

The Ledger editorial page

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COLUMNIST OPINIONS



Dana Milbank

THE WASHINGTON POST

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Hateful Talk Occurs On Both Sides of Gay Issue

Human Rights Campaign, the nation's largest gay-rights organization, posted an alert on its blog Tuesday: "Paul Ryan Speaking at Hate Group's Annual Conference."

The "hate group" that the Republicans' vice presidential candidate would be addressing? The Family Research Council, a mainstream conservative think tank founded by James Dobson and run for many years by Gary Bauer.

The day after the gay-rights group's alert went out, 28-year-old Floyd Lee Corkins II walked into the Family Research Council's Washington headquarters and, according to an FBI affidavit, proclaimed words to the effect of "I don't like your politics" — and shot the security guard. Corkins, who had recently volunteered at a gay community center, was carrying a 9 mm handgun, a box of ammunition and a backpack full of Chick-fil-A — the company whose president recently spoke out against gay marriage.

Mercifully, the gunman was restrained, and nobody was killed. When I walked by the Family Research Council building in downtown Washington on Thursday afternoon, things were returning to normal. Outside the main doors, above which is inscribed the group's "Faith, Family, Freedom" motto, some discarded yellow police tape lay on the sidewalk. Attention to the incident had already begun to fade.

Since the shooting, conservatives have complained that the media have played down the story.

That's unfortunate, because this shooting should remind us all of an important truth: that while much of the political anger in America today lies on the right, there are unbalanced and potentially violent people of all political persuasions. The rest of us need to be careful about hurling accusations that can stir up the crazies.

Human Rights Campaign isn't responsible for the shooting. Neither should the organization that deemed the Family Research Council a hate group, the Southern Poverty Law Center, be blamed for a madman's act. But both are reckless in labeling as a hate group a policy shop that advocates for a full range of conservative Christian positions.

I disagree with the Family Research Council's views on gays and lesbians. But it's absurd to put the group, as the Law Center does, in the same category as Aryan Nations, Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, Stormfront and the Westboro Baptist Church. The center says the Research Council "often makes false claims about the LGBT community based on discredited research and junk science." Exhibit A in its dossier is a quote by an council official from 1999 (!) saying that "gaining access to children has been a long-term goal of the homosexual movement."

Offensive, certainly. But in the same category as the KKK?

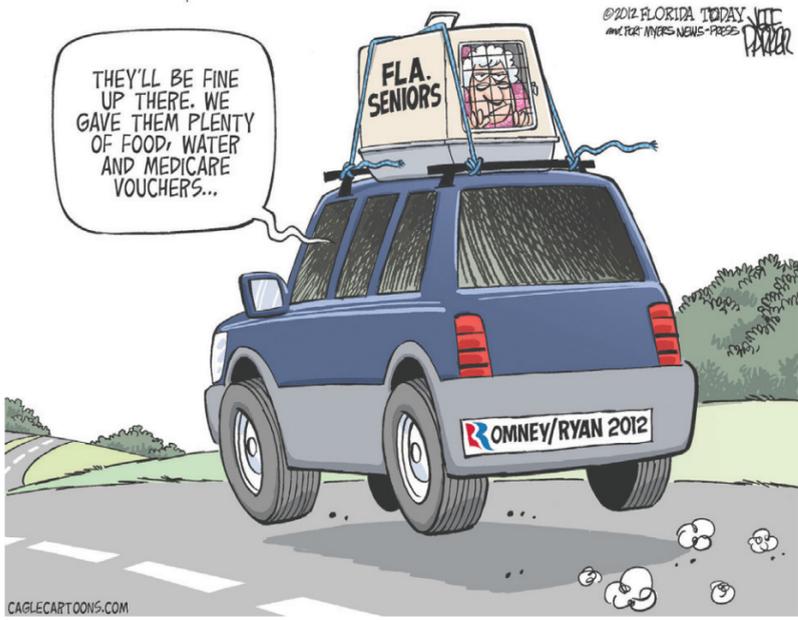
Since the shooting, conservatives have complained that the media have played down the story. This probably has less to do with bias than with the fact that nobody was killed.

I took issue with Glenn Beck for stirring up the unstable by promoting conspiracy theories in the mass media; more than one Beck follower became violent. What the Southern Poverty Law Center and Human Rights Campaign have done isn't close to the level of provocation Beck achieved, but that doesn't justify their actions. The National Organization for Marriage is right to say that the attack "is the clearest sign we've seen that labeling pro-marriage groups as 'hateful' must end."

