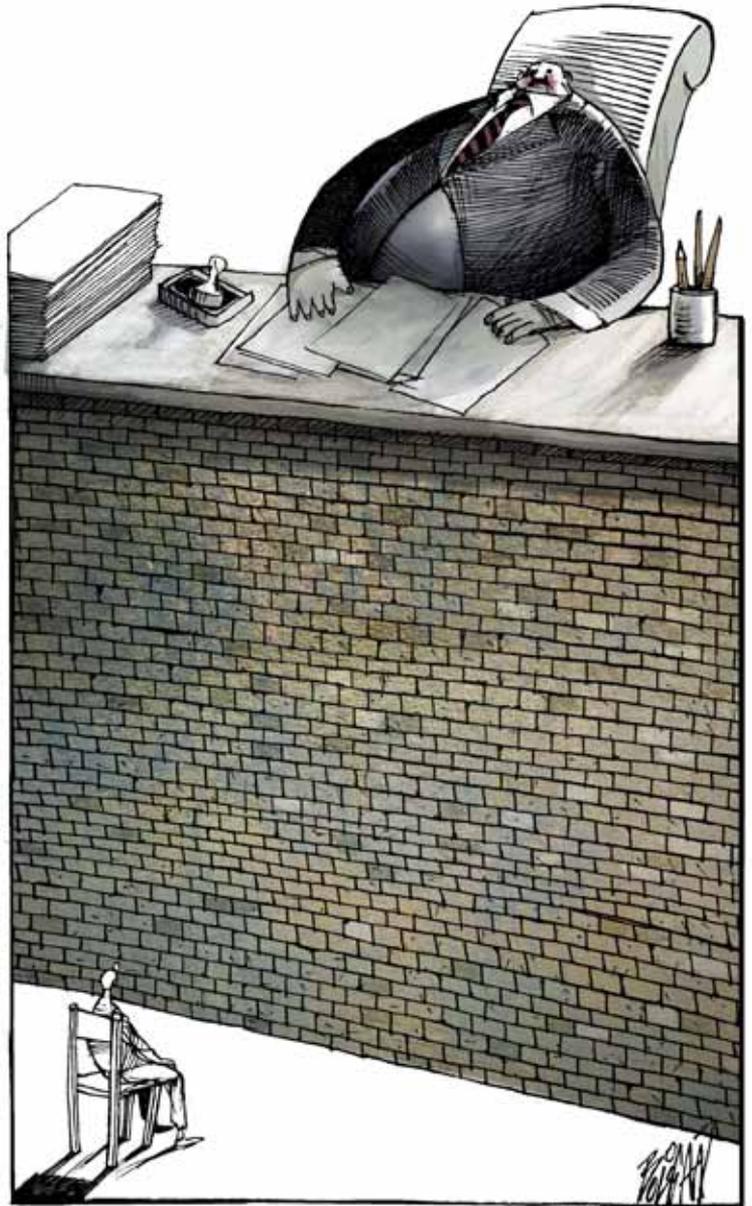
• AN INDEPENDENT JOURNAL OF COMMENTARY •

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EMPIRE STATE

*No, Not New York.
It's 2019 Oklahoma,
Where Statehouse
Leaders Managed To
Expand Their Powers
But Squandered
Opportunities To
Help Workaday
Oklahomans.*

Special Report begins on page 6



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OUR MOTTO

To Comfort the Afflicted and Afflict the Comfortable.

OUR CREDO

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

FOUNDING PUBLISHER

Helen B. Troy [1932-2007]

FOUNDING EDITOR

Frosty Troy [1933-2017]

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LETTERS TO EDITOR

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Observations

Fat Cat Feast

One late session week served as a microcosm of the current State of the State.

Without warning, Gov. Kevin Stitt vetoed two measures that really could have helped workaday Oklahomans – an especially dispiriting turn of events given that both easily won legislative approval.

First, the governor nixed HB 2465, which would have mandated overtime pay for state employees earning less than \$31,000 a year.

Some might think this is no big deal – just award them comp time instead. Well, that's been the practice. But it isn't working. Why? Many state agencies are woefully short-staffed after years of across-the-board budget cuts. That means fewer workers struggling to manage heavier workloads.

Exhibit A: Correctional officers.

Over-capacity prisons are operated by staffs so lean the state would have to release 12,000 inmates to match the national guard-to-inmate average. Correctional officers [starting pay: \$13.74 an hour] often are forced to work double shifts – no one is available to spell them.

Recoup your overtime with time off? When? In your next life?

With state workers' salaries largely frozen for a decade, the overtime pay mandate was the least state policymakers could do. A token of gratitude for keeping the Ship of State afloat during ferocious budget storms.

Lawmakers wholeheartedly endorsed the bipartisan measure – authored by Democratic Rep. Jason Dunnington and Republican Sen. Paul Rosino, both of OKC – 75-19 in the House, 41-2 in the Senate.

Sadly, Stitt prioritized policy over people. In his veto message, he essentially called for more study – insisting the state should first “develop uniform across-the-board” compensation policies.

It's no doubt easier to kick the can down the road when taxpayers are providing your housing, security detail, and \$147,000 annual salary

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THE OKLAHOMA
Observer

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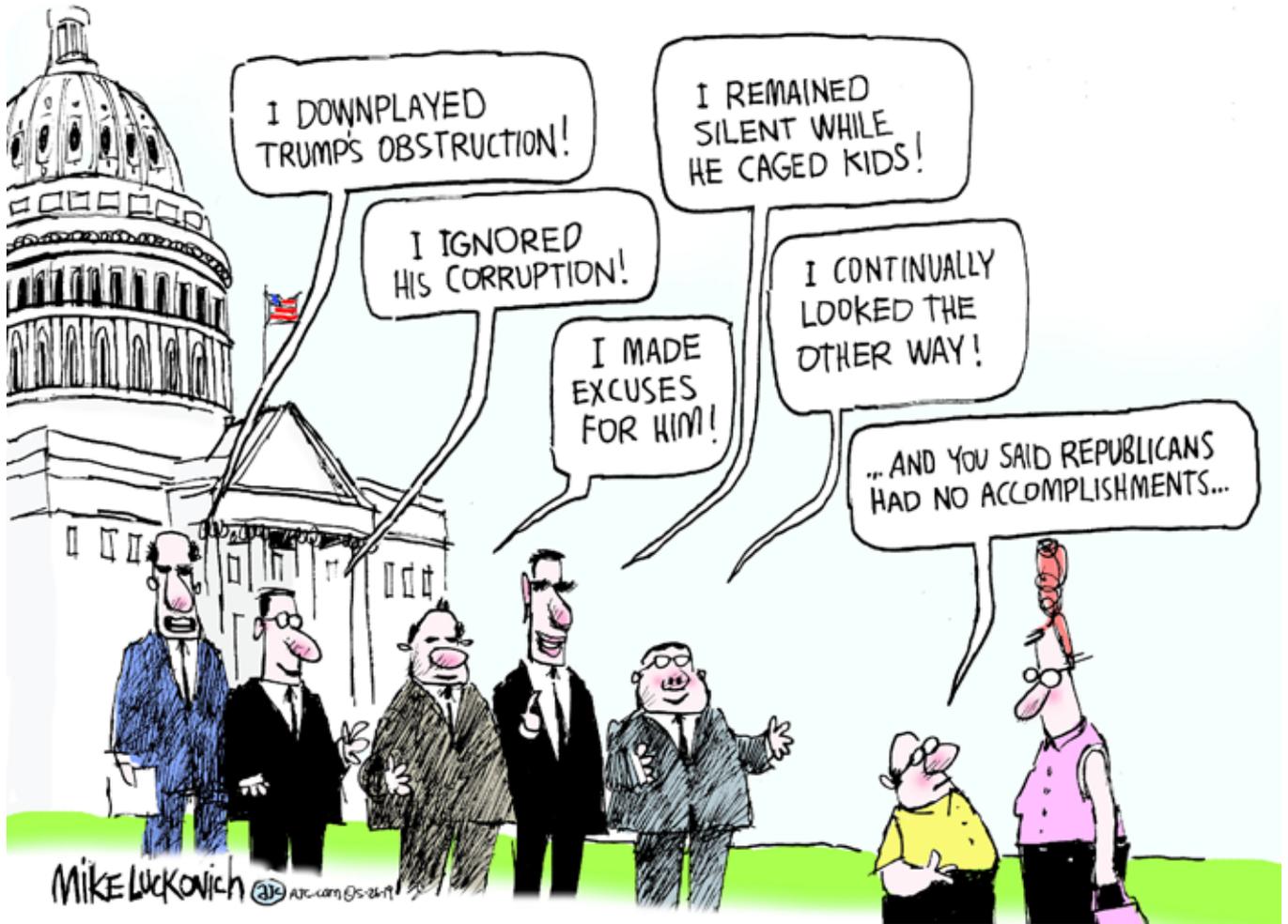
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Observerscope



Don't miss June 13's Newsmakers, wrapping up the 2019 session with two of Oklahoma's sharpest political minds: former Gov. David Walters and longtime House Democratic Leader Scott Inman. See back cover for details.

Dart: To statehouse leaders, claiming fiscal conservatism while expanding their empire. The new Office of Fiscal Transparency costs \$1.7 million and duplicates the Agency and Accountability Commission lawmakers created last year.

Bad News for House D's: South OKC Rep. Shane Stone won't be seeking a fourth term. Don't be surprised if R's pour big bucks into the working class district, hoping to stem Democrats' urban momentum.

Laurel: To Oklahomans for Equality's Toby Jenkins, honored by NBCNews.com as one of America's Pride Month Top 50 changemakers, innovators, rising stars and LGBTQ movement veterans. Well deserved!

Third wettest May on record inflicted at least \$2 million in damage on the state's roads and bridges. At one point, 65 roadways were closed because of weather-related issues.

Speaking of bridges, Oklahoma's are the nation's third worst – 11% of 23,116 in poor condition, according to federal data. Rather than address a pressing problem, Gov. Stitt demanded \$200 million be deposited into savings – now \$1 billion-plus. Penny wise, pound foolish.

Congratulations to Chuck Hoskin Jr., newly elected Cherokee Nation principal chief, continuing his family's legacy of public service. His father, former 12-year Cherokee Tribal Council member and six-term Rep. Chuck Sr., now is Vinita mayor.

Three African American women – Christine Byrd, Sheri Dickerson and Alicia Andrews – are vying to become state Democratic chair at June's convention in OKC. Current chair Anna Langthorn declined to seek a second term.

Dart: To the Koch-funded aristocratic wannabes at the Oklahoma Council of Public Affairs, fighting to torpedo the Medicaid expansion initiative. Shameful indifference to the least among us.

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Letters



Editor, The Observer:

Re: Virginia “Blue Jeans” Jenner’s statement [Letters, May 2019 Observer] that she won’t vote for Joe Biden because of his mistake in the Anita Hill case ...

Grow up, girl! That’s not the dumbest thing Biden ever did, but he has grown and learned and served us well.

When push comes to shove [the 2020 election] you may be thinking – as many good Democrats are – that Kamala Harris or Pete Buttigieg would make a better president. But the important word here is “electability.” We live in a racist, sexist, angry country and we will vote for whoever Democrats decide has the best chance of defeating Donald Trump.

So, unless you just have a masochistic need to hold on to old grudges, if Joe Biden gets the nomination, you will vote for Joe Biden. Anita Hill will, too. She’s a smart and practical woman who forgives and understands reality.

Fran Morris
Oklahoma City

Editor, The Observer:

Impeachment is not wrong-head-

ed given that Trump has declared *total non-cooperation* with the House of Representatives regarding response to subpoenas or providing *any* information requested by the Democrats regarding his presidency! Trump’s behavior runs absolutely counter to the constitutional right for the HOR to “check” the president. Unfortunately, the Democrats now have all of their stakes misplaced in the slow moving courts, a process that will likely “run out the clock” in 2020.

Since Trump has completely “stonewalled” all information, the only logical path to digging out the truth lies in the impeachment process. It’s immaterial that conviction is out of the question given the highly partisan Republican Senate. What matters most is that all the facts will be laid on the table for voters to digest while senators will be forced to “show their hand.”

Of course, the “loyal 40%” will side with Trump no matter the facts. Nevertheless, the “honest thinking segment” of our voting population will recognize the folly of allowing this despot to retain the office. A wave of first-time voters,

most especially women, people of color and the 18-31 segment, who have the most to lose with the ominous possibility of a second term for this incumbent, will certainly vote this man out.

“Hate” has definitely run its course!

Frank Silovsky
Oklahoma City

Editor, The Observer:

America has been hoisted on its own legal petard by allowing a *policy* of the Department of Justice to not indict or charge a sitting president of a crime to take the place of a law passed by Congress. This *policy*, in effect, of immunity from judicial review, has *never* been tested in an appropriate court of law. To me it *proves* that a president when supported by a majority of his party in the Senate and by five reliable votes on the Supreme Court *is above the law*.

Most American voters who support Trump-hole will not understand, nor wish to admit to understanding, this very open and direct evidence waving in our faces that once again Trump-hole has weaseled and squirmed his way out of still another jam in his lifetime of dissembling and lying by purchasing the loyalties of flunkies and minions who circumvent the laws of justice and pervert the decencies of civil society while he lines his pockets with money harvested from his business toadies.

I predict Trump-hole’s supporters will rally at the 2020 election to make sure no chicanery with the Electoral College will be necessary to assure him of a second term that will justify in his mind anything that he does will be approved and applauded even as those same supporters descend further into the economic quagmire brought about by their supreme leader’s wars of both military actions and trade tariffs.

He’s no stable genius – all he

CONTINUED ON PAGE 45



Putting Self-Interest Ahead Of Public Interest

When it came time this session to put public interest ahead of self-interest, the Oklahoma Legislature failed – yet again.

For the second consecutive year, lawmakers nixed a State Ethics Commission proposal that would have established a two-year “cooling off” period before outgoing elected officials could lobby their former colleagues.

Sadly, it wasn’t even close – the Senate voting 35-8 and the House 65-29 against efforts to minimize any temptation for term-limited legislators to audition for more lucrative, post-officeholder gigs as lobbyists.

This isn’t cynicism, writ large. It’s reality enough that most other states – including five of our six neighbors – already have imposed such restrictions.

Here’s why: It’s hardly comforting to know the people’s representatives – ostensibly impartial arbiters of public policy – could be on the state payroll one session, then serving as hired guns for special interests the next.

To whom are they loyal?

As Oklahoma City Rep. Shane Stone, who supported the two-year ban, put it, “We shouldn’t be casting our vote for ourselves ... but for the greater good” – careful to avoid even the appearance of “any wrongdoing.”

Stone, in fact, argued it was “such a high privilege” to serve in the Legislature that “we should be willing to make the small sacrifice not to do one particular job for a couple of years once we’re done.”

His argument fell on deaf ears – mostly along party lines. All 35 Senate votes to kill the two-year proposal were from Republicans. In the House, 63 of the 65 were GOP reps – Oklahoma City Reps. Jason Dunnington and Ajay Pittman were the only Democrats to oppose the ban.

Those leading the charge against the Ethics Commission proposal – including Ada Sen. Greg McCortney and Idabel Rep. Johnny Tadlock – contended it would unconstitutionally attempt to regulate the employment opportunities of private citizens.

They also warned it could lead to a costly [for

taxpayers] legal challenge that likely would result in the ban being overturned.

Perhaps. But that rarely seems to dissuade the Legislature’s Republican majority from pursuing constitutionally dubious measures that it thinks will fire up its base. Think: myriad attempts in recent years to further restrict abortion, nearly all of which were rejected by the state Supreme Court.

Further, why would it be unconstitutional for Oklahoma to impose the two-year cooling off period when so many other states already have it on the books?

If it’s unconstitutional here, wouldn’t it be unconstitutional elsewhere?

Consider Oklahoma’s neighbors: Colorado, Kansas and Missouri all have two-year bans while Arkansas and New Mexico have one-year restrictions. Only Texas has no such cooling off period, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures.

For the record: Florida will have the nation’s longest cooling off period – six years - starting on Dec. 31, 2022.

Lest you think this is a purely hypothetical issue in Oklahoma, know this: Five of this year’s lobbyists were lawmakers last year – GOP Reps. Pat Ownbey, Josh Cockroft, Bobby Cleveland and Katie Henke, and Democratic Sen. Randy Bass.

Why wouldn’t special interests covet recently departed officeholders? In many cases, they afford instant credibility having already built relationships with legislators who will be casting votes in the next session. Further, they know how the system works and, perhaps more importantly, what is likely to influence the thinking of their former colleagues.

This tilts the public policy playing field even more toward special interests, which already wield outsized influence at the Capitol, picking up meals and making campaign contributions.

In Missouri, it took a statewide vote to impose the two-year cooling off period, among other so-called “Clean Missouri” reforms. Oklahoma voters may have no choice to but to sidestep a reluctant Legislature as well.

‘MISSED OPPORTUNITIES’

Statehouse Leaders Expanded Their Political Empires, But Failed To Solve Many Problems

BY ARNOLD HAMILTON

To hear statehouse powers-that-be tell it, the 2019 legislative session was blue-sky glorious. Progress promised, progress made.

“I think it’s been a fantastic session,” Gov. Kevin Stitt crowed, near session’s end. “I really feel happy with where we’re at with the savings we got, protecting Oklahomans in the future from another tax increase or cuts to core services.”

The Oklahoman joined the hallelujah chorus, cheering what it called a “rancor-free” session and trumpeting a “record” \$8.1 billion budget that the governor “noted included a number of firsts.”

The Tulsa World was more measured, judging the four-month conclave “a success,” albeit “not the success it could have been.”

Legislatures are designed, of course, to operate at a deliberate, glacial pace. As a result, once-in-a-generation change is, well, rarer than once-a-generation. But it lowers the bar to near meaninglessness to simply be relieved – much less thrilled – with 2019 just because thousands of teachers didn’t walk off the job and descend on the Capitol.

Indeed, there was some progress – modest funding increases to emaciated public services like higher ed and mental health. But it’s far more accurate to suggest the session was rife with opportunities squandered, especially when it came to improving the lives of workaday Oklahomans.

What makes the reality even more disheartening is that statehouse leaders instead opted to focus on expanding their own empire – giving the governor broad new powers, creating a new Legislature-controlled bureaucracy, and adding more staff, all the while penny-pinching programs that help hurting Oklahomans.

Here’s a look at the good, the bad, the ugly and, yes, even the nonsensical:

THE GOOD

Topping the list was increased funding for public education, including an average \$1,200 teacher pay raise [that followed last year’s average \$6,100 hike] and \$74 million for the school funding formula that could help districts hire more teachers.

It wasn’t as much as the Oklahoma Education Association sought, but it clearly represents progress. There is every reason to believe the trend of increased school investment will continue next year. Why? It’s an election year.

Republicans keen on protecting their supermajority don’t want to risk inciting the wrath of public education backers. They lived that horror in 2018 – and don’t want a sequel.

In addition, lawmakers this session wisely refused to expand vouchers – in the form of so-called “opportunity scholarships” – that could have siphoned \$50 million out of public and into private education.

And they finally showed some love to higher education, providing \$28.6 million for faculty salary increases after cutting funding 26% in recent years.

Public education wasn’t the only beneficiary of looser purse strings. State employees also are ticketed for pay raises, ranging from \$1,500 per year for the lowest-paid [less than \$40,000] to \$600 annually for the highest earners [\$60,000-plus].

There’s also new money for mental health care, roads and bridges, corrections – even a hike in public defenders’ salaries.

Let us pause to remember that this year’s budgetary breathing room was made possible by courageous tax votes lawmakers took in 2018, creating about \$500 million in new revenue that could patch some holes in the Good Ship Oklahoma.

As Senate Democratic Leader Kay Floyd put it, “Our state finances are no longer in crisis” yet lawmakers failed to address “some critical needs.”

“The funding increase for education is less than half of what the State Department of Education requested, and Oklahoma spends over \$1,000 less per student in education funding than our neighboring states.”

THE BAD

The Legislature did precious little for workaday Oklahomans.

Despite the threat of an initiative petition that could force a statewide vote on the issue, lawmakers

ers punted again on Medicaid expansion that would make health care available to about 100,000 uninsured, low-income Oklahomans.

Republicans have long resisted the expansion, not because it isn't smart or prudent, but because of partisan politics – it was part of former President Barack Obama's Affordable Care Act.

It looked like momentum was building this session to accept the 9-1 federal match – tax dollars Oklahomans already have sent to Washington, but are currently being spent on health care in other states. But Stitt abruptly reversed course just before the session began and announced his opposition.

Alas, his promises to study it this summer are eerily reminiscent of Donald Trump's vow to come up with a big, beautiful plan that will work even better. Perhaps Stitt will surprise us.

More likely, the issue will be taken out of lawmakers' hands. SQ 802 already has been filed – though it is currently being challenged in the courts. Republicans know if it reaches the ballot, it likely will be approved – given recent history of Red State votes on the issue in Idaho, Utah and Nebraska. If enshrined in the state Constitution, legislators will lose the power to craft a plan unique to Oklahoma and more favorable to their deep-pocketed Big Insurance and health industry benefactors.

Additionally, the statehouse's GOP supermajority continues to block an increase in the minimum wage or to mandate equal pay for equal work. Seven measures introduced this session – two seeking to hike the minimum wage, five others to restore local control over such issues – didn't go anywhere.

Yes, Democrats authored all seven. But wouldn't Republican voters benefit from a minimum wage boost, too? Or from their moms, wives or sisters earning the same pay as their male colleagues? You don't have to think long or hard to figure out who's discouraging GOP leadership from hearing, much less approving any of these measures.

Once again, other states can show us the way. Voters in Arkansas and Missouri – both Red States – overwhelmingly approved minimum wage increases last year.

More bad news this session: Stitt and Co. refused to restore the Earned Income Tax Credit that benefits the poor or to provide a sorely-needed cost-of-living boost for state retirees. The Legislature also killed the state Ethics Commission's proposed two-year ban on ex-lawmakers lobbying their former colleagues.

"Low-income working Oklahomans were once again forgotten this session," said OKPolicy's David Blatt. "In a year where there was plenty of money to expand business incentive programs like the Quick Action Closing Fund and to allocate enormous increases for the governor's office and the Legislature, there was no excuse for turning a deaf ear to those struggling to get by and get ahead."

Lawmakers also made far too little progress on criminal justice reform, even though voters made

clear three years ago that they no longer will stand for Oklahoma being the world's incarceration capital.

The best news this session was enactment of HB 1269 that made retroactive SQ 780's 2016 provisions reclassifying some property offenses and simple drug possession as misdemeanors. It was the fair, right thing to do. The voters spoke clearly on the issue.

But the Legislature mostly nibbled around the edges on other important proposals, including how the criminal justice system is often financed through fees and fines paid by criminal defendants and how the bond system helps create modern day debtors' prisons.

THE UGLY

The governor and Legislature took bold steps when it came to expanding their own political power.

Lawmakers, for example gave Stitt the authority to hire, fire and set the director's salary at five of the state's most consequential agencies – the Oklahoma Health Care Authority, the Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services; the Department of Transportation; Department of Corrections; and Office of Juvenile Affairs.

Proponents of the massive power shift argue it will make clear to Oklahoma voters who is ultimately responsible when state agencies succeed or fail. It's a good sound bite. But the genius of the previous system was that directors were hired and fired by boards and commissions, typically filled with private-sector experts in each agency's mission.

Giving the governor sole authority to be a super-CEO creates the opportunity for mischief – for unqualified cronies or political donors to be empowered to run agencies that provide vital state services. What could possibly go wrong?

In crafting the deal to give the governor more power over state agencies, House and Senate leaders also grabbed for themselves the power to make some board appointments – creating another potential source of patronage shenanigans.

Additionally, the Legislature's self-proclaimed fiscal conservatives awarded the governor's office a 121% budget increase for next year – up from \$1.7 million this year to nearly \$4 million next.

Lawmakers extended the generosity to themselves, too – the House will receive \$7.3 million more than last year's \$12.5 million budget and the Senate \$2.2 million above last year's \$9.2 million.

Moreover, the Legislature created a new \$1.7 million bureaucracy, the Legislative Office of Fiscal Transparency, which they insist will be the state equivalent of the U.S. Government Accountability Office, providing important fiscal data for budget decision-makers.

Of course, lawmakers conveniently ignored the fact that it duplicates the Agency Performance and Accountability Commission they approved last year. They claim the new eight-member office will replace the panel created in 2018.



Honeymoon Spin Can't Conceal All The Bull In Stitt's First Session

BY CAL HOBSON

Let me describe the unlikely scenario. A God-fearing, church-going, family-loving millionaire but political novice awakes in Jenks during the summer of 2017 and decides that, by November of 2018, he is destined to be governor of Oklahoma.

Coincidentally, his mom remembers he told her the same thing when he was a first grader at Wayne. However, he hasn't voted much over the last two decades and maybe never for the position he covets. Later, on the campaign trail, he jokes about his absenteeism from the polling booth and is pleased that nobody much seems to care.

Our too-busy-to-vote candidate has a full-time and demanding job in the national real estate mortgage business and is blessed with a wonderful wife and six kids who attend private church schools. He has a degree in accounting from Oklahoma State University, owns a big house and a small ranch. His dad is a preacher of some note, his mom a supportive

spouse. He has two brothers, one older, one younger.

But most of all, he has an itch. He wants to be a politician, not on his city council but as occupant of the prime second floor corner office at the state Capitol and full-time resident in the governor's mansion on 23rd street in Oklahoma City.

He, by his own admission, doesn't know a pollster from a consultant, opposition research from survey cross tabs, talking points from push propaganda. Nor, in the summer heat, does he much care.

He just knows he wants to be this struggling state's CEO because it needs to be run like a business, similar to his wildly successful Gateway Mortgage Group. Fortunately, the company's profitability means he can self fund his long shot race if he has to ... and eventually he has to – to the tune of more than \$5 million from his own very thick wallet.

Other folks, including many of his own employees,

combine to donate a similar amount, making this gubernatorial race the most expensive in state history.

By now, dear reader, if you don't know who I'm talking about, you have probably voted even less often than our new governor, Kevin Stitt, elected by a landslide over former Attorney General Drew Edmondson, a very frequent voter as well as an experienced, career pol with an impressive record of military, political and community service.

However, Drew was and is a Democrat so in politically ruby red rural Oklahoma his name might as well been Lenin, Stalin or mine. Edmondson carried only three, populous counties – Oklahoma, Tulsa and Cleveland – but not by margins necessary to overcome losses endured in the other rock rib Republican 74.

Although another political novice, a young fellow named David Walters had also ascended directly to Job One without any elected political experience – it took him two, tough tries, while Stitt sailed into office during his first general election.

So the question is: How did he do that? And the answer is: Well, it's complicated but here are five factors that contributed to the Gateway wunderkind's transition from Kevin Who to Gov. Stitt.

1 Republican big money, deciders and insiders, especially those residing in the capital city, never took the Tulsa mortgage titan too seriously until it was too late. Once he barely got past Trump Lite, Lt. Gov. Todd Lamb [the new KFOR-TV *Flashpoint* Republican anchor] into a runoff with the long time, likable OKC mayor Mick Cornett, the die was cast because, with the exception of Democrat Jack Walton 100 years ago, no mayor of our biggest burg has ever made the minimal, locational move from the municipal building downtown to the People's House on 23rd street.

And exacerbating the hex, Walton served the shortest time ever as governor, about 10½ months, because he was impeached by lawmakers for being too anti-Ku Klux Klan. That's right. *Too anti-KKK* – thus confirming our Legislature always has been home to several, sometimes many, unhinged humans.

2 Fortunately for Stitt, Gov. Mary Fallin was the perfect foil on the campaign trail ... a lame-duck Republican governor who fiddled for seven years while the state burned but in her eighth – the election year of 2018 – she committed herself by advocating tax increases.

Cautious Kevin, while personally courteous to Queen Mary – who was rudely and roundly booed when introduced during a football game at OSU, her alma mater – piled on politically by criticizing her tax-raising proclivities while simultaneously promising his own big spending on education, health care, infrastructure and public safety.

Oklahomans, by a wide margin, liked that impossible dream and hired the dreamer. Providing the margin of victory were rural folks who did what they

so often do – vote against their own best interests – thus guaranteeing more hospital closures, fewer doctors and longer drives for health services.

Note to granny in Gotebo: What were you thinking?

3 Although our new governor found little time over the last two decades to personally participate in the democratic process, he did religiously do the second most important thing ... remain registered as a Republican. For almost a generation, no Democrat has been elected to any statewide office and none are likely to be in the near future as elephant registration continues to lumber past that of despondent, disorganized donkeys.

4 Personal wealth kept Kevin in the game for months while he crisscrossed the state introducing himself. No crowd was too small, no event too obscure, no distance too great to cause this natural glad-hander's absence. He knew well the most important ingredient of a successful campaign, besides plenty of long green, was, is and always will be likability ... with the notable exception of insufferable Sen. Jim Inhofe.

Stitt's cliches, though not original, fit the times. "I'm no career politician" or "Oklahoma's turnaround starts right here and right now" were predictable, vacuous and effective. He was disarming in the many debates, slow to jab others, while glib, upbeat and energetic.

Attempts to characterize him as a crooked businessman who was quick to cut regulatory corners, failed in light of his current wealth and record of success. And, after all, most Okies don't like regulations because that means big government, which they also don't like ... unless it helps them. Think farmers, corporate welfare recipients and, of course, most retirees.

Stitt did especially well with all three demographics while struggling among minorities and millennials, both major components of inner city renewal and growth in Tulsa and Oklahoma City.

5 His photogenic family of Sarah and their six children looked right out of central casting for the 1950s but in reality are reflective of many Oklahoma Republicans today: white, conservative, church going suburbanites, messengers for poverty plagued parts of Africa and other continents. They, too, are strongly anti-abortion but pro-gun, outwardly courteous and polite to a fault. One almost envisions that the Stitt kids were born wearing suits, ties or dresses and have never uttered any words except "yes, sir" or "yes, ma'am." The Mrs., like her husband, is well spoken and will lead mental health initiatives for the state, having come herself from a family background afflicted by the disease.

Those five factors, and I'm sure others unmentioned, framed the blueprint to victory. It preceded the just-completed session in which a supermajority conservative Legislature of his own party provided

a honeymoon of almost historic proportions, fueled largely by last year's tax increases and the recovering shale oil industry.

Easy and early victories, like constitutional carry and yet another unconstitutional anti-abortion proposal, landed on his desk for signatures which he had signaled during the campaign would be provided. Promises made. Promises kept.

Record spending followed in a last-minute \$7.9 billion budget deal, crafted secretly behind closed doors, highlighted by investments in education, highways, mental health and, to a minor degree, criminal justice reform. However, guaranteed transparency failed to appear as most rank-and-file lawmakers had not read the funding details before casting their votes along predictable party lines. Promise made. Promise perished.

Much to the detriment of over 200,000 uninsured citizens Medicaid expansion was shelved again, costing our health care systems nearly \$1 billion. Also no cost of living adjustments were provided, marking a full decade of neglect for retired teachers, fire, police, public employees and judges.

However, actuaries did celebrate. They will be hired to do what they do best which is put on their green eyeshades, crunch numbers, submit reports that nobody reads or believes and then cash their paychecks. Opportunities offered. Opportunities ossified.

However Gov. Stitt and legislative leaders weren't grinch to everybody. His expanded executive cabinet no longer contains some unpaid, volunteer members. All now are salaried, fully covered by gold-plated insurance and retirement benefits, even though a few continue to also hold down private sector jobs in energy, banking and other professions.

Conflict of interest noted ... and ignored.

And there's more dividing of the taxpayer provided pie. Accusing Fallin of miserly and opaque methodologies for funding her office, Stitt solved the problem like the conservative businessman he is – requesting and receiving a 121% increase for FY 2020 which starts July 1. Besides expanded staff costs, the almost completed renovation of the Capitol digs for our CEO will require all new furniture, fixtures, technology and security. Trappings treasured. Trappings tapped.

Also showing interest in the lime green pie, our workmanlike, four-month-a-year, very part-time Legislature will hire dozens more new employees, costing nearly \$8 million dollars in the House of Representatives alone. Patronage planned. Patronage provided.

But look on the bright side. Stitt ordered the 22-year-old state airplane sold, directed agencies not to hire lobbyists without prior approval of cabinet secretaries, shaved ongoing remodeling expenses at the mansion and once even drove a “donated for a day” John Deere tractor three blocks to work saving costly security and chauffeur services.

Traffic jam? A small inconvenience for other drivers but a sure-fire photo opportunity for the 2022 campaign that will play well to big budget blockers in Bug Tussle, Bowlegs, Bessie and even Bertha.

But maybe not so much with those pointy-headed, bearded professors down at OU who can't even park their bicycles straight let alone drive a tractor in traffic on 23rd street or anywhere else probably.

Just sayin'.

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

DUBIOUS DISTINCTION

Oklahoma's Cut-And-Paste Legislature

BY ARNOLD HAMILTON

Who's really writing Oklahoma's laws? If you think it's a simple, obvious answer – the state's elected senators and representatives – you're wrong.

It turns out Oklahoma lawmakers often are cribbers, “authoring” so-called “model” legislation that actually was ghost-written by special interests then shopped to elected officials in governing bodies across the country.

A recent USA Today, Arizona Republic and Center for Public Integrity analysis found Sooner solons introduced 400-plus copy-and-paste measures between

2010 and 2018, enacting about 130 into law – second most nationally.

Let that sink in. Little ol' Oklahoma – 3.9 million strong – is second only to Illinois, population approaching 13 million, when it comes to adopting copycat bills that serve well-heeled special interests first, not the people's.

This isn't just dispiriting. It's also potentially scandalous.

Here's how it works: legislators effectively become marks for deep-pocketed corporatists or political ideologues aiming, say, to padlock the courthouse

door to asbestos-related claims, block cities from increasing the minimum wage or expand gun rights.

Some groups, like the industry-funded, conservative American Legislative Exchange Council, host lawmakers at annual conferences, often at swanky resorts, where they're briefed on the latest model legislation, then sent back to their Capitols to fight for enactment.

In supporting the model legislation, USA Today noted, lawmakers are "building relationships with lobbyists and other potential campaign donors" – financial support that could mean the difference between reelection and electoral defeat.

It's unclear how many Sooner lawmakers currently are affiliated with groups like ALEC, though Rep. Mark Lepak, R-Claremore, and Sen. Julie Daniels, R-Bartlesville, are listed on ALEC's web site as Oklahoma's state chairs.

What is certain: It debases representative democracy when elected officials outsource legislation-writing to unelected special interests whose purposely opaque wording is often aimed at tilting the playing field against workaday Oklahomans.

Unfortunately, big money permeates from campaigns to policymaking. Even the least contentious state House bid requires candidates to raise a minimum \$100,000 war chest.

Thus, the political truism: money talks and bullsh-walks.

Imagine if lawmakers instead took their constituents' concerns – voiced, say, at the local coffee shop – to NE 23rd and Lincoln Blvd., where independent,

professional, taxpayer-funded staff craft fair, honest legislation in a Solomon-esque fashion.

A quaint notion, isn't it? Yes – and far from reality.

It is worth noting, of course, that the proliferation of copy-and-paste legislation isn't solely a result of big money's increasing influence.

It's also a byproduct of term limits, which set in motion the greatest transfer of political power in state history, from the people's elected representatives to the unelected special interests.

In 1990, when Oklahoma became the nation's first state to impose term limits – six two-year terms for House members and three four-year terms for senators – it began a systematic erasure of institutional memory. Experienced lawmakers who knew the game and how special interests connived were shown the exit – not by constituents unhappy with their performance but by an arbitrary term limit aimed at one lawmaker loathed by the urban powers-that-be: longtime McAlester Sen. Gene Stipe.

By the time this year's Legislature was seated, nearly 40% were rookies – 57 of 149. Advantage: lobbyists. After all, they face no term limits. They return year after year. They know the intricacies of the game.

Is it any wonder lawmakers, more than ever, rely on the Capitol's unelected, but permanent class – the ones who often pick up lunch or dinner, provide Thunder tickets or serve as concierges, of sorts, connecting the elected elite and political donors?

Alas, too few recognize the pernicious effects of term limits, even as they lament the increasing power of special interests.

Equal Pay Would Slash Poverty Rate For Working Women

BY COURTNEY CULLISON

Poverty in Oklahoma is consistently above the national average, and women are even more likely to experience poverty than men.

Throughout the country, this trend is present across all races and family types – women of color have higher poverty rates than men of color, single mothers are more likely to live in poverty than single fathers, and poverty is higher among single women without kids than it is among single men without kids.

Why are women more likely to experience poverty? Because on average, they make less money. A typical woman working from age 17 to 70 will earn over half-a-million dollars less than a typical man.

In a time when families depend more than ever on women's wages, this is a troubling trend. We can identify three main causes.

First, caregiving responsibilities often cost women wages. Affordable child care is becoming less available in Oklahoma. When families decide it makes more financial sense for one parent to leave work to care for children, it is much more likely that the stay at home parent will be a woman.

Oklahoma has made some strides in reducing wage disparities for caregivers with policies like paid family leave for state workers [adopted last year]. But paid leave would be more helpful if it were available to all workers. We all get sick, and we all need time to care for our loved ones sometimes.

Second, a low minimum wage is especially harmful to women. The current wage of \$7.25 an hour has not been raised in almost a decade, and the minimum wage has been losing value for decades. Given that seven in 10 minimum wage workers in Oklahoma are

women, our low minimum wage is particularly problematic for women – even more so if they are supporting a family.

Unfortunately, despite a national trend toward a higher minimum wage, the Oklahoma Legislature has not recognized our low minimum wage as a real problem. Several bills have been introduced in recent sessions to raise our minimum wage and none have received consideration.

In 2014, the Legislature made it impossible for local governments to address this problem by prohibiting them from raising their minimum wage. But sometimes when policymakers refuse to act, citizens can – several other states have raised their wages with a vote of the people.

Third, some women earn less because their employers pay them less than they pay men doing the same job. Research shows that women and men are often treated unequally in hiring, performance evalu-

ations, and promotion decisions.

One reason pay discrimination persists is because it's so difficult to discover. For the past five years, advocates for pay transparency have introduced legislation to clearly prohibit employers from retaliating against workers who share their wage information with others. Unfortunately, those efforts have, so far, been unsuccessful. This secrecy is exactly the culture that fosters wage discrimination. Ending pay secrecy is a crucial part of closing the gender wage gap.

If equal pay were a reality in Oklahoma, the poverty rate for working women in the state would be reduced almost by half, and their earnings would increase by about \$5.4 billion a year. When women are paid fairly, their families are more economically secure, and our economy is healthier. Closing the gender wage gap should be a priority for all of us.

Courtney Cullison is a policy analyst with Oklahoma Policy Institute; www.okpolicy.org.

How To Build A Better Mousetrap

BY DAVID PERRYMAN

Ralph Waldo Emerson, America's quintessential philosopher, famously said, "If a man can write a better book, preach a better sermon or make a better mouse trap than his neighbors, though he builds his house in the woods, the world will make a beaten path to his door."

While Emerson's philosophical and literary contributions to American society were much broader than this simple quote, the truth found at the core of this mid-19th century Emerson statement embodies at once the American spirit, the American experience and the finite frailty of American exceptionalism.

Nearly a century before Emerson's observation, according to Rick Atkinson's new book, *The British Are Coming*, June 1773 saw King George III celebrat-

ing his reign over the greatest, richest empire since ancient Rome. Less than two years later, after a series of provocations, the king's soldiers took up arms against his rebellious colonies in America. Atkinson's book details that the war would last eight years and though at least one in 10 of the

Americans who fought for independence would die for that cause, the prize was valuable beyond measure: freedom from oppression and the creation of a new republic.

The concept of a better book, a better sermon and a better mousetrap had been achieved by the new republic. The new government was a shining beacon on a hill and was a celebrated form of government not so much for the individual rights retained as for the manner in which the collective rights of the electorate were served by the balanced powers of three branches of government, each individually existing of, by and for the people.

The transformation from what existed to what exists today was both foreseeable and preventable. Our founding fathers knew that there would be a struggle between the branches of government.

The unanticipated factor was the abdication of civic responsibility by the citizenry. Because citizens have shirked their duty to protect their own interests and fail to diligently exercise the power of the people, nefarious influences have energized groups that have no regard for the common good of our nation and the families that inhabit it.

In Oklahoma, where tens of thousands lack access to health care, life expectancy rivals Third World countries, student college debt is at all-time highs, mental health goes untreated and public education is perpetually underfunded, rural infrastructure and fire protection is virtually ignored, there is a fundamental failure of our government to protect citizens from powerful interests that profit from the perpetuation of these conditions.



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Oklahoma's Founding Fathers recognized that government could become self-serving and gave us the initiative petition. Exercising the right to vote in all elections and the power of petitioning for ballot initiatives is the only way to curb the organized power

of corporate interests, the partisan gerrymandering of legislative districts, the suppression of the right to vote, and the dangers of excessive financial influence in campaigns.

Addressing these four issues directly is a step toward restoring a model of a "better mouse trap" that will benefit all of our citizens.

Chickasha Democrat David Perryman represents District 56 in the Oklahoma House and serves as minority floor leader.

What You Need To Know About Health Coverage Expansion

BY CARLY PUTNAM

Oklahoma's uninsured rate is among the highest in the U.S. State lawmakers have the power to change that by accepting federal funds to expand coverage. Instead they opted to punt to a summer working group, putting the issue on a collision course with an initiative petition to expand Medicaid in 2020.

Expanding coverage to more than 100,000 Oklahomans can seem daunting. However, expansion comes with a powerful incentive for states, with the federal government paying 90% of the costs. Given that the federal government's share of most Medicaid funding in Oklahoma is 62%, this is an opportunity to bring home many more federal dollars.

Expansion will also generate state savings. In many cases, people who would gain coverage through expansion are already getting some form of health care through the state – but the care they're getting is patchwork, only covers certain acute issues, and is paid for almost entirely by the state.

Consultants hired by the governor's office in 2013 estimated state savings of \$400 million to \$600 million over a decade if the state expanded care.

Numerous states, including Arkansas, Michigan, Montana, and Virginia, have found that expansion generates significant budget savings.

The best estimates find that between 153,000 and 196,000 Oklahomans who are currently uninsured would gain coverage if the state expanded eligibility.

Most of these Oklahomans are working adults earning poverty or near poverty-level wages, in jobs like home health aides, child care providers, and food servers and preparers. Almost four in 10 are middle-aged [age 35-54] and 17% are near elderly [age 55-64]. About one in four are parents or otherwise responsible for a dependent.

Children would be key beneficiaries. Oklahoma's child uninsured rate is the fourth highest in the U.S., and many uninsured children are eligible for Soon-

erCare but not enrolled because parents don't know that they qualify for coverage.

Expanding coverage makes it more likely that parents will enroll both themselves and their children. Being able to see a doctor or fill a prescription also makes it easier to be a good parent.

Oklahoma veterans would also gain access to needed health care through expansion. As of 2015, nearly 12,000 Oklahoma veterans – more than one in 12 veterans in the state – were uninsured. Expansion is critical to veterans: they are not all eligible for services through the Department of Veterans Affairs [VA] and some, especially in rural areas, struggle to access VA facilities.

Expansion coverage should be comprehensive, affordable, and easily available. Medicaid coverage, which is the foundation of expansion coverage, is required to cover a wide range of services and limit cost-sharing and eligibility restrictions.

Some states have sought to charge enrollees premiums and higher copayments, impose "healthy behavior screenings" and work requirements, and duck covering important services like non-emergency medical transportation.

However, those federal guardrails exist for important reasons. Individuals and families who qualify for expansion coverage are already struggling to get by. Health coverage is an important part of helping families build financial security – in fact, people who have gotten coverage through expansion say that it helped them find a job.

A plan that restricts coverage or adds unnecessary red tape means people will lose needed health care because they can't navigate complex bureaucracy. As Oklahoma lawmakers set about building an Oklahoma plan, they should ensure that it works for the people who will use it.

Carly Putnam is policy director of Oklahoma Policy Institute; www.okpolicy.org.

Finally, Stitt insisted – and the Legislature acquiesced – to depositing \$200 million more into the state's Revenue Stabilization Fund. That sounds like a prudent fiscal move but in reality it's pure politics designed to burnish the governor's tight-fisted fiscal credentials.

State law already required \$450 million be deposited in state savings. Adding \$200 million more means Oklahoma will be among the nation's leaders in reserve funds – all the while vital state services are still severely underfunded.

Legislative Democrats rightly squawked about the misplaced priorities, but Republicans dusted off an old talking point, claiming D's never met a taxpayer dollar they didn't want to spend.

Responded House Democratic Leader Emily Virgin: "The accusations made during debates that House Democrats want to spend every dollar of the state's money and not save any is a 'mistruth' at best and at worst an outright lie. We absolutely support saving money, and, fortunately, Oklahoma has a Rainy Day Fund for that specific purpose.

"The problem is that over the last several years, Republicans have used the Rainy Day money to fund income tax cuts and corporate tax credits that mostly benefit wealthy Oklahomans, while also cutting agency funding.

"Taking \$200 million from taxpayers and putting it into a bank account isn't fiscal responsibility, it is legislative malpractice. Our position is that this money should be invested back into our students, our healthcare, and our infrastructure, while we also save the \$450 million in the Rainy Day Fund."

The Legislature and governor also approved a measure that ensures they get to decide how proceeds from lawsuits settled by the attorney general are spent – a shot at AG Mike Hunter for his \$270 million deal with Purdue Pharma that steers \$200 million to the Oklahoma State University Center for Wellness and Recovery in Tulsa.

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THE NONSENSICAL

The first bill Stitt signed was to allow Oklahomans to openly carry a firearm without a background check, training, or permit. Again: what could possibly go wrong?

Lawmakers also voted this session to make the rib eye the official state steak and to allow voters to take "selfies" with their ballots at polling sites.

Lighten up? Let them have their fun? Perhaps. But it would be easier to cheer the rib eye or make plans for a selfie if the Legislature had tackled some of the really important issues it left on the table.

What makes matters worse: They probably won't get solved in 2020, either, because of election year politics.

In fact, we're likely to see less outside-the-box legislating and more gamesmanship, aimed at firing up the base or depressing opposition turnout.

That is sad for Oklahoma.

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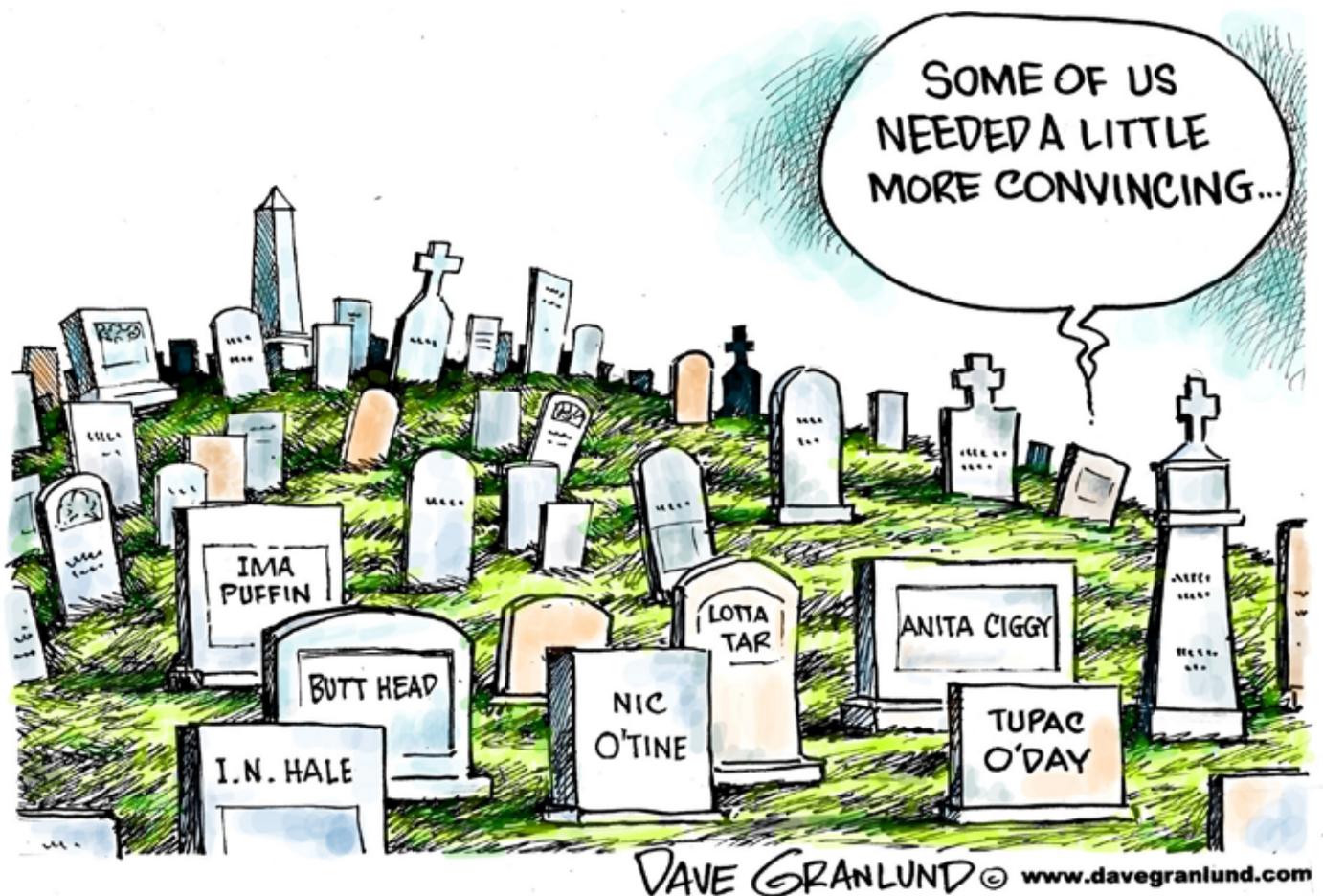
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Tobacco: Oklahoma Milestones And The Road Ahead

BY JAN NEW

In 1964 the U.S. Public Health Service released the first Surgeon General's Report on Smoking and Health. Based on a review of over 7,000 articles, the report concluded smoking was a "cause of lung cancer in men and a probable cause in women." This was a first step in what has been a half-century effort to diminish the health impacts of tobacco use – a truly mixed record nationally and at state and local levels.

Recently I attended a funeral and memorial for the eighth former co-worker, friend, and smoker to die from one of the smoking-related illnesses – lung cancer. These eight were part of a larger group of at least 15 employees who routinely used a small, separately vented, smoking room in a government office for smoke breaks, lunch, and conversations with other staff.

Some of the group are still living and are challenged by continuing struggles with cancers ranging from throat to lung, chronic pulmonary obstructive dis-

ease, bronchitis, and heart disease. One remarkable co-worker, friend and longtime smoker has had it all – metastatic throat cancer, lung cancer, ischemic stroke, heart and carotid stents, and several related conditions.

The eight men and women who have passed died an average of 11.75 and 15.75 years before average life expectancies of 76 and 81, respectively. Some reached retirement; others did not. These were the years they could have enjoyed relatives and friends and continued to contribute productively to family and community.

In purely monetary terms, their illnesses, often painfully lengthy, resulted in increased health care costs, lost income, and foregone tax revenues. How did all that occur?

Ironically, their lives were affected not only by the direct choices they made to smoke, but also by addictive products smartly marketed by the tobacco industry. They were also affected by state and local laws

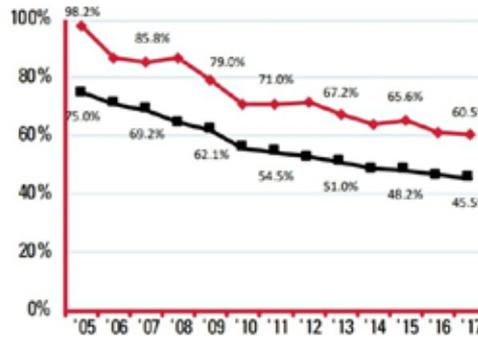
PROGRESS TO DATE

◆ Oklahoma ■ United States

SMOKING PREVALENCE
among Oklahoma adults²⁸



CIGARETTE SALES
in packs per capita²⁹



that advanced mitigating policies designed to discourage smoking and diminish health effects – but only at the pace of changing public opinion.

NATIONAL, STATE AND LOCAL LAWS

Just as there is no nationwide, federally imposed smoking ban, Oklahoma is one of only 12 states without a statewide smoking ban, though other states with bans still carve out some business exceptions. Oklahoma has carved out exceptions for workplaces occupied solely by smokers, private clubs, bingo halls, retail tobacco stores and other establishments.

Additionally, only Oklahoma and Virginia have preempted local governments from enacting more stringent regulations than the state [63 OK Stat § 63-1-1527, enacted in 2014].

To regulate state, county and municipal buildings and eventually more difficult workplaces like restaurants, Oklahoma’s “Smoking in Public Places and Indoor Workplaces Act” [2003] provided options for “nonsmoking buildings” or “nonsmoking with a ‘designated smoking room.’”

This room was required to be fully enclosed with separate ventilation systems and other requirements. Compliance was variable.

The eight co-workers now gone and others with smoking-related health conditions used the designated smoking rooms for more than 10 years; however, these smoking rooms have been discontinued, and the newer e-cigarettes are not permitted in a smoke-free building.

Even with Oklahoma’s carve-outs and those of other states, 26 states have enacted statewide bans in all enclosed workplaces, including bars and clubs. By 2017 it was estimated that 81.5% of the U.S. population lived “under a ban on smoking in workplaces, and/or restaurants and/or bars.”

These examples of difficult and variable progress in Oklahoma and elsewhere reflect not only the desire to improve public health, but simultaneously the ambivalence of elected officials who must balance the public health of consumers with an industry that produced 249 billion cigarettes in the U.S. in 2017.

ever a challenging balance – advanced government for knowledgeable voters.

OKLAHOMA’S TSET

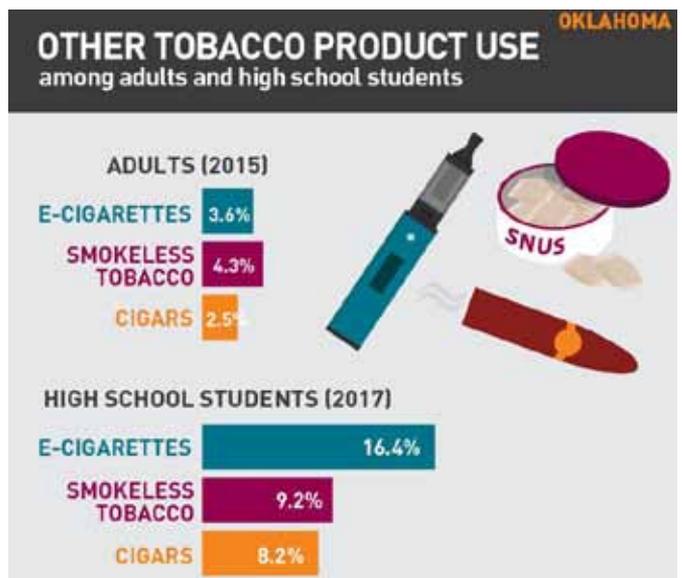
From 1964 to the 1990s more research and information became available about the adverse health effects of smoking and the predatory practices of the tobacco industry. In 1996 Oklahoma’s attorney general filed a lawsuit against the tobacco industry. By 1998, 45 other states had filed similar lawsuits.

Four of the largest tobacco companies agreed to negotiate a national settlement, the Master Settlement Agreement [MSA]. Among its provisions, marketing which targeted youth and certain other practices were curtailed or banned.

Under the 1998 MSA, states receive an annual payment while cigarettes are sold nationally. In 2000, Oklahoma voters wisely approved a Tobacco Settlement Endowment Trust [TSET] to receive 75% of these annual payments into a constitutional trust from which only investment earnings [not principal] are used to fund evidence-based initiatives and programs to improve the health of Oklahomans.

In FY ‘18 the net position was \$1.2 billion with ap-

At that time, retail sales were worth \$5.12 per pack up to \$10.66 per pack, and federal and state excise taxes averaged 44.3% of the retail price. In comparison with U.S. sales in 2017, the global or transnational tobacco industry reportedly produced 5.4 trillion cigarettes at a value of \$699.4 billion [U.S.], according to the Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids. Democratic governance and free market economies are



proximately \$85 million net investment income – a solid resource for Oklahoma’s considerable health care challenges.

TSET’s Annual Reports can be downloaded from their website. The reports document health improvement activities, including grants for Stephenson Cancer Center research and clinical trials, the Oklahoma Tobacco Helpline, health system grants, healthy living programs throughout Oklahoma counties, and policy and program development for smoking cessation, improved nutrition, increased physical activity, and reduced obesity – all vital steps in developing a healthier Oklahoma.

OKLAHOMA CIGARETTE TAX, 2004

Taxation has been accepted as a primary policy tool for reducing smoking rates with the caveat that black market sales across state lines can impede its effectiveness. That said, Oklahoma did not emphasize tobacco taxation until after 2000.

In 2004, approval of HB 2660 authorized a legislative referendum – SQ 713, which increased the state excise tax on cigarettes by 40 mills per cigarette or 80 cents per pack. The new law apportioned 80% of the revenues for eight significant health programs, with most of the remainder deposited in the General Revenue Fund. Thereafter, there was a steep decline in both Oklahoma cigarette sales and smoking prevalence (graphs from the Oklahoma State Plan for Tobacco Use, Prevention, and Cessation – Progress To Date). With so many efforts occurring simultaneously, it is difficult to know with certainty what portion of the decline in sales and smoking is attributable to the tax increase.

Approval of this landmark legislation and state question took Oklahoma from a rank of 9th lowest excise tax for cigarettes nationally to a rank of 15th highest – at that time an enormous step forward for future health care in Oklahoma. [However, by 2018 Oklahoma cigarette taxes had again slipped significantly below the national average of state cigarette taxes of \$1.73 per pack until the Legislature again raised the tax by \$1 per pack for a current total of \$2.03 per pack.]

CHALLENGES AHEAD

Oklahoma’s efforts to reduce smoking rates and improve health outcomes through the combined use of TSET earnings for research and public education; the funding and development of nationally recognized healthcare institutions; and the thoughtful apportionment of revenues from a 2005 tobacco tax are more than commendable achievements in policy, legislation, and programming.

Efforts to prevent costly and debilitating diseases and to improve the health of Oklahomans will need to continue as the tobacco industry has been resilient in its efforts to simultaneously [1] endorse public health policies that narrowly focus on educating consumers about health risks, including raising the legal age for purchase to 21 and [2] develop and aggressively market supposedly safer tobacco products – specifically e-cigarettes.

Reportedly the most popular tobacco product among youth, e-cigarette usage has climbed dramatically in the last four years. The controversial and well-advertised JUUL reportedly captured 68% of the e-cigarette market within two years.

The sleek design of JUUL, which makes it look more like a USB drive, and its rechargeable batteries add appeal. Though referred to as “vapes” and often characterized as an aid to quit smoking, current concerns center on the probability that e-cigarettes will be a gateway product to dual or multiple tobacco use.

Coupled with increasing popularity as shown in the graphics from Truth Initiative (‘Cigarette and Other Tobacco Product Use in Oklahoma’) are concerns about the nicotine delivery system – some products comparable to a pack of cigarettes in 200 puffs.

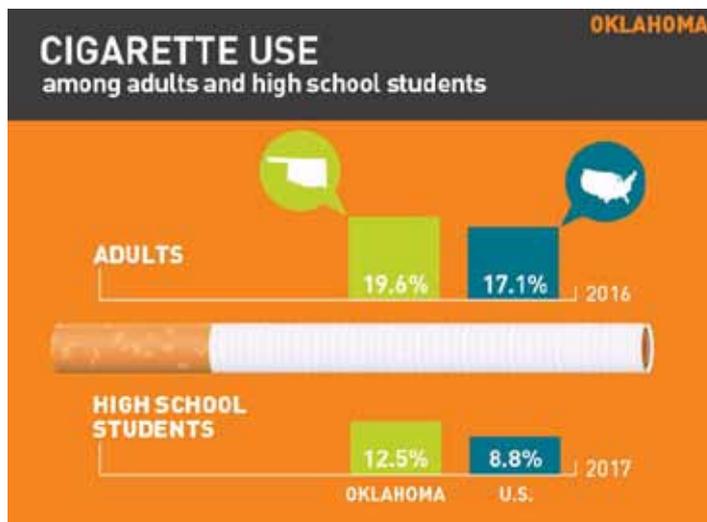
There are also questions about the safety of the inhaled, heated aerosols containing nicotine, flavorings, benzoic acid, propylene glycol as a propellant, and other additives criticized by the American Lung Association based on recent Harvard research.

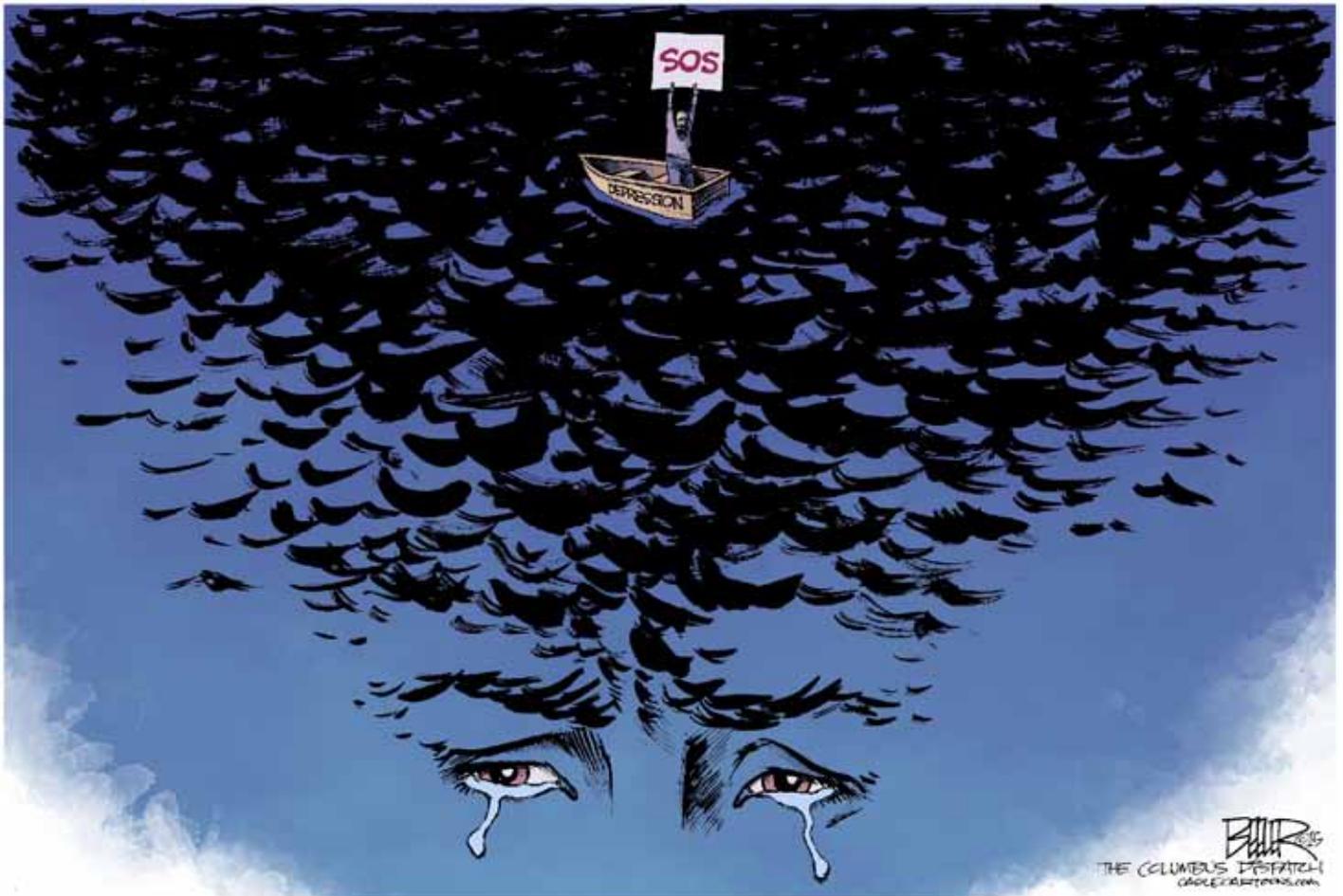
So much concern exists that some countries have already banned the sale of e-cigarettes while certain states and cities have excluded their use under smoke-free policies.

There are no easy choices moving forward. However, Oklahoma has already been recognized by the National Cancer Institute for its tobacco prevention and control efforts. As recently pointed out in the Oklahoman, both the University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center and Oklahoma State University’s Center for Wellness and Recovery in Tulsa are actively involved in researching and treating addictive diseases.

To continue improving Oklahoma health and mental health outcomes will require re-dedicated efforts of state leadership, both public and private. To continue this advancement, who you vote for and how they address our most serious issues matters. Oklahoma’s future is literally in your hands.

Jan New is a retired public administrator of municipal, state, and federal programs, with private industry and national trade association background.





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Growth Through Adversity: What Rhymes With Reason

BY NYLA ALI KHAN

How many of us realize that teen depression and anxiety are issues that should not be off-handedly dismissed and swept under the rug? How many of us are guilty of ignoring the trepidation, misgivings, and self-esteem issues that besiege teenagers? How many of us are aware of the statistics that one in five teenagers will suffer from depression before they reach adulthood, and that every 78 seconds a teen attempts suicide?

As a parent of a teenager, I admit, I don't always react kindly to her emotional outbursts and temper tantrums. I resort to calling my daughter a "drama queen" and rolling my eyes at her sudden releases of strong emotion. And that's probably because I have forgotten what it was like to be a teenager, and

I have forgotten how distressing growing up can be, particularly in a world that is not kind to the vulnerable.

My role as the mother of a teenage daughter motivated me to drive to Oklahoma City's Tower Theater last evening to see the teaser for the teen adventure film *What Rhymes with Reason*. Tower Theater is a quaint performance site, which was built in 1937.

The film speaks to the grueling struggle of teenagers to carve their paths and discover their destinies in an unforgiving world. The director, Kyle Roberts, and producers, one of whom is my friend Denise Castelli, laid emphasis on the reality of teen depression, which can lead to suicide.

They underscored the necessity of finding com-

PUBLIC FORUM

munity and faith-based avenues to treat it. Instead of stigmatizing teenagers who suffer from depression, it would behoove responsible adults to listen to their concerns with sensitivity.

Kyle said, “This film has been on my heart since I was about 18 years old. I’m very excited to bring this film to life told as an adventure/drama with real teenagers going through real problems.”

Life demands its dues from all of us, and balancing life’s demands is very difficult, particularly for young adults. Life has never been black and white, and there is no mathematical formula for living a trouble-free life.

Even the most talented, affluent, and privileged find themselves beset with adversity, hardship, and misadventure. It is in such situations that faith, self-reliance, and the social safety net provided by family/community enable even the most distraught person to heal.

Jonathan Koelsch, one of the illustrators working on the film, observed, “*What Rhymes with Reason* is exciting because it is not what many Christian films have been stereotyped as – cheesy, hollow, and preachy.

Instead, WRWR does not draw any faith-based conclusions, and it’s not afraid to be raw. That’s very rare.

In fact, Kyle coined a poignant term – this is a ‘truth-based’ film, not a faith-based one. It simply explores the human condition painted across an action-packed and dramatic canvas, and asks the underlying, perennial question that dissuades the faith of many – if the Christian God exists, why do good people suffer so much? It explores the ancient story of Job in a modern, youth-centered tale. ... WRWR is the film I wish I could have watched when I was an emotionally struggling and often depressed teen. It’s entertaining and evocative without being preachy. It’s sincere and authentic.”

I observe that *What Rhymes with Reason* is about organic healing that young adults find by leaning on faith. The film does not infantilize the growing pains of teens nor does it seek to pontificate. On the contrary, the film is about growth through adversity and the dynamism of the human condition.

One of the performers in the film, Brianne Gaither, who regaled us with her soul-stirring performance at Tower Theater, said, “It is a huge privilege to be part of such a meaningful and important project! This film is for anyone who has ever struggled to find hope during a season of tremendous pain.”

The film is being produced right here in Oklahoma, which is good for the state, and promises to uncover hidden talent. As my friend Denise Castelli pointed out, “Independent film in Oklahoma has come a long way in the past several years with the addition of directors like Kyle Roberts. His ability to



Dr. Nyla Ali Khan, left, with *What Rhymes with Reason* producer Denise Castelli and director Kyle Roberts.

turn a project into profit and expose Oklahoma to a broader audience of studios that hire filmmakers has put us on the map. *What Rhymes with Reason* is the story that Kyle has been waiting to tell and he will tell it in a way that appeals to teens.”

And the more our creativity transcends the fault lines of race, gender, and sexual orientation, the better!

Nyla Ali Khan is the author of Fiction of Nationality in an Era of Transnationalism, Islam, Women, and Violence in Kashmir, The Life of a Kashmiri Woman, and the editor of The Parchment of Kashmir. Nyla Ali Khan has also served as a guest editor working on articles from the Jammu and Kashmir region for Oxford University Press [New York], helping to identify, commission, and review articles. She can be reached at nylakhan@aol.com.

Climate Eucatastrophe

BY MARK Y.A. DAVIES

In J.R.R. Tolkien’s works, the eucatastrophic moment only comes when good and compassionate persons realize that they must be willing to bring their full and whole lives [even to the point of being willing to sacrifice their lives] to bear on the revolutionary task at hand of turning the world away from

fear, hate, darkness, and death towards hope, love, light, and life.

If one has not yet recognized that one's full life is being called upon, then one has not yet realized what we are facing, and half measures will be met with utter defeat and destruction rather than new life in a new world.

Eucatastrophe is only possible after fully realizing the breadth and depth of the catastrophe of this moment. The only way we can save anything is for us to realize that on our current trajectory we will lose everything.

Most people would rather not hear that our chances are very small for being able to address the climate crisis before it is too late to avoid climate chaos.

This is not news anyone wants to hear. We would rather be told that we have this under control, that everything is going to somehow be alright, that even though things look bad right now we can turn this around, or that there will be some kind of eucatastrophic breakthrough or turn of events that will lead us through our global crisis towards global renewal.

The dangers of hopelessness are real, but we have been telling ourselves that somehow we will figure climate change out for over 30 years and the indicators that we are doing anything but figure this out are staring us relentlessly in our collective face.

If we have any hope of participating in the climate eucatastrophe that we so desperately need, we must first recognize in full relief the reality of our climate crisis and embrace each other in the fierce urgency of now to work for the life giving turn around to create a new world in Beloved Community.

Sometimes we have to sit outside and mourn around the tomb of death that we are experiencing before new life and renewed life can break into the world.

There is hope, but not unless our eyes are wide open to the reality of the deadly threat we are all facing and why and how we have allowed ourselves to get to a point where the survival of humanity and many species of life hang in the balance.

We cannot forget, however, Martin Luther King Jr.'s warning that there is such a thing as being too late, and we have to realize that no one else is going to save us.

It is up to us, all of us, to give our lives to bring about the climate eucatastrophe to save our human community and the ecological community of which we are all a part.

It's worth the sacrifice. It's worth our lives. *Mark Y.A. Davies is the Wimberly Professor of Social and Ecological Ethics and director of the World House Institute for Social and Ecological Responsibility at Oklahoma City University.*

Why We Need Reading Teachers

BY SHARON MARTIN

I'm still trying to wrap my mind around why anyone would vote for a man who filed repeatedly for bankruptcy because "we need a good businessman in the White House." Let's grab a dictionary and look up the definition of bankruptcy.

Do you understand the moral bankruptcy of cheating contractors, of taking your cut off the top and letting investors carry the losses?

A news story last week said legislators' expenses were going up, so their salaries were being increased. How many of these same legislators have voted against the minimum wage increase? Do you agree with their assessment that raising minimum wage would hurt businesses, but working two jobs

Why Rev. Dr. William Barber Endorses Our Work.

“Many veterans and civilians are using a moral critique to challenge our government and military spending as a nation. Why spend trillions on private contracts for more planes when veterans don't get health care? Why are we spending in peace time almost three times more on war than we did at the height of Vietnam? Why do our inner cities look like occupied war zones? Why do we create poverty overseas?

It's time for a fusion movement to tackle these issues head on. About Face is doing just that.”

—The Rev. Dr. William Barber II

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and still living below the poverty line is OK for the little guy?

Maybe you don't understand cause and effect. How often do the wealthy amass their fortunes alone, without staff, sales people, and an army of workers? Is it OK for workers to be paid less than what they need to get by?

Even Henry Ford understood that his workers should be able to afford one of the cars they built for him and his company.

Comprehension is a skill that's improved by asking questions and thinking things through.

How many of the president's supporters have even read *The Art of the Deal*? Do they still appreciate the deals he's making with China [and Mexico and Canada], deals that are costing American farmers billions? Does it make sense that American taxpayers have to pony up to keep farmers afloat because of the president's deal making? And does it make sense that many farmers still support this deal-making president?

This is not liberal fiscal policy versus conservative fiscal policy, it's about making sense. It doesn't

make sense to spend billions to keep the people who are willing to work in our fields and in our houses out. It doesn't make sense to manufacture a crisis at the border by not hiring enough immigration judges to handle the influx. It doesn't make sense to ignore why people are making the dangerous trek to our border.

It doesn't make sense to slap tariffs on goods that increase the cost of those goods, especially if you're not going to raise the minimum wage so workers can pay the increased cost.

Maybe universities aren't hotbeds of liberal thinking at all. Maybe they are hotbeds of comprehension and common sense. Maybe those who think the president is on the right track need to go back to school, or at least start asking questions and thinking things through.

Sharon Martin lives in Oilton. Her latest book, Not A Prodigal, is available through Barnes and Noble. Her recent children's book, Froggy Bottom Blues, can be purchased in hardcover or paperback from Doodle and Peck Publishing and in paperback from Amazon.

GOP Economics: Self-Serving Greed

BY GARY EDMONDSON

Republican economic theory rests on the overriding principle that the rich deserve to get richer regardless the cost to everyone else. Two self-serving bulwarks prop up that creed: corporate socialism and crony capitalism.

Members of Greed's Own Party rail against the majority banding together to try to protect itself from their avarice. "Socialism" becomes pejorative, as if working together isn't what built this nation.

They're silent, of course, on the system of corporate socialism with which they reward their donors.

Corporate socialism is best exemplified by the special treatment afforded the oil and gas industry by Oklahoma politicians. A gross production tax of 2% for the first three years [the most productive years] of a well's production makes sure that petro-polluters will remember their pals come election time.

In 2015, those GOP local-control advocates banned municipalities from protecting themselves from oil-co fracking activities that might trigger earthquakes or threaten water supplies.

This spring, a new push by Republicans would force any city that challenged Big Oil's superiority to compensate the producers for any regulations or restrictions that resulted from them not getting free rein to act as if they owned the state – and not just its politicians.

And while cities, counties and entire states try to address the pollution of plastic bags, Oklahoma proudly bans those irritating local municipalities from trying to impose restrictions on that petrochemical by-product.

Legislators regulating their own businesses or those of their employers is standard operating procedure.

On the national scene, of course, the 2018 tax scam exemplifies putting corporate [donor] profits ahead of the general welfare. Corporate leaders spewed a lot of hogwash over the economic benefits of them getting massive tax breaks.

The results? In one week in May, Politicus reported "CEO who claimed he gave raises because of Trump's tax cuts lays off 150 employees" and Common Dreams noted "While reaping \$21 billion windfall from Trump tax cuts, report shows, AT&T slashed 23,000 Jobs."

Dismantling consumer protections is another favorite GOP tactic for putting corporate profits ahead of people. Some of the most egregious examples concern the ravaging of our nation's public lands.

After rolling back drilling regulations resulting from the 2010 British Petroleum Deepwater Horizon rig disaster to going soft on asbestos and watching the EPA become Enhancing Pollution Advancement,

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it comes as no surprise that the Daily Kos reports the Bureau of Land Management is changing its official mission statement from “to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of America’s public lands for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations” to the developer-friendly “the economic value of America’s public lands.”

And, of course, that “economic value” belongs to polluters, who get access to devalue our lands at sweetheart rates. Corporate socialism in its most obvious form.

Don’t overlook the inaction from Education Secretary Betsy DeVos that leaves college students in the grips of loan sharks.

Here’s the Daily Kos again: “A federal judge had to tell Betsy DeVos and her Education Department to forgive loans of students defrauded by for-profit colleges – and even after that court loss, DeVos’ department is blocking help for more than 150,000 fraud victims ... In one year, the Obama Administration approved relief for 30,000 students. In two years, the Trump Administration approved just 16,155 claims, with DeVos whining that relief for such claims is

‘free money,’ and the department actually referring some defrauded borrowers to the Treasury Department to have their tax refunds seized even though they have relief claims pending.”

I guess when the president’s sham university gets socked with a \$25 million judgment for its nefarious actions, we shouldn’t be surprised where the sympathies of his administration lie.

Corporate socialism exposes the myth of the rugged capitalists carving out their fortunes with grit and determination. Instead, we have an organized movement to make government work for corporations at the expense of individuals.

Corporate socialism is the overall guiding principle to Republican economic theory. But, sometimes the pro-bidness biases of Greed’s Own Party become more personal. This begets crony capitalism.

Crony capitalism rewards specific individuals with monetary windfalls. When Oklahoma Attorney General Mike Hunter announced the \$270 million opioid settlement with Purdue Pharma, the figure included \$55.5 million in contingency fees to outside lawyers

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Torrential rains swamped the state in May. Especially hard hit: Northeast Oklahoma, where rainfall was a record 330%-plus above normal. Talala and Miami each received more than 23 inches. At left, what persistent heavy rains wrought along Tulsa's Riverside Drive.

CLIMATE CATAclysm

Third Wettest May On Record Portends Dire Consequences Of Inaction

BY BOB AND MARIA ROUNSAVELL

Thirteen federal agencies recently released a report that directly contradicts the Trump Administration's position on climate change. This is an "exhaustive scientific report" that clearly indicates we humans are the primary cause of global temperature rise that has created the warmest period in human history.

The long-term global warming trend, if nothing else, shows that more and more of the predicted impacts of global warming are now a reality. The impact of global warming on communities, regions, infrastructure and economic sectors is expected to increase in the U.S. and the rest of the world, if action is not soon taken to deal with it.

The 2014 assessment forecast that coastal cities would experience more flooding in coming years as sea levels rose is no longer theoretical. Scientists have now documented a record number of "nuisance flooding" events during high tides. Nearly half the residents of Hampton Roads, VA, in 2014, could not get out of their neighborhoods at least once because of tidal flooding.

As oceans have warmed, disruptions in U.S. fisheries – long predicted – are now occurring. Record ocean temperatures in 2012 caused lobster catches

in Maine to peak a month early. And the distribution chain was totally unprepared.

Although much discussion about climate change is focused on the role of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gasses that warm the planet, there is also a renewed emphasis on the impacts of other atmospheric pollutants like ozone and smoke. Their significance to us is because of the resulting respiratory problems leading to premature death.

We now know with "high confidence" that climate change will increase ozone levels, as rising temperatures and changes in atmospheric circulation affect weather patterns. What climate deniers neglect to consider: *the increases will not be uniform.*

By the end of this century the worst ozone levels will be found across a wide expanse of the Midwest and northern Great Plains; however, ozone levels are expected to improve in the Southeast.

Deniers of climate change often fail to acknowledge the unevenness of change. Climate change does not occur all at once nor does it occur everywhere to the same degree or extent.

Last year California experienced the worst fires ever. The death count is not yet complete. The damage cost is undoubtedly astronomical and more dam-

age from flooding will appear in the near future.

The lessons learned by the West have come from hard experience. The warmer weather breeds longer dry seasons in summer along with other impacts. The fire season has greatly lengthened. Smoke from fires affects health and visibility. It can and will get worse before it gets better. We humans need to begin changing our lifestyles if we want to continue surviving on this planet.

Let's begin developing a strong program of adaptation, of obviating more and stronger effects of climate change. Detailed economic research has estimated that every year severe climate change could cause hundreds of billions of dollars in damages. More deadly heat waves, coastal and inland flooding, and increases in extreme weather events will take a tremendous toll, financially and otherwise.

Unfortunately the assessment document is reporting that few states and cities are taking steps to adapt to the impacts of climate change. There are a few places, mainly in Alaska and Louisiana, which have taken measures like preserving wetlands along the coasts to act as buffers against storms. But outside of these few, no places are taking serious measures for survival in the age of climate change.

Here in Oklahoma we can easily see the impact of climate change. Our climate is getting hotter – reportedly by nearly 10 degrees. You may want to look at your PSO or OGE bills to find your air conditioning usage and to document for yourself how you are being impacted. In addition, our state is also getting wetter. The weather impacts our lives, whether we like it or not, or whether we are aware or not.

The effects of weather can and will change how we live. Climate change is now a given in our daily existence. If we continue to ignore it, we risk survival.

The majority of climate scientists now give us approximately 12 more years to do something. If we continue doing nothing or doing only the bare minimum, we are only putting off the inevitable. The inevitable result is that we may not survive in the midst of climate change. The human race needs to stop denying the facts and begin to take serious measures.

Had a problem with the weather lately? Too much rain ruining your days? Will it be too hot to enjoy the outdoors this summer or maybe just too wet to spend much time outdoors?

Recently we decided to stop adding more miles to our 2011 Fusion. We bought a new car. Then the fun began – we had to get home from Tulsa to Oologah before the storm came.

We left the car lot and awkwardly turned the new knobs on our new radio; we had to rely on our brave weather observers and the meteorologists to keep us abreast of the latest moves of the storm. KRMG was our guide that day. It told us second by second of the tornado coming to Collinsville. With all the Tulsa commuters in a slow caravan along 169, we took back routes, roads we had discovered on our Sunday afternoon drives or our Mother's Day hunt for milkweeds.

Tornado threats were being reported as imminent. We started one way home, then we had to change course time after time. We were blocked on the roads with High Water signs. We remembered the TV warning: *Turn Around Don't Drown*. Many barricades blocked us. After a while, we decided we should have, could have counted the signs but too late. Then we thought we needed shelter.

On 116th Street was a QT station but cars were getting some gas for their longer trip home, maybe across the state line. Ah, ha! Sanctuary across Highway 20 at a big church where we hunkered down under the canopy. From there we finally got on 169 and made it home to our garage, our new car finally safe and sound. Not long after, Martha, our next door neighbor, gave us the latest news from Facebook.

During the stormy night our friends John and Faith Wylie's lakeside home had been hit by lightning and was destroyed by the ensuing fire. They escaped with only the clothes they had on and both of their cars.

At their refuge in her sister Dawn's house, we found the Oologah pastor, Dr. Jennifer Long, inside with Faith and John. Dawn mindful of John's diabetes was getting some food. We sat down with Faith. Aside from their cars, they saved very little, but they have good insurance and they will carry on.

There are many other stories out there in Oklahoma. El Reno had two dead and many others injured from a massive tornado. As we write this, Tulsa is being threatened by raging flood waters coming down at 282,000 CFS down the Arkansas River through the aging dam at Keystone Lake.

It is here, folks. Climate change deniers, time is galloping. There's little time to make these significant changes to survive the disasters looming ahead.

Let us begin.

Bob Rounsavell currently serves as chair of the Eastern Flyer Coalition of communities between Tulsa and Oklahoma City. Passenger rail can make life better for Oklahomans in the 21st century. His wife Maria serves as his editor and co-author.





Was The No Collusion Conclusion Good For Country?

BY RANDOLPH M. FEEZELL

Upon the release of the Mueller Report there was a common reaction to Part One among pundits, politicians, and talking heads. As far as I can tell from widespread media reports the reaction was virtually unanimous: Relief. It was good that Mueller and his investigators found insufficient evidence that there was a criminal conspiracy – collusion – between the Trump campaign and the Russians, who evidently strongly wanted the outcome they helped to achieve.

The report unequivocally shows that Russians did interfere in our election by means of the dissemination of disinformation and hacking the Clinton campaign and the Democratic Party organization. The Trump campaign welcomed the help. However, Mueller was unable to establish the crucial conspiratorial link between the Trump campaign and the Russians, despite numerous contacts that were documented,

lied about, and unreported to the FBI.

It turns out that Trump and members of his campaign are cheering a report showing they were merely dupes, not treasonous cheaters, fools rather than criminals, because the standard of evidence for conspiracy was high enough to allow the bar for self-congratulation to be absurdly low.

It's no wonder that Trump would trumpet the no collusion conclusion [NCC] – it's rhetorically flashy and effective for his base and others, but logically suspect.

There is a category of bad reasoning called the fallacy of appeal to ignorance. It is a fallacy to argue either that a claim is true because it hasn't been proven false or that a claim is false because it hasn't been shown to be true. Trump exploited the latter form of the fallacy.

Trump was quick to claim that because Mueller

couldn't prove there was collusion, it follows that there was no collusion. That doesn't follow. A claim isn't false because it hasn't been shown to be true. The proper inference is that there wasn't sufficient evidence to establish there was a criminal conspiracy, not that there was no conspiracy. It could still be true that there was a conspiracy. Lack of evidence for a claim doesn't establish that the claim is false. Insufficient evidence does not establish anything.

One scholar argued, before the report was released, and based on research concerning the history of interference in other elections throughout the world, that it would be virtually impossible to prove there was collusion, even if there was such a conspiracy. If this is true, and Trump could make use of an appeal to ignorance to persuade the logically unwary of a fallacious conclusion – as he did – it turned out that the investigation was good for him, politically speaking, despite his first reaction when he found out that a special counsel had been appointed to investigate Russian interference in the 2016 election.

“Oh my God. This is terrible. This is the end of my presidency. I'm f---ed.” He wasn't expecting exoneration – which he didn't get.

There was positivity and unanimity in the reaction to Part One of the Mueller report. What would a reasoned negative reaction look like? It should consider and evaluate the reasons offered for thinking that it was good the report found no compelling evidence of collusion.

According to many people, it was good that Mueller found insufficient evidence of a criminal conspiracy because it was “good for the country” or “good for America.” But they left us hanging – as if it was somehow self-evident that it was good for the country or that the claim needed no further explanation. Tell us more.

Why is it supposedly good for the country that Mueller found insufficient evidence of collusion? Why would it have been bad for the country if Mueller could have established a conspiracy? Answers to these questions are less than obvious.

One writer offered an argument about the legitimacy of our democratic process of electing the president. The charge that Trump's campaign conspired with the Russians was really a claim about whether Trump was legitimately elected. Since collusion couldn't be established we should be “relieved” that the election was legitimate.

But the Russians did interfere, and to the extent that their cyber attacks were at least partially effective [and Trump was elected] questions about legitimacy remain. I am not relieved about what happened, given Mueller's powerful verification of Russian interference.

Former Secretary of Defense and CIA Director Leon Panetta [no fan of Trump] said it was “good news” that Trump did not collude with the Russians. [Keep in mind: the proper conclusion is about lack of evidence, not the more robust assertion – “no collu-

sion” – that Trump has been hawking.] Panetta said, “To have a president or his campaign engage in treasonous activities, certainly would be horrible for the country.”

I suppose it would be a morally better state of affairs, other things being equal, if the person trying to be elected president is not attempting to win by conspiring with a foreign adversary. However, other things are not equal. It would also be a morally better state of affairs – for the country – if the candidate and now president was not a serial liar [bullshitter], an uncivil bully, a xenophobe, a defender of sexual assault, chummy with autocrats, and a person unwilling to criticize white supremacists and quite willing to attack central democratic institutions: the press, the courts, and the intelligence and investigative communities.

Electing this man was horrible for the country, getting rid of him would be a very good thing, and if a finding of collusion might contribute to a good outcome, then the finding would be instrumentally good.

Rudy Giuliani put his argument in terms of bad motives. “And any American should be very, very happy that this has been resolved this way. The only people who aren't are people with bad motives.”

On the contrary, in not applauding the NCC, one might have admirable motives, including an impartial concern for the good of the country, not simply a desire for a single loathsome individual to take a precipitous fall.

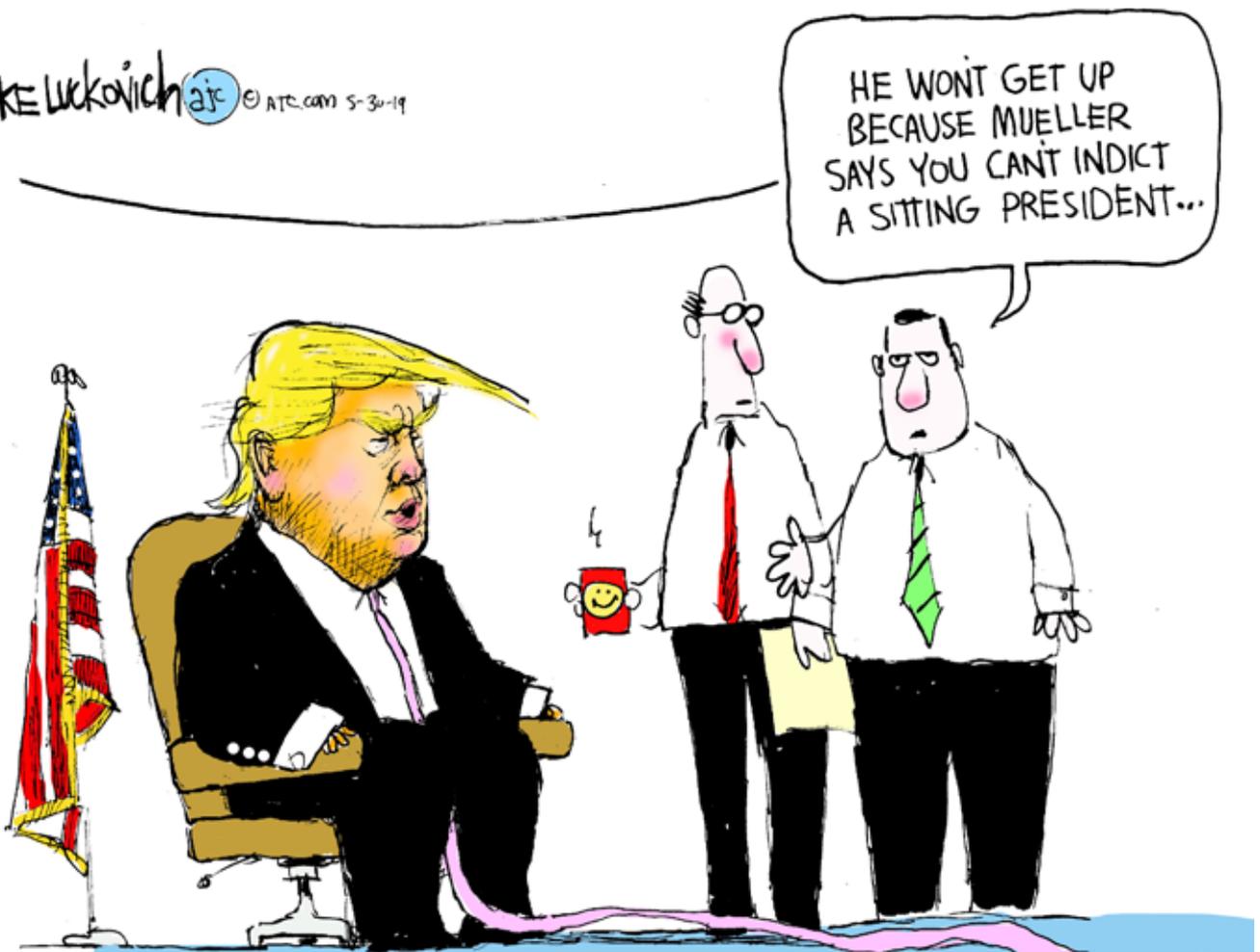
Another pundit also lauds a positive reaction to the report. “Hoping for the reverse is the definition of putting partisan interests before the country.” This simply repeats Rudy's accusation, as if the only motive for thinking it would have been better if Mueller could have established collusion would be something like Trump Derangement Syndrome rather than a dispassionate concern for country and fellow citizens.

