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OPINION OTHER VIEWS

The Trouble With Testing

LOS ANGELES TIMES (Oct. 27): The backlash against education reform as practiced by the Obama administration has been fierce and persistent, and not just from teachers. Parents have mounted their own protests by opting their children out of the annual tests that the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act requires schools to give. The two bills in Congress to reauthorize the law would return more authority over schools to the states.

President Barack Obama appeared to join the backlash himself over the weekend, saying that students are taking too many standardized tests, and ones of poor quality to boot. He promised to help states figure out how to reduce testing, and to push Congress for legislation barring teachers from spending more than 2 percent of their class time on tests.

Does this mean the president finally realizes that tests have been given too much power over public education?

Don't bet on it. Obama hasn't voiced support for scaling back federal testing mandates, eliminating harsh measures against schools with low test scores or rolling back the Department of Education's requirement that states link teacher evaluations to test scores if they want waivers from No Child Left Behind's performance standards.

It's quite possible that students take too many tests. But the president's statement ignores why. By and large, the extra tests are used to measure whether students are on track to score well on the big, federally mandated test in the spring that evaluates their schools' performance, the one with serious consequences. Even more important are the much larger amounts of time devoted to rehearsing students for the spring test.

Setting an arbitrary cap on test-taking time — the president's 2 percent isn't based on a strong body of evidence any more than the teacher evaluation policy was — is unlikely to reduce the time spent on test prep significantly. As long as schools with low test scores can be taken over by charter schools or lose half their staff under No Child Left Behind, and as long as teachers fear losing their jobs if their students' scores haven't measured up, classrooms will be focused more on tests and less on a rounded education.

Standardized tests still have a useful place. They provide an objective measurement of how well students are mastering math and language skills, point out achievement gaps and give useful feedback on which lessons haven't been adequately absorbed. They also signal that certain schools are in dire need of outside intervention.

If Obama is sincere about easing the testing frenzy, he should drop the teacher evaluation mandate and support intensive help, rather than punishment, for struggling schools. His existing proposal would treat the symptoms more than the cause.

ABOUT THIS PAGE

The View page provides a forum for open discussion of issues and interests affecting our readers. Initialed editorials represent the opinion of the writer, but not necessarily that of the PRESS & DAKOTAN. Bylined columns represent the view of the author. We welcome letters on current topics. Questions regarding the Views page should be directed to Kelly Hertz at kelly.hertz@yankton.net/.

IN HISTORY

By The Associated Press
Today is Thursday, Oct. 29, the 302nd day of 2015. There are 63 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History: On Oct. 29, 1940, a blindfolded Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson drew the first number — 158 — from a glass ball in America's first peacetime military draft.

On this date: In 1618, Sir Walter Raleigh, the English courtier, military adventurer and poet, was executed in London for treason.

In 1787, the opera "Don Giovanni" by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart had its world premiere in Prague.

In 1901, President William McKinley's assassin, Leon Czolgosz, was electrocuted.

In 1929, Wall Street crashed on "Black Tuesday," heralding the start of America's Great Depression.

In 1956, during the Suez Canal crisis, Israel invaded Egypt's Sinai Peninsula. "The Huntley-Brinkley Report" premiered as NBC's nightly television newscast.

In 1964, thieves made off with the Star of India and other gems from the American Museum of Natural History in New York. (The Star and most of the other gems were recovered; three men were convicted of stealing them.)

In 1966, the National Organization for Women was formally organized during a conference in Washington, D.C.

In 1979, on the 50th anniversary of the great stock market crash, anti-nuclear protesters tried but failed to shut down the New York Stock Exchange.

In 1987, following the confirmation defeat of Robert H. Bork to serve on the U.S. Supreme Court, President Ronald Reagan announced his choice of Douglas H. Ginsburg, a nomination that fell apart over revelations of Ginsburg's previous marijuana use. Jazz great Woody Herman died in Los Angeles at age 74.

In 1994, Francisco Martin Duran fired more than two dozen shots from a semi-automatic rifle at the White House. (Duran was later convicted of trying to assassinate President Bill Clinton and was sentenced to 40 years in prison.)

In 1998, Sen. John Glenn, at age 77, roared back into space aboard the shuttle Discovery, retracing the trail he'd blazed for America's astronauts 36 years earlier.

In 2012, Superstorm Sandy came ashore in New Jersey and slowly marched inland, devastating coastal communities and causing widespread power outages; the storm and its aftermath are blamed for at least 182 deaths in the U.S.

Ten years ago: Three blasts ripped through markets in New Delhi, India, killing 62 people in attacks blamed by the

government on Islamic militants. Hundreds of people slowly filed past the body of civil rights icon Rosa Parks in Montgomery, Alabama, just miles from the downtown street where she'd made history by refusing to give up her seat on a city bus to a white man. Saint Liam won the Breeders' Cup Classic at Belmont Park. Actor Lloyd Bochner, 81, died in Santa Monica, California.

Five years ago: Authorities on three continents said they had thwarted multiple terrorist attacks aimed at the United States, seizing two explosive packages addressed to Chicago-area synagogues and packed aboard cargo jets from Yemen.

One year ago: Ordering firm restrictions for U.S. troops returning from West Africa, Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel said the military men and women helping fight Ebola had to undergo 21-day quarantines upon their return — longer than required for many civilian health care workers. The San Francisco Giants succeeded where no team had in 3 1/2 decades, winning Game 7 on the road for their third World Series title in five years as they defeated the Kansas City Royals 3-2.

Today's Birthdays: Bluegrass singer-musician Sonny Osborne (The Osborne Brothers) is 78. Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf is 77. Country singer Lee Clayton is 73. Rock musician Denny Laine is 71. Singer Melba Moore is 70. Musician Peter Green is 69. Actor Richard Dreyfuss is 68. Actress Kate Jackson is 67. The former president of Turkey, Abdullah Gul, is 65. Actor Dan Castellana (TV: "The Simpsons") is 58. Country musician Steve Kellough (Wild Horses) is 58. Comic strip artist Tom Wilson ("Ziggy") is 58. Actress Finola Hughes is 56. Singer Randy Jackson is 54. Rock musician Peter Timmins (Cowboy Junkies) is 50. Actress Joely Fisher is 48. Rapper Paris is 48. Actor Rufus Sewell is 48. Actor Grayson McCouch is 47. Rock singer SA Martinez (311) is 46. Musician Toby Smith is 45. Actress Winona Ryder is 44. Actress Tracee Ellis Ross is 43. Actor Trevor Lissauer is 42. Actress Gabrielle Union is 42. Olympic gold medal bobsledder Veronika Florschütz is 42. Actress Milena Govich is 39. Actor Jon Abrahams is 38. Actor Brendan Fehr is 38. Actor Ben Foster is 35. Rock musician Chris Baio (Vampire Weekend) is 31. Actress India Eiseley is 22.

Thought for Today: "Put it before them briefly so they will read it, clearly so they will appreciate it, picturesquely so they will remember it and, above all, accurately so they will be guided by its light." — Joseph Pulitzer, American newspaper publisher (born 1847, died this date in 1911).

FROM THE BIBLE

Martha ... one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her. Luke 10:41-42. Portals of Prayer, Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Our Father's Sons

Ray Epp, Gayville
Yankton County Commissioner
It's harvest time and it's got me thinking. I pulled the combine out, went over it and got it ready for the field. Combine 20 acres and a bearing goes out! When did it go out? When I was using it!
About a month ago, 94 percent (not voting is a no vote) of Yankton County

decided it didn't matter what happened, you ain't raising my taxes!
A harvest progressed, we've had a few misfortunes. A couple combines have caused fire. Good thing there were good roads available. Good thing adequate emergency personnel and equipment were available.
We are experiencing a dry fall. Roads are in great shape for this beautiful harvest. We are getting by. How is it going to look a year from now?

What will winter and spring bring? The sky may not fall, but stuff will. Your maintenance on combines next fall may have to be more intense since nothing can be done about the roads until the spring of 2017 at the earliest.
Mr. Jagger stated a lyric a few years back: "You can't always get what you want, but if you TRY sometimes you just might find you get what you need." The two-wheel brethren have a saying: "Sit down, shut up and ride."

Yankton County, stand up, roll up your sleeve and get to work. Our fathers and grandfathers did! Are we our father's sons? Or, are we going to continue to walk around with our hands out waiting for a hand-out?
One more lyric a certain Mr. Cash once stated: "It ain't me, babe!" We are a tax-based budget. When the county doesn't grow, your taxes do! How much longer can you get by?



Writer's Block

A Figure Of Speech

BY JIM VAN OSDEL
For the Press & Dakotan

Some wise guy once asked, "How do you make a lady swear at church?" The answer: "Stand up and shout, 'Bingo!'"

We were not playing bingo but I witnessed my mother's younger sister, Mary, really get her Irish dander riled up. This occurred at a speaking contest for elementary students in Sioux Falls almost 70 years ago. Aunt Mary Buckman will be 96 this Christmas Eve. Our mother, Frannie, would have been 98 this month had she not lost her battle with cancer five years ago last January.

