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OPINION | OTHER THOUGHTS

Government Websites Not User Friendly

RAPID CITY JOURNAL (Nov. 16): If open government was graded on a curve, South Dakota would fail. According to Sunshine Review, a nonprofit group that analyzes state and local governments for their transparency, South Dakota ranks 43rd among the 45 states that it studied.

For its latest transparency checklist, Sunshine Review looked at government websites and graded them for the content available to the public. South Dakota's state website earned a "B-" grade, but most of the websites for the state's largest cities, counties and school districts received "D" grades or worse.

"Only two states, Nebraska and West Virginia, achieved a lower transparency rating than South Dakota. The state website as well as many of their city and county websites fall well short of the transparency every taxpayer in South Dakota deserves," said Sunshine Review's President Michael Barnhart.

Rapid City's website received a "B" grade, earning good marks for access to budgets; meeting schedules, agendas, minutes and video; contact information for elected officials and administrative heads; information on building permits and zoning; audits; bids; information on property taxes and sales taxes; and lobbying information. The city received bad marks for not posting contracts or providing information on making a public records request.

Pennington County received a grade of "D-" and was faulted for not archiving budgets and meeting agendas; not providing contact information for elected officials; not posting audits, vendor contracts and lobbying information; and not identifying a public records custodian.

Rapid City Area Schools also received a "D-" grade and got bad marks for nonworking website links; no archived budgets, audits and contracts; no information on public records requests; no tax information; academic performance not noted; and no information on background checks.

Despite the state website's passing grade, Sunshine Review noted that it failed to make public information on taxpayer-funded lobbying, budgets and how to request public records.

In fact, failure to provide information on how to ask for public records is a common problem with state and local government websites in South Dakota. Unfortunately, finding out how to request public records is only half the battle. Too often, government agencies simply refuse to release records that the public has a right to see.

The state's Open Government Task Force will be submitting legislation during the 2013 Legislature aimed at improving access to information and to make more government documents available to the public. We don't believe the task force's recommendations go far enough, but it's a move in the right direction.

The state's poor showing in Sunshine Review's transparency analysis is something that South Dakotans are familiar with but should not have to accept. The report shows that state and local governments still have a long way to go to make it easier for citizens to get the information that they have a right to know.

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Crushing Ambition?

BY BILL O'REILLY
Creators Syndicate

The left-wing media went wild after the election when analysis showed that many poorer Americans supported President Obama and entitlements could have been a major reason why. Liberals always like to think of themselves as noble, and the thought that some vote-buying could have occurred is deeply offensive to them. Nevertheless, the facts speak for themselves.

Americans earning less than \$30,000 a year gave the president about 7 million more votes than Gov. Romney. All told, Obama defeated Romney by 3.5 million votes. The math is clear.

But what about motivation? How can you assign entitlements as a voting factor? Well, what else is there?

Were lower-income Americans voting to support the \$16 trillion dollar debt? The 8 percent unemployment rate? The nearly \$5,000-a-year decline in wages for working people?

No, many lower-income voters were supporting the expansion of means-tested entitlements like food stamps, Medicaid and welfare payments, along with Obamacare, where about 30 million Americans will have their health insurance paid for by other Americans.

When you have individuals in more than 100 million American households receiving some kind of federal subsidy outside of Medicare and Social Security, that will mean something at the ballot box.

Especially because Mitt Romney proposed to change all that.

But why is doling out so-called "means-tested entitlements" a bad thing? Isn't it a sign of a humane society?

Financial safety nets are surely worthy. We can't let the elderly and children suffer because they don't

have resources. But what's happening in America is far more than simply expanding a needed safety net.

Twenty years ago, the feds spent 9 percent of the total budget on entitlements other than Medicare and Social Security. Now, the number is 16 percent. Liberals scream that it's because of the bad economy. Not true.

Twenty years ago, unemployment among African-Americans was 14.3 percent. This year, it is 14.3 percent. In the Hispanic-American precincts, unemployment in 1992 was 11 percent; today, it's 10 percent.

It is the liberal culture that is driving the entitlement mentality, and that is destructive to the country. The truth is that folks who get stuff are not likely to be as motivated as people who work for things. Freebies sap initiative.

We are living in a "Where's mine?" age. "If at first you don't succeed, then ask for things to be given to you." A record amount of Americans are receiving food stamps, and more workers are on federal disability than ever before. The Democrat Party actively supports the entitlement expansion, and that absolutely helped Barack Obama get re-elected earlier this month.