Another kind of argument was offered by Tulsi Gabbard, Democratic representative from Hawaii. She offered a consequentialist argument. If Mueller had found compelling evidence of a conspiracy, it would have caused a “terrible crisis that could have led to civil war.”

Rep. Gabbard probably was speaking figuratively, not literally, but it's clear that she was predicting grave consequences if Mueller's collusion conclusion had been different. As I have suggested, a consequentialist argument might lead in another direction.

If Trump and his campaign conspired with the Russians and Mueller could have shown it, this might also have shown, more persuasively, what kind of man he is – especially for those who have remained unconvinced that he is unfit to hold the office.

Civil war? Had the conclusion about collusion been different, I am hopeful that Republicans finally might have developed some moral and political spine and confronted Trump, as many disappointed conservative writers have. I am thinking of David Brooks, Michael Gerson, and George Will, whose criticisms of



Trump and his Republican enablers have been a consistent theme on editorial pages.

Good for the country? It's not good for the country that Trump is president and it would be good for the country if he were removed. If Mueller could have established that Trump colluded with the Russians the pressure to impeach might have leached across the aisle and turned reliable Trump Republicans into born again never-Trumpers. The pressure on Senate Republicans to give up this disastrous political experiment might have been strong – given the strength of Mueller's evidence.

Good for the country? It would be good for the country to rid itself of the dishonesty, corruption, and embarrassment associated with this presidency.

At least some of the defenders of the goodness thesis [as I will call it] were guilty of conflating two different claims: no evidence of collusion vs. evidence of no collusion. The distinction was more clear when it involved the charge of obstruction of justice. The report said, "If we had confidence after a thorough investigation of the facts that the president clearly did not commit obstruction of justice, we would so state. Based on the facts and the applicable legal standards, we are unable to reach that judgment."

Panetta seems guilty of blurring this important distinction when he says it would have been a horrible thing if the president committed treason. But this assumes that Mueller's report established that there

was no conspiracy. It didn't.

That's another reason for thinking that evidence of collusion would have been better. It would have more clearly resolved our uncertainty about whether Trump is a crook, independent of his other behavior, in both private and public life, including obstruction of justice.

There is a final reason for believing that a finding of conspiracy would have been good. If Trump and his campaign did engage in a criminal conspiracy and Mueller found strong evidence for this charge, then it would have been good as a matter of justice. Assuming that the conspirators would at some point be held legally [or politically] responsible for their crimes, and received a just reward, then they would be given what is due to them.

The consistent theme among those applauding the findings of the report is that we should be relieved and happy because Mueller found there was no collusion. But that's not what he found. Optimists assumed what Trump wanted us to conclude – fallaciously.

In the end, I'm disappointed, not relieved, about Mueller's finding with regard to collusion, and my reaction is neither unjustified nor the expression of bad moral motives.

Randolph M. Feezell, PhD, grew up in northwestern Oklahoma and is professor emeritus of philosophy at Creighton University in Omaha, NE.

What Mueller Told Us

BY JOE CONASON

Behind the straight-shooting, ramrod demeanor always mentioned by his friends, Robert Mueller possesses a shrewd intelligence.

He demonstrated that strategic acuity when, with a few carefully selected sentences, he wielded his own reticence to deliver a crushing blow to Donald Trump [and a hard shot to Attorney General William Barr, the White House henchman].

The more diffidence Mueller displayed in speaking publicly – after two years of principled silence as special counsel – the more powerful were the words he chose to utter. Standing before the seal of the Justice Department, he told us it is important that his 448-page report “speak for itself.”

Yet, with the nation listening, he briskly underlined the most salient aspects of the report, which the great majority of his fellow Americans will never read.

Mueller wants us to understand – contrary to whatever Trump, Jared Kushner or assorted Republican patsies might claim – that the Russian plot to sway the 2016 election against Hillary Clinton was a historic assault on our democracy. This act by a hostile foreign power was a matter “of paramount importance” that “deserves the attention of every American.”

Rather than clear Trump and his associates of conspiring with the Russians, Mueller pointed not only to the “numerous efforts emanating from Russia to influence the election” but also his report’s “discussion of the Trump campaign’s response to this activity,” which was enthusiastic if not provably criminal – despite his ultimate finding that “there was insufficient evidence to charge a broader conspiracy.”

The former FBI director also hopes we will grasp the gravity of charges that Trump obstructed justice, and realize why he spent so much time and effort investigating those accusations.

“When a subject of an investigation obstructs that investigation or lies to investigators,” he intoned, “it strikes at the core of their government’s effort to find the truth and hold wrongdoers accountable.” In other words, the cover-up is as despicable as the crime.

Then he delivered the harshest judgment. It wasn’t surprising to anyone who has read the report or the media coverage, but it was still news because he said it aloud.

After months of gathering evidence about the president’s efforts to block his investigation, he said, “if we had had confidence that the president clearly did not commit a crime, we would have said so.” But he didn’t.

Neither could he say that the president indeed had

committed a crime, as he explained, for two reasons: In fairness, no prosecutor should allege a crime that will not be the subject of indictment and trial, because that deprives the accused of a forum to determine guilt or innocence.

And the president, according to Justice Department policy that the special counsel must obey, cannot be indicted and tried while in office.

That reasoning, of course, is exactly the opposite of what Barr claimed when he presented his version of the Mueller Report. Back then, the attorney general insisted Mueller’s decision about charging Trump had not relied upon that Justice Department policy.

Even while he indicated that Barr had lied about that salient issue, Mueller said he “appreciated” the attorney general’s decision to release the report and doesn’t question “his good faith.”

That was well played – as was his implicit rebuke to Trump when he concluded by praising the fairness and professionalism of the prosecutors, FBI agents, analysts and staffers. Unlike the president, who has disparaged them so viciously over the past two years, Mueller described them as serving with “the highest integrity.”

The departing special counsel will now return to private life, after a long career devoted to the FBI and the Justice Department. While he emphasized his wish not to testify publicly in Congress, that is not a decision for him to make. In fact, many significant questions about his investigation still require answers.

[Perhaps the House Judiciary Committee should also call a few of his deputies, who may be more willing to testify.]

According to his associates, Mueller’s demurral is meant to express his distaste for “politicizing” the Russia investigation. But on the most pressing political issue that we face today, he said what everyone in Washington already knows about his report.

The special counsel could not indict Trump. And he would not clear Trump, who has obviously violated the public trust and several federal statutes.

So, as usual, he consulted the relevant rules and regulations, which led him directly to the Constitution – a document that “requires a process other than the criminal justice system to formally accuse a sitting president of wrongdoing.”

If that isn’t an impeachment referral, then what is?

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Trigger Warnings For President Snowflake

BY FROMA HARROP

That was a pretty stunning story about the White House asking some Navy officials to move the warship USS John McCain “out of sight” during President Donald Trump’s recent visit to Japan. The obvious fear was that sharing any stage with the war hero would unhinge the president. McCain died last August from brain cancer.

This is pretty wild stuff.

Higher-ups in the Navy reversed earlier efforts to cover the ship’s name with a tarp. Trump denies he knew about the request, as does acting Secretary of Defense Patrick Shanahan.

Believe them, or don’t. What cannot be denied is that someone in the White House sent email to the 7th Fleet urging that McCain’s name be kept out of Trump’s line of vision. Please confirm that the request “will be satisfied,” the White House Military official wrote in a follow-up message to the Navy.

Also, sailors wearing the USS John McCain’s insignia were not allowed to board the amphibious assault ship Wasp, where Trump was giving his Memorial Day address. Sailors from other ships were invited aboard.

What we have here is a trigger warning at the

presidential level. A trigger warning cautions that a work to be presented contains writing, images and/or concepts that some people might find distressing. Popular on some college campuses, trigger warnings have been subject to much-deserved ridicule.

Recall the fuss made during the last presidential campaign over the appearance of the words “Trump 2016” chalked on steps at Emory University. Students demonstrated with at least one insisting that the scribbling made him fear for his life. Others regarded this display of sensitivity as ludicrous.

Students demanding trigger warnings are often called “snowflakes.” Snowflakes are people so easily offended they feel a need for “safe spaces” away from realities of a harsh world. Snowflakedom is a mark of immaturity.

“Basically, we now have a capital city that is trying to child-proof the presidency, right?” historian Jon Meacham said. “You want to take everything away, all the sharp objects.”

Airbrush things out that might upset the “dear leader.”

So what about John McCain triggers Trump? Many have noted that the senator from Arizona is a true American hero who, having spent over five gruesome years as a prisoner of war in Vietnam, sacrificed greatly for his country – and Trump is not.

After running out of student deferments, Trump evaded conscription by claiming incapacitation due to bone spurs on his foot. It turned out he probably didn’t even have bone spurs. [His doctor reportedly lied about them as a favor to Trump’s father.]

It must have been hard for a fragile personality like Trump to watch the national outpouring of grief for McCain, who also embodied what now looks like a golden age of nonpartisan patriotism. The similar tributes paid to the late George H.W. Bush no doubt added tinder to Trump’s pile of insecurities.

Trump has tried to cover his neurotic bashing of a deceased politician by insisting his true beef was tied to McCain’s vote that stopped the repeal of the Affordable Care Act. Actually, Trump should have thanked McCain. His prospects for re-election would be far dimmer had millions of Trump voters started losing their health coverage.

What makes this incident different from campus trigger warnings is that after advised of the “dangers,” students can still choose to receive the material. Trump’s guardians wouldn’t even take that chance and worked to keep the trigger hidden altogether. Unless, of course, they were doing it all at Trump’s behest. The presidency doesn’t get weirder than this, or so we hope.

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Our Privacy Rights Are Being Sold, Stolen And Stripped

To get a job these days, chances are you'll have to pee in a bottle. Every company with a credit card, store card or website – or even a clerk who asks you nosy questions at the checkout counter – is looking to peddle “data” about your buying habits. In many states, you have to hand over your fingerprints to renew your driver's license. Public and private spaces alike are constantly scanned by ever more observant surveillance cameras.

When we're asked for our Social Security number to open a bank account, many of us simply shrug our shoulders rather than raising hell. And if we happen to be poorer than a banking customer – a footloose kid hanging on a street corner or an unemployed motorist guilty of “driving while black,” for example – we're liable to be locked up and lost in a vast criminal “justice” system that considers itself not responsible for any rights, especially privacy rights.

Invasion of our privacy has become a way of life. When you stand up and demand to be left alone, you're likely to be pegged as a quaint holdover from days gone by, a whiner or, more likely, someone with something to hide – maybe even a terrorist! We're living in a culture in which individual rights have been sold and subjugated, all for database marketing and to keep the lid on the unruly masses.

This is an issue that has fallen off the political radar. What are the chances that privacy rights will engage the mighty intellects of The Donald? Last I looked, the only people in Washington overly concerned with privacy were the corporate check writers and their pet politicians, eager to cover the tracks of their own financial quid pro quos.

Behind the shiny glass doors of your not so friendly, not so neighborhood bank, everything they know about you is for sale – your account numbers, bank balance, loan history, address, credit history, Social Security number. The checks you write and receive, the invoices you pay and the investments you make reveal as much about you as a personal diary. But instead of banks keeping your information under lock and key, they collect it, cross-reference it, collate it and sell it – mostly to companies determined

to sell you something else. The banks get 20% to 25% of the sales revenue generated by the marketers who buy the information.

In the brave new culture built around the marketplace, both corporate and government sectors have deemed private and personal information to be just another commodity. Already, our Social Security cards, which were never meant to be a tool for anything but our security, have become a basic means of keeping track of us, for both marketers and the police.

But now, driven by dreams of a citizen databank available to government at every level, public officials are falling over each other with new proposals for keeping us tabbed. The International Association of Chiefs of Police wants DNA samples from anyone who is arrested for any reason [as opposed to tried and convicted], while some right-wing politicians want to take DNA samples from all newborns.

Filing our DNA in a government databank is about the ultimate in unreasonable search and seizure. How far we have come from the days of Supreme Court Justice Louis D. Brandeis, who said in his famous dissent in *Olmstead v. United States* [1928]: “The makers of our Constitution ... sought to protect Americans in their beliefs, their thoughts, their emotions and their sensations. They conferred, as against the Government, the right to be let alone – the most comprehensive of the rights, and the right most valued by civilized men.”

And now there are companies like 23andMe that not only collect your DNA for genetic testing but will sell your DNA to government agencies. DNA tracking is not just an assault on the principles embodied in our Constitution; it has very real and frightening implications. Employers could deny you a job because your genes include a tendency toward certain diseases or health defects, and insurers might use DNA-derived information to impose limits on your health care coverage.

And don't get me started on the tech companies and what they are doing with the overwhelming amounts of data they are collecting. Ah, for the simpler days of 1984, when George Orwell imagined that

all this high-tech snooping and file gathering would be used to spot and snuff out society's troublemakers and dissenters before they threatened the system.

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What Does 'Made In America' Mean To Trump?

"MAGA," blusters Donald Trump. "Make America Great Again!" America's ranching families, however, would like Trump to come off his high horse and get serious about a more modest goal, namely Make America COOL Again.

COOL stands for Country of Origin Labeling, a straightforward law simply requiring that the labels on packages of steak, pork chops, etc. tell us if the meat came from the U.S., China, Brazil or Whereintheworldistan. That's useful information, empowering consumers to decide where their families' food dollars go. But multinational meatpacking giants like Tyson Foods, JBS, and Cargill don't want you and me having this basic knowledge and power to decide for ourselves.

So, in 2012, the meat monopolists got the World Trade Organization to decree that our nation's COOL law violated global trade rules – and our corporate-submissive congress critters meekly surrendered, repealing the law.

Then came Donald Trump, blustering furiously against world trade scams and launching his Made in America campaign, which included promising struggling ranchers that he'd make restoring the COOL label a centerpiece of his new NAFTA deal. Ranching families cheered Donald the Dealmaker because getting that "American Made" brand on their products would mean more sales and better prices.

Now, however, cheers have turned to jeers, for Trump has issued his new U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement, ballyhooing it as a "historic transaction." But wait a minute ... Where's the beef? In his grandiose 1,809-page document, there is not one scrap about restoring COOL, not one word.

Worse than being left out, America's hard-hit ranching families are actually slapped in the face by Trump's U.S.-Mexico-Canada deal, for it allows multinational meatpackers to keep shipping into the U.S. market foreign beef that does not meet our food safety standards! Aside from the "yuck" factor and health issues, this gives Tyson and other giants an incentive to abandon U.S. ranchers entirely.

What's the matter with Donald and The Trumpsters? Why won't they stand up for the American workers and business owners who make their products right here in the good ol' US of A?

Oh, yeah, I know they talk a good game. Trump himself even issued a bold, star-spangled executive order in 2017 promoting the purchase of "American-made goods" produced by American labor. We consumers respond positively to that pitch, generally preferring to buy everything from mattresses to hockey pucks that are manufactured here at home. For example, take Patriot Puck. What's not to like about this corporation, which literally wraps its hockey pucks in American flag packaging and proudly advertises that they are "the only American Made Hockey Puck"?

Well, sadly, one thing not to like is that the puck-seller's pitch was a lie. Its product actually turned out to be made in China. It's not just wrong to engage in such an unfair and deceptive sales scam. It's a federal crime.

Saddest of all, though, is that when honest competitors and defrauded consumers protested the blatant firm's deceit, Trump's Federal Trade Commission appointees proved to be Made in America wimps. Far from standing up for U.S. workers, they coddled the job-stealing culprit.

Trump's Commission assessed no fines, required no admission of the obvious corporate crime, didn't even make "Patriot" Puck notify customers of its false marketing scam and let it keep all the profits it pocketed from the fraud. Instead, Trump's regulatory "toughies" insisted that the threat of *future* fines would keep such outlaws in check.

Seriously? The real crime here is not just that corporation after corporation is being given a pass for mocking our Made in America laws but that our nation's president is mocking the plight of America's manufacturing workers by making a spectacle of standing up for them. It's a shameful political fraud.

One thing we can do to address the injustice of Trump & Co. not enforcing Made in America laws and backing down from COOL is to stand with America's farm and ranch families against their betrayal by Trump and the Big Food monopolists by contacting the National Farmers Union: NFU.org.

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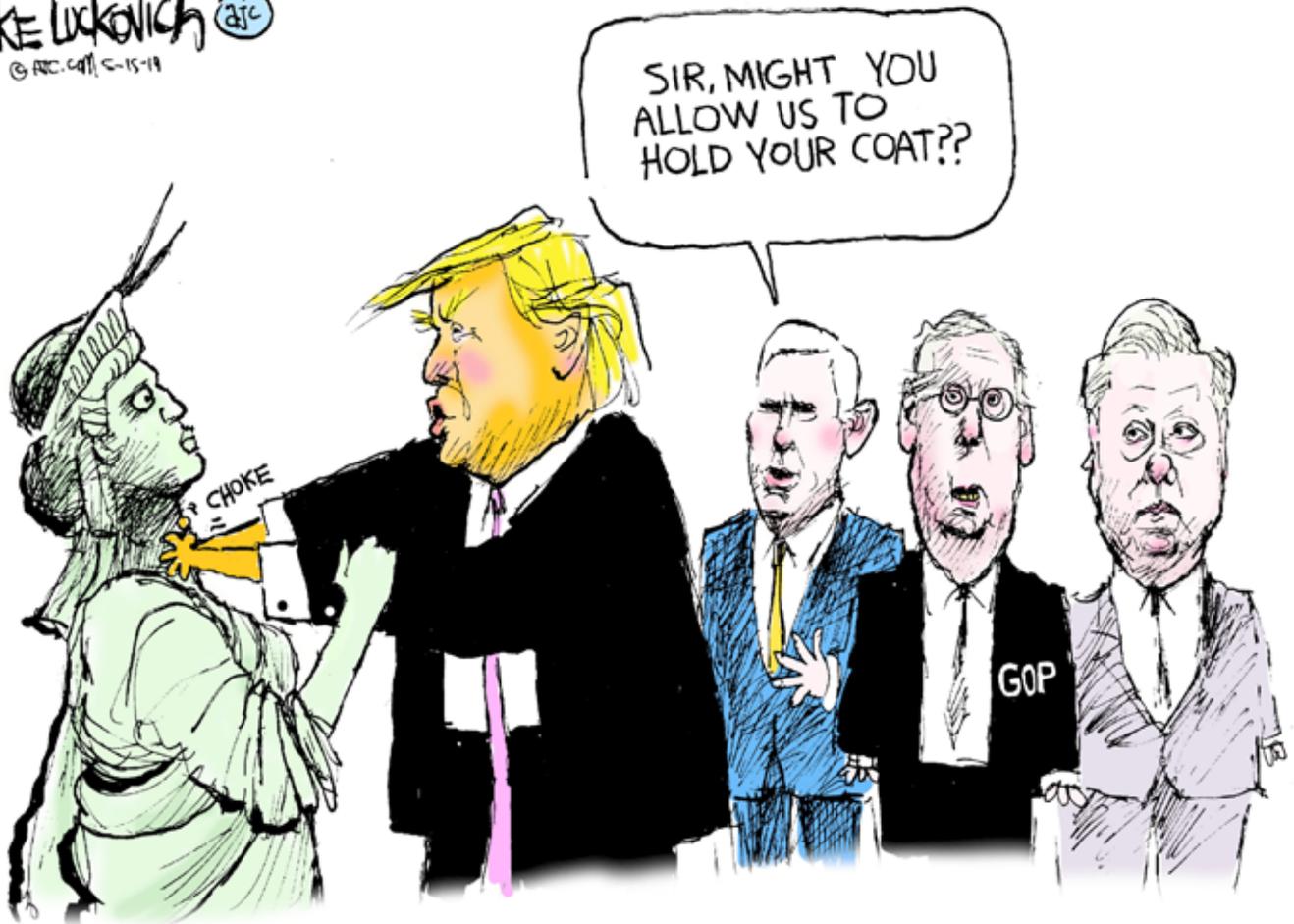
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The Hypocrites On The Hill

BY JOE CONASON

Donald Trump will never build the Great Wall he envisioned on this country's southern border, but his lawyers and minions are erecting the largest stonewall against congressional oversight since Nixon's presidency. In a scolding letter to Rep. Jerrold Nadler, D-NY, White House attorneys have said that the administration will simply reject some 81 subpoenas from the House Judiciary Committee that he chairs.

The reason offered for this blanket refusal to cooperate sounds much like a Trump tweet. "Congressional investigations are intended to obtain information to aid in evaluating potential legislation," huffed the president's lawyers, "not to harass political opponents or to pursue an unauthorized 'do-over' of exhaustive law enforcement investigations conducted by the Department of Justice."

Requests for information from the House Oversight Committee, the House Intelligence Committee, the House Ways and Means Committee and the Senate Intelligence Committee have all met with roughly the same arrogant attitude – as if the executive branch has no obligation to provide any information at all to Congress. Such dismissive responses represent a profound violation of the constitutional order.

Or as certain members of Congress explained not so long ago: "Congress's authority to oversee and investigate the Executive Branch is a necessary component of legislative powers and to maintain the constitutional balance of powers between the branches. As the Supreme Court held in 1927: '[T]he power of inquiry – with process to enforce it – is an essential and appropriate auxiliary to the legislative function.'"

Similarly, the Supreme Court held: “The power of the Congress to conduct investigations is inherent in the legislative process. That power is broad. It encompasses inquiries concerning the administration of existing laws as well as proposed or possibly needed statutes.’ When needed information cannot easily be obtained – or if government agencies resist – Congress has legitimate cause to compel responses.”

That pithy reference to our constitutional framework, complete with the relevant U.S. Supreme Court decision, is from the Final Report of the House Select Committee on Benghazi. It prefaces a long and indignant recitation of the supposed failures of the Obama Administration to cooperate adequately with the Benghazi committee’s lengthy and mostly pointless investigation, which was only the 10th – 10th – probe of the 2012 tragedy that claimed the lives of Ambassador Chris Stevens and three other State Department employees in Libya.

The 10th Benghazi “investigation” was known as a political sham long before Rep. Kevin McCarthy, R-CA, then the minority whip and now minority leader, boasted about its impact on Hillary Clinton’s approval ratings – its true and blatantly non-legislative purpose. That was why the Benghazi committee spent hours interviewing Sidney Blumenthal, a Clinton adviser with scarcely any connection to Libya and none whatsoever to Benghazi, about political topics including The Clinton Foundation, Media Matters for America and his communications with the presumed Democratic presidential nominee. [To this day, the transcript of Blumenthal’s interview with the committee remains sealed. Presumably, that’s because its contents would prove so embarrassing

to the Republicans who questioned him, including then-Rep. Mike Pompeo.]

When the Benghazi committee issued its final report – just in time for the 2016 presidential election – its press releases boasted about all the new information it had discovered through interviews of 107 witnesses, many from the White House, CIA, State Department and Defense Department. The most notable was Clinton, of course, who sat for 11 hours of nonsensical public badgering by committee members. The Obama Administration not only delivered 75,000 pages of documents in addition to 50,000 provided to the previous investigations; it also removed redactions as requested by the committee.

Yet none of this was enough for Trey Gowdy, the South Carolina Republican who chaired the committee and complained endlessly about the Democratic president’s attempt to “obstruct” his investigation. Incidentally, his final report culminated in no significant legislation concerning diplomatic security or any other conceivable issue – because that was never the Benghazi committee’s aim.

Now the same Republicans who whined so loudly about “lack of transparency” when Obama was president are silent, complicit or aggressive shells for Trump. They are aiding and abetting his obstruction of congressional investigations of the worst national scandal since Watergate, after two years of covering up for Trump and Russia when they held the majority.

They swore to uphold the Constitution, but for them it is always party first. Their oath means nothing.

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A Declining Population Need Not Cause Angst

BY FROMA HARROP

Total births in the United States fell last year to about 3.79 million, the smallest number in 32 years. The fertility rate hit a record low of 59 childbirths per 1,000 women. Americans are not having enough children to replace themselves.

This supposedly is bad news. Headlines are crying about a “Shortage of Americans” and “Demographic Decline.”

I don’t know. There seem to be plenty of Americans to go around. If population growth were the mark of national greatness, Oman, Equatorial Guinea and Angola would be the stars.

Of course, a sharply falling population would be cause for concern, but that’s not the situation here.

The United States has been below the replacement level of 2.1 births per woman for decades. The total continues to grow because of immigration.

Fewer workers, we are told, can be problematic for an aging society. An expanding elderly population needs more taxpayers to support its health care and, in many cases, more caregivers to make meals. This is true, but these demographics were totally predictable. It’s odd to see handwringing over the need for more tax revenues shortly after our leadership pushed through deep tax cuts that will drain the Treasury of said revenues.

As for who will fill caregiving jobs, the answer may

CONTINUED ON PAGE 42



Koch Brothers, 2.0

BY LEO GERARD

There's a new Koch organization in town. Instead of trying to buy politicians to do the bidding of billionaires, as Charles and David Koch have historically done, their rebranded network now says they will support community groups trying to cure the miseries of eons – everything from poverty to addiction.

And they've got some street cred, having successfully worked with liberal commentator Van Jones to secure legislation to reduce mass incarceration. Billionaire Charles Koch says the mission is this: "We must stand together to help every person rise."

That is some good stuff, right there. It's what labor unions have always preached – workers must stand together to gain the collective power essential to pull every one of them up. It works, too. In the middle of the last century, collective bargaining created the great American middle class.

There's an important difference, though, between the work of labor unions and billionaire-funded organizations.

Labor unions are created and controlled by workers. Billionaire-funded organizations are beholden to billionaires.

What could be so bad, though, about accepting gifts from billionaires? Just last month, billionaire Robert F. Smith promised to pay off the student loans of 396 graduates of Morehouse College. That means these young people get to launch their careers without the burden of debt.

Smith granted the loan forgiveness with no stipulations other than urging every member of the class of 2019 to do what they could to pay it forward – that is, help others achieve as well.

This gift is part of Smith's effort to fulfill his giving pledge. He signed a formal promise in 2017 to donate

half of his fortune, estimated at \$5 billion. The giving pledge is a project of billionaires Warren Buffett and Bill and Melinda Gates, who are bequeathing at least half of their money and urging other billionaires to do the same.

In 2016, Smith, who graduated from Cornell University and worked as a chemical engineer before he became an investor, committed to donating \$50 million to Cornell's chemical and biomolecular engineering school.

A significant portion of the endowment will be dedicated to scholarships and fellowships for African-American and female students who are traditionally underrepresented in engineering and technology. Cornell then named the department the Robert Frederick Smith School of Chemical and Biomolecular Engineering.

Not all billionaire gifts are benign, however. Just ask the students at George Mason and Florida State universities. Grants from the Kochs to the schools came with significant strings attached.

In the case of the millions the Kochs gave to Florida State for its economics department, the Kochs demanded the right to approve who was hired, to annually review their work and to withdraw funding if dissatisfied. Outrage erupted when students and the public learned of this infringement on academic freedom.

The Kochs donated approximately \$150 million to 300 colleges and universities between 2005 and 2015, gifts they frequently specified must support economics and law schools fostering unfettered free-market capitalism.

Of that, at least \$50 million went to George Mason, where, like at Florida State, the Kochs got control over faculty and course selections. The libertarian brothers' money helped convert the college into a center for libertarian study.

Three years ago, George Mason renamed its law school after the late, extreme right-wing Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia.

This occurred after George Mason received a \$10 million donation from the Kochs and a \$20 million gift arranged by the Federalist Society, a Koch-funded institution that has for decades cultivated conservative and libertarian attorneys and promoted them as jurists, including current Justices Neil Gorsuch and Brett Kavanaugh.

George Mason gave the Federalist Society and donors like the Kochs a say in faculty selection.

The Koch intrusion into George Mason academics was revealed by a campus group, Transparent GMU, which sued for release of the information. It is an affiliate of the group UnKoch My Campus, which seeks to preserve academic independence, freedom and integrity, as well as faculty governance rather than donor governance.

It's one thing to name an engineering school after a guy who sponsored scholarships for women and minority students. That promotes diversity among

learners and achievers and new perspectives for scientific inquiry. It's another thing to name a law school after a reactionary Supreme Court justice at the bidding of libertarian donors bent on converting the school into a right-wing training camp for future conservative judges. That covertly promotes a specific viewpoint, not free and wide-ranging academic instruction and research.

Billionaires don't necessarily have students' or workers' best interests in mind when they hand out cash. Libertarian and right-wing judges, like the libertarian and right-wing political candidates that the Koch network has propped up with hundreds of millions in donations, push policies that are great for private-jet-owning billionaires, not work-a-day thousands.

The 2017 tax cut is a good example. By 2027, millionaires will reap 82% of its benefits. The law definitely lined the pockets of the Koch brothers, among the richest people in the world, worth more than \$53 billion each.

And the Kochs showed their appreciation with a gift. Thirteen days after the U.S. House, under the leadership of former GOP Speaker Paul Ryan, passed the tax break for millionaires, Charles and Elizabeth Koch each gave \$247,000 to Ryan's fundraising campaign, Team Ryan – a total of nearly half a million.

When the U.S. Senate approved the tax cut, which is projected to increase the federal deficit by \$1 trillion over a decade, Ryan announced that he would attempt in 2018 to close that massive hole by slashing Medicare and Medicaid.

Those are the health insurance programs for the elderly and poor that are beloved and depended on by working people – the very people who got precious little out of the tax cut for the rich that exacerbated the federal deficit.

Here's the thing: Maybe it's nice that some billionaires are willing to give. But billionaires' "gifts" too often bear self-dealing strings. And handouts make many workers queasy anyway. They'd rather earn their own money and make their own decisions.

For Americans to achieve real freedom and self-governance, some of the billions that flow into the pockets of the already rich must go instead into the paychecks of the workers whose sweat creates profits. Political bribes, like the \$500,000 the Kochs gave Ryan, must be outlawed. And the rich must be properly taxed so that the nation can afford to pave its roads, send its youngsters to affordable, properly government-supported technical schools and colleges, and restore its once-great middle class.

American workers want autonomy, not charity, to help every person rise.

Leo W. Gerard is a steelworker and a Canadian and American labour leader. He was elected president of the United Steelworkers in 2001, and is the second Canadian to head the union. He is also a vice president of the AFL-CIO.

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THIS IS A BANK ROBBERY!
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Wall Street Money Buys Silence On Big Bank Abuses

BY MAX MORAN

In February 2018, Rachele Faroul became a symbol of racial discrimination in lending when an award-winning investigative report from Reveal covered her experience trying to buy a home.

Faroul, who is black, had good credit, plenty of savings, and a steady job when she first applied for a mortgage, but was denied twice. Only after her partner, who is half-white, co-signed did the bank approve Faroul's loan. Her partner was working part-time at a grocery store, earning \$144 per week.

Several big Wall Street banks have been cited for lending discrimination. Yet, not long after Faroul's story was published, Congress approved a partial

rollback of the landmark Dodd-Frank law passed after the 2008 financial crisis. One provision in that law, known as S. 2155, now makes it harder for journalists and law enforcement to even find out if discrimination occurs.

Why would Congress do such a thing? As always in politics, follow the money.

A new report from Americans for Financial Reform found that in the 2017-18 electoral cycle, big banks and financial interests pumped almost \$2 billion into American politics through campaign contributions and lobbying, and spent heavily to get S. 2155 passed into law. That means that the industry spent an aver-

age of \$2.5 million per day trying to influence lawmakers.

And it often works. Wall Street has succeeded in getting legislation that the public opposes, and fending off any action to rein in its abuses.

CONSUMER PROTECTION

After the 2008 crisis, Congress established a Consumer Financial Protection Bureau to safeguard ordinary Americans from financial chicanery. Over almost a decade, the CFPB won \$12 billion in restitution and cancelled debts for over 29 million Americans.

One of them was Shirley Banks, who was charged exorbitant fees for a service her debt settlement company didn't even provide. Thanks to the CFPB, she received a \$1,000 check as compensation.

Things look different now that the bureau's leadership has changed hands.

Trump's first CFPB director, Mick Mulvaney, spent his tenure trying to dismantle the agency which once cracked down on payday lending, an industry which heavily funded Mulvaney's campaigns when he was in Congress. Now, he's passed the seat off to his protege Kathy Kraninger.

In late January, Kraninger settled a case against Mark Corbett, a shady lender who forced ex-service members to hand over their pensions to get relief from his high interest rates. Corbett's fine? One dollar.

PRIVATE EQUITY

Private equity firms have also earned dividends for lining pockets in Washington. When private equity strip-mined Sears and Toys R Us for assets before bankrupting the companies, they left lifelong employees behind.

Some, like Anne Marie Reinhardt Smith, organized to get a small hardship fund, but only after she and her husband were left to choose whose medicine they could afford to buy each month.

Other private funds gobble up housing everywhere from metro Atlanta to rural manufactured housing parks. Wherever Wall Street becomes a landlord, the same patterns follow: neglect, rent hikes, and no recourse for tenants.

An industry with a consistently harmful track record shouldn't go without oversight. But the Blackstone Group – on track to become the largest private equity company in history, and recently cited by the United Nations for its single-handed contributions to the global housing crisis – spent \$18 million influencing federal lawmakers last year.

There's also a well-established revolving door between private equity and high political office, from Mitt Romney and Newt Gingrich to Joe Lieberman and Al Gore.

Candidate Trump declared that the carried-interest loophole – which grants hedge fund managers a lower tax rate than teachers and firefighters on their salaries – allows Wall Street “get away with murder.” In office, led by a treasury secretary who once worked for Goldman Sachs, Trump abandoned plans for change.

Trump's tax cut law merely delays the period at which the carried-interest loophole kicks in.

WELLS FARGO

Of course, if housing is your worry, you need not look to private equity for Wall Street abuses.

Wells Fargo, the fourth-largest bank in America, denied mortgage modifications for at least 870 homeowners over five years for no reason but its own incompetence, resulting in the eviction of 525 families who had done everything right. Jose Aguilar was one of the foreclosure victims. He stayed in a friend's basement for three months.

Wells Fargo has shown little interest in cleaning up its many messes in a decisive manner, and has avoided real accountability, like legislation that would break up large banks. Wells posted \$22 billion in profit last year, boosted by the 2018 tax cut legislation. In other words, all \$10.5 million of its direct influence spending cost the bank just .17% of its earnings.

VOTERS WANT CHANGE

We know that voters of both parties want tougher enforcement of the rules on Wall Street. But the industry uses money, plain and simple, to head off meaningful change and preserve its ability to rip off consumers.

The good news? House Democrats made a package of democracy reforms to get money out of politics, restore voting rights, and close the revolving door the first bill introduced in the 116th Congress.

Also, this Congress' freshman class is resisting the tug of Wall Street's wallet. Rep. Katie Porter has made a name off her prosecutorial questions to Wall Street CEOs and lax regulators alike. Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez famously refuses to spend her time making calls to big-money donors. Some politicians are starting to hear their voters' demands to take on Wall Street and other corporate titans. But not enough. *Max Moran is communications intern at Americans for Financial Reform and a graduate of Brandeis University.*

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What Should Guide Next Education Reform Era?

AFTER THE EDUCATION WARS

How Smart Schools Upend The Business Of Reform

By Andrea Gabor

The New Press

192 pages, \$27.99

BY JOHN THOMPSON

Second Of Two Parts

A first review of Andrea Gabor's excellent *After the Education Wars* concentrated on the progressive reforms that should have informed the improvement of New York City schools. Billionaires like Bill Gates and Mike Bloomberg essentially imposed a set of policies that virtually guaranteed "Taylorism," and turned so many schools into sped-up 21st century versions of Henry Ford's assembly lines. Gabor then draws on that history to offer advice on how educators can "recover the road not taken."

Each of Gabor's chapters teaches invaluable lessons, but I learned the most from her account of New York City's lost opportunities. I still would like to learn more about Eric Nadelstern's efforts to work within the reformers' system.

It's often speculated that some billionaires now sense that their experiments failed and they now place their faith in "personalized," online instruction. But they still seem to misunderstand Nadelstern's experiences and ignore his warning, "Virtual communities don't raise children, people do."

Although the nuances of education reform in Massachusetts are often lost on true believers in high stakes testing, Gabor shows how the policies that actually worked in Boston and Brockton were actually much closer to New York's progressive reforms than the test-and-punish mentality which challenges them.

First, Massachusetts improved its schools through a well-funded, well-planned, openly deliberated, and patient process. Its accountability test, the MCAS,

was transparent and iterative. Its graduation targets were only set at a sophomore level, and schools were allowed time for preparation. Individual teachers weren't held accountable for test results and charters were not used to scale up a battle between traditional public schools and choice schools, with test scores as the ammunition.

In both Brockton High School and the very different schools in Leander, TX, critical thinking and literacy were stressed. Both progressive approaches to school improvement were consistent with Edwards Deming's continuous improvement.

They both believed in group efforts to improve school, and embraced vigorous debate over policy. It wasn't much of a shock to read about Massachusetts' efforts to build intrinsic, as opposed to extrinsic, motivation, but it was an especially nice surprise for this Oklahoman to learn about similar efforts in Texas.

In my state, we heard plenty about the supposed "Texas Miracle," where test-and-punish drove the creation of bogus test score gains. It was a joy, however, to read about Leander's campaign based on "driving out fear" in order to protect teachers' autonomy and empower collaborative school improvement.

It was doubly fun to read about a Texas administration which used an I Love Lucy video during its "Culture Day." Gabor provides this summary of the assembly line where Lucy and her friend Ethel need to pick chocolates, wrap and send them down to the packing room:

A stern supervisor hovers over them. "If one piece of candy gets past you ... you're fired."

... The assembly line gradually speeds up and the

two friends start shoving chocolates they can't wrap fast enough into their mouths, down the front of their uniforms, and under their caps.

The Lucy and Ethel video clip has become a Leander metaphor for fear and the systemic havoc it unleashes.

Although the chapters on Massachusetts and Leander mostly stress the ways that the progressive school improvement path was taken, both end on cautionary notes.

Massachusetts recently defeated Question 2, but corporate reformers who funded the lifting of the charter school cap still threaten the state's gains, and the new Texas teacher evaluation law could be a mortal threat to collaboration and trust in Texas.

Then Gabor turned to the alleged New Orleans [NOLA] mass charterization success. NOLA has often been proclaimed as the rare victory that is proof that the concept of accountability-driven, competition-driven reform can improve the education outcomes of poor children of color.

Gabor shows, however, the New Orleans' portfolio model provides another example of how reform has most hurt the poorest children of color.

Yes, studies by the Education Research Alliance documented impressive gains for a brief time. But she notes that it didn't study high school results or control for no-excuses schools' pedagogies.

The gains occurred when NOLA funding was at its peak, and its Darwinian tactic of counseling out traumatized and disabled children inflated test scores.

Moreover, by 2012, New Orleans had between 12,195 to 15,781 disconnected youth, who were out of school and not in a job.

It is now clear that NOLA is another example of reformers' "self-congratulatory" public relations spin, and another illustration of, "Noisy transformations [that] are often more mirage than miracle." As in other schools where venture philanthropists claimed transfor-

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mative gains, its charter schools competed "by skimming off the most engaged parents, [which] it turns nearby public schools into dumping grounds for the most troubled kids."

Once again, reformers produced gains for some by "essentially

writing off the bottom 20% to 30% of poor children."

We in Oklahoma City witnessed the same dynamics that Gabor documented.

As Gates and other edu-philanthropists were deciding that they needed to "teacher proof" the

classroom, a bipartisan Oklahoma City coalition led a collaborative, openly-debated effort to build trusting relationships, and our district began to improve. Then came No Child Left Behind, and as in the systems described by Gabor, our humane, holistic efforts were eventually abandoned.

After a superintendent from the Broad Academy doubled down on micromanaging a sped-up assembly line, my once-improving school dropped to the lowest-performing mid-high on Oklahoma. I studied the paper records of my high school students and discovered the reality reformers ignored, but that should inform the next era of school improvement.

Almost without exception, my struggling students had been doing well in school until tragedies hit their families. Cancer and heart disease dwarfed all other causes of failures, and many teachers saw what was happening. When family illnesses caused kids to fall off the instruction assembly line, school didn't have the resources to help them get on track. Rather than tackle those problems in a collaborative manner, doomed market-driven solutions were forced on us, increasing segregation.

As school choices proliferated, the students who survived multiple traumas [ACEs] were left behind in schools serving neighborhoods with extreme concentrations of generational poverty. Those schools suf-

fered the most from high stakes testing conducted in an aligned and paced, worksheet-driven curriculum.

My students were acutely aware that powerful adults had fought an intense battle over their schools, and that they were lab rats in an experiment that turned them into drill-and-kill factories.

So, what should guide the next reform era?

First, we can build on points where most people agree, such as the hard-won conclusion that "standardized tests have no place in kindergarten." And we may be getting to the point where nearly all sides agree that schools need better funding.

Gabor ends with praise of David Kirp and the early education reforms, and the team effort to improve New Jersey's Union City. Rather than seek better, quantitative clubs and socio-engineer the building of "a better teacher," we should return to the promising path of peer review teacher evaluations. And as Gabor repeatedly explains, the next era's school should be founded on trusting, collaborative, and respectful relationships.

John Thompson is an award-winning historian who became an inner-Oklahoma City teacher after the "Hoova" set of the Crips took over his neighborhood and he became attached to the kids in the drug houses. Now retired, he is the author of A Teacher's Tale: Learning, Loving, and Listening to Our Kids.

Population

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 35

be those whose previous work was taken over by robots. And if caregiving pays too low to attract workers, the answer is to pay more.

Meanwhile, there are nuggets of very good news embedded in the U.S. population numbers. The birthrate among teens and unmarried women has plummeted. More women are having children when they're older and, presumably, better able to support them.

Also interesting, women with college degrees are having more children.

And thank you, Affordable Care Act, for making birth control, especially the long-acting kind, more available to women. That, not abortion, is behind the drop in unwanted pregnancies. Abortions are now at their lowest number and rate since around 1973, when the U.S. Supreme Court upheld *Roe v. Wade*.

Some causes of falling births were expected. The birthrate among Hispanic women – once high relative to the rest of the population – is now more in line with that of other groups.

Fewer Americans would be a welcome relief for those living in our highly congested urban corridors. One can argue that America's big, open spaces provide room galore for a far bigger population, but somehow natives and the foreign-born alike choose to shoehorn into densely populated areas.

Sadly, the habit of associating a dipping headcount with decline still plagues city leaders unable to deal with the numbers they already have. New York Mayor Bill De Blasio was so upset by the census report showing that his city's population shrunk by 40,000 – a mere drop in a sea of 8.4 million souls – that he questioned its methodology. At rush hour, some of the subway trains get so overcrowded the doors won't close because passengers can't get their hands and legs inside. And we can light a candle for the drivers consigned to the flames of perpetual gridlock.

Some take falling birthrates as a sign of lost confidence in the future. But those fretting about the millennials' lack of enthusiasm for reproducing might investigate deeper. They might start addressing the onerous burden of student debt. Babies are expensive.

They might look into today's crazy work schedules and, for those without college degrees or specialized skills, low pay. There was a time when parents could come home at 5:30 in the afternoon.

What makes for a strong society is healthy people, prosperous people and happy people – not more people. Americans can put low birthrates at the bottom of their worry list.

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Observations

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 2

than when you're scrambling to make ends meet on less than \$31,000 a year.

Even more baffling: The Legislature's fiscal analysis concluded HB 2465 would have "minimal" impact on the state budget.

No amount of veto message dissembling can disguise this reality: It would have cost the state little to be generous to its beleaguered state workers.

Stitt's second anti-little guy veto was of SB 841, which sought to give patients more flexibility in choosing their pharmacies and independent, community pharmacists protection from a medication delivery system that currently favors mega-pharmacy chains.

The measure by Sen. Greg McCortney, R-Ada, and Rep. Marcus McEntire, R-Duncan, was approved unanimously in both the Senate [46-0] and House [99-0]. But it drew the ire of a deep-pocketed health care status quo, including so-called pharmacy benefit managers that effectively control drug prices and reimbursement processes.

In his veto message, Stitt argued SB 841 would violate federal law that prohibits state regulation of health plans governed by the Employee Retirement Income Security Act of 1974. Signing the measure into law, he added, would force "Oklahoma employers" into a legal challenge that would be costly and unnecessary, given previous federal court rulings that derailed similar laws enacted in other states.

Ironically, Stitt evidenced no such reservation when signing into law SB 614 requiring doctors who perform medically induced abortions to inform patients the process can be reversed – even though there is scant scientific proof that it can.

If past is prologue, the new anti-abortion law is destined for the sort of legal challenge Stitt warned against in vetoing SB 841. Recent legislative history is replete with examples of anti-abortion measures that both state and federal courts struck down as unconstitutional.

It's noteworthy that Stitt warned about the cost to "Oklahoma employers" of challenging SB 841, but didn't mention the cost to taxpayers of defending the constitutionally dubious SB 614.

Ultimately, the GOP-dominated Legislature helped save the rookie governor from himself, affording him two opportunities to soften his let-them-eat-cake indifference to the state's working class.

Rather than face a potential veto override, Stitt signed a "compromise" version of the pharmacy measure, HB 2632. And next year's state budget included \$37.7 million for state employee pay raises – ranging from \$1,500 annually for the lowest paid [under \$40,000] to \$600 for the highest [\$60,000-plus].

TOM GOODWIN

Cheyenne, OK

*Reader and supporter of The Observer
for over 30 years and counting.*



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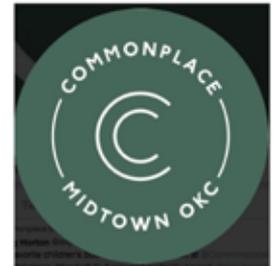
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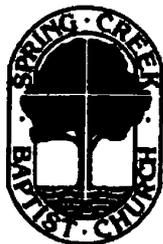
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The session was replete with such policy skirmishes in which the state's deepest pockets prevailed over workaday Oklahomans – a sad reminder that big money has cemented its control at NE 23rd and Lincoln Blvd.

It will take a revolution at the ballot box – starting in 2020 – to break the stranglehold.

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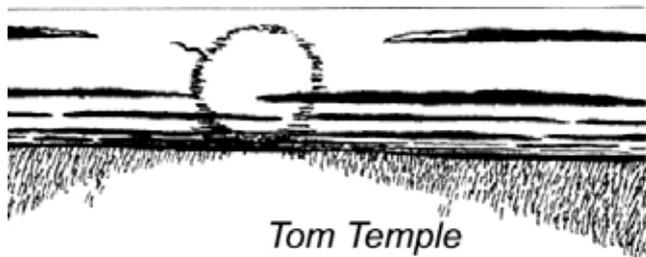
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Observerscope



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

Be sure and stop by The Observer's booth at the State Democratic Convention in OKC to say hello, pick up one of our cool, new gray t-shirts or take advantage of our subscription special.

As summer kicks into high gear, the FDA has discovered four of the most common active sunscreen ingredients can be absorbed through the skin into the bloodstream. The health effects are unclear, but more research is underway.

Mark your calendar for June 14: Observer Editor Arnold Hamilton is featured speaker at Cleveland County Dems' Cornbread and Beans luncheon, 11:15 a.m., at West Wind Unitarian Church, 1309 W. Boyd.

As expected, loose cannon Duncan Sen. Paul Scott already has drawn a GOP primary opponent for 2020 – assisted living administrator Jessica Garvin. Between online bullying and juvenile pranks, Scott deserves to be a one-term wonder.

Notable: Last year, more than 19,000 Oklahomans reported being victimized by identity theft, fraud and other consumer complaints. Nationally, \$488 million was lost to imposter scams in 2018. – AARP

Keep an eye on former Sooner Elani Gretzer's class-action lawsuit seeking damages after OU was stripped of its U.S. News & World Report "Best College Rankings" for providing false information to boost its standing.

State Treasurer Randy McDaniel reports gross state revenue reached \$13.4 billion in the last 12 months, ending April 30 – up 12.3%. But there are worrisome signs, including flat oilfield employment and sluggish housing permits.

James Gallogly's brief tenure as OU president will be unlamented. If remembered at all, it will be as a financial hatchet man and for his nasty dust-up with predecessor David Boren.

The reimagined musical *Oklahoma!* is up for eight Tony Awards June 9, including Best Revival of a Musical and Best Performance by an Actor in a Leading Role in a Musical, Damon Daunno.

Letters



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 4

needed to know was how to pitch the manure in the right places.

James Nimmo
Oklahoma City

Editor, The Observer:

No doubt that the GOP thinks impeachment is a winner for them, along with obstruction and contempt of Congress. The Democrats would prefer to do the things they promised in the election for the people who elected them, however none of that is possible with the GOP Senate. The Democrats should continue trying to get the promised things done and force the GOP to vote against everything progressive.

I know it sounds hard and Trump is a lunatic, but the GOP is going to allow him to do anything and everything, including selling arms to anyone who wants them to do anything they want to please Trump's base.

I am sure the only things the GOP will buck him on are things he isn't going to do like raise taxes on the wealthy, come out for gun control, allow abortion on demand or be pro-LGBTQ.

Anything else is fine, including gunning down people at the border.

They are going to continue, with the help of the Russians to divide Democrats and force impeachment.

I am definitely with Nancy Pelosi on this one, but it is really scary.

Karen Webb
Portland, OR

Editor, The Observer:

Every other day, U.S. Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez has a new startling revelation, observation, accusation. "Good on her." The question is what the heck are the other Congressfolk up to? *And*, why weren't they doing this last year?

Gary Edmondson
Duncan

Editor, The Observer:

The old rule of politics was to never pick a fight with a guy who buys printer's ink by the barrel.

The new rule is to never pick a fight with Donald Trump's lap dogs, Fox News.

Fox has 2.4 million prime time cable TV viewers,

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compared to MSNBC's 1.9 million and CNN's 1.05 million.

Only one Democratic candidate for president dares to thumb their nose at Fox – Sen. Elizabeth Warren, an Okie born and raised purple cow.

Warren says she will never be a part of any candidate town hall on Fox.

"I won't raise money for a network that features hate, bigotry and out-right lies," she has declared.

Warren practices the rule of former Oklahoma state Auditor Gladys Warren.

Asked what a political candidate should do if he or she can only do one thing, Gladys replied, "Think and cause others to think."

Virginia Blue Jeans Jenner
Wagoner

Editor, The Observer:

Evangelicals-Fundamentalists want legislation based on the Bible. Saying it would "never fail," Jesus upheld Mosaic law by "every jot and tittle." For one, the Bible is fertile ground for all who wish to employ extreme severity in the treatment of children. "Happy shall he be, that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the stones." [Psalms 137:9] Adults wanting to beat children find no reason to refrain in the scriptures, as they are instructed to whip them mercilessly.

The irate parent-guardian with a Bible is all it takes to inflict pain to the point of death upon an unruly or "stubborn" child: "Withhold not correction from the child; for if thou beatest him with the rod, he shall not die. Thou shalt beat him with the rod, and shalt

deliver his soul from hell." [Proverbs 23:13-14] Many children have died when a Bible-inspired beating was performed. "The blueness of a wound cleanseth away evil; So do stripes the inward parts of the belly." [Proverbs 20:30]. Spare the rod and spoil the child! "Honor thy father and thy mother; that thy days may be long upon the land, etc." [Exodus 20:12] was to be taken literally. Honor was to be bestowed not because it was earned, but to save the child's very life. Not only was cursing a capital offense when perpetuated against a parent, but should children be stubborn, fathers and mothers were to stone them to death or run them through with a sword. At one time a "stubborn child" statute in Massachusetts evolved from Biblical law.

Child sacrifices are not strangers to the Bible. Scriptures make it clear they are necessary. God made Jephthah burn his daughter as an offering. [Judges 11:30-40] There are many mass slaughters of children by the Lord as he wreaks his vengeance. God's brimstone, flood-waters, plagues, famines, etc., take a grisly toll of the innocent, and when his vengeful famines continue so long that women boil their children for food, he still has to be persuaded to stop.

There is not one instance in the Bible where the Lord ever spares a child in the atrocities and conquests he orders his servants Moses and Joshua to perform. The Lord's orders were always crystal clear. For example: "then shalt save alive nothing that breatheth" [Deuteronomy 20:16] and "Slay both man and women, infant and suckling." [Samuel 15:3]

John Karlin
Tecumseh

Greed

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 23

– chosen without a bidding process – who worked with the state.

As reported in April by Paul Monies and Trevor Brown of Oklahoma Watch April, "More than a dozen

states use competitive bidding for outside legal services, but it's not a requirement in Oklahoma."

So, if you have the unquestionable power to award lucrative contingency contracts, you have the ability to reward friends. The bulk of the \$55.5 million was shipped to Texas. But what intrigued Monies and Brown was the \$5.5 million awarded to Glenn Coffee & Associates.

The reporters could find little actual documentation as to what work Coffee contributed to the case. What they found was a close connection between Hunter and Coffee.

Former GOP Senate Pro Tem Coffee was an adviser to Hunter's 2018 AG campaign: "The Hunter campaign paid Coffee more than \$22,700 for legal services in the campaign, according to Ethics Commission reports. It also paid TVC Pro Driver, a Coffee family company, more than \$5,000 for the rent of a small office in Oklahoma City."

AG spokesman Alex Gerszewski "did not specifically answer questions about whether Coffee took depositions, wrote motions, attended hearings or



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participated in settlement negotiations or discovery hearings.”

Maybe Coffee was puppet-mastering the whole affair behind the scenes. But you think his pals would provide some evidence for skeptical minds.

Coffee’s firm’s website brags, “We are the only Oklahoma law firm dedicated to [the] intersection of policy, politics and business.”

Location, location, location. Pretty profitable intersection.

Another potential contingency fee windfall was reported by Chickasha State Rep. David Perryman recently. SB 251 would have turned over the amelioration of Medicaid and Medicare benefits with subsequent lawsuits to private attorneys working on a contingency basis.

“For instance,” Perryman wrote, “if a person runs a stop sign and injures someone who is on Medicare, the injured person must repay Medicare for the cost of treatment before they are allowed to keep compensation.”

Three or four employees at the Oklahoma Health Care Authority – total annual salary of about \$150,000 – collected \$8.7 million for the state in 2018; \$7.1 million in 2017 and \$8 million in 2016, according to Perryman.

“So the cost of the recovery is just a fraction of a percent of the total amount recovered,” according to Perryman. “It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to know that lawyers don’t handle contingency fee cases for less than 1% of the amount collected, or even 10% or

15% or 25% of the amount collected.”

Had Gov. Stitt signed this bill – he vetoed it instead – the Oklahoma Department of Insurance would have chosen which lawyers to enrich.

In February, Oklahoma Watch’s Brown also reported on Side B of crony capitalism. Three GOP lawmakers who left office in November “are now lobbyists, embodying a practice that state ethics officials have unsuccessfully tried to ban in the face of opposition from the Legislature.”

In one version of crony capitalism, legislators reward pals and patrons. In the other, industries reward ex-lawmakers with jobs after their Lege life has ended.

Oklahoma is one of only a few states that has no cooling off period between legislating and lobbying. And efforts by the Ethics Commission to rectify the matter get shot down by legislators looking out for their best interests and not that of the state.

When it’s not what you know, but who you know, crony capitalism reigns supreme.

There is a third leg to the GOP tripod of economic favoritism. Privatization is the bastard child of corporate socialism and crony capitalism. It gives government work to special pals in the name of smaller [irresponsible] government while guaranteeing a continuous flow of our tax revenue into private hands. But my level of disgust is nigh on to overflowing.

Duncan resident Gary Edmondson is chair of the Stephens County Democratic Party.

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