

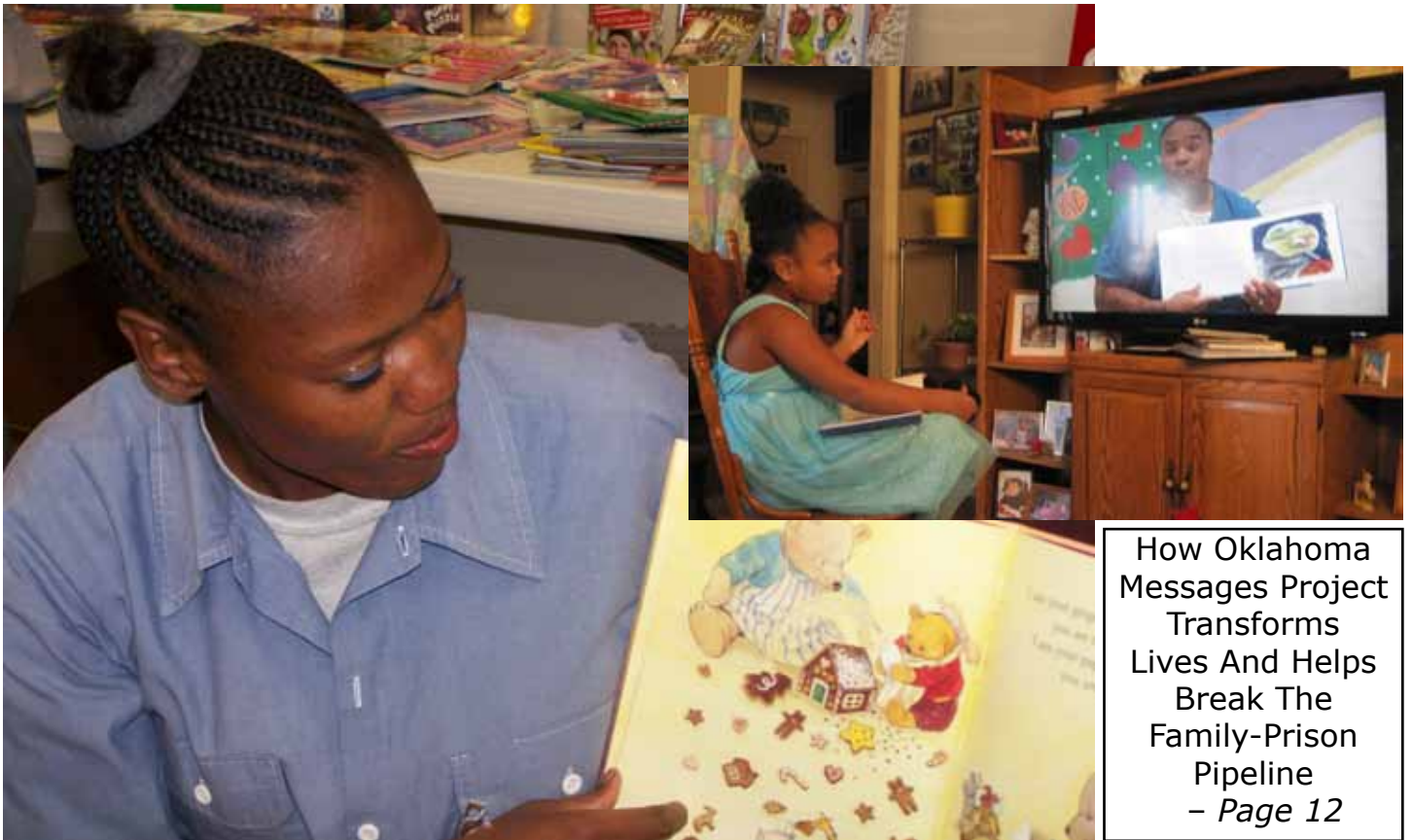
THE OKLAHOMA Observer

• AN INDEPENDENT JOURNAL OF COMMENTARY •

DECEMBER 2015 • VOLUME 47 NUMBER 12 • \$5.00

SPECIAL DELIVERY

*Video Messages From Incarcerated Parents
Brighten Holidays For Oklahoma Children*



How Oklahoma
Messages Project
Transforms
Lives And Helps
Break The
Family-Prison
Pipeline
- Page 12



THE OKLAHOMA Observer

www.okobserver.net

VOLUME 47, NO. 12

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OUR MOTTO

To Comfort the Afflicted and Afflict the Comfortable.

OUR CREDO

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

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[ISSN 0030-1795]

The Oklahoma Observer [USPS 865-720] is published on the first Wednesday of each month by AHB Enterprises LLC, 13912 Plymouth Crossing, P.O. Box 14275, Oklahoma City, OK 73113-0275. Periodicals postage paid at Edmond, OK and additional entry office.

POSTMASTER

Send address changes to The Oklahoma Observer, P.O. Box 14275, Oklahoma City, OK 73113-0275.

SUBSCRIPTIONS

1-Year [12 issues] \$40. Send check to The Oklahoma Observer, P.O. Box 14275, Oklahoma City, OK 73113-0275. Online: Visit www.okobserver.net to use a credit card.

UPDATE ADDRESSES

Please notify us at least two weeks before your move to ensure uninterrupted service. E-mail address changes to subscriptions@okobserver.net or mail to P.O. Box 14275, Oklahoma City, OK 73113-0275.

LETTERS TO EDITOR

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Observations

Idiocy

It's difficult to pick Oklahoma's dumbest public policy decision in recent years. There are so many choices.

The series of income tax cuts and corporate welfare schemes now crippling state services rank near the top. So do the litany of unconstitutional measures that violated church-state separation and reproductive rights.

The most egregious, though, may be the state's refusal to accept Medicaid expansion, a classic example of cutting off your nose to spite your face.

It's nothing short of criminal that the state's physical and economic health is at risk because of political pettiness – Gov. Mary Fallin's and the elected Republican leadership's loathing of President Obama.

Without Medicaid expansion, an estimated 150,000 working poor remain without basic healthcare coverage. Rural hospitals teeter on the brink of collapse because of uncompensated care. And a staggered oil-dependent economy sorely needs the 12,000-15,000 jobs that Medicaid expansion was projected to create over 20 years.

Sadly, there is no sign that Fallin and Co. will come to their senses anytime soon, even though other "red" states are.

Louisiana just elected a Democrat, John Bel Edwards, who favors Medicaid expansion. Alabama's GOP-dominated leadership also is reported to be reconsidering its opposition to Medicaid expansion. Even Kentucky's newly elected Tea Party governor, Matt Bevin, wants to negotiate with the feds, rather than simply end Medicaid expansion.

Fallin and Co.'s anti-Obama, anti-fed ideology rings especially hollow when considering this: Millions of Oklahoma tax dollars sent to Washington are making a significant difference in the health and well being of taxpayers in other states that accepted Medicaid expansion.

The state is stuck with Fallin for three more years. But voters in 2016

CONTINUED ON PAGE 43

THE OKLAHOMA Observer

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ObserverScope



Please keep The Observer atop your holiday gift-giving list. Your generosity keeps the presses running and the truth alive all year long. See inside back cover for details.

Laurel: To the Oklahoman's Rick Green, for an excellent story exposing Attorney General Scott Pruitt's "small government" hypocrisy. Pruitt's office has grown significantly while other state agencies downsize.

The Bedlam score isn't the most important fact. This is: OU graduated 65% of its football players within six years, OSU 54%. There's much work to be done.

Dart: To Gov. Mary Fallin, playing politics with her attack on Planned Parenthood's alleged billing errors. This stunt is about bolstering her anemic poll numbers.

Feel the Bern? A YouGov poll found 26% of those 18-39 have a favorable view of socialism, nearly double [15%] those 65-plus.

Laurel: To Oklahoma Democrats, formally opening their primaries to registered independents, about 13% of the electorate. The first statewide opportunity for I's vote is the March 1 presidential primary.

Sen. Patrick Anderson, R-Enid, wants to ban state-funded athletic scholarships to out-of-state students at two-year colleges. Imagine how that was received at Northern Oklahoma College-Enid, with its rich athletic tradition.

Dart: To Rep. Doug Cox, R-Grove, ripping Tyson Foods for importing "cheap Muslim labor from Africa" for its Noel, MO plant. This has nothing to do with religion – it's about worker exploitation.

Oklahoma's tax amnesty program paid huge dividends, recovering nearly \$130 million in past-due taxes – with promises to pay \$16 million more. The plan, waiving penalties and interest, originally was projected to collect about \$35 million.

Laurel: To Oklahoma County Sheriff John Whetsel, urging more investment in early childhood education – arguably the best anti-crime tool available.

We note the passing of inveterate Observer reader, yellow dog Democrat and staunch union man Guy Free, father of our dear friend Kaly Free.

Dart: To GOP Rep. John Bennett, the state's Islam-Hater-In-Chief, demanding the governor seal the borders and investigate Syrian refugees already here. He needs to read the red letters in the Bible.

Laurel: To Albuquerque, NM, offering cash-paying beautification jobs to the needy twice weekly, plus providing transportation to and from worksites. OKC leaders seeking to ban panhandling should adopt the common sense solution.

Laurel: To Jalal and Mohammad Farzaneh, honored with the Interfaith Alliance Foundation of Oklahoma's annual Harley Venters Humanitarian Award. Bravo!

Aaarrggghhh! Last month's Observer goofed on the email address to inquire about the Creek County Democrats' two \$750 scholarships. Correct address: creekcountydemocratscholarship@hotmail.com.

Dart: To the Daily Disappointment, disguising press releases/ads as "news" under the moniker "Brand Insight." Even Eddie Gaylord didn't stoop to such shenanigans.

Oklahoma education lost a powerful voice with the passing of teacher union leader Mike Barlow. A longtime Observer reader, he was inducted into the Oklahoma Educators Hall of Fame in 2010.



Editor, The Observer:

In the November article "Black Parenting Matters," I very much agree with some of the advice given and just as strongly disagree with some of it. All young people should be taught how to respond when stopped by the police. No one should reach into their pockets or be disrespectful.

Policemen have a difficult job to do. They want to ensure public safety and that includes keeping themselves safe. Their job is impossible without public support.

It is wrong, as the article stated, to refuse to answer questions. Many times those questions are asked to eliminate suspects, get help to those in most need quickly, assess the danger someone may be to themselves or others, etc.

I would advise folks to role play with their teens and have them put themselves in the role of an officer trying to protect the public and stay alive at the same time.

June Murphy
Ada

Editor, The Observer:

Laurel: To The Oklahoma Observer for bringing suit against Gov. Fallin to enforce the Oklaho-

ma Open Records Law.

Kent Frates
Oklahoma City

Editor, The Observer:

In response to Arnold Hamilton's article on page five of the November issue of The Observer, I wish to say that most of the people who are in jails and prisons have committed crimes. And the biggest factor in committing crimes or otherwise getting into jails and prisons is substance abuse. It is slander for your newspaper to fail to separate alcoholic and drug addicted mental health clients from those who have never participated in chemical recreation.

The article also suggests that recent tragedies could have been prevented if Oklahoma just out patient committed an unknown number of persons. This threatens the basic rights of people minding their own business while living in their own homes.

One of the violent poster children listed in this article really and truly is a criminal. I was unable in my Internet search to find anything about Alton Nolen ever being in a mental hospital. See, nobody is just bad or brainwashed. The

media is able to diagnose people after they kill. Very strange.

With so much of tax money squandered by the Legislature, are real services actually conveniently available to the people who are voluntarily seeking them?

Mary K. West
Oklahoma City

Arnold Hamilton replies: Ms. West offers a classic Straw Man, seeking to refute arguments I did not make.

First, Ms. West contends that "most" of those behind bars "committed crimes" and "the biggest factor" in criminal behavior is "substance abuse." Neither of her declarations refutes the fact that jails/prisons have become the state's largest mental health facilities.

Second, Ms. West may wish to look up the definition of slander. Mental illness and substance abuse often go hand-in-hand, but not always. It's hardly slanderous to discuss mental health separately from drug and alcohol misuse.

Third, Ms. West asserts that I promoted a police-state notion of rounding up those suspected of mental illness and forcing treatment upon them. If she believes offering more options to "desperate families scrambling to find help for troubled loved ones" is a threat to individual liberty, she has spent far too many hours glued to Fox News.

Fourth, Ms. West states flatly Nolen is a criminal – then implies, in effect, I had practiced psychiatry without a license. Nolen is accused of a barbaric act, but it's worth noting he hasn't been convicted of anything – yet. Further, Nolen may never have been treated for mental illness, but that doesn't mean he didn't need it or couldn't have benefited from it had it been more accessible. We simply don't know.

Finally – ironically – Ms. West actually makes the point of my

CONTINUED ON PAGE 45



The One-Trick Party

What will Oklahoma's elected leaders do when they don't have Barack Obama to kick around anymore?

The calendar pages are turning quickly on Obama's presidency. Just over a year left to blame him for everything from high *and* low gas prices to poor service at IHOP.

Latest conniption was over Obama's decision to nix the Keystone XL pipeline. Gov. Mary Fallin, bless her heart, nearly required smelling salts, decrying it as "absolutely mind-boggling" – the result of "political pressure from anti-fossil fuel extremists."

She then, predictably, launched into the carbon industry's talking points, depicting Keystone XL as "an important driver of economic growth and even President Obama's State Department says it will create over 42,000 jobs. It will also support North American Energy production, which is good for both our economic security and our national security."

That's debatable, of course. Domestic producers are so awash in crude they're seeking to lift the 40-year ban on oil exports. In addition, many of the Keystone XL-related jobs were likely to be temporary, construction-related. The president, of course, contends better, more permanent jobs loom in the transition to renewable energy.

What isn't up for debate is this: Seven years into his presidency, Obama remains the perfect foil in Oklahoma politics. It's the political equivalent of Pavlov's dog: Show Obama's face and the canine instinctively snarls.

The question is, why? Is it race? His embrace of marriage equality? His healthcare reform package? His commitment to climate science? His support for new gun laws?

The Republican political pros argue it's about policy – Obama's simply too liberal for Oklahoma.

Except ... that's really not so. If you believe the polls, Oklahomans support many of the president's policies in principle. It's when Obama's name is attached they snarl.

Take health care reform. Many of the Affordable

Care Act's individual components are quite popular in Oklahoma: You can't be denied coverage because of a pre-existing condition. Young people can remain on their parents' health care plans until age 26. Insurers can't charge more for coverage based on gender or health status.

Mention them individually, thumbs up. Mention ObamaCare, thumbs down.

What's even more fascinating is that ObamaCare has made a positive difference in Oklahoma, even though the state still has the nation's fifth highest uninsured rate.

According to a 50-state analysis by WalletHub.com, the health reform package cut Oklahoma's uninsured rate for children by 13.04% and for adults by 19.53% between 2010-14.

Overall, the state's pre-ObamaCare uninsured rate of 18.86% has dropped to 15.36% – 110,039 gained coverage under the plan.

State leaders, of course, blame ObamaCare for next year's spike in insurance rates – the state's dominant insurer, Blue Cross Blue Shield, averaging a 30%-plus hike. But that says more about the lack of competition in Oklahoma than it does about the ACA.

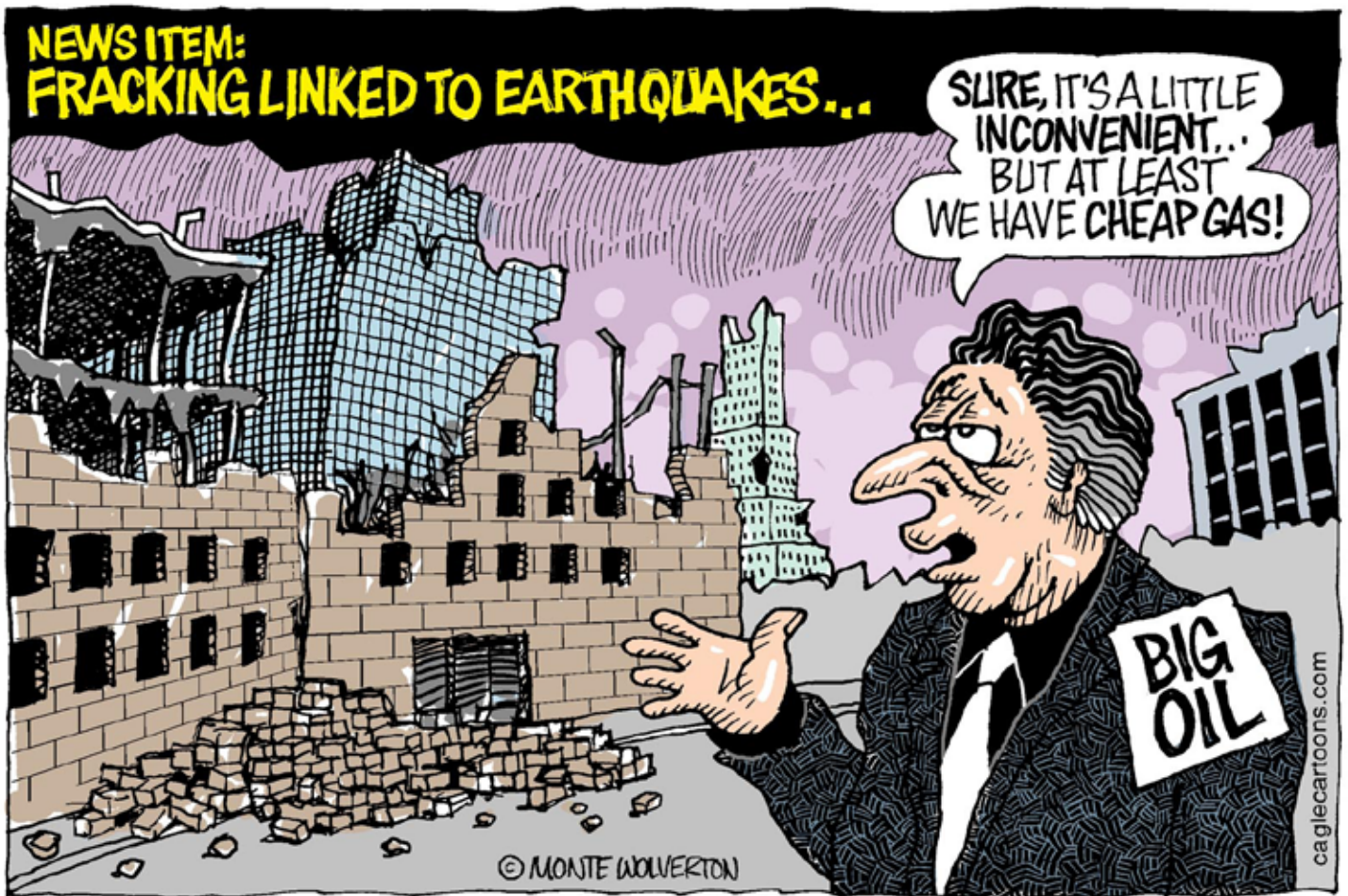
What happens when a single company corrals the lion's share of a market? Prices spike.

Let's shift to environmental policy. Fallin, Attorney General Scott Pruitt and most of the state's Republican-dominated elected elite toe the oil and gas line when it comes to opposing federal regulation.

Pruitt, in fact, filed suit against the EPA over its Clean Power Plan – Obama's signature climate action – that will mandate states cut their use of coal in an effort to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Yet – interestingly – a poll by the Yale University Project on Climate Change Communication found 52% of Oklahomans support tighter limits on emissions from coal-fired power plants.

Invoking Obama is red meat for GOP voters now. Who will be the bogeyman when he's gone? Better yet, when will Oklahomans focus on policy, not personality?



Disposal Wells And Chernobyl, OK

BY BOB JACKMAN

The list of man-made disasters puts the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear power plant meltdown at No. 1.

Today, as the holidays near, the question on the minds of 500,000 or more Oklahoma homeowners and renters is this: Will central and north central Oklahoma's seemingly unstoppable earthquakes let loose a Richter magnitude 5.0 or greater one?

Oklahoma's petroleum industry disposals wells do have the potential to create a high magnitude earthquake during 2015 holidays. If that happens, will Oklahoma be included on Google's worldwide list of the 25 worst man-made disasters?

There is some hope this will not happen. However, Gov. Mary Fallin, the Oklahoma Corporation Commission [OCC] and our earthquake areas' oil producers do not get an ounce of credit for this ray of hope. That credit belongs to the abrupt market decline in prices of crude oil and natural gas which in turn causes less of the briny wastewaters to be injected in disposal wells.

The low prices and oil production slowdowns are illustrated by one field near Glencoe, OK. Currently two pumpers on 46 pumping oil wells are only switching on several hours each day, compared to the around-the-clock pumping when crude prices were \$100 per barrel.

The oil produced in quake-prone areas like Glencoe, north of Stillwater, has ratio of one oil barrel per 10 barrels of brine. This slowdown drastically cuts down high volumes injected in disposal wells causing quakes. And we are seeing some declines in oilmen-made earthquakes in the last 60 days.

Word of caution: Oklahoma is still on an upward track for total of 850 magnitude 3.0-plus earthquakes in 2015 versus 585 magnitude 3.0-plus quakes in 2014.

Last month, the year's highest magnitude – 4.7 – occurred near Cherokee.

The internal subsurface stress of literally billions of barrels of heavy saltwater injected since mid-2000s in north central Oklahoma has built-up enor-

mous pressure – mega tons pushing against and into known and unknown deep ancient faults. This rapidly causes earthquakes.

Scientific evidence clearly shows earthquakes can continue as long as a year or more after disposal wells stop injecting.

Think of it this way: Stretch a rubber band extra tight around a vase and set it out of sight. Constant strain weakens the rubber's micro-links. So when will it snap?

Remember the oil industry is not messing around with big underground rubber bands; they are teasing sleeping earthquake giants.

Seismicity [earthquake] scientists – especially government ones – avoid speaking bluntly on causes and effects of Oklahoma's six-year earthquake epidemic.

Add to that Oklahoma's petroleum industry-employed geo-scientists, who are hanging on to their jobs and dare not say anything conflicting with OIPA or OCC's spin-of-the-week.

Rarely – but sometimes – a state scientist blurts out

next morning.

Her complaints echo others interviewed, including several local fire chiefs.

“Living this way is not acceptable. Quake damages are both physical and psychological. The anxiety of living in Medford or Glencoe is like being in a war zone. When will the next big one hit?” said one.

The elderly report living in constant fear of earthquakes. The Enid News reported damage to schools and homes in northwestern Oklahoma. People interviewed are concerned their homes and commercial property values will drop sharply if placed in the Red Zone of the new USGS Oklahoma Earthquake Hazard Map to be released in April 2016.

Who wants to move to and buy a home in one of Oklahoma's high earthquake counties?

Back at Oklahoma's Capitol: For six years now, other than Gov. Fallin's infamous advice that “people with earthquake damages should buy insurance,” not one person in the many OCC press releases, at government-sponsored quake conferences or on panels

“Living this way is not acceptable,” one local fire chief said. “Quake damages are both physical and psychological. The anxiety of living in Medford or Glencoe is like being in a war zone. When will the next big one hit?”

the harsh truth!

On Nov. 10, at the Governors' Energy Conference, panelist Dr. Mark D. Zoback, a Stanford-based seismicity consultant to the Oklahoma Geological Survey, disclosed that injecting into the Arbuckle formation has quake-causing problems.

Earthquake-suffering citizens of Oklahoma can add one more to the OCC's ongoing fairy tales – that it's safe injecting into the Arbuckle.

The Oklahoma Observer [May 2015, page 14] was the first to disclose that due to the interconnectedness of the Arbuckle with basement granite, injecting in the formation is not a solution but a cause of quakes.

After enduring years of shaking and hard knocks, one city official in Medford – the Quake Capital of Oklahoma – has actually become a human seismicity monitor! She can accurately tell from horizontal and vertical variations of earthquake jolts at night in her bed whether a particular earthquake is caused by, in geological terms, a Normal Fault or a Strike-Slip Fault.

She tells of a recent overnight visit by her son and daughter-in-law who experienced 14 quakes in 24 hours.

“We are scared and leaving right now!” they said the

stacked with pro-petroleum industry representatives ever expressed concern over peoples' earthquake damages.

The OCC's spokesperson, Matt Skinner, did say recently that “magnitude 5.0-plus is the awful number.”

Really? That's the best OCC's elected commissioners can do after years of spending taxpayers' money reporting over and over again that “we are working on earthquake problems but need more data and studies”?

If they were Walmart we would demand our money back. It reminds of Merle Haggard's song, *If We Make It Through December*.

Bob Jackman is a petroleum geologist living in Tulsa.



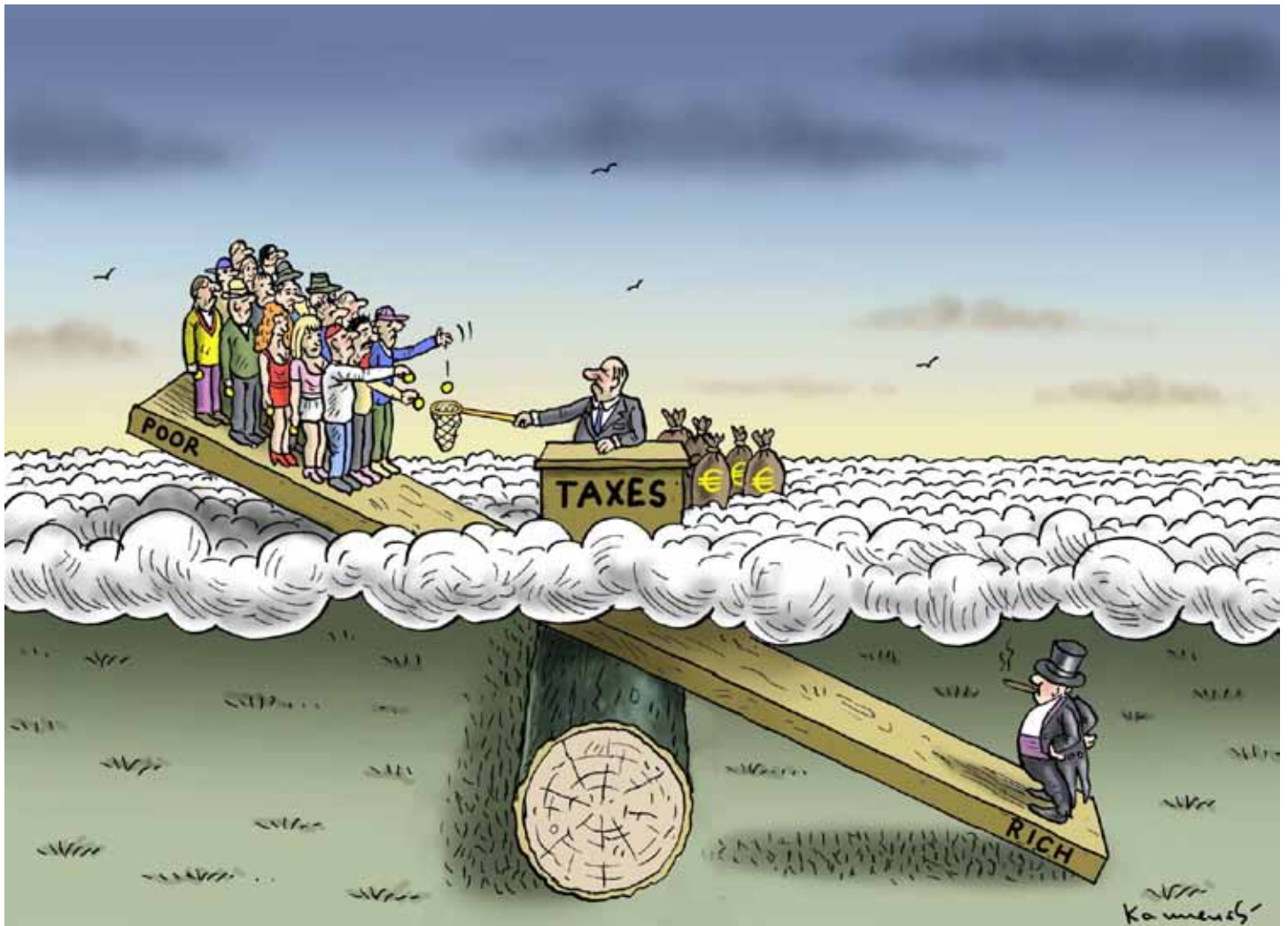
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Think [?] Tank's Ice Cream Diet Promotes Truth Decay

BY GENE PERRY

Last month, a group of Oklahomans led by University of Oklahoma President David Boren launched an effort to put an initiative petition on the ballot that would restore funding to education in Oklahoma through a 1% statewide sales tax increase.

Even before the effort has begun gathering signatures, the ballot initiative has been challenged in court by OCPA Impact, a lobbying group associated with the Oklahoma Council of Public Affairs. They argue that the initiative violates the single-subject rule in Oklahoma's constitution that requires individual ballot initiatives and legislation to deal with only one main issue.

Interestingly, OCPA Impact did not try to argue that

Oklahoma doesn't need to improve teacher salaries, which are among the lowest in the nation even after adjusting for cost-of-living. Instead they suggested that a tax increase of any kind was not necessary to boost teacher salaries, because we can find the money solely by eliminating "wasteful or non-essential state government spending."

They even prepared a list that claims to show where more than \$600 million in savings could be found [similar to a 1% sales tax increase, which is estimated to generate around \$608 million annually].

However, digging into the contents of OCPA's list reveals a very different conclusion from what they claim.

Their recommendations fall into four broad catego-

ries. The first is selling off state assets. By far the largest part of OCPA's recommended savings come from selling off the Grand River Dam Authority [\$300 million], an Italian monastery used for study abroad programs by the University of Oklahoma [\$20 million], the University of Oklahoma's Weitzenhoffer Art Collection [\$50 million], and other miscellaneous state assets [\$11 million].

Whatever you may think about the merits of selling any of these items, the problem with using that revenue to fund a teacher pay increase should be obvious – it's all one-time money. Oklahoma teachers will not be reassured if they're promised a salary increase based on money that is gone after the first year.

In their proposal, OCPA Impact also mentions the dispute around a painting in the Weitzenhoffer Collection that was stolen from the Meyer family by Nazi Germany before it ended up in the collection. Yet if OU returns that painting to the Meyer family, they can't also sell it for profit.

It's hard to escape the conclusion that this item was included in OCPA's plan solely to make a political attack against the University of Oklahoma and not as a serious idea for funding education.

After taking out all of the one-time funds, OCPA's promised savings amount to \$236.3 million, nearly \$50 million short of what they say would be needed to fund \$5,000 teacher raises.

Yet that's not the only issue. Their other savings proposals also don't stand up to scrutiny.

After one-time funds, the next biggest source of savings they propose are providing health savings accounts in lieu of traditional health coverage for state and education employees [\$42 million] and cost-saving Medicaid reforms [\$100 million].

Both of these ideas are controversial as to whether they would realize savings or improve health outcomes.

Health Savings Accounts could shift a much greater share of the risk away from employers and onto individual workers for paying high health care costs, which is hardly a recipe for attracting more teachers to work in the state.

And OCPA's Medicaid reforms reference "Florida/Louisiana/Kansas Medicaid reform models," which translates to an idea being pushed by a conservative think tank based in Florida – a form of privatized managed care that critics have argued left the very low-income Medicaid population with less care.

The debate over these ideas is complicated and by no means settled.

But even if you think they are promising ways to reduce health care costs without hurting health outcomes too much, they are still highly contested and largely untested ideas.

We aren't prioritizing teachers by putting funds for pay raises at the mercy of controversial experiments in health policy.

A third category finally gets to examples of "wasteful spending" that OCPA would cut to fund teacher

pay raises. Most of these are quite small in comparison to the overall state education budget – less than \$10 million comes out of ending state funding for tourism, quality of life, and economic development projects like space industry incentives, golf courses, rodeos, county fairs, and museums.

Another \$39.8 million would come from ending Oklahoma's membership in the National Conference of State Legislatures [NCSL] and cutting travel reimbursements, advertising, and sponsorships from state agency budgets.

These spending items are not obviously wasteful. The NCSL provides non-partisan expertise that can be very useful for ensuring good public policy around complicated issues. Funding state employee professional development through travel to conferences and public awareness campaigns is well within the core mission of several state agencies.

Indeed, we should want to encourage policy expertise and professional development for legislators and state employees – these can be just as important as competitive salaries for attracting the most talented and effective workers.

There may be room to trim spending in these categories, but after years of sustained budget cuts, there is likely little fat left in these budgets.

Finally, OCPA suggests cutting appropriations from agencies that can fund themselves through fees [\$20 million], shifting the CareerTech system to using property tax revenue for general operations [\$3 million], and securing additional federal funds for the Oklahoma Teachers Retirement System [\$20 million].

Each of these may or not be good ideas, but we should still see them for what they are: avoiding general taxes by increasing our reliance on fees, property taxes, and federal funds.

The Oklahoma Council of Public Affairs and OCPA Impact are among the most dedicated groups in Oklahoma advocating for cutting taxes and reducing the size of our state government. It should tell us something when this is the best they can do for an alternative way to fund major state needs.

Set aside the one-time funds, questionable reforms, and tax shifts, and we are left with no alternative to the fact that paying teachers a competitive salary can't be done without a significant new source of recurring revenue – and that means taxes.

We can have an honest debate over whether Oklahomans should tax ourselves more to invest in education. However, we should not take seriously the false alternative presented by OCPA.

Instead of a serious policy idea, it's the return of the ice cream diet – the dubious claim that Oklahomans can have all the services we want without paying for them.

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



Child Uninsured Rate A Health Care Bright Spot In Oklahoma

BY CARLY PUTNAM

Some new research highlights a rare health care success story for Oklahoma. A new report from the Georgetown University Health Policy Institute Center for Children and Families found that the United States' child uninsured rate hit an all-time low of 6% in 2014. Oklahoma saw one of the largest decreases in uninsured children, from 95,042 in 2013 to 82,251 in 2014 – a decline of 13.5%.

This is great news for many reasons. Having affordable health insurance is shown to improve child health. Children with health coverage have access to the care they need in order to keep growing and learning in school.

When children who are covered do get sick, their families can take them to the doctor without fear of catastrophic health costs, and simple ailments can be managed before they can develop into more serious illnesses.

Successes in reducing the number of uninsured children in Oklahoma can be attributed to Medicaid, the Oklahoma Children's Health Insurance Program [CHIP], and major provisions of the Affordable Care Act that swung into effect in early 2014. Oklahoma-specific policies have helped: the Health Care Authority's automatic newborn enrollment system and No Wrong Door efforts have strengthened insurance access for children.

That said, an estimated 82,251 children are still uninsured in Oklahoma. Nationwide, more than two in three uninsured children are eligible for but not enrolled in some form of health insurance.

The state has options to build upon prior successes to strengthen the health and well-being of Oklahoma children and families.

In addition to supporting ongoing efforts by OHCA and other organizations aimed specifically at enrolling children, Oklahoma can also get more children

Unfortunately, Oklahoma has steadfastly refused to extend coverage to the low-income uninsured, despite the fact that one in six uninsured Oklahomans would be eligible for such coverage. Expanding the program would also save the state money and create thousands of well-paying jobs.

covered by getting their parents covered.

As the report found, health coverage for parents appears to be a strong driver for health coverage for children: when uninsured parents learn about and enroll in health insurance, they sign up their children, too.

An estimated 44% of the remaining uninsured in Oklahoma, including both adults and children, are eligible for either Medicaid or subsidized coverage on Healthcare.gov. More active efforts aimed at reaching this population could extend health coverage access for Oklahoma children and families.

The report also found that Medicaid expansion had a significant impact on lowering states' uninsured rates. States that expanded Medicaid coverage to more uninsured adults saw declines in their child uninsured rate nearly twice the size of states that haven't expanded coverage.

Of the 10 states with the largest declines in percentage of uninsured children in the last year, eight had expanded Medicaid. Oklahoma ranked 14th.

While the state's decrease in the child uninsured rate is certainly encouraging, it could clearly be better. Unfortunately, Oklahoma has steadfastly refused to extend coverage to the low-income uninsured, despite the fact that one in six uninsured Oklahomans would be eligible for such coverage. Expanding the program would also save the state money and create thousands of well-paying jobs.

The declining child uninsured rate is wonderful news for Oklahoma that promises a future of better health and financial security for thousands of families. By continuing to advocate for health insurance enrollment for both children and their eligible parents, Oklahoma can continue to expand access to care for thousands.

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

My Resume

1. My first job was working in an orange juice factory, but I got canned. I couldn't concentrate.

2. Then I worked in the woods as a lumberjack, but I just couldn't hack it, so they gave me the ax.

3. After that, I tried to be a tailor, but I just wasn't suited for it – mainly because it was a sew-sew job.

4. Next, I tried working in a muffler factory, but that was too exhausting.

5. Then, I tried to be a chef – figured it would add a little spice to my life, but I just didn't have the thyme.

6. I attempted to be a deli worker, but any way I sliced it I couldn't cut the mustard.

7. My best job was a musician, but eventually I found I wasn't noteworthy.

8. I studied a long time to become a doctor, but I didn't have any patience.

9. Next was a job in a shoe factory. I tried but I just didn't fit in.

10. I became a professional fisherman, but discovered that I couldn't live on my net income.

11. I managed to get a good job working for a pool maintenance company, but the work was just too draining.

12. So then I got a job in a workout center, but they said I wasn't fit for the job.

13. After many years of trying to find steady work, I finally got a job as a historian – until I realized there was no future in it.

14. My last job was working at Starbucks, but I had to quit because it was always the same old grind.

15. So, I tried retirement ... and found that I'm perfect for the job!

Thanks to Larry and Judy Maupin for sharing this gem

PRECIOUS GIFTS

DVDs Connect Oklahoma Kids To Imprisoned Parents – Reducing Anxiety, Improving Reading Skills

BY ARNOLD HAMILTON

It's late November, and a storage room at a west Edmond office is brimming with packages, addressed and ready to ship to Oklahoma children, just in time for Christmas.

There aren't Thunder jerseys, Elsa dolls, or X-box games among the gifts. What's inside is far more personal and valuable – a video message from a mother or a father who can't be present every day.

The DVDs are the work of the Oklahoma Messages Project, a four-year-old non-profit whose mission is to help the state's invisible children – an estimated 30,000 whose mothers or fathers are in prison, literally out of sight and out of touch.

The 15-minute videos revolve around Mom or Dad reading their child a book but also includes personal messages that can range from reassurances they are safe in prison to bedtime prayers.

"It is so much more effective than letters or phone calls," says Cheri Fuller, the OK Messages Project's executive director. "It's this amazing powerful digital format that is their world – kids feel like their parents are in the room."

Since the group began videoing parent-inmates in May 2011 – often near Christmas, Mother's Day and Father's Day – it has distributed more than 4,000 videos to children. Hundreds more are set to go out this



ABOVE

An unidentified mother participating in Oklahoma County's ReMerge diversion program reads a book to her child, videoed by Oklahoma Messages Project volunteer and state Rep. Cyndi Munson, D-OKC.

ON THE COVER

Left, an unidentified mother at Eddie Warrior Correctional Center in Taft practices reading a story to her child. Right, nine-year-old Kathren Campbell follows along as her father, Oklahoma State Penitentiary inmate Demico Campbell, reads her a story.

Courtesy: The Oklahoma Messages Project

month.

Oklahoma owns the nation's second highest incarceration rate – and is No. 1 in locking up women per capita. Eighty-five percent of the state's female inmates have at least one child – most have several.

Few of the children get to visit their imprisoned parents. Most live with family members who can't afford the time it takes, much less the travel costs.

It's creates a disconnect that often fuels a family-to-prison pipeline, a difficult-to-break generation-to-generation cycle of dysfunction that all-too-often ends in incarceration.

This is not an insignificant concern, given that nearly 30,000 men and women were in state custody last month and that a suburban Oklahoma City elementary school reports nearly half its students have at least one parent in prison.

Imagine the impact on a child who's present when their mother or father is arrested. Or the bewilderment when their lone parent suddenly is gone, locked up in a prison far away.

Is prison what they see on TV? Is Mom safe? Was it somehow my fault she was arrested? If only I had been a better kid ...

Take the case of Hunter, who was about 3½ when his mother went to prison, leaving him and his two

sisters to be raised by their grandmother.

Early on, Hunter asked, "Grandma, is mommy in a cage?" "No," his grandmother would assure him, "she's not."

The next day ... and the next ... and the next, he repeated the question ... until an OK Messages Project video arrived. He then could see his mother and hear her voice. She appeared safe and healthy.

"That's one of the first things parents say on the video - 'I want you to know, kids, that I'm safe and healthy' and, in fact, most of them are healthier than the kids have probably seen them because they're off drugs, they're sober and they tell them, 'here's the courses I'm taking, I work in the saddle shop, I've gotten my GED, I'm in college classes,'" says Fuller.

"It gives the kids hope. It relieves a lot of their nightmares, because especially if they were with the parent when they were arrested, they have nightmares. We've heard that from a lot of caregivers. The nightmares stopped."

According to research by University of Oklahoma sociologists, video messages from imprisoned parents helped their children significantly - 65% had less depression and sadness, 78% higher self esteem and 55% less anger, anxiety and acting out.

"It's like a virtual visit," Fuller says. "It's very safe. They don't have to go through layers of razor wire and concrete doors to go see their parent. So when they're missing them, they put the video in ...

"The thing we are hoping for and parents are aiming for is that they will have bedtime stories - they can go to sleep seeing their Mom or Dad reading a book, maybe saying a bedtime prayer, saying how much they love and miss them - and it has amazing results."

Perhaps the most impressive statistics from the OU research: 72% of children receiving the video messages showed improvement in their abilities to read and 59% showed a significant increase in their commitment to schoolwork.

Fuller's interest in children of incarcerated parents was heightened in 2008 when she learned about OU Professor Susan Sharp's research on women in prison. Fuller, a former teacher-turned-writer, developed a parenting curriculum and began teaching at Mabel Bassett Correctional Center near McLoud.

Her first class had 25 students. By the time she completed her first two years at the women's prison, she had taught 380 mothers. With the help of her daughter, she learned of a program in Virginia that served as the model for the Oklahoma Messages Project.

Now, 4½ years after it was launched, OK Messages Project's 25 or so volunteers

periodically visit Oklahoma's prisons, producing the video messages sent to inmates' children at no cost to the inmates, their families or the state.

The group's board includes former state corrections director Justin Jones, now director of the Tulsa County Juvenile Division; newly-elected state Rep. Cyndi Munson, D-OKC; and former state Sen. Connie Johnson.

Support for the group is raised through tax-deductible private donations and foundation grants which, among other things, help purchase books that inmates read to their children. The books then are mailed, along with the DVDs, to the children so they can read along with their parents' video messages - an important part of the group's literacy efforts.

For more information on the Oklahoma Messages Project, visit www.oklahomamessagesproject.org.

On Dec. 12, the SandRidge Santa Run in downtown OKC will benefit the Oklahoma Messages Project. The event includes a 5k race, a one-mile fun run and a Kid's Dash to Santa. Visit DowntownInDecember.com for more details or to register.



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Cal's First Annual Top 10 Christmas Gift And Award Winners

BY CAL HOBSON

I am sitting here by our roaring fireplace in Lexington thinking about Oklahoma politicians who made the news during 2015. Naturally, it being the holidays, my thoughts also turned to the true meaning of Christmas which, as everyone knows, is an opportunity to make Sam Walton smile from On High as we shop till we drop.

Searching for those “just right gifts” for someone special is something any red-blooded American man enjoys doing almost as much as having your mother-in-law stay over for the extra long Thanksgiving weekend.

I'm no exception.

Therefore, instead of camping out all night in the freezing rain outside a Super Target, shaking in fear of being trampled by a crazed crowd of screaming bargain hunters, I've chosen an easier way to deliver my

goodies to the deserving – via The Observer.

In selecting my winners I gleaned information from the always-accurate Internet as well as chat room gossip, moronic tweets, Facebook foolishness, and, of course, an in-depth study of Tea Party activist Al Gearhart's baseless allegations about people's sex lives. Hot stuff!

However, the very best sources were from the finalists themselves via their bloviated and pompous press releases where they have taken credit for everything from the breakup of the Soviet Union to finding the Dead Sea Scrolls. Who knew?

So now let's unwrap my little jewels for our deserving dignitaries. They have truly earned the recognition:

1. *The Mortician and Funeral Home Owners Full Employment Gift.*

Unlike most of our categories the competition for this distinction wasn't even close. Queen Mary "It's Not My Problem" Fallin steamrolled to victory here through consistently denying health care to 225,000 of her neediest, sickest and mostly elderly constituents by simply refusing to expand Medicaid.

The painful outcomes of her inaction for the uninsured are: Unnecessary emergency room visits, medications denied, less access to rural hospitals due to closures and observing their health dollars spent in other states. All this wreckage and more just to placate ObamaCare hater Dr. Tom Coburn who threatened to run against the Queen if she took an additional farthing of federal money for the suffering.

This gives a new meaning to the doctor's Hippocratic Oath. Do all the harm you can.

2. Speaking of hypocrites, *The Do As I Say Not As I Do Badge of Merit* goes to Attorney General Scott Pruitt.

A Grover Norquist sycophant, Scotty rails against Big Gubment, bloated staffing and payrolls, waste, fraud, abuse, herpes, gays, Mexicans, Muslims, kinky people, pets other than small, neutered dogs, and anybody that isn't a middle-aged rich white guy. The last describes his contributor list.

Anyway, thanks to the Oklahoman's nosy reporter Rick Green, we now know Mr. Fiscal Conservative is really Monsieur Fiscal Phony. Since taking office his full time staff has increased by 33% and, as a proud resident of Tulsa Town, The General recently leased additional and more expensive work space up there so he can avoid the truck dominated and dangerous commute down the Turner Turnpike to the desolate, less sophisticated cowtown of OKC.

If it wasn't for the free Thunder tickets and travel per diem, OKCers might see Scott about as often as we do Haley's Comet.

3. *The Unemployable Lawyer Gift Baskets Welfare Program*.

Our only double winner this year is General Pruitt, who has single handedly reduced the unemployment rate among incompetent lawyers in our state to almost zero. He has done this through endless appeals on lost causes previously determined by courts of competent jurisdiction, ranging from the U.S. Supreme Court, various tribal venues and even Judges Judy and Wapner.

He does, however, maintain a winning record among his scores of full-time assistant attorneys general when they convene regularly in kangaroo courts. During these secret sessions, crayons, Big Chief tablets, catered lunches and orange Kool-Aid [akin to that dispensed in Guyana by Jim Jones but this concoction won't kill - rather it just causes temporary insanity] are provided at taxpayer expense.

4. *The Three Card Monty Shell Game Gift*.

One of the time-honored traditions in the Legislature is for lawmakers who vote against a new revenue source to always come up with ways to appropriate the dough raised. Gaming, horse racing, a state lot-

tery, and cigarettes are obvious targets of these spineless spenders.

Big Tobacco's best buddy in the Senate is Bryce Marlett, R-Woodward, who has previously busied himself smooching the cigarette-makers' butts by killing every proposal to make access to the deadly product more difficult, especially for teenagers.

Now, in perhaps the phoniest demonstration of make believe support to date for our teachers, circus carney Bryce has proposed that millions be stolen from the Tobacco Settlement Endowment Fund - earmarked to health care by the voters in 2004 - for the purpose of financing a long overdue educator pay raise. Of course, everyone, including the Oklahoma Education Association which represents 35,000 classroom teachers, condemned this political prank for what it is: Just smoke and hot air being blown around by a shill impersonating a serious solon. So sad.

5. *The Helen Keller Crystal Ball Gift*.

This unique treasure is given only once a generation. To earn it the recipient must be oblivious to the historic and predictable cyclical nature inherent in the price of oil, but more importantly, the designee must also hold a high government position of great influence over the state budget.

The bankruptcy courts are currently choked with folks who meet only the first requirement but lack the second since the dual qualifications make such a person, thankfully, extremely rare.

Therefore, the clear winner of the Crystal Cudgel, newly named because it will now be used to pummel core state services, goes to Finance Secretary Preston Doerflinger, who cinched the title with the following quote as reported in the Oklahoman on Nov. 23: "Who could have predicted we would see this dramatic of a drop [in price], or that it would be as prolonged as it has been?" Answer: Any high school student who took an Oklahoma history course or me when, in my only meeting ever with Preston two years ago, I urged that he familiarize himself with a fellow named Issac Newton who had some advice about ups and downs as related to apples. The same law, tragically, applies to oil.

6. *The Human Fire Starter Gift*.

Truly a special present during the holidays. Comes in life-size courtesy of Oklahoma City Rep. Kevin Calvey, who threatened to light himself up outside the Supreme Court building due to the high court's ruling that a law passed by the Legislature was unconstitutional.

If every member of that august body did the same each time one of their bills was struck down by jurists, we just as well could convert the Capitol to a fire station. Hmmm. Maybe a better public purpose.

7. *The Laser Surgery Enhancement Gift* goes to Rep. Scott Martin, R-Norman, who recently declared through crocodile tears he is searching for money to fund our public schools. Really?



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What If It Were All True?

BY HARRY T. COOK

Maybe the best Christmas story since shepherds got themselves over to Bethlehem at the bidding of a messenger from on high was the Christmas truce between German and British soldiers during a war that was at that point only five months old.

The strife would go on for almost three years more and bring to unforgettable history such names as Chateau Thierry, Somme, Verdun and Belleau Wood. Yet as the guns fell silent on Dec. 24 – 101 years ago – the antiphonal singing of *Stille nacht*, *heilige nacht* and other yuletide carols by otherwise opposing troops was one of the few poignant moments in the whole of that senseless conflict.

It was, when you stop to think about it, a rebuke of the high and mighty who had allowed their nations to drift into a war driven by imperial testosterone and outdated visions of power.

I was told once that my great-uncle Father Michael Endl, at that time a Bavarian priest, had penned in a letter – now long lost – these words: “*Gott im Him-*

mel! Warum?” – God in heaven, why?

At least he was dealing with one deity, which is why, maybe, the British soldiers and their cultural cousins, the Germans, could sing in the dark of that Christmas Eve of 1914 the same tune in different languages, both longing for the hearths of home.

What if the story that gave rise to the carols and to the huge unlikelihood that enemies would emerge from their dank trenches to sing them in harmony – what if that story were true?

What if it happened just as St. Luke and St. Matthew wrote it down toward the end of the first century of the Common Era?

What if the barely pubescent Miriam from some hamlet in the Galilee did encounter a spectral messenger that told her she had been made pregnant by an unseen presence, rather than by her betrothed, and that the child in her womb was to be the savior of the world?

What if Miriam and Joseph did obey a government mandate to go to David’s hometown of Bethlehem to

be counted in a census because the once-great king was somehow an antecedent of Joseph?

What if, when they arrived, the hostel was full to overflowing and they had to take their rest in a cattle shed where Miriam's baby was born?

What if shepherds on a nearby hillside actually heard and maybe even saw a band of choristers descend to announce that messiah had finally arrived, but as a newborn infant swathed in rags?

What if the choristers then sang an anthem about peace on Earth among humankind?

What if the shepherds and goatherds came down from their midnight watch to see messiah for themselves?

What if St. Matthew's story of the magicians from the East coming to see the young king were true as told?

What if?

It all must have seemed true enough on a December night a century ago to the troops who probably hadn't the slightest idea about how and why the war started in the first place.

Maybe the brief cessation of hostilities meant to them that a miracle of peace on Earth had come at last, and they could just go home to mothers and fathers or to wives and children.

Of course, it did not and they could not. Many of them would die on the muddy, mortar-pocked landscape of northern France and Belgium as the old monarchies of Europe and the Mideast toppled or were toppled and the "war to end all wars" – the one Woodrow Wilson said needed to be fought to make the world "safe for democracy" – ground on.

Even I, an agnostic secular humanist, cherish the Bible's Christmas story and know most of it by heart – both in English and in Latin. Nothing beats *Gloria in altissimus Deo et super terram pax hominibus bonae voluntatis*.

Both *pax hominibus* and *bonae voluntatis* are in very short supply just now, and, if history instructs us correctly, have been since Cain lied to Yahweh about where his brother was: "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?"

How wondrous the text would be if the Hebrew philosopher who crafted the story three millennia ago had depicted Yahweh as replying, "You are right. You are not your brother's keeper. You are your brother's brother."

Those whose wont it is to go off to midnight mass or just to stay home and sing *Silent Night* around the Christmas tree might take a moment or two to remember the young men of Germany and Britain a century ago clambering out of their cramped dug-outs to greet one another as brothers.

In doing so, were they daring to hope that their commanders, perhaps affected as they themselves were, would think better of slaughter in the name of national pride, sound retreat and seek peace? *Harry T. Cook is an Episcopal priest, journalist and author living in Michigan.*

Offending For Offending's Sake? Bah Humbug!

BY KAREN WEBB

Using the greeting "Merry Christmas" is not offensive to me, but I am speaking only for me. However, I was shared a post from Facebook last year that said something like:

If Merry Christmas is offensive to you then let me be more offensive to you by saying it again and again.

That is offensive. It was shared by someone who attends church every weekend. I don't go to church regularly, but I did for most of my life and I was a religious education major at a Baptist college and the idea that knowingly offending someone is a way to lead them to Christ is really foreign to me.

The old fashioned way would have been to ask them why they are offended and attempt to tell them why I do not think Jesus intends to be offensive.

The first time I carried a protest sign was in college and the BSU [or Baptist Student Union] was protesting the idea of mandatory chapel attendance. My sign said, "you can't preach a free gospel to a captive audience." I still believe it is not possible to legislate people into heaven. Evangelism by force has never worked.

After leaving college, I taught 12-year-old girls in Sunday School. I remember one asking me about a statement made by the preacher in his sermon the previous week. She asked, "Do you agree with the preacher that when you are discussing religious beliefs and someone doesn't agree with you that you should say, 'Liar, liar.'"

I answered that, first, if you call someone a liar with regards to their beliefs that you lose all hope of ever converting them to your way of thought. Second, you can be completely wrong and not be a liar if you are saying what you really believe to be true. In order to be a liar, you have to not only know the truth, but believe it is true and say the opposite.

You can say you didn't rob a bank, but if you did, you are a liar. If you say I didn't offend you because I do not believe "Merry Christmas" is offensive and the other person is offended, then you are wrong. But you are not a liar.

I have never at any time in my life thought "Happy Holidays" had anything to do with political correctness or was anti-Jesus and I still don't.

Irving Berlin wrote the song *Happy Holidays* in

1941 and I have heard it all my life and love it. He also wrote *White Christmas*. When they were written he was accused of secularizing Christmas.

He also wrote *God Bless America* as sentiment of how he felt after having to leave his native Russia. He was five when he remembers being wrapped in a blanket on the side of the road while watching his house and town being burned by the Cossacks. He was Jewish.

In 1941, when he wrote *Happy Holidays* he had relatives still in Russia and Eastern Europe being killed because they were Jews. I don't think he was being politically correct; I think he may have been suggesting that maybe someone, not Christian, had

a right to include a holiday other than Christmas, even while his people – those being called by Christians “God's Chosen People” – were being killed by the millions for their beliefs.

So, if I should slip and say, “Happy Holidays” – which I won't do just to be offensive and will not repeat again and again just to make sure I am offending you – I am honoring Irving Berlin.

By the way, Irving Berlin never tried to evade taxes by using tax shelters, even when his accountants told him it would save him money, because he thought it was his duty as an American.

Karen Webb lives in Moore and is a frequent contributor to The Oklahoma Observer.



The Supreme Court has ruled that there cannot be a nativity scene in the United States Capitol this Christmas season.

This isn't for any religious reason. They simply have not been able to find three wise men in the nation's capital.

A search for a virgin continues. There was no problem, however, finding enough asses to fill the stable.

The Story Behind The Tradition: Why Angel Tops The Christmas Tree

Four of Santa's elves got sick. The trainee elves did not produce toys as fast as the regular ones, and Santa began to feel the pre-Christmas pressure.

Then Mrs. Claus told Santa her mother was coming to visit, which stressed Santa even more.

When he went to harness the reindeer, he found that three of them were about to give birth and two others had jumped the fence and were out, heaven knows where.

Then when he began to load the sleigh, one of the floorboards cracked, the toy bag fell to the ground and all the toys were scattered.

Frustrated, Santa went in the house for a cup of

apple cider and a shot of rum. When he went to the cupboard, he discovered the elves had drunk all the cider and hidden the liquor.

Just then the doorbell rang and an irritated Santa marched to the door, yanked it open, and there stood a little angel with a great big Christmas tree.

The angel said very cheerfully, "Merry Christmas, Santa. Isn't this a lovely day? I have a beautiful tree for you. Where would you like me to put it?"

And so began the tradition of the little angel on top of the Christmas tree.

Not a lot of people know this.

Cal's Top 10

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 15

After undergoing this sight-improving procedure, Scott, a Norman banker and thus experienced in handling other people's money, can then clearly peruse his own legislative record and discover he voted for over \$1 billion in tax cuts since being elected to the house. Hint. That's probably where the money is.

8. *The Gen. George B. McClellan Missing in Action Award.*

A dead heat. Early in the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln, frustrated by McClellan's refusal to engage Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee in battle, asked the cautious Union military man if he could "borrow" the Army of the Potomac. History does not reveal the answer but Lincoln soon fired the reluctant warrior.

The same fate should have befallen both House Speaker Jeff Hickman and Pro Tempore Brian Bingman, who have done little of note while occupying their powerful positions of leadership. Hell, they won't even take a position on the most important question facing Oklahomans today: Are we going to adequately fund public education – or not?

Neither man, nor Queen Mary, have uttered a single word, for or against, concerning President David Boren's proposal for a \$5,000 teacher pay increase. Good grief. Why have a tongue, let alone occupy a powerful elected position, if you are not going to use them?

9. *The Glass Trailer House Award.*

For some unknown reason First Daughter Christina preferred her own mobile home digs on the mansion grounds rather than taking up space in the Queen's Castle. Commoner Cal has been in The People's

House many times so I don't understand the problem. It comes with highway patrol troopers, maids, cooks, wood burning fireplaces, several portraits of Frank Keating, really, really big screen TVs, Wi-Fi, and even indoor flush toilets!

Just proves you can't please these moody millennials.

10. *The All American Amnesia Award.*

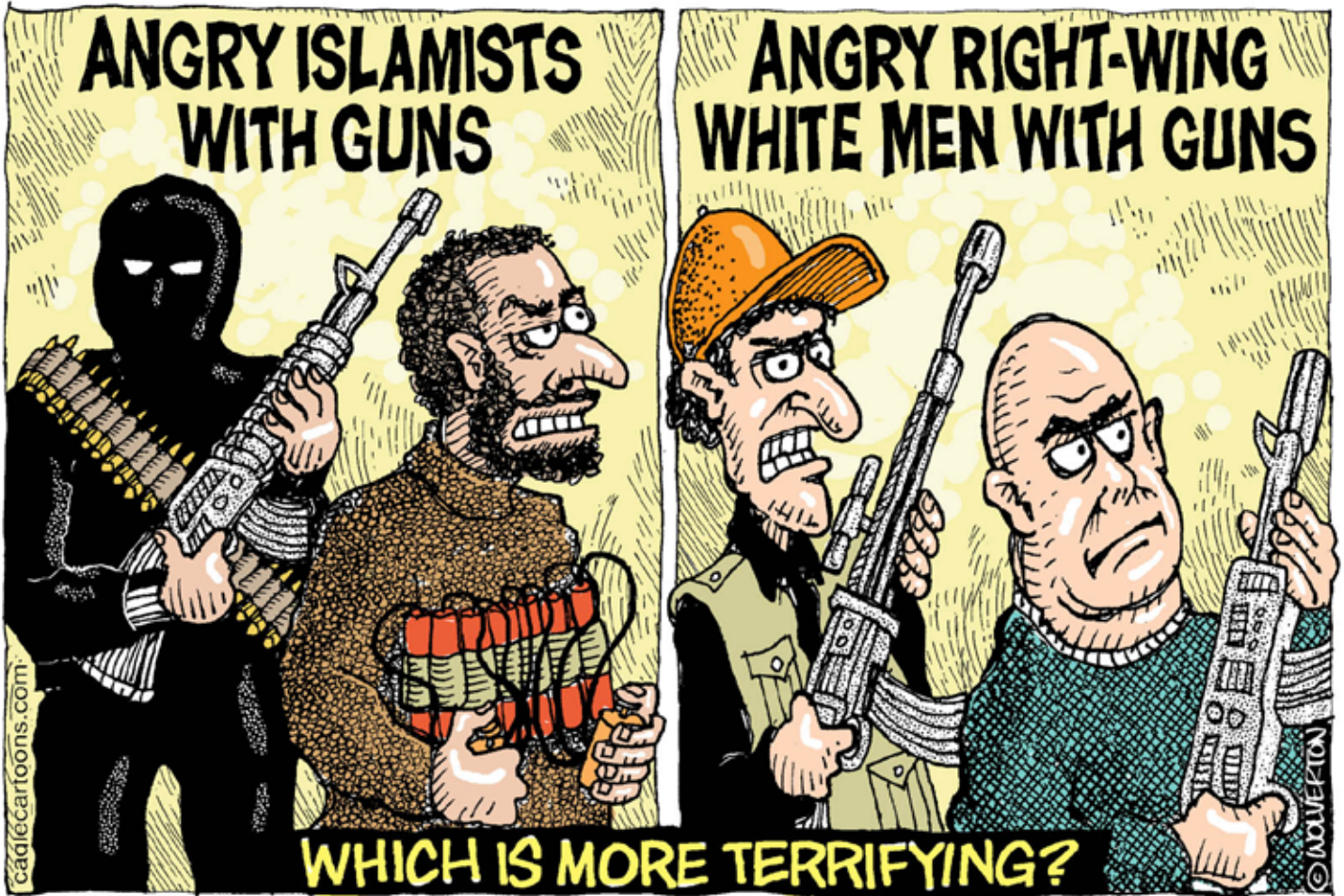
Our only group selection goes to those who have forgotten the Emma Lazarus poem associated with the Statute of Liberty. As a brief reminder for the memory challenged, it starts, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to be free ... " and, of course, Lady Liberty was a gift to America from the currently beleaguered French.

We are a country of immigrants and refugees but, in recognition of these volatile times, have in place the most restrictive system in the world to screen people such as those fleeing the Assad regime, which already has murdered 300,000 of his own citizens.

Quite frankly, it would be easier to pull an Arab camel through the eye of a Jewish needle than for a terrorist from Syria to slip into the United States. Yes, it could happen, but it's much more likely that The Donald will be elected our president in 2016 – in other words, an impossibility.

There you have my Terrible 10. Talk about a bunch that only deserves a lump of coal in their stockings! Bah humbug!

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



Guns Do The Killing

BY BOB D. ROUNSAVELL

Guns don't kill, people kill. A simple statement the National Rifle Association has used through the years to build a passionate and dedicated cadre of support for its freewheeling philosophy that every citizen has the right to own as many guns of any caliber he or she desires.

When will it advocate citizen ownership of a Bradley tank for the backyard or, better yet, one's own jet fighter plane? We only need remember the oft-stated rationale: "After all, it's not guns or weapons that kill people, it is people who kill other people." Or some such BS. The point is they have most of us believing it.

The craziness sweeping America today as the norm has created horrifying acts of violence against single individuals and groups of individuals. It includes police shooting citizens, citizens shooting police, whites shooting people of color, and Christians

shooting Muslims on Main Street America.

Crazy enough for you yet? Stick around 'cause you ain't seen it all. There's plenty more insanity getting ready to pay us a visit. It's only a matter of time until the disgruntled, misinformed and unschooled try to take control of us all using their legally or illegally obtained weapons of mass destruction. I can see them now strutting around packing heat and saving those just too gullible to understand. The reality that surrounds us waits just around the corner to a future that once was our past. If going back is our future, then we are well along our way.

Shootouts at OK Corral could be the community policing of the 21st Century. Your future mode of travel may require your very own tank for shopping. Why not start with a Humvee today?

That is hyperbole intended to show just how crazy it could get out there on our streets. Should I have to worry if I forget my gun before leaving the house for

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my doctor's appointment? The good ol' USA is heading right down the path of lawlessness by letting everyone own a gun.

People are pulling the triggers on all those millions of guns that are readily available. Look at it this way: it takes one trigger on a gun that is pulled by the finger on the hand of a human being that is taking all these lives. In other words: It is people who are killing one another today by using guns. And that's just the point – the guns are there for the using. It is much too easy these days not only to get a gun, but also to get one of any caliber.

There is a huge black market for any kind of weapon if one has the money or even just the desire. The FBI has probably underestimated the number of guns in American society when it reported recently 90 guns for every 100 Americans. That means there are about 300 million guns out there in this land of ours, more than likely 322 million-plus guns in our society today. With our current population, that means at least one gun per person.

Owning a gun or maybe even two is probably all right as long as its caliber is .22 or .38. Oh yes, I'm forgetting my 12-gauge shotgun. That's more than enough for self-protection. Fully automatic large caliber weapons are not appropriate or necessary for an average person.

When citizens can outgun law enforcement officers, society faces a serious problem. And that's precisely the one currently plaguing the nation. The police are outgunned. Outnumbered they have always been as guardians of our public safety, entrusted with our lives and the smooth functioning of society and thus discharging a sacred trust.

However, that is not the present reality. Our community is in grave danger: some of us in the "hood" have been well aware of this for a long, long time. It is the gun that is killing perfectly innocent people all over America today. We need to stop all the nonsensical killing of our fellow man, woman or even child. How about children as in Sandy Hook or Umpqua Community College or unsuspecting adults as in a movie theater?

We need to organize, even create an organization that returns our country to the days of the debate on the Second Amendment before the ephemeral icon of the cowboy supplanted the vaquero of the West.

Yes, we may need today to do spadework to win the Nobel Peace Prize for 2025. Look at the 2015 Nobel winner – the Tunisian Dialogue Quartet. They ushered in the Arab Spring with its repercussions in Egypt, Libya, Iraq and now the horrendous Syria with its refugees being lost at sea, barricaded by fences in Europe as they straggle towards a refuge, any refuge.

We need to take up the cause the Bradys have tirelessly worked. As someone remarked, there needs to be gun control for America to survive and fulfill its

destiny as the Jerusalem on the hill. Sane and sensible gun control laws so that I can keep my 12-gauge shotgun.

Bob D. Rounsavell lives in Oologah and is president of the Carrie Dickerson Foundation.

Why We Stand With Paris And Muslim Friends, Neighbors

BY CARL J. RUBENSTEIN

Editor's Note: These remarks were delivered Nov. 17 at an interfaith prayer vigil in Oklahoma City, just after the carnage in Paris.

It is significant that this is an interfaith event. We in Oklahoma, as elsewhere in this nation, are truly diverse in all our human descriptors. We can be proud of the interfaith understanding, respect, and cooperation that has developed here, sometimes in response to disaster or crisis, sometimes in response to conscious development of relationships between individuals and between organizations, sometimes in response to threats to a given minority.

What has occurred in Paris is not just a crime against Paris, nor just a mass murder of French people, it is a barbarous crime against all of humanity. Whether similar evil has occurred in Beirut, Lebanon recently, or in Ankara, Turkey, in other nations, or even here in 1995 in OKC, there is no religious justification, period. There is no religion that condones this evil – evil that sometimes deceptively masquerades as religion. The interfaith community uniformly condemns such heinous acts.

As pointed out in a statement from the National office of Interfaith Alliance, "Free societies face the challenge of balancing civil rights with civil order. ... The objective of any terrorist is to strike fear into the hearts of innocent citizens and provoke them into betraying their peaceful inclinations. Already we are seeing some public figures exploiting the understandable distress of Americans by calling for discriminatory policies against those fleeing terrorist oppression ... promoting vigilantism in the guise of 'self-defense' and repeating slanderous generalizations about faith communities and nationalities. We must hold fast to our American values and not give in to the specious reasoning born of fear."

So why are we here today?

To grieve for those who died.

To pray for the families of those who died or were in-

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jured, and at least say that our hearts are with them.

To pray for peace.

To affirm that we *all* share the resolve that these evil deeds need to be punished; that the evil people who planned and perpetrated this horrible massacre should be defeated and eliminated; that our nation needs to stand strongly with France and *all* nations to bring this radical, barbaric terrorism to an end.

To remind ourselves of our moral responsibility to the refugees, many or most of them women and children, who are fleeing dangerous and horrible conditions, and to remind ourselves of our responsibility to defend the civil rights and personal safety of our Muslim friends, neighbors, and fellow citizens, people who repeatedly over time have shown their dedication to our nation, our state, our communities, our human values.

We, of multiple faiths, multiple ethnic and racial backgrounds, multiple family histories of being immigrants or refugees, must stand together in mutual love and support.

Carl J. Rubenstein, MD, is president of the Interfaith Alliance of Oklahoma.

What Happened To Thanksgiving?

BY SHARON MARTIN

It was created as a day to share with family and friends the bounty around the table. Now, hucksters have commandeered Thanksgiving and the day after to part us from our money, to lure us into buying things we don't need instead of celebrating the bounty that we have.

Is your roof watertight? Is your electric bill paid? Did you have too much to eat on Thanksgiving? Did your car start when it was time to go back to work?

Let's take stock of our priorities. And when we've done so, let's see what we can do to make sure that everyone in this country has the necessities – clean water, a safe place to sleep at night, nutritious food, and a sound education.

We won't get there by cutting food stamps. We won't get there by adding to the conflagration in the Middle East, by putting ourselves slap dab in the middle of World War III, although Bush and Cheney and company may have set it into motion.

We'll get there by being decent human beings.

We contributed to the flow of refugees. Now let's take in those we can, making friends instead of enemies.

We used up too many people to fight our ill-con-

ceived wars. Now, let's make sure that every veteran has a home and the medical care he or she needs, including drug treatment.

We've cut education and social services budgets to the bone. Now, let's reconsider what we want our tax dollars to pay for.

I'd much rather feed and educate every family in the U.S., whether you think they're deserving or not, than to build one more unnecessary bomber or tank.

We've destroyed the air, the water, and the wild spaces. Now, let's sign on to a workable climate deal.

Christmas is coming. Ignore the corporate hucksters and the paid mouthpieces crying doom. Celebrate this season of joy one day at a time rather than by buying what they have to sell.

Sharon Martin lives in Oilton and is a regular contributor to The Oklahoma Observer. More of her essays can be read at www.okobserver.net.

Facts, Ignored

BY RON duBOIS

Oklahoma Bureau of Narcotics Spokesman Mark Woodward expresses the opinion that cannabis is the very reason for – and need to continue – the [failed] Drug War.

The reason that punishment and incarceration are necessary, the very reason for the drug prohibition is no doubt the hefty salary he is paid at taxpayer expense.

In the view of drug policy reformers, “It is time to dump them all.”

Hillary Clinton's words – “Deep seated cultural codes, religious beliefs, and structural biases have to be changed” – apply to Woodward's presentation earlier this year to Stillwater's League of Women Voters.

During World War II, Hillary's words apply as well to perfectly intelligent Germans living next to extermination camps. “Deep seated cultural codes” account for notions of German racial superiority, as well to American racist notions during the Colonial and the Civil War eras ... they apply to every era of social injustice ... they apply to drug policies that insure suffering, misery, and death.

In direct opposition to Dr. Sanjay Gupta's series on marijuana, explaining the medicinal value of cannabis, Woodward paints every strain of cannabis as a “gateway drug” and the very reason for the war on drugs.

Gupta explains that a small squirt of liquid cannabis derived from a strain known as “Charlotte's Web” taken orally in small quantities instantly cures seizures. The relief to an afflicted child and family is enormous.

PUBLIC FORUM



Woodward disparaged Colorado's legalization of cannabis and had nothing to say about Portugal's legalization of all drugs. He knew nothing of Canadian psychologist Dr. Bruce Alexander's research with rats pointing to environment as the reason for addiction rather than the substance itself.

According to Woodward, marijuana smokers smoke "morning, noon and night."

The very opposite is true. A pea-sized amount of the right strain and one inhalation is sufficient to knock out pain for a day. A single puff in the evening takes pain away all night.

Woodward failed to explain that the right strain of cannabis removes the most intractable addiction to tobacco. A possible downside is that when cannabis is stopped the craving for nicotine returns. More research is needed.

According to NIDA, "Evidence from one animal study suggests that extracts from whole-plant marijuana can shrink one of the most serious types of brain tumors." Woodward failed to explain that THC is not the only component of cannabis – i.e., that CBD [the curative component of cannabis] is capable of actually repairing the damage to lungs by smoking

cigarettes.

Cannabis in his view has no curative powers. He appeared only interested in talking about the THC content – i.e., the mood altering component – rather than the curative CBD content.

Upton Sinclair said, "It is difficult to get a man to understand something, when his salary depends on his *not* understanding it."

No doubt many League members thought Woodward delivered "a powerful message." No doubt they, like the uninformed lay public, are addicted to the American model of prohibition, punishment, incarceration, hatred, and stigma towards the illness of substance use disorder.

When a member of the LOWV audience asked, "Do you think marijuana laws are mainly prejudiced fairy tales?", Woodward replied, "I support marijuana being illegal."

Ron duBois lives in Stillwater and is professor emeritus at Oklahoma State University.

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Why Are Democrats Running As Republicans?

BY THOM HARTMANN

Republicans haven't taken over red states; Democrats have lost them by not running as real Democrats.

That's my big takeaway from Alec MacGillis' fascinating look into the biggest political mystery of our time: why poor white people in red states are not turning out to vote, leaving the field to Republicans elected by more affluent whites in those states.

There are a lot of theories as to why this happens.

One of the most famous comes from Thomas Frank, who argued in his book *What's The Matter With Kansas?* that poor white people vote Republican because Republicans have duped them into caring about social issues like abortion, guns and gay marriage.

There is a lot to be said for that line of analysis, but Alec MacGillis has a different theory.

As he explains in a new piece for ProPublica and The New York Times, the problem isn't that poor white people who have tended to vote Democrat now

vote Republican.

No, the problem is that "the people who most rely on the safety-net programs secured by Democrats are, by and large ... not voting, period."

To put it in less wonky terms, Democrats are losing out to Republicans in what have become red states because the people who should vote for Democrats aren't voting whatsoever, full-stop.

A great example of this, according to MacGillis, is Pike County, KY, which is both a place where 18% of households get some sort of government assistance and a place where Kentucky governor-elect and Tea Party favorite Matt Bevin just won 55% of the vote.

All logic suggests that Pike County should vote Democratic, and it used to do so pretty much every election, "but 30% fewer people voted in the county last month than did in 2003 – 11,223 voters in a county of 63,000, far below the county's tally of food-stamp recipients, which was more than 17,000 in

2012.”

If all of Pike County’s 17,000 food stamp recipients had come out to vote, we could be talking about how that county was a Democratic stronghold in a sea of red.

But that didn’t happen, and now we’re left with the same old problem of a county – and a state, for that matter – that should go Democratic but instead falls to Republicans.

The situation is pretty similar in other former Democratic shoe-in-states like West Virginia, Arkansas and Tennessee, where pretty much no one comes out to vote, except white middle- and upper-class Republicans.

Not surprisingly, West Virginia, Arkansas and Tennessee are also states that have now flipped red after years of going blue, again, because Democrats are not showing up to vote.

All this, of course, raises the question: Why are poor people, especially poor white people in red states, not showing up to vote?

This is obviously a complex question with a complex answer, but to me, at least, there’s one really big reason why.

It’s because with the exception of a few people like Elizabeth Warren, Sherrod Brown and Al Franken, Democrats don’t run as Democrats any more.