If we continue down this road, however, say hello to Emperor Nero. Same thing happened in Ancient Rome. Look it up. The population became weak and unmotivated, and Roman power collapsed as individual ambition was crushed by selfishness and dependence on the state.

The question used to be, "Who's your daddy?" Now, it's, "Who's your nanny?" And we all know the answer.

Veteran TV news anchor Bill O'Reilly is host of the Fox News show "The O'Reilly Factor" and author of the book "Pinheads and Patriots: Where You Stand in the Age of Obama."



Bill O'REILLY

Don't Lower The Educational Bar

BY LEONARD PITTS JR.
Tribune Media Services

I take this one personally. Let me tell you why.

As I recall, I scored 960 on my SAT. This was good enough for second best in my class and many congratulations and backslaps from teachers and administrators. Based on that, I thought I'd done pretty well.

So I'm in college, right? Freshman year, and I get to talking with my roommate, this white guy named Reed, about our SAT scores. Reed's kind of sheepish, finally confessing that he scored "only" about 1200.

That's when I realized I had not done pretty well. I had done pretty well for a student of John C. Fremont High, in the poverty, crime and grime of South Los Angeles. I had done pretty well for a black kid.

As it happens, I started classes at the University of Southern California at 15 years of age, got good grades and came out four years later with my degree. So there was nothing wrong with my brain. I've always suspected my modest SAT score and the fact that I was encouraged to celebrate it said less about me than about the expectations others had of me — and kids like me.

So yes, it touches me in a raw spot, this news that two states — Florida and Virginia — have adopted new education standards under which they would set different goals for students, based on race, ethnicity and disability.

Like many other states, Florida and Virginia requested waivers from the No Child Left Behind Act's unrealistic goal of having every child at grade level in reading and math by 2014. But these states used their waivers to create separate and unequal performance standards for their black, white, Hispanic, Asian and disabled children.

Last month, for example, Florida set a goal of having 86 percent of white kids at or above grade level in math by 2018. For black kids, the goal is 74 percent. Virginia is wrestling with similar standards.

In fairness, both states would want you to know a couple of things. First, that these dissimilar standards reflect the achievement gap, the fact that kids do not start toward the goal from the same place. Black kids

may have to cover more ground to reach a lower benchmark because they are starting from further behind. The second thing is that these are interim goals and the ultimate goal remains the same: close the achievement gap and educate every child to her fullest potential.

Understood. But if that's what these standards are, can we talk for a moment about what they feel like? The best analogy I can give you is based in the fact that some coaches and athletic directors have noted a steep decline in the number of white kids going out for basketball. They feel as if they cannot compete with their black classmates. What if we addressed that by lowering the rim for white kids? What if we allowed them four points for each made basket?

Can you imagine how those white kids would feel whenever they took the court? How long would it be before they internalized the lie that there is something about being white that makes you inherently inferior when it comes to hoops, Steve Nash and Dirk Nowitzki notwithstanding?

Indeed, for all the talk about the so-called "reverse racism" of affirmative action, I have long argued that the real problem with it — and the reason it needs an expiration date — is that it might give African-American kids the mistaken idea they carry some inherent deficiency that renders them unable to compete with other kids on an equal footing.

We should be wary of anything, however well-intentioned, however temporary, which conveys that impression to our children. I am proof we have been doing just that for a very long time. And it burns — I tell you this from experience — to realize people have judged you by a lower standard, especially when you had the ability to meet the higher one all along. So this "interim" cannot end soon enough.

Because ultimately, you do not fix education by lowering the bar. You do it by lifting the kids.

Leonard Pitts is a columnist for the Miami Herald, 1 Herald Plaza, Miami, Fla., 33132. Readers may contact him via e-mail at lpitts@miamiherald.com.

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■ Please limit letters to 300 words or less. Letters should deal with a single subject, be of general interest and state a specific point of view. Letters are edited with brevity, clarity and newspaper style in mind.

■ In the sense of fairness and professionalism, the PRESS & DAKOTAN will accept no letters attacking private individuals or businesses.

■ Specific individuals or entities addressed in letters may be given the opportunity to read the letter prior to publication and be allowed to answer the letter in the same issue.