The Family Research Council's president, Tony Perkins, said Thursday that "Corkins was given a license to shoot an unarmed man by organizations like the Southern Poverty Law Center." This goes too far. Nobody gave Corkins a license to kill.

Late Thursday, the Law Center fired back at Perkins, defending its categorization of the Family Research Council as a hate group because it "has knowingly spread false and denigrating propaganda about LGBT people." The center said that Perkins should stop putting out "claims that are provably false" about gay people.

Yes, Perkins should stop doing that. But even if he doesn't, the Southern Poverty Law Center should stop listing a mainstream Christian advocacy group alongside neo-Nazis and Klansmen.



VOICE OF THE PEOPLE

READER OPINIONS

Parental Involvement Even More Crucial With Changes in Education

With the changes and challenges taking place in schools and students, it is imperative for parents to be involved in education. The Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test 2.0, Common Core State Standards, which will be fully implemented in 2013-2014, and the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers are the major changes that are taking place locally, statewide and nationally in education.

For students to succeed at an early age, parental involvement must also take place early. It must take place at the ages of 1 through 5 and continue. When parents are involved in their children's education, they positively influence the child's chances of success. Such children tend to perform better than those who have uninvolved parents. If there is a lack of parental involvement, a school can provide a mentor for students if needed for each grade level.

Mentoring is a one-on-one relationship between the student, administrator, educator or adult wherein the more-experienced person provides personal, academic and career guidance to the student. This relationship provides a positive role model for obtaining consistent support and guidance.

The Florida Department of Education lists a variety of ways parental involvement and mentors can impact a student's education. They state that when parents or a mentor are involved in a student's education, they will achieve academic and assessment success, higher grades, better attendance, increased self-esteem and motivation, and fewer disciplinary problems.

It is imperative that we provide the best education and a safe environment that is conducive to students learning.

DALE TERRELL
Lakeland

Common Sense Needed

In response to Regina Davis ["Polk School Board Making Man Pay For Juvenile Mistake," July 26], archaic rules and inactions do not make a sane reaction conducive to the present situation. How long does the poor soul (Travis Hudson) have to pay for an indiscretion in his youth?

School Board, please apply some common sense to your insensitive decision. Look at the nature of the event, the age of the offense and relationship to the job.

Educate, don't denigrate.

THOM CHANDLER
Lakeland

Problems With Paintball

I have learned some things about the game called paintball because a friend of mine lives near a paintball playing field north of Lakeland, just off U.S. 98. In paintball, players with special rifles pretend to try to kill each other by shooting little balls of paint.

When I visit my friend and there is a paintball tournament, the racket from all the shooting and the yelling is horrendously loud and disturbs the peace of the neighbors for hours.

The neighbors have complained repeatedly about the annoying nuisance of the paintball operation. But the county officials who defend the paintball operation bow down to worship of filthy lucre and say it is an economic activity that brings in money to the county, and so to heck with the neighbors.

There are some indications that the noise reaches decibel levels that can do permanent damage to the inner ears of participants. The splattered paint chemicals get washed by the rain into

the surface water and aquifer of the Green Swamp, where the field is located. Are there other adverse effects of paintball?

Well, it turns out that the recent Colorado movie theater massacre was done by an avid paintball participant. I heard that on NBC News. One article in The Ledger cited officials who wondered how the shooter was so accurate in his shooting. The answer is that he had plenty of practice playing paintball.

At one public hearing, the paintball people assured county officials that they have a prayer before they begin to practice pretending to kill each other. Paintball is bad. It should be abolished.

TRAVIS EPSHIRE
Lakeland

Respect for the Elderly

I have to ask what has happened to society today? Where has respect and caring for our elderly gone?

Recently, at the Lakeland Square Mall, I watched an elderly woman lose her balance and fall to the ground near the food-court entrance. Several people younger than I, including a mall security officer and a Pepsi-truck driver, watched the woman struggle to sit up, but did nothing.

Another gentleman, myself and the friend I was with rushed to her side to assist her.

If this is how the mall cares for its customers, it is no surprise that there are so many empty stores inside.

As for the younger people who sat and watched, thank God it wasn't your mother who needed help. Shame on you.

CHARLES CAMERON II
Haines City

Politicians Exceed Promises

Jim Posmer's letter ["Liberal Democrats Think We'll Believe Anything They Say," Aug. 5] compels me to reply. The intended goal of politicians and the subsequent nonattainment of those goals is as old as time. When politicians exceed promises that evolve into outright fabrications, it then becomes disastrous with heart-wrenching and far-reaching consequences.

I cite the Bush-Cheney war in Iraq and the resulting innocent American blood that will forever lie on Iraq soil. And we have to consider the staggering loss that funded a war that was supposed to pay for itself. Colin Powell suffered embarrassment when directed to go before the U.N. Council and the world to justify the Bush-Cheney war. Time will heal his embarrassment but time will never justify an unjust war.

I would like some brilliant economic mind to explain how the United States can engage in two wars, cut taxes for wealthy Americans and have any chance for a balanced budget.

JAMES M. DONALDSON
Lakeland

WRITE TO US

The Ledger welcomes letters for publication in the Voice of the People Column. Only original letters written directly to The Ledger will be considered, and preference is given to discussion of contemporary issues. Volume precludes acknowledgment or return of unpublished letters. All letters are subject to editing for clarity, length, taste and libel. Letters should be signed and contain the writer's full name, address and telephone number. Anonymity is granted only under unusual circumstances. Letters should be kept to 300 words or less, and brevity is encouraged.

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[CITY OF WINTER HAVEN]

Minutes And Minutes

On June 2, The Ledger reported in an Eye on Polk investigative article that

the city of Winter Haven was not producing minutes of City Commission workshop meetings — study sessions prior to formal meetings — as required by the Florida Government-in-the-Sunshine Law. City Clerk Dorothy Johnson had begun to create minutes from recordings of 34 workshop meetings dating to 2009, reported The Ledger's Ryan E. Little.

City commissioners have been testy about the report since. They have singled out Little for criticism during commission meetings over the summer. They have sung the praises of Johnson, and pointed out the long hours of hard work she puts in.

The following information will probably raise their blood pressure further, but Winter Haven residents deserve a full accounting.

On June 3, a Ledger editorial reported that the posting of regular-meeting minutes on the city's website was lagging by a month.

This weekend, a follow-up check showed posting of the regular-meeting minutes on the city's Online Documents website to have doubled to two months. The most recent set of minutes on the document site, under the heading of Commission Meeting Minutes, is for the June 11 regular commission meeting.

DOUBLE TROUBLE

This is not to say that minutes for the regular meetings are not being produced. However, they are not being presented to the public in the place to which online readers are directed and not in approved form. To find these draft minutes, one must follow a virtual yellow brick road.

First, ignore the intuitive heading of Commission Meeting Minutes. Second, look instead for the Commission Agenda heading.

Under this heading, the latest agendas are for Aug. 13. In the regular-meeting agenda for Aug. 13 are the unapproved minutes for July 23.

However, because the chain of approval, disapproval or amendment is broken by posting only the draft minutes in the agendas, no final versions of minutes later than June 11 are available on the city's document website.

DON'T SHOOT THE MESSENGER

In the approved-and-posted minutes of June 11, City Commissioner Pete Chichetto is noted as saying during his report, "Thanked the city clerk for her hard work and support to the commission, and commented on the newspaper article concerning the minutes."

From an audio recording of the meeting — the city does an excellent job of posting online podcasts of the meetings, the equivalent of what one would have called tapes in the old days, but now available online via computer — Chichetto had more to say:

"To the credit of our city clerk, and for the public, she does work numerous hours over 40 hours a week. At any given time, she's got five of us to deal with. So I want to publicly thank Dorothy for her hard work and I do not appreciate the comments from Ryan, because she does have accurate minutes. She will get them caught up. I do not think it will take — as you comment — three months to get them done.

"To say that we are violating Sunshine Law, the last time I checked, Ryan, you weren't an attorney. And your comments are basically just random comments. I know The Ledger wants to create the news. But we ought to get some accurate statements because we do have tapes, we do allow the public to speak at those workshops — so that would cover two of the three Florida records law."

As to the facts, that third point under the Sunshine Law, as stated by the Florida Attorney General's Office on its Government in the Sunshine website at www.myflsunshine.com/sun.nsf/pages/FAQs is "3) minutes of the meeting must be taken."

As valuable as a podcast is for long-form following of a commission meeting — sitting back and listening to the events of a meeting as if over a radio — it is not searchable, nor has it been reviewed and approved as an official record by the commission.

As to the time it will take to produce the 34 sets of workshop minutes, with no such minutes posted on the city document website 2½ months after publication of the article about the missing minutes, three months sound reasonable — at a minimum.