Ever since the “centrist” [aka corporatist] “New Democrats” staged their coup back in the late 1980s and recruited Gov. Bill Clinton, most Democrats have run for office and governed as Republicans-lite.

Instead of pushing progressive values and populist economics, they call for welfare “reform,” talk about how cutting Social Security might be a good idea, and support awful trade deals like NAFTA and the TPP.

Oh, and if that wasn’t bad enough, they also take in millions of dollars in donations from the fat cats on Wall Street, big Pharma and the so-called “defense” industry.

Aside from just adopting Republican talking points, you really couldn’t ask for a better way to alienate the poor – people who already have every reason to be alienated from the political process.

The takeaway here?

Easy: It’s time for Democrats to embrace and run on their party’s core values, the kind of values represented by people like Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Lyndon Johnson and Bernie Sanders, who up until recently didn’t even call himself a Democrat!

That’s the only way Democrats can hope to win elections in red states again.

It really is that simple, because, as Harry Truman once said, “Given a choice between a Republican and a Democrat who acts like a Republican; the voters will pick the Republican every time!”

It’s time for the Democratic Party to stop promoting Democrats who act like Republicans, and return to the progressive roots and values laid out and championed by truly progressive presidents like FDR.

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What I Learned On My Red State Book Tour

BY ROBERT REICH

I recently returned from three weeks in “red” America.

It was ostensibly a book tour but I wanted to talk with conservative Republicans and Tea Partiers.

I intended to put into practice what I tell my students – that the best way to learn is to talk with people who disagree with you. I wanted to learn from red America, and hoped they’d also learn a bit from me [and perhaps also buy my book].

But something odd happened. It turned out that many of the conservative Republicans and Tea Partiers I met agreed with much of what I had to say, and I agreed with them.

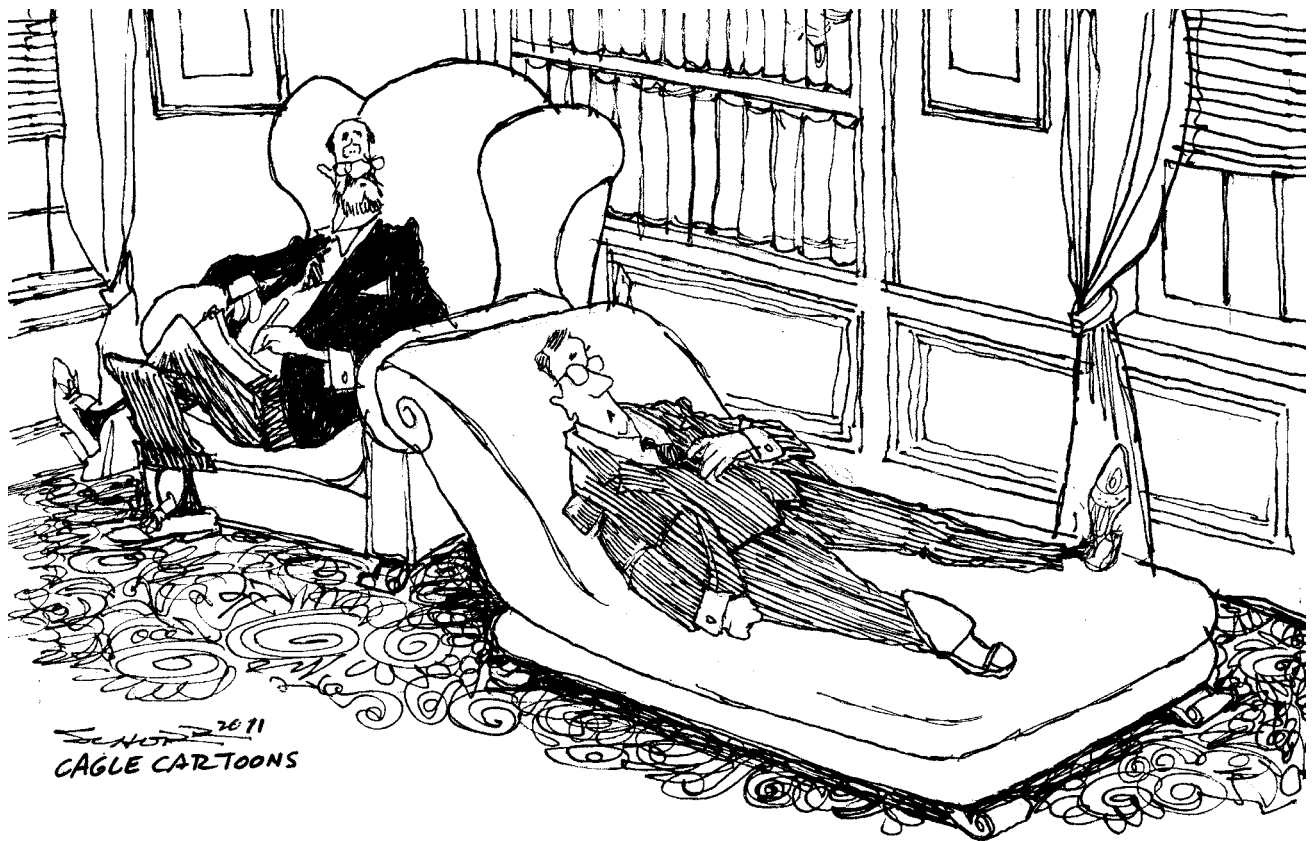
For example, most condemned what they called “crony capitalism,” by which they mean big corporations getting sweetheart deals from the government because of lobbying and campaign contributions.

I met with group of small farmers in Missouri who were livid about growth of “factory farms” owned and run by big corporations, that abused land and cattle, damaged the environment, and ultimately harmed consumers.

They claimed giant food processors were using their monopoly power to squeeze the farmers dry, and the government was doing squat about it because of Big Agriculture’s money.

I met in Cincinnati with Republican small-business





“SOMETIMES, DOC, I FEEL LIKE A BLUE STATER TRAPPED IN THE BODY OF A RED STATER...”

owners who are still hurting from the bursting of the housing bubble and the bailout of Wall Street.

“Why didn’t underwater homeowners get any help?” one of them asked rhetorically. “Because Wall Street has all the power.” Others nodded in agreement.

Whenever I suggested that big Wall Street banks be busted up – “any bank that’s too big to fail is too big, period” – I got loud applause.

In Kansas City I met with Tea Partiers who were angry that hedge-fund managers had wangled their own special “carried interest” tax deal.

“No reason for it,” said one. “They’re not investing a dime of their own money. But they’ve paid off the politicians.”

In Raleigh, I heard from local bankers who thought Bill Clinton should never have repealed the Glass-Steagall Act.

“Clinton was in the pockets of Wall Street just like George W. Bush was,” said one.

Most of the people I met in America’s heartland want big money out of politics, and think the Supreme Court’s “Citizens United” decision was shameful.

Most are also dead-set against the Trans Pacific Partnership. In fact, they’re opposed to trade agreements, including NAFTA, that they believe have made it easier for corporations to outsource American jobs abroad.

A surprising number think the economic system is biased in favor of the rich. [That’s consistent with a recent Quinnipiac poll in which 46% of Republicans

believe “the system favors the wealthy.”]

The more conversations I had, the more I understood the connection between their view of “crony capitalism” and their dislike of government.

They don’t oppose government per se. In fact, as the Pew Research Center has found, more Republicans favor additional spending on Social Security, Medicare, education, and infrastructure than want to cut those programs.

Rather, they see government as the vehicle for big corporations and Wall Street to exert their power in ways that hurt the little guy.

They call themselves Republicans but many of the inhabitants of America’s heartland are populists in the tradition of William Jennings Bryan.

I also began to understand why many of them are attracted to Donald Trump. I had assumed they were attracted by Trump’s blunderbuss and his scapegoating of immigrants.

That’s part of it. But mostly, I think, they see Trump as someone who’ll stand up for them – a countervailing power against the perceived conspiracy of big corporations, Wall Street, and big government.

Trump isn’t saying what the moneyed interests in the GOP want to hear. He’d impose tariffs on American companies that send manufacturing overseas, for example.

He’d raise taxes on hedge-fund managers. [“The hedge-fund guys didn’t build this country,” Trump says. They’re “getting away with murder.”]

He'd protect Social Security and Medicare. I kept hearing "Trump is so rich he can't be bought." Heartland Republicans and progressive Democrats remain wide apart on social and cultural issues.

But there's a growing overlap on economics. The populist upsurge is real.

I sincerely hope Donald Trump doesn't become president. He's a divider and a buffoon.

But I do hope the economic populists in both parties come together.

That's the only way we're going to reform a system that's now rigged against most of us.

Robert B. Reich served in three national administrations, most recently as secretary of labor under President Bill Clinton. He also served on President Obama's transition advisory board. His latest book is Aftershock: The Next Economy and America's Future. His homepage is www.robertreich.org.

The One Question Reporters Never Ask Candidates

BY RALPH NADER

Candidates for public office, especially at the state and national levels, are never asked this central question of politics: "Since the people are sovereign under our Constitution, how do you specifically propose to restore power to the people in their various roles as voters, taxpayers, workers and consumers?"

Imagine that inquiry starting the so-called presidential debates of both the Republican and Democratic presidential candidates. I'm not sure any of the candidates – so used to saying, "I will do this" and "I propose that" – would even know how to respond.

Regardless of their affiliation with either of the two dominant parties, politicians are so used to people being spectators rather than participants in the run-up to Election Day that they have not thought much about participatory or initiatory democracy. Too many of them, backed by the concentrated wealth of plutocrats, have perfected the silver-tongued skills of flattery, obfuscation and deception.

Many voters oblige candidates by not doing their homework about the candidates, their records and the issues they want addressed. Such passivity lowers expectations of what voters should demand from the elected officials who, after all, are supposed to hold their delegated power in trust and not sell it to big-money donors.

Let's begin with voters. How could elected officials

empower the people they represent?

Power to the voters would mean eliminating the private money financing public elections. Big commercial interests nullify votes, and turn most elections into low-grade ditto days of tedious repetition. Well-promoted voluntary checkoffs up to, say, \$300 can make public financing of elections into a more politically acceptable reform.

But to strengthen the power of voters there must also be more voices and choices on the ballot lines, the Electoral College should be abolished and state legislators must stop gerrymandering districts that ensure seriatim one-party domination. Same-day voter registration and a binding none-of-the-above choice can give more voters significant leverage as well.

Voters themselves must demand that legislative votes by their representatives be immediately put on their public website with their justification.

Taxpayers lack the tools and resources to challenge the many hundreds of billions of federal tax dollars that each year are used illegally, corruptly or are shockingly wasted. Taxpayers have no standing, under our laws, to sue to stop such abuses. They are rendered weak and meek by this exclusion. When will voters hear a candidate pledge to give them their day in court?

Another way to increase taxpayer power is to provide for a voluntary checkoff on the 1040 tax return that makes it easy for taxpayers to voluntarily contribute funds and band together with a full-time staff of watchdogs focused on the government's waste, fraud and abuse. Big-time leverage is likely with this taxpayer searchlight.

Workers are empowered when they demand that candidates stand for the repeal of the notorious Taft-Hartley act of 1947 – the most handcuffing law obstructing union organizing and union rights in the western world. Enforcing fairer labor standards that are already on the books, protecting pensions from looting by corporate management [see <http://www.pensionrights.org/>], establishing full improved Medicare for all [see <http://www.singlepayeraction.org/>] and lifting the minimum wage [see <http://www.timeforaraise.org/>] – all of these initiatives increase the power of workers.

Finally, how can it be that the "customer is always right" when the consumer has no might?

Consumers are becoming serfs in many ways – deceived and tied up by fine print contracts that exclude them from the courts, even if wrongfully injured, and allow vendors, using the same fine print, to unilaterally change contract terms whenever they want. Consumers have no way to easily band together either for collective bargaining or collective justice, such as negotiating away those fine-print contracts and restoring the exercise of trial by jury.

Corporate power, led by the cruel U.S. Chamber of Commerce in Washington, DC, is stripping consumers of class action remedies, imposing severe pen-

alties and fines in the marketplace and intimidating them from complaining for fear of lowering their credit ratings and credit scores.

Add to this the gouging prices for drugs and health care, malpractice, near-zero interest rates on their savings, high rates on credit cards, and vulnerability to unregulated foreign imports of food, medicines and other products, and you have a compelling case for a power shift from vendors to consumers.

Inserts in billing envelopes or online required by vendors – such as electric, gas and water utilities, banks and insurance companies – inviting consumers to band together in non-profit advocacy organizations, with full time champions, can be a great step forward in getting consumers seats at the tables of power [see <http://www.citizensutilityboard.org/>].

Consider how much of your money and assets the government spends to facilitate business organizations – with subsidies, handouts, bailouts and giveaways, with tax credits and deductions and with privileged bankruptcy laws to give mismanaged or reckless companies second and third chances.

Consumers and taxpayers pay for all these goodies. Where is the reciprocity, where is the modest payback for all these exactions? Let consumers have easy ways to organize, with full time advocates, as bank customers, insurance policyholders, car owners, energy and credit users, and those simply wanting food that is safe to eat. When enough consumers can organize, through easy checkoffs, they can defend themselves and make for an efficient and equitable economy.

The appeal of these power shifts is that they come at little or no cost to citizens. No more than the equivalent of one week of the Pentagon's budget would comprise the aggregate costs of all of these resets for a functioning democratic society.

By their own accomplishments, they would save consumers, workers, taxpayers and voters more dollars than the entire Pentagon budget. Not to mention the quality of life, peace of mind and life-saving justice that cannot be measured just in dollars.

Meet your candidates; ask your candidates "The Question Never Asked!"

To find more ideas for citizen empowerment, check out the introduction to the Public Empowerment Act of 1997 at <http://csrl.org/model-laws/introduction-the-public-empowerment-act-of-1997/>.

Nader.org

“Polarizing people is a good way to win an election. And also a good way to wreck a country. Many a time freedom has been rolled back – and always for the same sorry reason: fear.”
– Molly Ivins, 1944-2007

A Year From Now

BY HARRY T. COOK

Thinking of my five grandchildren – four teens and one toddler – makes me worry about where their country will be after the general election of 2016.

My concern is about the kind of life my grandchildren will have. The older four have already learned in civics class that the America in which they were born is a democracy. I suspect that they have been taught that democracy is the rule of the majority.

I was taught that, too, and my youngest grandchild eventually may be told that in her school. By that time, it may clear that such is not the case.

In fact, America is not a democracy. It is turning into an economic oligarchy based on a brash capitalistic venture in which the accumulation of vast wealth is protected by bought-and-paid-for elections. Why would everyone in the lineup seeking the Republican nomination for president have a tax plan that, when scrutinized even by us non-economists, reveals sure and certain signs of tax cuts for the wealthy at the unmistakable disadvantage of the poor and middle class.

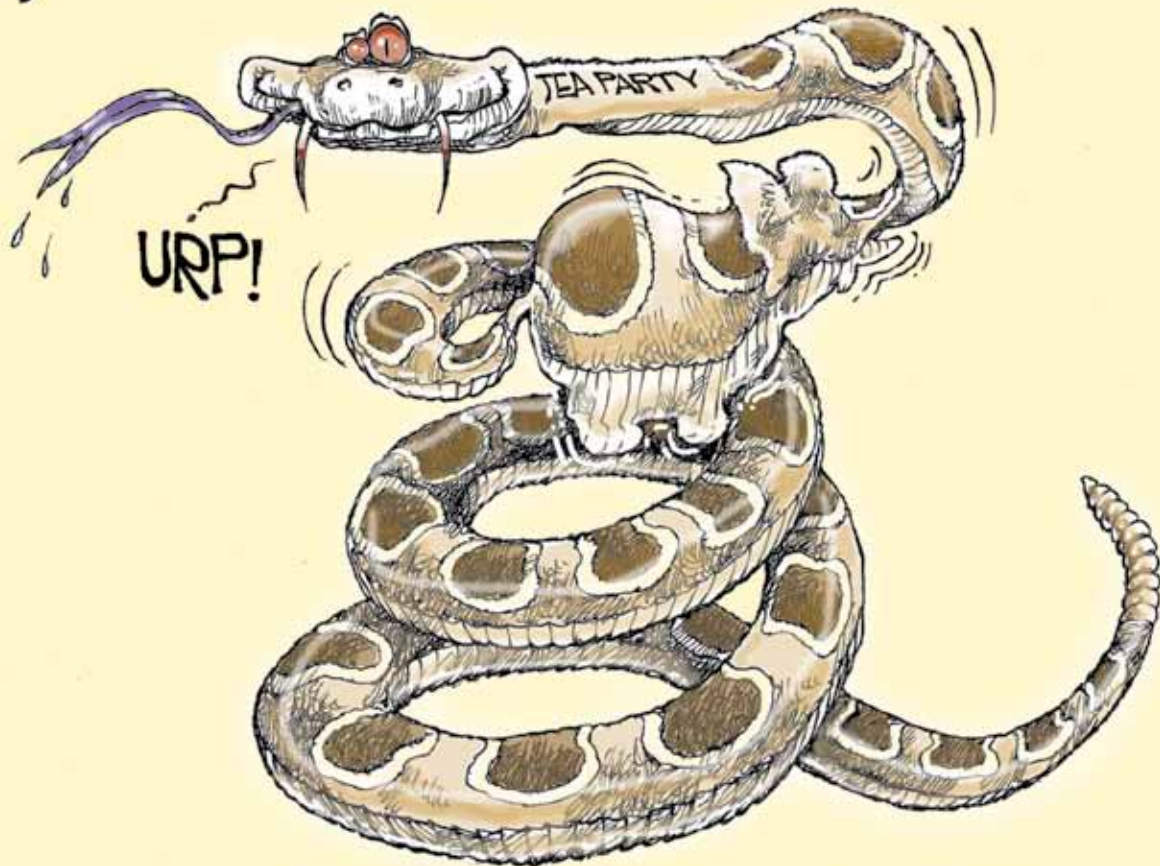
It took the election of the nation's first African-American president to awaken the Fafner that has become the Tea Party. It's all about anger. It's all about the government being the enemy of the people. Since Obama is a Democrat, we should all vote Republican to put him in his place.

So tens of thousands of the angry voted Republican in 2010, sending a very strange lot to the House of Representatives and, in 2014, to the Senate – the pièce de résistance of which was the woman hog castrator from Iowa. Things have been getting worse ever since.

Suddenly the program is to do away with Social Security and Medicare. "Medicaid" is a bad word. Food stamps are the spawn of socialism. Taxes are grand larceny. The poor and struggling? Give us liberty and give them ... well, what?

The nation's electrical grid, its highways and bridges, its railroads, its basic infrastructure are being left to deteriorate, because, heaven forefend, the government should spend any money. All that is a lesson in how to reduce your country to Third World status.

Speaking of my grandchildren and the air they will grow up breathing, the water they will grow up drinking and the climate they will have to learn to endure, how is it that the best a serious candidate for the Republican presidential nomination could manage when asked about global warming and climate change was: "I'm a skeptic." Translate that into



DON'T TREAD ON ME

policy, and you've got nothing.

This man is from Florida, where sea levels are already rising. Ask the guy in Miami who picks up a sodden newspaper outside his condo door four mornings out of seven. There's no leak in the outdoor plumbing. It's the Atlantic Ocean come to call.

Every dependable poll not manipulated by Fox News shows clearly that the American people are anxious about climate change. When species native to the subtropics appear in Georgia and South Carolina, when birch trees begin to die off in northern lower Michigan, something is up, and it isn't good.

Wind and solar energy sources have every conceivable roadblock thrown before them by a Congress and legislatures in thrall to the oil and gas lobbies.

This nation is not a democracy. It is a plutocracy moving toward an absolute oligarchy in which hedge funds are thought to approximate the acme of commerce and hedge fund proprietors the demigods of society. Men and women out of work are blithely told in effect that the education they were given and degrees earned no longer make them eligible to participate in a global economy. Have a nice day.

The idea that "all men are created equal," as the composers of the Declaration of Independence had it, and as Abraham Lincoln applied it to former slaves

as well as their one-time owners, does not suggest that the permanence of equality's original creation depends on how many boots of others are licked or bootstraps pulled up in singular effort. It means that the dignity of everyone thus blessed in a kingless democracy shall be respected and not overrun by institutions, corporations or political blocs but encouraged and assisted in realizing that equality.

That's what a democracy is and ought to be about. That is not what the United States of America is or is about at present.

What happens between now and Nov. 8, 2016, will tell us whither we shall go and under what aegis. We will elect someone who wants to be president because it's a really cool job, or someone who would remind us of such giants as Abraham Lincoln or Franklin D. Roosevelt – presidents who came to see so much that was wrong about what was supposed to have been a democracy and gave their lives to fix it.

I hope for my grandchildren's sake it is the latter. Is it too much to hope that Lincoln's vision of a government of, by and for the People – that is, an actual democracy – may be realized in this century?

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

Climate
Change...



Thinking About The Earth: Taking Care of Mother

BY JAMES L. STOVALL

In the opening words of the Pope's encyclical addressing climate change and the environment, we are invited to think of the Earth as a mother who opens her arms to us and embraces us. Too often we have thought about the earth as something simply to be used and exploited. While I'm sure that some mothers feel that way, the end result is that we are in big trouble with our mother.

At the end of November and the beginning of December, leaders from around the world will gather in Paris to consider strategies that can combat global warming and the dramatic rise in temperatures currently taking place. Leaders of nearly every country have come around to recognize that climate change is, in fact, a serious problem that deserves a serious response and that time is running short. Most scientists agree that this may be the last opportunity to respond in order to prevent a major planetary catastrophe.

While there are many major changes in public policy needed to deal effectively with climate change, many faith leaders argue that the effort must begin with a change in how we see the earth. Is the Earth just inert matter to be used in any way we want? Or is it sacred and deserving of our utmost care and concern?

The vast majority of religious leaders around the world are recognizing and speaking out about the threat of climate change and the urgent need for coordinated action. While religious leaders are paying close attention to what the scientists are telling us, the call for action grows out of a deeper truth about the fundamental connectedness that exists between humans, other living creatures and the earth itself.

Historically, native and indigenous tribes around the world operated out of a story in which human beings were fundamentally connected to the Mother Earth. They believed that the Earth was infused

with the presence of a sacred spirit. This core belief about the Earth gave shape to their ways of using the natural resources available to them and also to their economic systems. They understood that the air, the water and the trees were relatives because the breath of the Spirit was in them. In the native view, we are surrounded by the sacred.

There is a “green” tradition that is a part of Christianity but in the past several centuries Western religion has too often viewed nature and the Earth quite differently from native people. Since the Enlightenment, much of Western Christianity has focused upon matters of the spirit as separate and apart from matters of a physical nature.

The uneasy truce between science and religion centered upon science being concerned with the natural world and religion focusing upon spiritual matters. This split had at least two tragic consequences: first, religion was now reluctant to draw upon the natural world as a means of experiencing the divine; second, science was now able to relate to the earth as mere stuff lacking any sense of the sacred.

Respect for the Earth grows out of seeing the Earth as an aspect of the divine and seeing our responsibility to care for the Earth as sacred as well. A large part of our current predicament with climate change is that modern society generally sees nature as inert, lifeless stuff to be manipulated and messed with as long as it serves our purposes. The divine is too often seen as something out there or up there but not something to be found in the real, physical world. Religion often challenged people to transcend the natural world in order to connect with the divine.

Being able to detach from the physical world in that manner allowed modern people in the West to probe, explore, and analyze the stuff of the earth in a new and unprecedented manner. This leads us to the incredible explosion of science and technology of the present age.

This view of the Earth and failure to view the Earth as sacred has now turned against us in an incredibly destructive manner. We are up against centuries of theological interpretation that regarded the natural world with outright hostility – as a misery to be transcended and an “allurement” to be resisted. As a result, we may be on the verge of stretching the limits of the Earth’s capacity to tolerate human activity.

In more recent years, science and religion both have begun to recognize a fundamentally different way of seeing the Earth. Rather than seeing the universe in all of its separateness and individual parts, science has begun to see reality as fundamentally connected in much the same way native people have regarded the Earth.

As people living on one fragile planet, it is no longer appropriate to say, “your end of the ship is sinking.” The survival of the planet depends upon a new way of thinking based upon this sense of connectedness that most religious traditions recognize. This aware-

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Dear Future: If Only We’d Acted Sooner

BY BILL MCKIBBEN

This is part of the Letters to the Future campaign, a national effort to encourage people from all walks of life to write six generations into the future about climate change. The campaign puts a spotlight on the importance of world leaders agreeing to a global climate treaty at COP21 in Paris.

The first thing to say is, sorry. We were the last generation to know the world before full-on climate change made it a treacherous place. That we didn’t get sooner to work slowing it down is our great shame, and you live with the unavoidable consequences.

That said, I hope that we made at least some difference. There were many milestones in the fight – Rio, Kyoto, the debacle at Copenhagen. By the time the great Paris climate conference of 2015 rolled around, many of us were inclined to cynicism.

And our cynicism was well-taken. The delegates to that convention, representing governments that were still unwilling to take more than baby steps, didn’t really grasp the nettle. They looked for easy, around-the-edges fixes, ones that wouldn’t unduly alarm their patrons in the fossil fuel industry.

But so many others seized the moment that Paris offered to do the truly important thing: Organize. There were meetings and marches, disruptions and disobedience. And we came out of it more committed than ever to taking on the real power that be.

The real changes flowed in the months and years past Paris, when people made sure that their institutions pulled money from oil and coal stocks, and when they literally sat down in the way of the coal trains and the oil pipelines. People did the work governments wouldn’t – and as they weakened the fossil fuel industry, political leaders grew ever so slowly bolder.

We learned a lot that year about where power lay: less in the words of weak treaties than in the zeitgeist we could create with our passion, our spirit, and our creativity. Would that we had done it sooner!



Building Monopolies, One Merger After Another

Corporate World is experiencing a surge in the urge to merge.

Control of market after market – from cable TV to chickens, banking to washing machines – has been seized by less than a handful of enormous corporations. Rather than compete, they collude to set prices, cut quality, shrink service and squeeze out any would-be competitors.

There was a time, not that long ago, when monopolies, duopolies and oligopolies were not only frowned upon by our public officials and watchdog agencies but also aggressively challenged and busted up. In recent years, however, corporate giants feel free to get ever-gianter by gobbling up their competitors, knowing that the watchdogs will barely bark, much less bite.

In fact, now that the Supreme Court has turned corporate campaign donations into legalized bribes, our so-called “public” officials – including congress critters, governors, judges and even presidents – have become tail-wagging accomplices to the amalgamation of corporate power.

The Bush-Cheney regime was infamous for cheerleading this consolidation, including mergers that allowed AT&T and Verizon to capture 70% of all wireless phone subscribers. But this is not just a Republican phenomenon.

Obama’s Justice Department, Federal Trade Commission and Federal Aviation Administration genially waved through American Airline’s takeover of US Airways and United’s consumption of Continental, effectively leaving air travelers to the brutish mercy of one or two bullies in every major airport – and no service at all in smaller cities.

Now come dominant health-care giants Aetna, Humana, Anthem and Cigna, as well as Walgreens and Rite Aid, demanding to merge into behemoths that would control the availability of health insurance and essential medicines to millions of Americans. Ironically, the very lawmakers, corporate lobbyists and pundits who push and praise each of these mergers are also the noisiest preachers of the virtue of competitive markets, small business and consumer

choice.

Oh, they also claim to be champions of the people’s will – even though the clear will of the vast majority of Americans is to stop the merger-mania and anti-consumer monopolization that corporate America and its political servants are hanging around our necks. That’s not just ironic. It’s cynical, hypocritical ... and disgusting.

Even our brewskis are falling to monopolists. Belgian conglomerate Anheuser-Busch InBev is set to swallow South American-owned conglomerate SAB-Miller. The merger, they gloat, will be the first “truly global brewer.” Indeed, it will control a third of all beer sales in the world and a whopping 70% of all U.S. sales.

The monopolizers assert there’s no anti-trust problem because hundreds of small breweries are popping up like dandelions all over America and the world, thus creating wide-open competition. The winner, says the Anheuser-Busch behemoth with a wink and a crooked smile, will be the one that gets the most customers.

How free-enterprise-y! And fallacious. The “winner” will be the one with the key to the marketplace gate.

To get customers, you first have to be able to get your beers in the bars and on store shelves, which is mostly controlled in the U.S. by beer wholesalers who distribute beers from various breweries to the retailers. These wholesalers can simply refuse to distribute the brews of smaller “competitors.”

Now, guess which big honking beer-maker has been aggressively buying up wholesale distributors in recent years in order to fill the shelves with their brands and lock out the new independents?

If Anheuser-Busch InBev is allowed to become the first global brewery, it won’t be because it makes the best beer but because it’s rigging the marketplace to slam the door on its “free enterprise” competitors.

The word “free” in “free enterprise” is not an adjective, it’s a verb; i.e., let’s “free up” the enterprise of small businesspeople by stopping giant monopolists from locking them out of the marketplace.

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Let's Get On Board With High-Speed Rail

Practically every wealthy nation today is making major investments in building high-speed rail networks to transport their people: Japan, Canada, France, Russia, India, England, Morocco, Korea, Saudi Arabia, Italy, China, Mexico, Poland, Spain, Brazil, Germany, South Africa, Turkey and more.

But not us, the wealthiest nation, with dozens of cities dotted across a continent with millions of people who need fast, convenient rail connection.

Why are we stuck in traffic on roadways and runways and left with a pokey, out-of-date rail system while nations with a small fraction of our resources – such as Morocco, Poland and Turkey – are cruising on HSR networks?

Because our leaders sold us out to corporate hucksters who fed us ideological lies. Their fairy tale was that mass transit is creaky, inherently inefficient, and socialist – and that Americans deserve the independence that comes from a one-person-one-car doctrine.

As early as the 1930s, giant corporate consortiums formed to buy out more than 100 of America's very effective networks of streetcars and interurban train systems.

Not to run them, but to rip out the tracks and pave over the rail right-of-ways to make roads.

Likewise, corporate profiteers mounted a new offensive in the 1990s to undermine the higher-speed potential of Amtrak's Acela trains, hiring such Koch-funded front groups as Cato Institute, Heritage Foundation and Reason Foundation to spread hokey "analyses" that brand Amtrak as a slow train to collectivist hell.

They also bought trainloads of politicians, who're still promoting the fabricated studies and talking points of the corporate-cabal to derail HSR proposals.

Despite attempts to kill the notion of a national passenger rail system, trains are only getting more popular.

Here are just a few things that HSR would offer our county:

- HSR construction creates a start-up economic boom [from the manufacturing of trains and equipment; the construction of everything from bridges to stations; the

installation of high-tech control systems; the generation of renewable energy to power the electric engines; the development of new businesses to serve rail passengers, and more] and would be a sustained source of good, permanent jobs running and maintaining the network.

- HSR is a boon for passengers, providing a competitive alternative to airline rip-offs and traffic congestion. Travellers get access to more cities, safer and more comfortable rides and the ability to work or just relax on the road.

- HSR trains are powered by electricity, thus they substantially reduce consumption of grossly polluting fossil fuels.

- HSR crisscrossing America would be a monumental achievement by and for our people, on a par with the 10-year moon-landing effort launched by President Kennedy or the interstate highway system initiated by President Eisenhower.

It would be a history-making project, worthy of a nation with unsurpassed wealth and under-used talent. Creating such a treasure for future generations would re-engage our people's can-do spirit, and it just might rekindle some sense of national unity.

The U.S. is in the caboose of transportation innovation because special-interest politics continue to thwart our national will, leaving you and me with a rickety, malfunctioning rail system that is a national embarrassment.

It's unforgivable that corporate and political leaders have intentionally failed to maintain, much less improve, the quality of America's rail infrastructure for future generations.

And the cowardice of Congress critters, who take special-interest money to oppose the best policies for the common good, is not only shamefully corrupt; it's a firing offense.

That's where we come in.

High-speed rail offers such huge benefits for us that we need to push it to the center of our policy demands, especially with a national election cycle already on us.

To learn more, contact the National Association of Railroad Passengers [www.narprail.org] and US High Speed Rail Association [www.ushsr.com]. – *Jim Hightower*

Oklahoma Friends Meetings (Quakers)

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

- Author unknown

MEETING FOR WORSHIP SCHEDULE AND CONTACTS

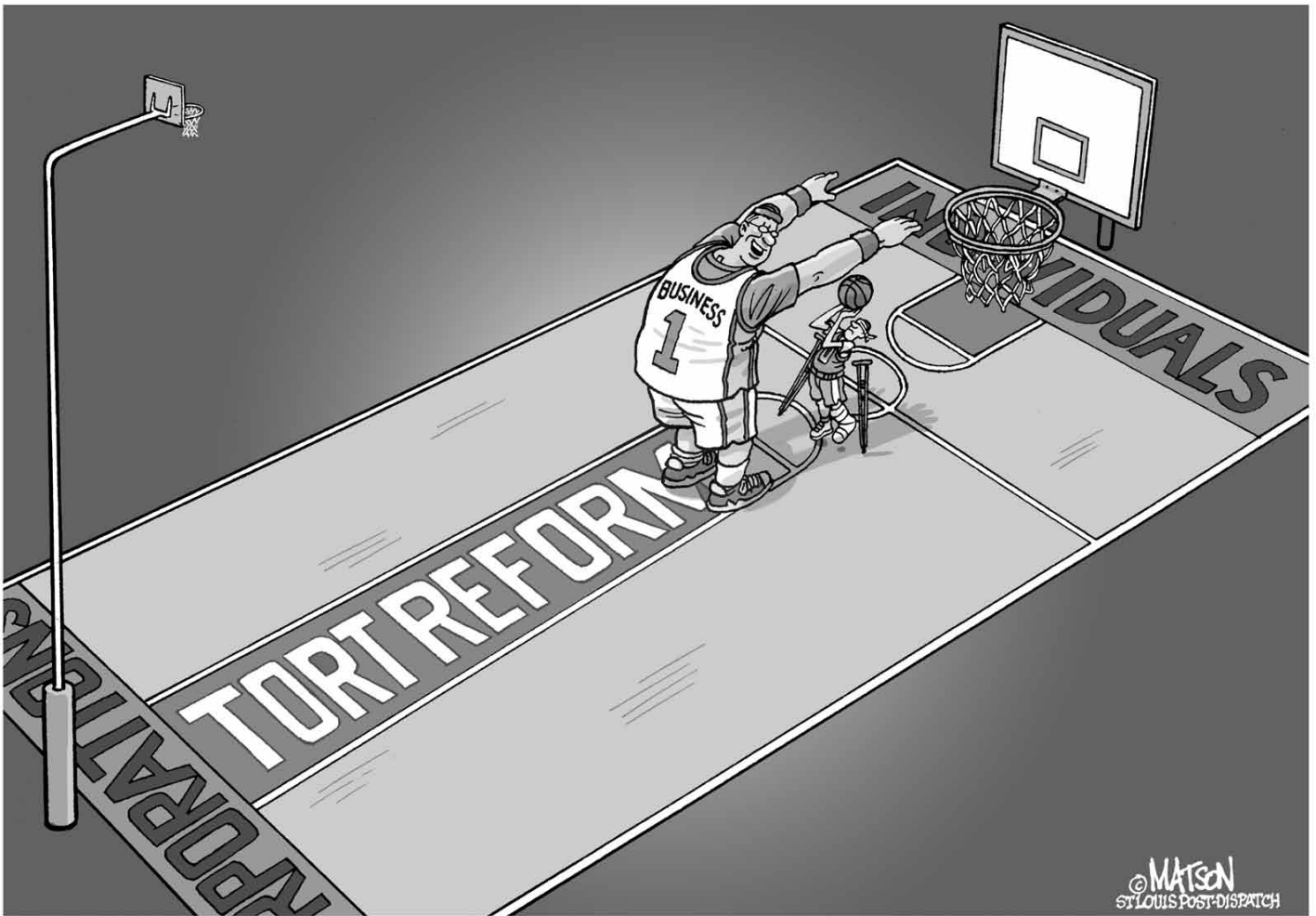
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<http://www.rsof-okc.com>

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"NOW *THIS* IS WHAT I CALL A FAIR COURT SYSTEM!"

How To Stop Getting Ripped Off By Forced Mandatory Arbitration

BY AL FRANKEN

Forced arbitration rigs the game in favor of big corporations and against consumers and employees. And recently, a New York Times investigation has exposed just how prevalent this damaging practice is; indeed, the story almost certainly affects you, personally.

If you've ever opened a credit card, rented a car, or engaged in any number of other routine interactions with big corporations, you've probably had to sign away your right to go to court, or band together in a class action with other customers.

Instead, you have legally [if unwittingly] agreed that, if a dispute occurs, you will seek justice only through a secret, profit-driven arbitration process – one in which no comprehensive records are kept, no meaningful appeals are allowed, and the arbitrator

likely has significant financial incentive to rule in favor of the corporation.

That arbitration clause was likely buried deep in the fine print in a lengthy terms-of-service agreement. Even if you had read [and correctly interpreted] the entire contract, and decided to take your business elsewhere, odds are you would have seen the same clause in every competing company's terms-of-service agreement, too.

Consumers are left with no real recourse: you sign, or you do without a cell phone, or cable TV, or Internet service.

Now, imagine facing the same dilemma when placing a loved one in a nursing home – or even looking for a job. Believe it or not, more than 30 million American workers are bound by forced arbitration

clauses as a condition of their employment.

Make no mistake: These clauses, which are practically impossible to avoid, are designed to make it easier for big corporations to break the law and rip you off without facing any real consequences. It's unbelievably unfair. And it shouldn't be legal.

That's why we have introduced the Arbitration Fairness Act, which has been co-sponsored by 16 Democrats in the Senate and another 74 in the House.

Our legislation doesn't ban arbitration. If both parties want to arbitrate instead of going to court, they can. But you would get to make that decision after a dispute arises.

Corporations wouldn't be able to force you to preemptively waive your right to go to court or pursue a class action – often your only real avenue for holding these giant companies accountable.

Congress isn't the only place where we can level the playing field. In early November, the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau [CFPB] announced it was considering a proposal to ban arbitration clauses that block class action lawsuits in consumer financial contracts.

While we would like to see the CFPB go further and eliminate the use of forced arbitration clauses altogether in consumer financial service contracts, this proposed rule would be a big win for consumers.

Meanwhile, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services [CMS] has proposed reforming its requirements for long-term care facilities like nursing homes, acknowledging the negative impact of these clauses on residents and suggesting some ways to make these clauses more transparent and easier to understand.

That is a start. But forced arbitration clauses have no place in these agreements, and we urge CMS to ban them altogether.

We are hopeful that these processes will result in real progress for consumers. But the law requires that any CFPB proposal must undergo an arduous review before being finalized and implemented, and CMS, which has already received thousands of comments on their relatively modest proposal, will likely engage in a lengthy rulemaking process, as well. And that leaves plenty of room for the Chamber of Commerce and other corporate-backed pressure groups to make their mark.

It's up to ordinary Americans everywhere whose rights are at stake to weigh in, as well.

There's one more arena where this fight will play out: the Supreme Court. After rulings this summer to protect health insurance subsidies and make marriage equality the law of the land, many thought that perhaps concerns about the Roberts court's conservative bent were overblown.

But as the Times revealed, Roberts himself was a driving force behind the creation of the forced arbitration scheme a decade ago. And in a long series of 5-4 decisions, including the two that paved the way for these unbelievably unfair forced arbitration clauses,

he and the other members of the court's conservative majority have systematically slammed shut the courtroom door on millions of Americans.

These cases may not garner the same headlines as those involving public displays of religion or government surveillance, but they affect the rights, and the pocketbooks, of nearly all of us – something to keep in mind when evaluating not just the current Court's record, but also future nominees.

Americans are beginning to understand that the game is rigged. Now we must take action to level the playing field.

Democrat Al Franken represents Minnesota in the U.S. Senate.

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Labor's Fealty To Establishment Democrats Is Killing Unions

BY C. ROBERT GIBSON

Hillary Clinton's recent endorsement from the 2.1 million member Service Employees International Union [SEIU] is another example of union leadership prioritizing political connections in high places over the best interests of its members.

As *In These Times* reported, the SEIU endorsement angered local chapters so much that they're breaking off from the main union and endorsing Bernie Sanders, as they already have in New Hampshire, the first official presidential primary state.

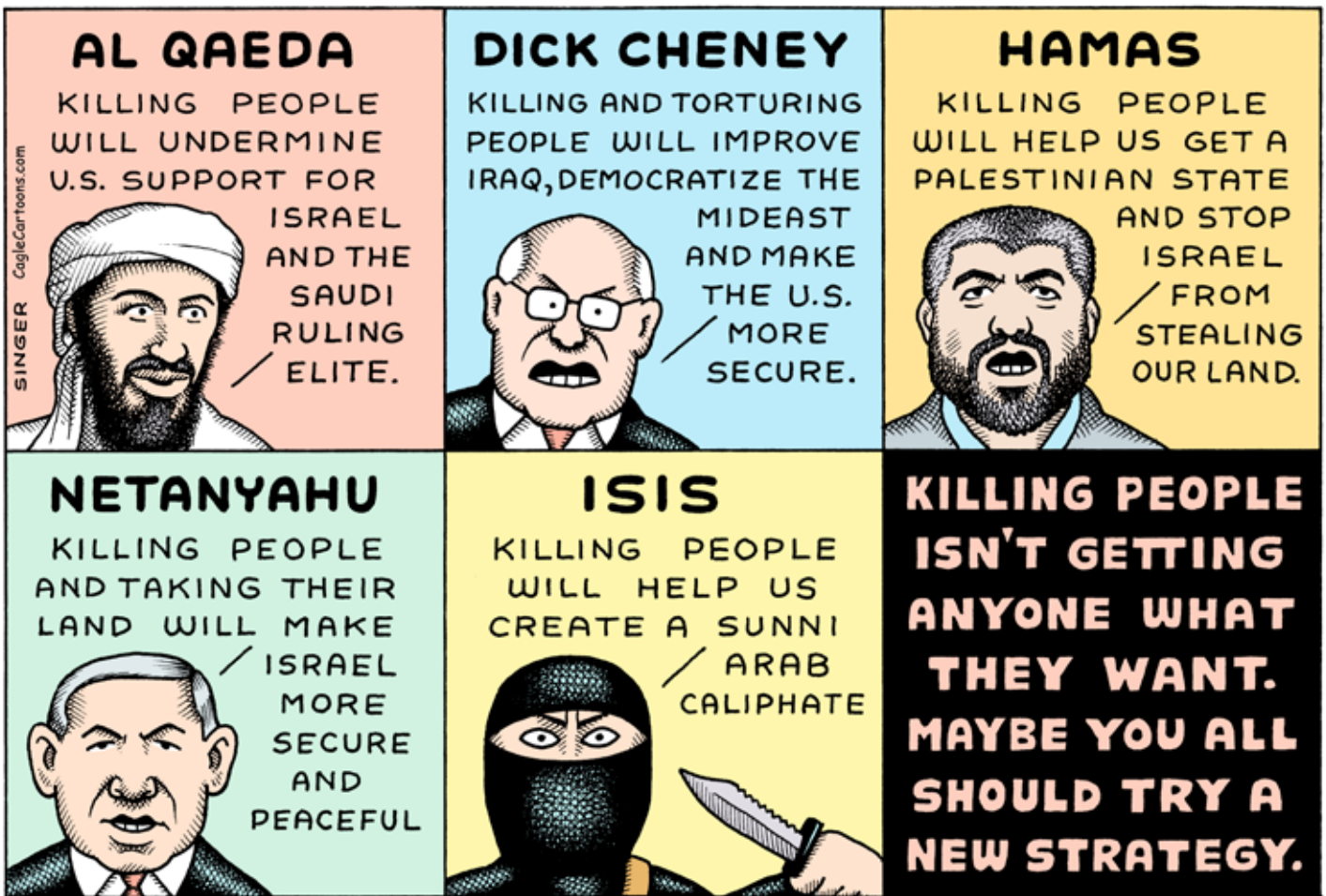
Rank-and-file dues-paying members of the SEIU said the executive board's announcement came too early, and point out that while Clinton's proposal for a \$12 an hour minimum wage flies in the face of the SEIU's own Fight For \$15 campaign.

Both of Clinton's opponents in the Democratic primary, Bernie Sanders and Martin O'Malley, have gotten behind the call for a \$15 an hour minimum wage.

The SEIU's Facebook page was full of angry rants from dues-paying members upset with the endorsement. Daily Kos collected some of the more descriptive posts from the page's wall:

"Please retract the SEIU endorsement for Hillary Clinton. She does NOT represent the average working American. She takes funding from Wall Street PLUS foreign donations as well as contributions

CONTINUED ON PAGE 42



How To Fight ISIS? With Cartoons

BY DARYL CAGLE

Pundits like to complain that there are few voices from the Islamic world that condemn terrorist attacks by Islamic extremists. I run a small business that distributes editorial cartoons from around the world. With every major attack, including the recent attacks in Paris, I see a chorus of cartoons from Arab countries condemning the terror. The pundits must not be looking at the cartoons.

Editorial cartoonists are typically the most influential voices in newspapers throughout the Middle East, reflecting the views of their readers. Newspapers remain important in everyday life in the Middle East. Editorial cartoons grace the front pages throughout the Middle East. Arabic language cartoonists are typically anti-American and anti-Semitic, but on issues of terrorism they are largely voices of reason.

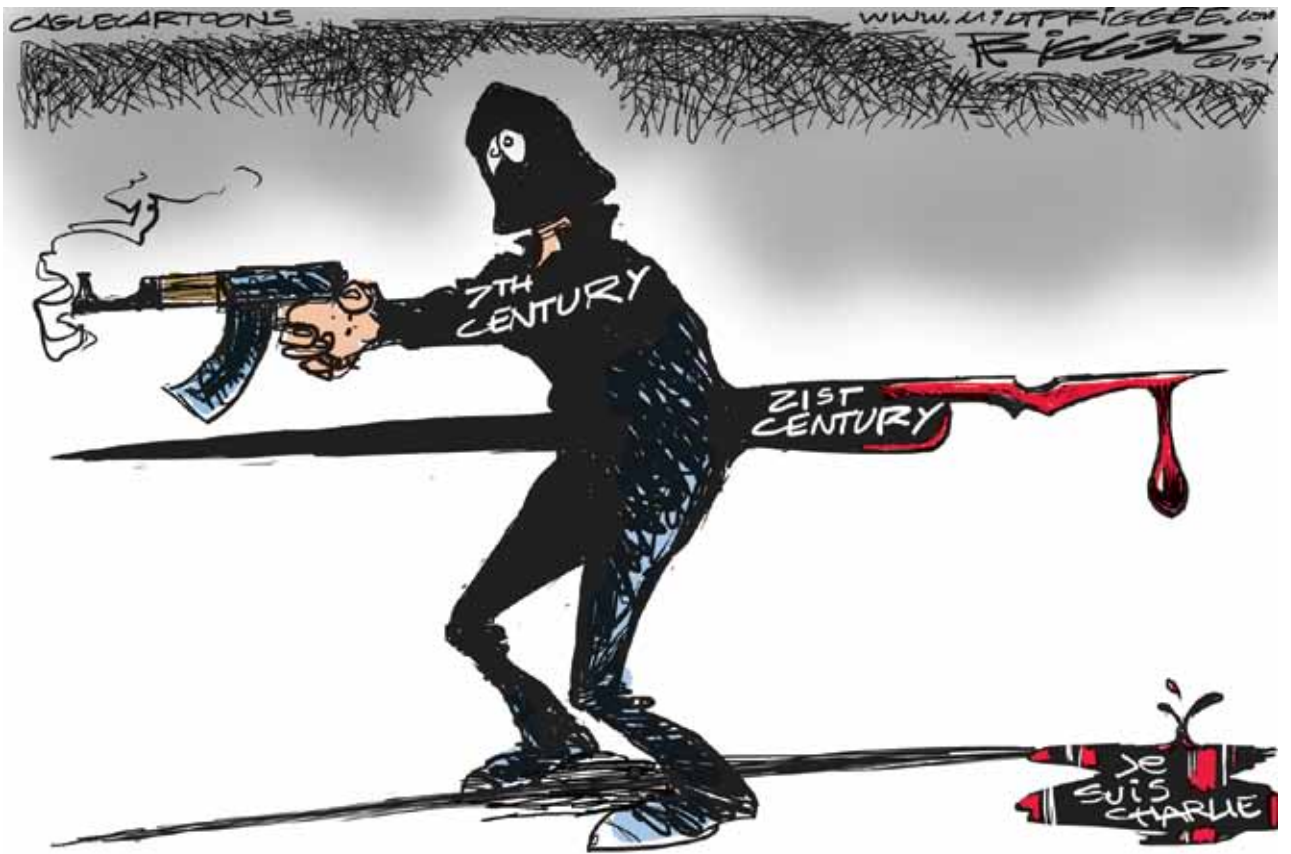
I often hear politicians complain about how the war with Islamic extremists is a battle for hearts and minds and we need to step up our role in an information war that we are losing. Editorial cartoons could be a weapon on the front lines of that battle.

By now Americans should see how powerful cartoons can be; clearly the terrorists see this, as cartoonists are among their primary targets. It is difficult for Americans to comprehend that editorial cartoons are important and effective in the Middle East because we view cartoons as trivial jokes, leading us to miss many opportunities.

Until recently, the U.S. State Department had programs that brought American cartoonists on speaking tours to the Middle East to meet their colleagues, and had reciprocal programs to bring Arabic language editorial cartoonists to America. The programs sought to spread common values to countries where persecuted and influential cartoonists typically are barred from drawing their own presidents.

These effective State Department speaking programs for editorial cartoonists were dropped at the time of the “sequester” budget cuts. USAID supported journalism education initiatives in the Middle East ignore and exclude cartoonists.

As international respect for America has plummeted, respect for many of our institutions still runs



high. American cartoonists are respected around the world, like American jazz musicians and basketball players. Middle Eastern cartoonists are eager to have their work appreciated by American readers and by the star American cartoonists who they respect and emulate. The Arab cartoonists push back against the press restrictions imposed by their regimes and envy America's press freedoms.

Every act of terror brings new recruits to the Islamic extremists in ISIS; they seek glory, selling an image of bravery, striking back against the arrogant infidels in the West. Brandishing a gun demands a kind of respect. Fighting for religious values, no matter how twisted, demands a kind of respect. ISIS craves respect; what they can't bear is ridicule. Islamic extremists who are widely seen as the butts of jokes won't find many eager converts.

Cartoonists are masters of disrespect and are a continuing threat to the Islamic extremists. It is no surprise that editorial cartoonists are prime targets for terror.

Along with other web sites around the world, my

own editorial cartoon Web site, Cagle.com, is suffering hacker attacks that appear to originate with terrorists and despotic regimes who fear cartoons.

Terrorists and despots have a weakness in common; they can't take a joke.

America needs to wake up, deploy and support the world's best soldiers in the modern information war, American cartoonists.

President Obama recently claimed that he is already doing most of the things that his political opponents demand in the war with ISIS; he called on his critics to contribute new and constructive ideas on what should be done. My recommendation is inexpensive and powerful: bring back and greatly expand the State Department's shuttered editorial cartoon programs around the world.

Daryl Cagle is the editorial cartoonist who runs the CagleCartoons.com newspaper syndicate, distributing editorial cartoons to more than 850 newspapers around the world, including The Oklahoma Observer. Comments to Daryl may be sent to editor@cagle.com. Read Daryl's blog at www.darylcagle.com

CALM DOWN!

'We'll Be Fine ... But You Must Vote'

BY VERN TURNER

This sage advice would serve us all well, especially in light of the hysteria occurring around the world and around the country.

The French, remarkably, are "maintaining an even strain" while finally taking pointed action against the forces who use hysteria as a recruiting tool. Good for them. The crazed lunatics who bring mindless killing to the fore of modern society seem to be asking for retribution from the majority of sane people in sane societies led by sane governors.

The mindless Nov. 13 slaughter in Paris must also serve as a reminder of our origins as a stone-age cave dweller where tribalism led the league in intellectual processing. In Rebecca Costa's very interesting book, *The Watchman's Rattle*, she posits that humans have evolved much more quickly socially than biologically.

Groups like ISIS, al-Qaeda and some raving lip-strummers in Iowa seem to corroborate that thesis. The primitive, tribal imperative in all things obviously evolved as a survival mechanism for tribes still needing to hoard and defend food and shelter resources from human and non-human competition. Along the way, somebody invented religion or shaman-ism as power forces to explain the unexplainable to the "masses" and thus control their behavior.

There were certain aspects of this arrangement that were probably valuable to survival, but there also must have been power struggles for the "hearts and

minds" of the masses we still see today.

It is especially upsetting to this writer to see our own political animals denying refuge to those who are being mindlessly killed by mindless wars waged by mindless, hysterical forces who feel that their tribe is the only tribe while all else must die.

Nobody told these deeply disturbed people to calm down. No, they were given or sold guns and tanks and explosives with which to conduct their mayhem and killing.

How does this work? Who, in conscience, sells terrorists weapons in 2015? There are obviously some very bad people out there. By the way, the United States is the world's leader in weapons manufacturing and sales.

One school of thought shows how western petrodollars used by kingdoms and caliphates in the Middle East are funneled to religious schools that are specifically committed to destroying western civilization. Ironic, huh?

Why would those schools be so committed to an entire civilization? The answer most often floated is revenge for the Crusades, the first major religious wars between Christians and Muslims. Much like the American Civil War, animosity was woven into the fabric of the culture that keeps manifesting itself in ugly, violent, hysterical ways. Now, it's because the West is entrenched in the oil business there and sim-

ply can't leave.

Worse, these major religions have sects fighting each other over ideology and who owns the truth. Ironically, there is no hard evidence whatsoever that there is even a truth that exists regarding the manifestation of a deity, or the veracity of the prophets. The conflicts seem to be not so much about justifying religion in general as it is questioning what is its purpose.

So, why the hysteria? Well, when the human mind lacks rational and tangible evidence and proof, it tends to default to emotion, the primitive, life-saving reactions and behavior that most mammals exhibit. Sometimes that tangible evidence evokes emotions, too, but then we say those emotions are justified and behave a lot less irrationally and violently.

Clearly, the group emotion of the United States while fighting fascism in World War II was predicated on forthright attacks on our homeland and well being like Pearl Harbor, 1941.

You may have noticed that our politicians who promote hysteria and emotion are still beating the Sept. 11, 2001 drum whenever they want to secure attention or votes from a particular demographic. There was certainly an emotional gathering after that date, but what we got from our "leadership" at the time was a hysterical response that plunged our fighting men and women into two irresponsible wars in two countries that had no significant military forces that could threaten our shores.

We also got a major tax cut for the richest among us, while we borrowed money to fight the wars. Tax loopholes were expanded, not reduced. The result was a multi-trillion dollar debt. We quickly received the infamous Patriot Act from the fear mongers that suspended the letter of the Fourth Amendment. We invoked our panic by creating the Department of Homeland Security and doubled our military budget. Meanwhile, corporate America was sending millions of jobs to China, Mexico and Indonesia.

These collective behaviors have to be described as hysteria on steroids. Imagine the scenario had the Supreme Court allowed all Florida ballots to be counted in 2000. Imagine the scenario had Al Gore been president, something denied him and us even though he won the popular vote. If there was ever a need to relegate the Electoral College to the ash heap of bad ideas, this should have been it.

We are now in the throes of a presidential campaign that is as hilarious as it is hysterical, especially from the GOP candidates. These people have never met a fear that they wouldn't exploit. Truth is out the window. Rationality and facts are almost entirely absent.

The Republican campaign and the dumb-show debates remain an emotion-based, mud-slinging exercise in nincompoopery that has rational people rolling on the floor with laughter ... or acute indigestion, depending on emotions invoked on their individual psyche.

Blessed be those who can laugh these "candidates"

off. Cheers to those who can dismiss the nonsense with a shrug and return to the fact that actually 75% of the Republican Party is rational and able to think ... even a little.

The bottom feeders like Christy, Santorum, Jindal, Paul, Huckabee and Fiorina who are transparent with their lies, nonsense and fictions, are easily dismissed.

Ted Cruz seems to glory in being the most dangerous and disliked person in Congress, EVER. Yet, he continues to feed the maw of hysteria and nonsense. It's all he's got. Truth and Ted Cruz rarely cross paths.

Trump and Carson must take turns applying clown face makeup to each other. Their bigotry and disrespect for the American people is profound.

The only Republican candidate who exhibits adult behavior and rational thought at the same time is John Kasich. So, naturally, his poll numbers remain in single digits.

The media, bless their ratings-addicted hearts, run around like scalded cats to follow the latest iteration of hysterical nonsense from this collection of exceptionally primitive candidate strategies. It's about selling advertising, after all.

My message to the media is: *calm down*. These guys and lady will do your job for you. Crazy sells in America. Hysteria sells in America. It'll be OK. Relax.

Having said all this, my message to the American voter is: *calm down*. It's OK. We'll be fine, but you must vote. The progressives, black and brown people tend to stay home on Election Day that isn't a Presidential event. *Bad* decision. This allows hysteria to win.

I mean, look at the House of Representatives populated by loonies like the "Freedom" caucus. These people were elected by a voting population of less than 40% of the eligible voters. Look at what Texas elects as governors and its Republican caucuses in Washington and Austin. The Texas governor – who also denies access to Texas for fleeing Syrian refugees – "won" election with a whopping 17% of the eligible electorate. Only 32% of eligible voters showed up. Guess who votes. Yup! Hysteria votes.

The only way around that is for rational and calm voices to vote. Vote like your country depends on it, because it does. If rational people don't vote, we will become like "them" – those led by hysterical demagogues who have no idea about a complicated, peace-loving way of life.

Vote out the warmongers and there likely will be no war. Listen to the experts who KNOW how to dismantle hysterical organizations. They can only be utilized by rational and calm leaders ... like Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton.

Take a deep breath and vote the right way for the United States. Vote.

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

How Investing In Anti-Poverty Programs Pays Future Dividends

OUR KIDS

The American Dream In Crisis

By Robert Putnam

Simon & Schuster

400 pages, \$28

BY JOHN WOOD

In Putnam's book, he explains the problem with upward mobility through the widening gap between rich and poor.

A book any Bernie Sanders fan would certainly love.

Putnam is most famous for his classic *Bowling Alone* [2000] in which he surveyed the weakening of "social capital" in this country since 1950.

Social Capital is the relationship between people with the approach that "if I do this for you," I do so with a confident expectation that someone will likewise do something for me in the future. However, this norm has deteriorated, as evidenced from the decline in active civil engagement required for a vibrant democracy – i.e., voting on all levels, knowing your neighbors, participating in social clubs, and even other activities such as participating in bowling leagues.

Putnam blames pressure on time, disintegration of the family, our focus on the media, especially television, and intergenerational change – all of which have divided us. "Social Capital," Putnam argues, needs to be strengthened to better drive productivity, increase health, and provide for education, safety, and the economy – through reconnection.

Our Kids is based off *Bowling Alone*'s premises, but with a greater emphasis on the differences between upper- and lower- class engagement found both in his interviews and statistical analysis. This is important, Putnam finds, for two reasons.

The first is political voice, where the upper class voices are amplified and the lower classes are muffled. For example, as the upper classes pour more money to political coffers, the lower classes are not voting – exaggerating differences in representation.

As Political Scientist Robert Dahl states: "If you are deprived of an equal voice in the government, the chances are quite high that your interests will not be given the same attention as the interests of those who do have a voice. If you have no voice, who will speak up for you?"

Public officials, Putnam explains, are much more responsive to those with privilege over those who don't. Therefore, there is an "opportunity gap," undermining "political equality and thus democratic legitimacy."

Second, is a much more subtle, yet more of an emphasis in his book and even potentially more disastrous for democracy – that of alienated or estranged citizens.

Putnam argues past scholars have noted such people are only a minimal threat to democratic stability. However, during times of stress – either through international threats or internal economic crisis, not unlike the 1930s – this mass of people could be highly manipulated by "antidemocratic demagogues at the ideological extremes."

Putnam cites *The Politics of Mass Society*, arguing that those in the 1930s who were most susceptible to Nazism in Germany or even McCarthyism here, had the "fewest opportunities to participate in the formal and informal life of the community."

This leads us to *Our Kids*, the disadvantaged children – such as those he devotes short vignettes to in the first half of the book – that provide background for his statement, "to ignore these kids violates our deepest religious and moral values."

He shows how upper- and lower- class kids are treated using scissortail graphs. All of which have the upper-class kids' line moving up progressively while the lower-class kids' stagnate and/or fall back.

For example, when it comes to divorce, upper-class parents are only 10% likely to divorce vs. 70% for lower-class parents. Lower-class parents spend on average only \$700 on extracurricular activities, such as on soccer, camps, and tutoring versus 10 times that for upper-class parents. Also, he found that students with the bottom third of test scores, but from upper-class families, were much more likely to go to college than students who tested in the top third, but were

from lower class families. Putnam wonders how is that even moral? When it is not merit that gives opportunity, but money?

On top of this, there is a “savvy gap” where upper-class families have built up informal networks of people who have achieved and can mentor young children – not the case typically in lower-class families. Putnam says this gap between rich and poor is handed down from generation to generation and such disparity is untenable.

Putnam said that he once visited the White House where he met G.W. and Laura Bush. Putnam was explaining his ideas to G.W., but he seemed to not get it. Laura turned to her husband and explained: “If you don’t know if you can keep your job or house, you have less energy for your kids.” This became the Laura Bush hypothesis because she got it. At least one person in the household did.

What can be done? We need to support contraception access, Putnam said, increase money to head start, preschool and elementary programming, expand earned income credit [EIC], expand the child tax credit, and protect poverty programs, such as food stamps, housing vouchers and child care. Beyond families, we need to reduce nonviolent crime sentencing, increase rehabilitation, more job training, etc.

I think it’s interesting that Putnam gives a pat on the back for Oklahoma’s early childhood education initiative begun in 1998, partly funded by the Kaiser Foundation. Obama recently called this program “The Oklahoma Project,” an investment shown to help in pre-writing, pre-reading, and pre-arithmetic skills. Such an initiative is an investment in your poorest children. Wow, the state of Oklahoma is known for something positive outside of sports?

While Putnam seems to de-emphasize the macro sources of the difference between rich and poor, Bernie Sanders alternatively focuses on the micro-causes – such as greedy bankers, billionaire’s gluttony, and money in politics –

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and solutions to alleviate the difference between rich and poor as well as social mobility.

Not unlike *How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of New York* [1890], a book that shocked the upper classes, filled with photos by Jacob Riis,

documenting squalid living conditions in New York City slums in the 1880s, Putnam brings to life children’s lives, rich and poor, painted with vivid picture with a palate of words, describing their lives in the first half of this book.

While this book is well written,

it is also packed with information to enlighten the reader in understanding not only what poverty looks like but also how it feels.

The book resonated with my past living in childhood poverty. Investment in those who are in poverty can pay dividends in the future. Just ask Lincoln,

J.K. Rowling, Obama, and someone much less successful – me.

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

Earth

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 31

ness of our fundamental unity must form the basis for a new way of relating to the Earth.

Recent discoveries offer a way of overcoming this split way of thinking that has been present for several centuries. Physics demonstrates that nothing exists in isolation. All of matter – from subatomic particles to the galaxies in space – is part of an intricate web

of relationships in a unified whole.

Biology reveals that, in a totally interrelated system, the principle of survival of the fittest has new meaning. The “fittest” is now seen as that species that best contributes to the well being of the whole system. Ecology provides the understanding that all parts of a living system are interconnected and that greater stability results from increased diversity.

These and other “discoveries” reveal a new paradigm and point us in the direction of a new rela-

tionship with the Earth and with one another.

Francis explains, “We lack an awareness of our common origin and our mutual belonging. We can no longer regard nature as something separate from ourselves or as a mere setting in which we live. We are part of nature, included in it and thus in constant interaction with it.”

James L. Stovall, M.Div., is director of the Mediation Institute in Oklahoma City and an ordained United Church of Christ minister.

Unions

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 35

from Private Prison Corporations. So just exactly who does she work for?” wrote Cathy Bosell Hays.

“This is scandalous, shameful, counterintuitive, problematic, defeating, and divisive. Pathetic,” wrote Angel Rodriguez. “SEIU’s biggest national campaign is the Fight for \$15 and a union. Across the country, we are organizing workers to strike and demand a \$15 minimum wage. *Despite this:* Hillary Clinton is on public record as opposing a federal minimum wage of \$15 per hour.”

So if the SEIU’s endorsement wasn’t due to Clinton’s progressive values, why did they endorse her?

Other unions that have endorsed Clinton’s 2016 campaign paint a clearer picture.

The Association of Federal, State, County, and Municipal Employees [AFSCME] also endorsed Clinton earlier. As Huffington Post reported, AFSCME was largely responsible for the rise of Bill Clinton in 1992, and endorsed Clinton in 2007 during her last attempt at the Democratic nomination.

And just as happened with the

SEIU endorsement, AFSCME members revolted at the national leadership’s decision to endorse Clinton, saying an endorsement this early only served to divide members, and that union leadership should instead focus on issues that unite the union’s members.

Clinton’s first union endorsement came from the American Federation of Teachers [AFT], which represents public K-12 teachers as well as college-level instructors.

As with SEIU and AFSCME, AFT members resisted the leadership’s endorsement of Clinton, as it only served to stifle debate that is essential to the Democratic process. A petition circulated by AFT members calling for national leadership to pull back their endorsement of Clinton garnered over 5,500 signatures by late November.

As CounterPunch pointed out, unions steadily have been declining as labor leaders continue to implore members to trust “friendly” parties rather than try to make the unions a political force in and of themselves.

Curiously, over the past 60 years, union membership has declined at the same time as wages have stag-

nated or dropped.

In 2012 research from the Economic Policy Institute’s research found that the share of the workforce that had union representation dropped from 26% to 13% between 1973 and 2011. That time period covers three Democratic and four Republican administrations.

Regardless of the party in power, union membership and wages continued to decline.

The numbers bear out – labor unions’ longtime ties to establishment Democratic politicians hasn’t won them more membership, and hasn’t grown the middle class. On the contrary, both parties have overseen large gains in wealth for the top 1% of Americans, and the simultaneous evaporation of the middle class.

If labor unions really want to hold power again, they should focus instead on pushing members of both parties to support their goals, rather than aligning with politicians to have a seat at the table of power.

The future of organized labor may depend on it.

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Observations

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 2

can purge the Legislature of the far right fools who wouldn't know a good, smart deal if it bit them in the keister.

State Secrets

The Observer recently joined forces with the American Civil Liberties Union of Oklahoma and a nursing home watchdog in a lawsuit demanding Gov. Mary Fallin comply with the state's Open Records Act.

The ACLU filed the suit in Oklahoma County District Court nearly 1½ years after The Observer and A Perfect Cause first requested Fallin Administration documents – which they still haven't received.

On July 15, 2014, The Observer requested all records and communications “from or to” Fallin's office regarding the executions of Garry Thomas Allen on Nov. 6, 2012 and Brian Darrell Davis on June 25, 2013. The state Pardon and Parole Board had recommended clemency for both – a rarity for death row inmates – but the governor rejected the calls for leniency.

In October, Fallin's office sent The Observer four CDs loaded with what it said were 41,697 pages of “non-privileged and privileged documents responsive to your open records request regarding any executions that occurred or were scheduled in 2014.”

The CDs amounted to nothing but a document dump. None addressed the Allen or Davis cases. This, after waiting nearly 17 months for the governor's office to provide what are clearly open records under the law.

In response to The Observer's suit, Fallin's then-spokesman, Alex Weintz, repeatedly emphasized that the governor's office had released 357,000 pages of documents since 2012 – asserting the administration is arguably most responsive in state history.

Baloney. Fallin's office provided the same CDs to the Oklahoma ACLU that it provided The Observer.

This is the transparency the ACLU discovered: *The first 677 pages of the governor's document release contains duplicated copies of Oklahoma Policy Institute newsletters, page after page of Google Alerts, media alerts from Oklahoma City television station KFOR, clippings from the Republican Governor's Association and political clippings from Politico, a Washington, DC-based newsletter.*

Fallin's administration actually is among most secretive in state history.

To take nearly 17 months to respond to The Observer's request, then deliver documents that had nothing to do with it, suggests either incompetence

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or indifference ... which translates into contempt for the law and Oklahoma taxpayers.

The fact is, government wields no greater power than imposing the death penalty. Oklahomans have a right to know what went into the governor's decisions to reject the Pardon and Parole Board's clemency recommendations.

It shouldn't require a lawsuit to find out.

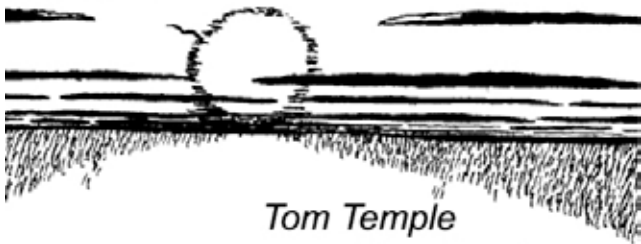
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Observerscope



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

American Exceptionalism? The U.S. now has roughly the same number of people with criminal records as four-year college degrees. – Brennan Center for Justice

Dart: To Gov. Mary Fallin, intervening in a State Board of Medical Licensure investigation of a Tulsa surgeon – at the behest of ex-Texas Gov. Rick “Oops” Perry. The surgeon, one of Perry’s donors, kept his license.

Former journalist and political aide Mike Carrier is new director of communications and outreach at OU’s Political Communication Center. He replaces the late Leroy Bridges.

Laurel: To Sue Ann Arnall, giving \$4.8 million to the state Department of Human Services to help young men and women aging out of the state’s foster care system. Arnall is billionaire Harold Hamm’s ex.

Nineteen House members and 11 senators are term-limited next year. Republicans remain smug they won’t lose any seats, despite driving the state into a financial abyss.

Dart: To Tulsa Mayor Dewey Bartlett, urging America slam its doors on Syrian refugees after the Paris terrorist attack. How about quarantining Bartlett’s brain instead?

The Oklahoman’s 2016 propaganda machine already operates full throttle, nearly two full “news” pages squandered on an amateurish screed, “Is there a Democratic war on youth?” It was the work of the far right Washington Examiner, a freebie publication with less credibility than the National Enquirer.

Laurel: To Oklahoma Southern Baptists, figuring out – finally – that pro-life also includes after a child is born. SBC is launching a campaign to help care for 10,000 children in state custody.

Good news: Tea Party U.S. Rep. Jim Bridenstine, R-Tulsa, intends to keep his pledge to serve only three terms. Bad news: He’s likely to run for something else.



Letters



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 4

column in her final paragraph, questioning whether misplaced legislative priorities contribute to a dearth of mental health treatment options.

Editor, The Observer:

Oklahoma's prison system is fraught with problems – crowding, substance abuse, idleness, mental health, medical costs for geriatrics, and officer staffing problems. Incarcerated Oklahomans need programs to deal with substance abuse, sex offender treatment, education and vocational training, and re-entry if the cycle of dependency and crime is ever to stop.

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy recently participated in a public conversation with Harvard Law School Dean Martha Minow, which was reported in the Oct. 22 edition of the Harvard Gazette. In that discussion, he identified the three prison scourges: long sentences, solitary confinement, and overcrowding. "It's an ongoing injustice of great proportions," he said.

Kennedy's view is that solitary confinement "drives men mad," that mandatory minimum sentences are "terrible" and that sentences in the United States are eight times longer than sentences in some European countries for equivalent crimes. He lamented the fact that nobody pays attention to these wrongs, not even lawyers. "It's everybody's job to look into it."

In case someone believes Kennedy is a liberal, he was nominated by Ronald Reagan, and the U.S. Senate confirmed him on Feb. 3, 1988 by a vote of 97-0. When his nomination was voted upon, Kennedy received bipartisan support. Maureen Hoch of PBS has written that he "virtually sailed through the confirmation process and was widely viewed by conservatives and liberals alike as balanced and fair."

No one makes a single decision that leads to prison; it is a series of little decisions. Why are Oklahoma's politicians so afraid of doing the right thing for the right reasons? Why is it so hard for first-time offenders to get a second chance.

Jonathan Staines
Lexington

Editor's Note: Jonathan Staines is an inmate at the Joseph Harp Correctional Center.

Editor, The Observer:

It appears that this movement to force vaccinations

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on all the children of Oklahoma is heating up. I don't understand why those pro-vaccination folks who vaccinate their children are so concerned about having unvaccinated children around their vaccinated children.

That leads me to believe that they are acknowledging that vaccinations don't work because if vaccinations do work, then how could an unvaccinated child be a threat to those who are vaccinated? The state of Oklahoma needs to keep its nose out of forcing parents to vaccinate. And if the state does force vaccinations then the state needs to accept *all* responsibility for any harm present and future.

Jim Maxey, DDS
Tulsa

Editor, The Observer:

Just because you're opposed to abortion doesn't make you "pro-life." Your morality could be deeply lacking if all you want is a child born but not a child fed, not a child educated, not a child housed.

Why would I think that you might not? Because you don't want any tax money to go there. That's not pro-life, it's just "pro-birth."

We need a much broader conversation on what the morality of pro-life is.

Frank Silovsky
Oklahoma City

Editor, The Observer:

Blood from the Paris slaughter is on the hands of Barack Obama.

And, like Lady Macbeth, no matter how often he washes his hands, the president can never get it off.

His endless wars in the Middle East are the cause of the murders of 129 innocent people.

One terrorist shouted, "This is for Syria."

Former Ohio Congressman Dennis Kucinich, an opponent of the Iraq War, warned that this would happen when he said, "America cannot put its foot on the accelerator of war and advocate peace.

"Freedom bids us to free ourselves from the shack-

les of violence."

My state of Oklahoma is guilty of promoting war by making 50,000 bombs a year at our Army munitions plant in McAlester.

It's time to stop making bombs because after one of our Iraq air raids that killed innocent people a survivor said, "We will take revenge on you if it takes nine generations."

Violence begets violence.

Virginia Bluejeans Jenner
Wagoner

Editor, The Observer:

It is so refreshing to receive your paper each month. The Daily Oklahoman is such a disappointment.

We enjoy many of your regular contributors but especially like Cal Hobson's articles – such a smart man and excellent public servant. Thank you for having him.

We look forward to The Observer to keep informed about what is really happening.

Betty Carson
Yukon

Editor, The Observer:

The Sooner-born Kristin Chenoweth was featured in the Oklahoman's "Healthy Life" section, Nov. 24, for her appearance at a local breast cancer awareness and funding event. She is an angel as well as a superstar.

In 2005, however, organizers of the Oklahoma Women of Faith Conference disinvited Chenoweth from performing for them at the last minute because they learned that she was an advocate of LGBT rights.

Chenoweth would not budge from her position. "I read my Bible and I pray and all of that. I really do," she told one publication. "But at the same time, I don't think being gay is a sin. Period."

She asked, "What would I do if it was a sin to be short? I'm 4-feet, 11-inches, and that's the way God made me, so what could I do? That's what I believe about homosexuals."

So, listen carefully, all remaining anti-gay religious zealots: You can be as deeply religious as Kristin Chenoweth and believe in universal human and civil rights for LGBT people.

For purely rational humanists the conclusion of professional health organizations is persuasive: Sexual orientation – whether gay or straight – has been officially declared a normal human characteristic by the American Medical Association, Psychiatric Association, Psychological Association, and National Association of Social Workers.

Someone tell Rev. Paul Blair of Fairview Baptist Church in Edmond: "There is still time, brother. You can repent your sins and be forgiven."

Nathaniel Batchelder
Oklahoma City

Editor's Note: Nathaniel Batchelder is director of the Peace House in Oklahoma City.



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