■ Only signed letters with writer's full name, address and daytime phone number for verification will be accepted. Please mail to: Letters, 319 Walnut, Yankton, SD 57078, drop off at 319 Walnut in Yankton, fax to 665-1721 or email to views@yankton.net.

TODAY IN HISTORY

By The Associated Press

Today is Monday, Nov. 26, the 331st day of 2012. There are 35 days left in the year.

Today's Highlights in History: On Nov. 26, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt ordered nationwide gasoline rationing, beginning Dec. 1. The motion picture "Casablanca," starring Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman, had its world premiere at the Hollywood Theater in New York.

On this date: In 1789, Nov. 26 was a day of thanksgiving set aside by President George Washington to observe the adoption of the Constitution of the United States.

In 1825, the first college social fraternity, the Kappa Alpha Society, was formed at Union College in Schenectady, N.Y.

In 1842, the founders of the University of Notre Dame arrived at the school's present-day site near South Bend, Ind.

In 1912, CBS newsmen Eric Sevareid was born in Velve, N.D.

In 1933, a judge in New York decided the James Joyce book "Ulysses" was not obscene and could be published in the United States.

In 1941, a Japanese naval task force consisting of six aircraft carriers left the Kuril Islands, headed toward Hawaii.

In 1943, during World War II, the HMT Rohna, a British transport ship carrying American soldiers, was hit by a German missile off Algeria; 1,138 men were killed.

In 1950, China entered the Korean War, launching a counteroffensive against soldiers from the United Nations, the U.S. and South Korea.

In 1965, France launched its first satellite, sending a 92-pound capsule into orbit.

In 1973, President Richard Nixon's personal secretary, Rose Mary Woods, told a federal court that she'd accidentally caused part of the 18 1/2-minute gap in a key Watergate tape.

In 1986, President Ronald Reagan appointed a commission headed by former Senator John Tower to investigate his National Security Council staff in the wake of the Iran-Contra affair.

In 1992, the British government announced that Queen Elizabeth II had volunteered to start paying taxes on her personal income, and would take her children off the public payroll.

Ten years ago: WorldCom and the

government settled a civil lawsuit over the company's \$9 billion accounting scandal. A United Nations report said that for the first time in the 20-year history of the AIDS epidemic, about as many women as men were infected with HIV.

Five years ago: President George W. Bush met separately at the White House with the leaders of Israel and the Palestinian Authority a day ahead of a major Mideast peace conference in Annapolis, Md. Vice President Dick Cheney experienced an irregular heartbeat and was taken to George Washington University Hospital for evaluation. President Bush greeted the 2007 Nobel Prize winners — including former Vice President Al Gore — in the Oval Office. Mississippi Sen. Trent Lott announced his retirement after a 35-year career in Congress. Washington Redskins star safety Sean Taylor was mortally wounded during a botched armed robbery at his home in Palmetto Bay, Fla. (Taylor died the next day.) Hall of Fame jockey Bill Hartack died in Freer, Texas, at age 74.

One year ago: NASA's Curiosity rover blasted off from the Kennedy Space Center on an 8 1/2-month, 354 million-mile journey to Mars. NBA players and owners reached a tentative agreement to end a 149-day lockout.

Today's Birthdays: Actress Ellen Albertini Dow is 99. Impressionist Rich Little is 74. Singer Tina Turner is 73. Singer Jean Terrell is 68. Pop musician John McVie is 67. Actress Marianne Muellerleile is 64. Actor Scott Jacoby is 56. Actress Jamie Rose is 53. Country singer Linda Davis is 50. Blues singer-musician Bernard Allison is 47. Country singer-musician Steve Grissaff is 47. Actress Kristin Bauer is 39. Actor Peter Facinelli is 39. Actress Tammy Lynn Michaels Etheridge is 38. Actress Maia Campbell is 36. Country singer Joe Nichols is 36. Contemporary Christian musicians Randy and Anthony Armstrong (Red) are 34. Actress Jessica Bowman is 32. Pop singer Natasha Bedingfield is 31. Country singer-musician Mike Gossin (Gloriana Rock) is 28. Ben Wysocki (The Fray) is 28. Singer Lil Fizz is 27. Singer Aubrey Collins is 25.

Thought for Today: "The difference between the men and the boys in politics is, and always has been, that the boys want to be something, while the men want to do something." — Eric Sevareid (1912-1992).

FROM THE BIBLE

Every son that is born to the Hebrews you shall cast into the Nile. Exodus 1:22. Portals of Prayer, Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis