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OPINION | OTHER THOUGHTS **Court Decision And Changing Times**

CHICAGO TRIBUNE (June 26): In the summer of 1964, Ku Klux Klan members murdered three men who were working to register African-American voters in Mississippi. A year later, on what came to be known as "Bloody Sunday," police in Selma, Ala., beat and tear gassed hundreds of marchers demanding voting rights for African-Americans

In 1965, Congress passed the Voting Rights Act to attack the outrageous ways in which white officials in the South stifled black voter registration

That same year, only 6.7 percent of registered voters in Mississippi were black, according to census data. Last year, black voter registration reached 90 percent, exceeding white registration in Mississippi. Today, Selma has a black mayor and so does Philadelphia, Miss., long haunted by the infamous murders of those three civil rights workers during "Freedom Summer."

Times have changed for the better.

On Tuesday, in a 5-4 vote, the U.S. Supreme Court acknowledged that change by lifting decades of federal voting rights oversight on nine states, mostly in the South.

At issue was a part of the law that required those states to receive Justice Department approval before they impose any changes that could affect voting, such as polling place hours or voter identification requirements. Such "preclearance" was mandated in 1965 because in so much of the South, white officials relentlessly used every possible means to disenfranchise African-American voters.

President Barack Obama said he was "deeply disappointed" by the ruling. U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder said it "represents a serious setback for voting rights — and has the potential to negatively affect millions of Americans across the country." Those sentiments were reflected in many other quarters. ..

Are voters in those states in immediate peril of being disenfranchised? In recent years, the Justice Department has rarely rejected a change in law or regulation submitted under the preclearance rule.

With this Supreme Court ruling, the Justice Department and the courts may still respond to attempts to disenfranchise minority voters

wherever and whenever they occur. And they have been doing so. ... The federal oversight of the nine states was never intended to be eternal. It was supposed to right a wrong, to help secure voting rights

for minorities. If Congress detects that there is a pattern of disenfranchisement, it holds the option of creating a new set of rules for particular states. The high court did not argue that voter disenfranchisement has

been eradicated across the land. It did find that the Voting Rights Act must reflect the United States of 2013.

ON THIS DATE

By The Associated Press Today is Thursday, June 27, the 178th day of 2013. There are 187 days left in the ye

Today's Highlight in History: On June 27, 1963, President John F. Kennedy spent the first full day of a visit to Ireland, the land of his ancestors, stopping by the County Wexford home of his great-grandfather, Patrick Kennedy, who'd emigrated to America in 1848.

On this date: In 1787, English historian Edward Gibbon completed work on his six-volume work, "The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire." In 1844, Mormon leader Joseph

Smith and his brother, Hyrum, were killed by a mob in Carthage, Ill. In 1846, New York and Boston

were linked by telegraph wires.

of Clarence Thomas to succeed him.) Ten years ago: More than 735,000 phone numbers were registered on the first day of a national donot-call list aimed at blocking unwelcome solicitations from telemar-

Five years ago: North Korea de-stroyed the most visible symbol of its nuclear weapons program, the cooling tower at its main atomic reactor at Yongbyon. (However, North Korea announced in September 2008 that it was restoring its nuclear facilities.) In Zimbabwe, roaming bands of government supporters heckled, harassed or threatened people into voting in a runoff election in which President Robert Mugabe was the only candidate.

One year ago: Britain's Queen Elizabeth II and former Irish Republi-



LET FREEDOM RING

Everybody's A Comedian

BY KATHI FEN PARKER

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WASHINGTON - When it comes to knockknock jokes, it helps to be 5 years old: You can slap your head, roll your eyes, and run outside and play.

In a courtroom where the defendant is charged with second-degree murder, a knock-knock joke has all the appeal of a bar of soap on the shower floor.

It is difficult to imagine how Don West, defense attorney in the trial of George Zimmerman, the man accused of killing 17-year-old Trayvon Martin, worked through the thought process that led him to slap his own forehead and say to himself:

'Yes! A knock-knock joke is just the way to begin my argument. No, wait, wait! Even better and ridicule the people who will decide the fate of my client! 'Colbert Report,' here I come!"

Thus, when Zimmerman's trial began Monday - in a courtroom where the parents of the victim were present — he offered a little joke:

"Knock-knock. Who's there? George Zimmer man. George Zimmerman who? All right. Good. You're on the jury.

No one cued the laugh track. Lightning is funnier.

West's opening-day thud may have seemed amusing over coffee in his own kitchen, but even he knew it was inappropriate. We know because he said so in a lengthy, disclaiming preamble that would have killed even a funny joke. Before launching into The Joke, he warned jurors that they might not think it's funny under the circumstances. He even asked forgiveness in advance just in case they found the joke inappropriate (his word) and to hold it against him, not his client

At this point in a comedy club, never mind a courtroom, anyone listening would be squirming in vicarious embarrassment for what was to come and was surely going to be a very bad/un-funny/inappropriate joke. Why tell it?

Because everyone is a comedian these days. Or at least everyone wants to be. Comedy, rather than providing relief from our too-serious times, has become the currency of choice. Indeed, as more and more people turn to "Comedy Central"

hosts in 2004 that their left-right political slugfest was bad for America (and then-CNN president Jon Klein soon after killed the show), the power of the comedian has surged past the serious commentators.

Who wants to be the straight man when the funny guys get all the girls?

Not that comedy isn't commentary. But time and place are as important as the punch line. When a comedian is funny, we never forget that he is primarily a comedian. When a defense attorney plays a comedian at a murder trial, our sense of verisimilitude is thrown off kilter. Wrong character, wrong scene, wrong everything — especially the audience, which included the parents of the victim and the people whose sympathies West was trying to enjoin.

After much criticism, West sort of apologized for his lapse in judgment. He was sorry if anyone was offended, but he still thought it was funny.

Humor has a role in public life, obviously, and comedians make valuable contributions to our

understanding by casting a light on our hypocrisies and self-righteousness. Nothing quite delivers a memento mori like a well-placed barb. But that barb best be sharp, and it better be well-placed. West's joke fell flat because it was neither.

Some variation of the knock-knock joke seems to be as old as recorded humor, but it is humor in amoebic form - single-celled and juvenile. West's joke didn't even do what a knockknock joke is supposed to do, which is to make a pun

Not punny? Not knock-knock.

The only imaginable use for humor in a murder trial — and this is a stretch — would be spontaneous and self-deprecating, which rarely goes wrong. Insulting one's potential allies, on the other hand, is an unforced error of conceivably catastrophic consequence. It's bad enough to be the butt of a joke, but a joke that's not funnv?

The poor jurors in Zimmerman's trial were told more or less that they're so uninformed that they just might be stupid enough to buy the rest of his defense. Let's hope West has better material in his briefcase or Zimmerman, should he be



PARKER

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In 1893, the New York stock market crashed

In 1922, the first Newberry Medal, recognizing excellence in children's literature, was awarded in Detroit to he Story of Mankind" by Hendrik Willem van Loon. In 1942, the FBI announced the

arrests of eight Nazi saboteurs put ashore in Florida and Long Island, N.Y. (All were tried and sentenced to death; six were executed while two were spared for turning themselves in and cooperating with U.S. authorities.)

In 1944, during World War II American forces liberated the French port of Cherbourg from the Germans. In 1950, the U.N. Security Council

passed a resolution calling on mem-ber nations to help South Korea repel an invasion from the North. In 1957, more than 500 people

were killed when Hurricane Audrey slammed through coastal Louisiana and Texas.

In 1977, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down state laws and bar association rules that prohibited lawyers from advertising their fees for routine

In 1988, at least 56 people were killed when a commuter train ran into a stationary train at the Gare de Lyon

terminal in Paris. In 1991, Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, the first black jurist to sit on the nation's highest court, announced his retirement. (His departure led to the contentious nomination

FROM THE BIBLE

Portals of Prayer, Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis

Meet Went Swimmingly Yankton Swim Team Board of Directors and Coaching Staff

Over the weekend, Yankton Swim Team and Vermillion Area Swim Teams hosted almost 200 swimmers and their families for the 50th annual Charity Invitational Swim Meet. It was a wonderful weekend of fun and competition. It all came together through the generous efforts of the many volunteers and businesses that support our local swim clubs.

We would like to thank the following businesses for their support - Yankton Chamber of Commerce, Chesterman's, HyVee, Roy Wilcox — State Farm Insurance, Subway, King Buffet, Avera Sacred Heart Hospital, First National Bank, Dakota Business Group, Lewis and Clark Specialty Hospital, Mount Marty College, Paul's Kwik Stop, ShurČo, WalMart, Pizza Hut, Cimpl's, Days Inn, Yesterday's

can Armv commander Martin McGuinness offered each other the hand of peace during a private meeting inside Belfast's riverside Lvric Theatre. A 22-year-old former Texas Tech University student from Saudi Arabia, Khalid Ali-M Aldawsari, was convicted in Amarillo of attempting to use a weapon of mass destruction. (He later received life in prison.)

Today's Birthdays: Business executive Ross Perot is 83. Former Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt is 75. Singer-musician Bruce Johnston (The Beach Boys) is 71. Fashion designer Vera Wang is 64. Actress Julia Duffy is 62. Actress Isabelle Adjani is 58 Country singer Lorrie Morgan is 54. Actor Brian Drillinger is 53. Writer-pro-ducer-director J.J. Abrams is 47. Sen. Kelly Ayotte, R-N.H., is 45. Olympic gold and bronze medal figure skater gold and bronze medal tigure skater Viktor Petrenko is 44. TV personality Jo Frost (TV: "Supernanny") is 43. Actor Yancey Arias is 42. Actor Chris-tian Kane is 39. Actor Tobey Maguire is 38. Gospel singer Leigh Nash is 37 Reality TV star Khloe Kardashian is 29. Actor Drake Bell is 27. Actor Ed Westwick is 26. Actress Madylin Sweeten is 22. Actor Chandler Riggs is 14.

Thought for Today: "A man, after he has brushed off the dust and chips of his life, will have left only the hard, clean question: Was it good or was it evil? Have I done well — or ill?" — John Steinbeck, American author (1902-1968).

Only say the word, and my servant will be healed. Matthew 8:8.

YOUR LETTERS

Café, The Wooden Spoon, Minerva's, Roger's Pharmacy, KFC/Taco Bell, Dairy Dock, Slumberland, Pizza Ranch, Clark's Rentals, Quiznos, Leader Concrete, Cork N Bottle, Yankton Surgical Associates, Dairy Queen, Koepetsky's Ace Hardware, Kolberg Pioneer Inc. and Walgreens. Thanks also to Matt Ahlers and Chad Ekroth for their donations to YST. And a big Thanks to Jim Snook and the City of Yankton, Parks and Recreation crew for moving picnic tables and bleachers for the meet!

Special Thanks to Duke Ellingson and Mike Campbell for their many years of dedication to YST in helping to officiate our swim meets. Also, a special thank you to the Kanago family — who each year donates to YST in memory of their son Tim who swam with the team. You are special people.

Thank you to our friends in Vermillion with VAST — couldn't have done it without you!

for news, comedians have become among the most influential arbiters of current events.

Not, as funnyman Dave Barry would say, that there's anything wrong with that.

Ever since Jon Stewart told CNN's "Crossfire"

cteu, may grounds for appear His lawyer couldn't tell a joke.

Kathleen Parker's email address is kathleenparker@washpost.com.

Congress Can Now Create A **Better Farm/Ecology Balance**

BY WILLIAM MCKENZIE

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Let's rejoice that the House killed its version of the five-year farm bill last week.

The death came for numerous reasons, including differences over the food stamp program. What's important in this news is that now Congress has a chance to reconsider policies that reward agricultural production and ecological stewardship.

This is a management problem hardly peculiar to Texas, the second-largest agricultural state. The Environmental Working Group reported in May that all seven states that use the High Plains Aquifer have seen their water table fall by more than 150 feet in some areas.

The water source runs from the Texas Panhandle up to South Dakota. In other words, it runs underneath America's breadbasket.

Farmers and ranchers rely heavily on that aquifer. The report claimed 99 percent of its water is used for agricultural purposes.

Of course, some farmers and ranchers already give careful thought to the stewardshipproduction balance. You see creative irrigation practices on the High Plains of Texas and elsewhere. You find managers of groundwater districts trying to keep aquifers from being overproduced. And you see operators such as Nathan Kells, who the New York Times recently reported has shifted to raising dairy cows on his Kansas farm.

But not all producers find the balance. Otherwise, we wouldn't see aquifers being challenged so severely.

Janie Hopkins studies water supplies in Texas' major aquifers. She and other geoscientists at the state's water agency install and track wells that let them record how much water these underground sources contain.

Lately, the situation has been anything but pretty. In March, Hopkins and her Texas Water Development Board crew reported the median water level decline from 2010-2011 was nearly three times greater than the decline in major aquifer levels from 2009 to 2010.

This is more than a data point to farmers and ranchers in the Panhandle, Central Texas and other regions where groundwater is king. Without sufficient water supplies, they can't grow their crops or raise their livestock.

Naturally, agricultural producers can't make it rain. But they can control how they farm and ranch. That affects how long the aquifers that run underneath their fields and pastures last.

If they practice innovative irrigation techniques or grow grasses and crops that demand less water, they can give an aquifer more time to replenish. At the least, they can stretch out the lifetime of the reserves.

Congress can help make that happen by beefing up parts of the bill that reward land conservation. The Senate cut conservation spending by \$3.5 billion. The House tried to reduce it by \$4.8 billion. That money means less money for programs that reward ranchers and farmers for protecting the soil, water and air.

For example, Congress has previously invested in the Conservation Stewardship Program, the Agricultural Water Enhancement Program and the Wetlands Reserve Program. Although the need for those programs remains, the bills are affecting them and other programs. Ag Week reported this month that 1.3 million acres of U.S. wetlands have been lost since 2006.

Fortunately, there's a way to finance more conservation spending.

Congress could reduce Washington's share of the premiums farmers pay for crop insurance, which protects them against the weather and price fluctuations. The government funds an average 62 percent of a farmer's insurance payment, regardless of the person's financial condition.

Two Wisconsin legislators — Democratic Rep. Ron Kind and GOP Rep. Tom Petri — introduced an amendment to the House bill that would have limited Washington's underwriting of crop insurance premiums to \$40,000 per farmer. The pair also wanted to curtail premium assistance to farmers making over \$250,000 annually in net profit.

Their proposal went down. But, interestingly, they gained more votes than the entire farm bill did in the House. The result suggests an appetite, if you will, for reforming crop insurance payments.

Another way to improve conservation is to require farmers to practice conservation practices in return for crop insurance payments. The Senate made the link, but the House did not. The lower chamber should do so with its second chance to rewrite the farm bill.

Those wells Hopkins and her team are monitoring won't show improvement overnight. Droughts are a reality for the time being. But better farm and ranch practices can yield crops, produce livestock and save lands.

William McKenzie is an editorial columnist for The Dallas Morning News. Readers may write to him at the Dallas Morning News, Communications Center, Dallas, Texas 75265; email: wmckenzie@dallasnews.com/.