When I was in the second grade at Howard School District 30 six miles east of Yankton, Aunt Mary encouraged me to participate in a speaking event which was to be held in the 1905 Yankton County Courtroom. The event was open to all students in the rural schools in Yankton County.

Aunt Mary had stepped in as our Howard teacher because of the resignation, due to illness, of our previous teacher, Miss Elizabeth Rempp.

The speech Aunt Mary chose for me posed me as a country boy telling his rendition of a story about a man hunting a bear. But the author of the piece indicated that the little boy in the story spoke with a lisp. So I practiced

my "lithp" — to the point that at supertime one night our mother said in exasperation, "When the devil is that speech contest so we can get back to normal conversation around here?"

The big day arrived for my first visit to the third floor courtroom in the old courthouse at Third and Broadway. Nervous kids from all over the county were there, gave their speech and, for some reason, mine was chosen as the most humorous piece.

That win gave Aunt Mary and I the opportunity to visit the labyrinth halls of Washington High School in Sioux Falls. The enrollment there was about 3,000 students. One after another of the rural school kids stood and delivered their speech until I nervously delivered the story about the bear-hunting man as told by a little boy with a "lithp."

My initial public speaking event in Sioux Falls failed to impress the array of judges. Aunt Mary charged the table of judges and informed them in no uncertain terms that they HAD to know my speech was delivered better than any of the others.

They concurred. And one of the judges consoled her by saying, "Your student would surely have won first place had it not been for his unfortunate speech defect, his lisp."



Jim VAN OSDEL

Questions Of Conscience And 'Religious Freedom'

BY LEONARD PITTS JR.
Tribune Content Agency

So maybe experience is not all it's cracked up to be.

I mean, if experience were really the teacher the axiom claims, the state of Florida would not be threatening to lumber down the same thorny path from which Indiana and Arkansas so recently retreated in humiliation. Both those states, you will recall, attempted to impose so-called "religious freedom" laws earlier this year that would have allowed businesses to refuse services to gay men and lesbians.

These attempts to dust off Jim Crow were beaten back when businesses condemned the laws and conventions started looking for new places to convene. But apparently, Florida was not paying attention. Or at least, state Rep. Julio Gonzalez wasn't.

Last week, Gonzalez filed a so-called religious freedom protection bill that would allow any health care provider to refuse services, except in emergency cases, to any person who violated the provider's moral or religious conscience. The bill doesn't mention sexual orientation, but is clearly aimed at gay people. On the other hand, given how broadly one may define moral or religious conscience, it would also include women seeking contraception.

And there's more. The bill empowers adoption agencies to refuse to place children in homes contrary to the agency's religious convictions. Again, given how broadly that term may be defined, that could include the home of two lesbians, but it might also include a Muslim home, an atheist home or even a home whose definition of Christianity does not jibe with the agency's. Finally, the bill also allows individuals and small companies to refuse service on the same grounds.

"This is not about discriminating," Gonzalez told the *Herald-Tribune* newspaper in Sarasota. But it is about exactly that.

Given what happened in Arkansas and Indiana and that Florida is a tourist-dependent state, it is hard to imagine this bill ever becoming law. But its very existence suggests the lengths to which the forces of recalcitrance and

resistance are willing to go to carve out some kind of official exemption for their bigotry.

They always define that exemption as an article of faith, as if ostracism were some core tenet of the gospel of Christ. But it isn't. Indeed, Jesus was famously inclusive, openly consorting with prostitutes, paralytics, lepers, tax collectors, women and other second-class citizens of the 1st century.

Moreover, it is telling how narrowly some of us define that which offends religious conscience. Consider: We live in a country that throws away 70 billion pounds of food a year, while 14 percent of us don't know where our next meal is coming from. The *Washington Post* recently reported that toddlers with guns kill or injure themselves or others roughly once a week on average. Yet if things like that trouble anyone's religious sensibilities, their cries have yet to reach my ears.

But let someone order a cake with two men on top and suddenly the moral klaxons are blaring.

You know what affronts my moral conscience? This habit of using God as a cudgel against his most vulnerable people. You have to wonder how many of those who could use the solace faith brings have instead been driven away from faith, made irredeemably hostile toward it, by small-minded people who exclude them in the name of God.

I remember chatting once with some gay men who seemed attracted to the promise of faith, but were repelled by the expression of it they had seen in churches, where they were regarded as outcasts and rejects. Sadly, I was never able to convince them that that humiliating treatment was not the sum and totality of faith. Now, here comes Julio Gonzalez, eager to give that kind of mistreatment the imprimatur of law.

He sees it as a matter of conscience. Really, it's about the massive failure thereof.

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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