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Introduction

I became politically activated after the 2000 election when I realized there was something seriously wrong with our country's political direction and that my home state, Oklahoma, one of the reddest of red states, reflected this misdirection. I realized then in ways I never really considered that my state had become hostage to extreme right-wing politics and that something needed to be done about it. As a writer and professor, I felt I could contribute to changing the political climate by publishing articles that gave a progressive slant to local and national political events. So I began publishing articles in the state's one real liberal political journal, *The Oklahoma Observer*, edited by the indomitable Frosty Troy, a legend in Oklahoma political circles.

In March, 2004, in anticipation of the election, I started my blog, Okie Funk Notes From the Outback, www.okiefunk.com, in order to give an unfiltered view of how right-wing politics was slowly but surely destroying the economic opportunities of ordinary Oklahomans through stagnant wages and rising health care costs and now rising gasoline prices. I remained baffled, and I still do, as to why Oklahomans continue to vote against their economic interests in order to support candidates who only focus on wedge issues, such as abortion or gay marriage.

Okie Funk, then, was the perfect storm. I was a tenured professor and a former journalist. I possessed enough technology skills to maintain a blog and Web sites. I asked myself, If don't speak up, who will? Thus began my journey into grassroots politics through my blog and other political activities. For example, I began writing for Oklahoma City's excellent alternative publication, the *Oklahoma Gazette*, and I began

contributing radio commentary to *Left Hook*, a liberal program recently taken off the air after its station sold and its talk format changed.

Two years later, I realized I needed to compile my blogs into a book for several reasons: (1) I want to reach people who have yet to discover the Internet. (2) I want to publish this book as a contribution by a progressive to the Oklahoma centennial in 2007. I think the “Okie Rebels With A Cause” series shows clearly how the state was founded on progressive ideology, which is often ignored by the state’s right-wing power structure. (3) I want state progressives to have a hard-copy book to distribute to open-minded voters before the 2006 elections. (4) I want to publish my blogs under the structure of a hard-copy book so I could index my material and place it in sections under a table of contents. This structure remains convenient and important in our culture despite how the Internet has changed the way we communicate. (5) I want to spread the word around the state and nation that there are fighting mad progressives in Oklahoma who stand against the conservative juggernaut on a daily basis. (6) I want to change the political reality in Oklahoma by trying to unify progressives.

The articles, or blog posts, in this book are diverse. The articles are about both local and national issues. Some articles are philosophical or think pieces, such as the Okie Rebels series, while others deal with the day-to-day aspects of politics. (But politics are never boring in Oklahoma.) Taken together, they tell the story of how a red state operates politically, from its politicians to its conservative mainstream media. I believe the book tells a national story as well, and I believe there are lessons here for progressives everywhere.

The book tries to answer, among others, these questions: What will it take for states like Oklahoma to swing back and embrace progressive values again? How does the right-wing operate in extreme red states like Oklahoma? What are the habits and strategies of the right-wing on a local level? How do progressives survive in conservative places, such as Oklahoma?

Ultimately, I believe progressives are making inroads here in Oklahoma. We still remain fragmented to a certain degree, but the political reality is rapidly changing as more progressives network. There is a quality of grim determination about it all, resembling the fortitude held by those who experienced the Dust Bowl days in the 1930s. Progressives will prevail in Oklahoma again. It is only a matter of time. Be patient. Dig in. Get busy.

I sat on the recliner watching the video tape from last Thanksgiving as my brother Sean taped me. It was Thanksgiving. There aren't many older brothers on this planet like Sean who would let a kid brother do something like this, even after the coyote thing in 1997. I love him and everyone in my family. On the video, I saw myself sit in the same recliner watching a video from the previous Thanksgiving. I've been doing this every year since 1995. It's a Thanksgiving ritual I do, a personal and now a family thing.

On the video I watched, I talked. I said, "This year, Granddad got confused, and thought a bowl of potpourri was party mix. He went, 'Sort of spicy.'

"Also, Erin lost weight.

"Raymond is drunk."

I turned to the camera that taped me as the previous year's tape rolled. I said, into the camera, "Raymond is drunk again this year.

"Granddad has not eaten potpourri, but he did have a nice morning 'reading the newspaper,' and he's told everyone, including a sorority friend of Patricia's; this made Tricia embarrassed. It was a very decent one, Pop said, grinning, and he was proud of it, everyone was, and thus the new medicine, some prescribed laxative Mama said was never going to work, is, indeed, a success after all.

"Erin remains depressed because of some lingering boyfriend thing from last summer. His name escapes my memory.

"Also, I need to say it: I love my family for letting me be crazy."

I watched myself watching myself for a minute. Everything remained still. Frozen time. I love frozen moments. These moments make me feel like I fit, like I belong to something, like I'm connected to something universal, connected to history maybe, to a

past in which facts remain real and safe and accurate. I get this good feeling only when everything stops like this, and I can feel myself watching myself, and it's like nothing is moving.

Thoughts Along The Armadillo Highway

Conservatives Attack Okie Optimism

"I don't care how little your country is, you got a right to run it like you want to. When the big nations quit meddling then the world will have peace."—Will Rogers.

Oklahoma's history is filled with independence and diversity. The state's rich history includes both Will Rogers and Woody Guthrie, two Oklahoma populists who consistently spoke out for ordinary people. At one point, the state was even a hotbed for socialist ideas. The state once symbolized hope, opportunity, and eternal optimism for regular people trying to make a living and raise a family.

So I prefer to view the last twenty-five years or so in our history as an aberration. It has been a time period in which the state's trusting and honest citizens were taken for rubes and dummies by a conservative juggernaut many wrongly still see as populist. This has caused a majority of Oklahomans to now vote against their financial and personal interests. As the Oklahoma Gaylord family—the owners of *The Daily Oklahoman*, the state's largest newspaper—and their ilk became richer during this time frame, salaries declined in proportion to the national average, health care and health insurance costs rose astronomically, and good jobs became scarce for Okies. Teachers, for example, have been leaving the state in droves.

This truthful view of our state history, of course, is marginalized by the state's corporate media, including *The Daily Oklahoman*, yet the facts are readily available through census figures and income rate studies. The state is losing population relative to the rest of the nation, and we make some of the lowest incomes in the country. We don't provide decent health care for many of our children, yet we jail people at the highest levels in the nation.

Can you imagine what it was like when Oklahoma was actually viewed as a place where someone's dreams could come true? Can you imagine what it was like here when people packed up their trucks to come to Oklahoma, not leave Oklahoma? Can you imagine a time when educated and innovative people were trying to get to Oklahoma as soon as possible, not escape it at the first conceivable moment?

Oklahoma has now become a place in which a small, ruling elite, a new ruling class really, dictate how ordinary people will live virtually every aspect of their lives. By constantly marginalizing any dissent or alternative ideas through propaganda and local control of the media, the power structure remains firmly entrenched. In this regard, Oklahoma is a microcosm of George Bush's vision of America, a vision imbued with the attributes of fascism that emerged in the middle of the twentieth century in Europe. These attributes include secret government, the abolishment of due process for its citizens, misinformation campaigns, and the use of torture against a widening circle of "enemy combatants."

Okies fought against fascism in World War II. Will they recognize it again in their own state, in their own country, even if it is falsely called "patriotism"? I think so. Rooted in Oklahoma's history is an open distaste for political power mongers, sympathy for the underdog, and an admiration for straight talk and common sense. As Will Rogers once said, "This country is not where it is today on account of any one man. It is here on account of the real common sense of the Big Normal Majority."

What we need now is a new populist movement in Oklahoma, a movement that will sweep out the new dregs of disguised fascism and restore true democracy and equality to our state. Our first goal is to vote George Bush out of office and restore sanity to our

national government. Our next goal will be to make Oklahoma a place of opportunity again by working to improve conditions for all its citizens, not just the extremely wealthy.

May 15, 2004

Okie Populism

One of the most vexing questions in the political scene today is how a majority of voters in the South, Southwest, and Midwest consistently vote against their economic interests on the national level. Oklahoma, for example, has voted Republican on the national level for two decades now, yet the conservative agenda consistently rewards a wealthy elite over middle-class and poor people.

Take President George Bush's recent tax cuts which heavily favored the wealthiest people in the nation and consider the new corporate welfare state in which we live. Yet Oklahoma has one of the lowest per capita income levels in the nation and has recently suffered through high unemployment rates and cutbacks in education. How does granting huge tax breaks to billionaires and large corporations help the average Oklahoman?

Pundits argue the reason for this contradiction is that conservatives play Okies and beyond by emphasizing such emotional cultural issues as abortion or family values. Consequently, Okies may well feel such social issues outweigh their rights and success as professionals, workers and farmers.

Yet if Okies are not empowered financially and socially, how can they expect to have any voice at all in the national debate? It's a paradox.

The neocons currently in power wouldn't give the time of day to an impoverished or underemployed Oklahoman who wants to rant against abortion or the decline of family values. Conservatives support the measurement of capitalism in terms of bestowing power and voice to people. If you have the money, you get to have some say. So why vote against your economic interests if you really want to change the culture?

The time is ripe for a new populist movement in our state, one based on the realities of our life here in this state, not one based on cultural issues we can never really resolve that only serve to divide us.

June 1, 2004

Big, Fat, Lying Armadillos

One of the most absurd claims in the right-wing rhetoric that has oppressed Oklahoma and America over the last twenty-five years is the myth that big media is operated by a liberal elite.

To those who claim the media is liberal, I say, borrowing from Al Franken on Air America Radio, "You, sir, are a liar!" (Franken uses this line humorously on his radio show.)

Okies should know this better than anyone else.

For decades, Okies have endured the most extreme right-wing conservative newspaper in the nation, *The Daily Oklahoman*, and *The Tulsa World* is only a little better. We get a skewed perspective from these publications, and, ultimately, they keep the state mired in ignorance, mediocrity, and just plain conservative boredom and ugliness. For years, *The Daily Oklahoman's* Edward L. Gaylord operated a dishonest publication that privileged the extremely wealthy over the middle-class and poor. The reign of class oppression continues under his daughter who took over after his death last year.

But what about *The Washington Post* or *The New York Times*? Okies have been told for years that these evil publications represent extreme liberalism. Well, both these publications supported President George Bush's Iraq war. In fact, some pundits believe *New York Times* reporter Judith Miller actually started the war with her inaccurate and dishonest reporting about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. So *The New York Times* actually starts President Bush's war, and then supports it on its editorial page, yet it is considered a liberal newspaper by the right-wing. Right. If you believe that, then I have some ocean-front property near Gotebo I want to sell you.

But let's take a larger view. Both *The Post* and *The Times* are parts of huge, monopolistic corporations that have profit, not truth, as their bottom line. Neither of these publications will ever jeopardize their own existence. Through their inaction and silence and greed, they support the current, dangerous redistribution of wealth to a small, elite rich segment of our culture. Neither publication has given fair coverage to the millions of Americans, including some Okies, who see the new redistribution of wealth under President Bush as a first step toward a government operated by a small handful of rich people, a sort of American-style fascist feudalism. Even publications such as *The New Yorker* and *The New York Review of Books* are reserved and careful in their critiques of the conservative agenda. Perhaps their writers and editors are afraid in today's paranoid climate of secrecy, terror alerts, and conservative retribution.

Meanwhile, extreme right-wing media types, such as Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity, Michael Savage, Ann Coulter, Joe Scarborough, Robert Novak, William Safire, etc. (and I could go on and on), all decry the liberal media, even as liberal opinions are consistently shut out of the mainstream, corporate media. They are lying, and they know they are lying. What they do is manipulate and lie to people for money and power, which they get from the largest corporate media companies in America. Even a so-called liberal columnist like economist Paul Krugman supports a very conservative form of capitalism. It is all conservative media, all the time, in this country today. Do not be fooled.

I believe Okies know better than most in this country how a right-wing media company can distort the truth and, in the process, hurt and oppress ordinary people, and I believe this makes us better able to confront the lies of the extreme right-wing media machine.

So if it squeals like an extreme right-wing armadillo, then it is an extreme right-wing armadillo, no matter what Rush Limbaugh has to say.

June 2, 2004

Ronald Reagan Didn't Do One Damn Thing For Oklahoma

I was driving down the road yesterday listening to the radio as one of our local right-wing extremists, Mike McCarville, eulogized former President Ronald Reagan. (It is very important to keep tabs on political and religious extremism right now in this country. I am quite serious about this.)

McCarville, a radio show host on a local station, beatified Reagan ad nauseam, using the weird right-wing propaganda that has quickly become part of the Reagan disinformation campaign the last couple of days: Reagan ended the Cold War, revived the economy with his trickle-down economics, made American prouder, and on and on.

None of it is true, of course. Reagan did not end the Cold War. The Soviet Union had been weakened economically for years because of its corrupt government. Trickle-down economics had to be replaced with huge tax increases during the last years of the Reagan presidency to keep the government semi-solvent. Reagan's budget deficits hurt the economy in countless ways. As for making Americans prouder, well, if scandal, corruption and the greed of wealthy people make you proud, then I guess Reagan did bring about a "new morning" in America. It is now called "conservative politics."

Yet the biggest absurdity in McCarville's show was his insistence that Oklahomans loved "Dutch." As a generalized statement, I think that is simply untrue. There were and remain plenty of Oklahomans against Reagan politics. We are just not allowed to express our opinion at any length in the local media. In addition, many of those who voted for him were hoodwinked by the new conservative juggernaut and the ensuing propaganda spewed by *The Daily Oklahoman*.

So I ask this second group of people: What did Ronald Reagan ever do for Oklahoma and its citizens? Here is the true answer: Not a damn thing.

Oklahoma's last oil boom went bust in the early 1980s, and Reagan's policies that supported Middle-East dictators and their ability to control a major segment of our economy did nothing to help us in this regard. In addition, Reagan's efforts to deregulate banking was directly responsible for the savings and loans banking crisis in the 1980s. This also had a huge impact on Oklahoma.

For those Okies too young to remember, let me tell you how it was in Oklahoma during much of Reagan's presidency. Banks were going under throughout the state day after day, people were leaving in droves because there were no good jobs, and the government was cutting back education and other programs because there was no money. The wealthiest people in the state, however, became richer because of Reagan's tax cuts for the rich. In fact, the disparity between the extremely wealthy and the middle-class and poor was one of the main legacies of the Reagan presidency. Does all this sound familiar?

Meanwhile, the national news was filled with tempered reports about the Iran-Contra scandal, Reagan's mental lapses, his disdain of those dying of AIDS and the poor, and the idea that somehow the individual greediness of the extremely wealthy was good for America. The term "plausible deniability" became entrenched in right-wing, conservative politics during this time.

Now I know there are those Oklahomans who hate themselves so much they think their lives are somehow made better when the Gaylord family makes even more money and Oklahoma kids go without health insurance, and for you, yes, Reagan was wonderful. He ensured you made less money and had less opportunity to succeed financially.

Hurray! Your kids' schools went underfunded. Hurray! Overall, Oklahoman's per capita income levels remained low. Hurray! More and more people went without adequate health care. Hurray! It was great for you.

Democrat or Republican, many of us remember the difficult 1980s in Oklahoma. That's Reagan's legacy in the state. It was not until the centrist Bill Clinton took over that the state began to fully rebound, and it was not until George Bush became president that we faced yet another fiscal crisis that damaged the state. And no amount of lies and distortion on a local, right-wing radio station can hide that fact.

When will Okies tire of the right-wing lies that keep our state down? The state will only soar again, as it did when first founded by a diverse and multicultural people, when its citizens embrace true American ideals of democracy, equal rights and opportunities, and compassion.

June 8, 2004

Are Young Oklahomans Getting More Politically Involved?

The Okie contradiction of the week: Some Oklahoma parents, especially those in rural areas, complain there are few local career opportunities for their children because their towns are dying out, but many continue to vote for politicians such as President George Bush whose policies privilege the extremely wealthy over middle-class professionals and workers. How does creating more wealth for the richest top one percent of the nation create good career jobs in Clinton or Idabel?

Younger, liberal Okies are going to be more active than ever during this political season. Will it be enough to convince state voters to vote for their own financial interests and the financial interests of their children? Probably not. The twenty-five-old conservative juggernaut, a corporate-sponsored takeover of national politics, cultural values, and organized religion did not happen overnight, and its overturn will take time, work, and patience, no matter who is elected president in the upcoming election. But I am encouraged by some recent developments.

My evidence is purely anecdotal, but here it is:

(1) Over the last few months, many of my younger students have become more outspoken about political views that challenge the conservative majority in this state, and many say they plan to vote for John Kerry this year. It is not uncommon for these energized students to express a great deal of anger towards President George Bush and his policies. I have not seen this political energy on the left in Oklahoma in the sixteen years I have taught college. In the past twenty-years, it has been difficult and even dangerous to speak out as a moderate or liberal in any Oklahoma institution, especially when the state's mainstream media is operated by right-wing extremists who refuse to

publish or present alternative views. In the face of the right-wing hate and meanness to which we have grown accustomed in the state, these students are both courageous and life affirming.

(2) I have been thanked repeatedly over the last few months by students who now realize the local and national mainstream media continues to slant the news to the right. For example, after giving out information about Web sites that expose right-wing propaganda and critique the so-called “mainstream” media, I’m often approached privately by students who thank me profusely for showing them plural and diverse views.

(3) A recent discussion board question in one of my classes asked students for their views on same-sex marriage. The students were overwhelmingly in favor of it, and many courageously confronted religious arguments against gay marriage. Just the fact some Oklahoma college students were willing to openly refute the ideas of religious fundamentalism is a sign to me that “the times they are a changing.” How encouraging to hear students say, again, “Government should get out of people’s personal lives.”

(4) A recent Oklahoma rally for presidential candidate Dennis Kucinich drew a large crowd of primarily young people who, for the most part, are committed to making sure President George Bush is not reelected. These younger people are, without doubt, some of the most intelligent citizens in the state right now. They are logical and passionate. They represent the optimistic, indomitable spirit and future of this country.

(5) Increasingly my students, most of who have to work to get through college, are miffed about tuition increases, and they put the blame on President George Bush’s reckless tax policies that have squeezed state budgets over the last couple of years. Many also see proposed changes by the Bush administration to the federal student loan program

as a direct assault on them personally. They realize the current presidential administration is against working-class students struggling to get an education.

(6) National and state organizations, such as Moveon.org and the Red River Democracy Project, continue to involve young voters on the Internet. Do not be surprised if this election produces the most voter participation of young people in the history of the country. Do not be surprised if Oklahomans under the age of twenty-five vote in record numbers as well.

I'm not suggesting the state's young people are in a state of serious rebellion yet, and many of my younger students still reflect the conservative Bible Belt views of their parents (it can be difficult to break with the ideology of parents, even when their political views can be toxic to their own children), but I believe young people on the left and in the middle are starting to speak out in college classrooms across this state as they increasingly see their own interests arrogantly dismissed by President Bush, Oklahoma's Republican politicians, and the right-wing Oklahoma media.

June 22, 2004

What's The Matter With Oklahoma?

What's the Matter with Kansas? is a relatively new book by Thomas Frank that explores a question which is getting a lot of attention these days. The question is how a majority of middle-class voters in states such as Kansas and Oklahoma, once hotbeds of populist revolt and even radicalism, came to believe they shared the same interests of millionaires and billionaires on Wall Street and elsewhere.

This vexing issue is particularly important in Oklahoma. A recent local poll of state voters shows Republican President George Bush far ahead of Democrat Senator John Kerry in the presidential race. This is typical news in conservative Oklahoma, but now more than ever, with middle-class Americans losing financial ground under the unfair fiscal policies of the Bush administration, it is important to ask the question: Why do Okies continue to vote against their financial interests?

Frank's answer to that question, when applied to Kansans, is to analyze the conservative juggernaut over the last thirty years and its success in creating a phony cultural war against a fictional liberal elite.

That applies to Oklahoma, as well, but our state has its own special story. In the last thirty years, we've had a conservative media, led by the right-wing *The Daily Oklahoman*. The newspaper constantly brainwashes its readers with unfair news coverage and an unbalanced editorial page. *The Tulsa World* is somewhat better, but that is a qualified "somewhat." By any definition, it is extremely conservative. Meanwhile, local television stations in Oklahoma and throughout the nation have simply given up on covering news with any depth or substance. And local talk and news radio is virtually all right-wing all the time. (For a refreshing alternative, check out Air America Radio.)

It is easy to get used to the stench when you are faced with it day after day.

As this right-wing takeover of the media ensued, the conservative mantra was always that "the media is liberal, the media is liberal," which is a lie. The mainstream media is big business devoted to profits, not truth. It has always been that way in this country.

Where and why did we lose that basic, non-partisan truth?

Why a majority of Oklahoma voters continue to believe the propaganda of the right-wing media is perplexing. For the vast majority of working-class Oklahomans, health insurance rates and medical costs continue to soar. Students and their parents face rising college tuition. Professional, well-paying jobs in Oklahoma continue to be scarce. The middle-class now pays proportionally more in federal taxes under the George Bush tax cuts, which favor the most wealthy in the country.

When I ask Oklahoma Republicans why they vote against their own financial interests, I am usually met with the barrage of conservative, untrue clichés about less government. Yet, today, the Republican Party, more than any other time in its history, stands for more intrusive government in people's lives, not less.

I have had this argument with a countless number of middle-class, lifestyle liberal Oklahomans who grew up to become Republicans. They vote with the wealthy elite and the country's religious extremists, which comprise a small part of the population. But the wealthy elite, by its very nature, will do everything in its power to acquire more wealth by lowering the incomes of the middle-class and the poor. That is historically true. It is a non-partisan truth. And the religious extremists will do everything in their power to stop some of the lifestyle choices made by many Oklahoma Republicans. For example, I know a lot of conservative Oklahomans who want the state to legalize six-point beer for

convenience stores. What state groups would be the first to stand up against this idea?

Religious groups. That is another non-partisan truth.

At what point will you stand up, I ask my conservative friends, and demand a decent living and decent health care for yourself and your children and millions of other working middle-class Oklahomans and Americans? Do you have to lose two or three or four jobs? Do you have to be homeless, on the street, begging? I ask, Why do you have to take me and my family down with you into the potential despair of lifelong low incomes or unemployment or unaffordable health care?

I always ask, What will it take to make you love yourself again and vote for your own interests?

September 1, 2004

Young Oklahoman Voters Can Make A Difference

A recent *New York Times* article confirms what I have been saying for months: There is a distinct increase in the political participation of younger people, ages 18-25, during this campaign season.

I have seen this surging political participation and interest among younger people rise dramatically at my university. Do not be surprised if young Oklahomans vote in record numbers during this upcoming election.

According to the *The Times'* Timothy Egan, "After dismal turnout by young voters in 2000, surveys this year show that interest in the election among the young is near the highest level it has reached at any time since 18- to 20-year-olds were given the vote in 1972. And state election officials say registration of new young voters is coming in at levels they have not seen in years."

I wrote about this issue in another post ("Young Oklahoman Voters Getting More Involved," June 22, 2004) months ago, and finally a major newspaper in this country acknowledged what has been blatantly obvious on college campuses for a long time. (It simply amazes me how conservative and out-of-touch the mainstream, corporate media has become. I am a longtime reader of *The Times*, but, come on, do reporters and editors ever get on the Internet, visit a college campus, or check out voter registration trends? This story is several months old.)

I believe the youth vote will break big for John Kerry here in Oklahoma and nationally. This is only anecdotal and limited to my experience with some students, but these young newcomers to the political arena are worried about rising college costs, the possibility of a draft for the Iraq war, and their future job prospects. Many young voters

feel alienated by both parties, true, but their concerns logically place them in the anti-Bush category. Also, these Okie young people are far more tolerant of alternative lifestyles than their parents and grandparents, and they are repulsed by the Republicans' anti-gay agenda.

Although Oklahoma voters will surely vote overall for Bush, the youth vote could be significant for U.S. Rep. Brad Carson, the Democrat running for the U.S. Senate in Oklahoma against Republican Tom Coburn. The youth vote could win it for Carson. A recent poll showed Carson with a slight lead over Coburn.

This is not to say the conservatives have given up on the youth vote. The College Republicans, of course, are extremely active on most university campuses, but I am unsure what logic and persuasion they can use on these new politically active young people who see nothing in their immediate future but rising college costs and less financial aid. It is a hard sell, for sure. The Republicans will need to reach deep into their weird bag of shallow clichés to convince most of the newly activated young people I know to vote against their own interests.

What I find most significant about this new youth activism in Oklahoma is how conservative parents and grandparents are now pitted against so many of their children and grandchildren. For example, how does a middle-class Republican grandmother ignore the astronomical rising health care costs her grandchildren face under the Bush administration? What about the budget deficit, the net loss of jobs, rising tuition, all major issues for young people? We can only assume this Oklahoma grandmother puts ideology before family.

This continuing disconnect between generations will play out in Oklahoma for years to come no matter who is elected president. It will have a huge impact on the state's ability to significantly grow in population and to create job opportunities for our young people. This new progressive movement among the state's younger voters should help us all.

September 14, 2004

What's The Matter With Oklahoma? Part II

In a recent post, I discussed Thomas Frank's book *What's the Matter with Kansas?* The book details how conservatives in places such as Kansas vote against their own best interests, destroying their communities and ensuring their children have bleak futures. As I previously argued, Frank's book could have been written about Oklahoma, which has become a bastion of right-wing conservatism. Like our neighbors to the north, Oklahomans consistently vote against their own interests.

This is an important issue that needs to be consistently revisited in Oklahoma. For example, polls show President George Bush with a commanding lead over Senator John Kerry in Oklahoma. Why do Oklahomans continue to vote against their own interests, and what will make them wake up to this reality?

A recent review of Frank's book in *The New York Review of Books*, points out that Frank sees America today as "a panorama of madness and delusion . . . of sturdy blue-collar patriots reciting the Pledge while they strangle their own life chances; of small farmers proudly voting themselves off the land; of devoted family men carefully seeing to it that their children will never be able to afford college or proper health care; of working class guys . . . deliver[ing] up a landslide for a candidate whose policies will end their way of life [and] transform their region into 'rustbelts,' [and] strike people like them blows from which they will never recover."

All of this is applicable to Oklahoma. Why would an Oklahoman father or mother vote to ensure their children have inadequate health care or no opportunity for a college education? Why would someone in Ponca City or Newkirk or Clinton vote to ensure their city dies a slow and painful death? Why would a grandmother in Tulsa make sure her

grandchildren have no job opportunities in Oklahoma. Have we become so morally bankrupt in places like Oklahoma and Kansas and Nebraska that we no longer care about real family values, like making sure our children can go to the doctor, or has the right-wing snookered people into thinking it represents their best interests?

Obviously, the answer is that the right-wing extremists have hoodwinked middle America's electorate. They have done so through shallow yet consistent sloganeering and media manipulation. For example, look how long *The Daily Oklahoman* has refused to allow any progressive voices on its editorial page. The newspaper is unfair and unbalanced. It is ultimately a detriment to the vast majority of the state's residents.

What will George Bush do for Oklahoma? Nothing. If he is reelected, our insurance premiums (if we even have health insurance) will continue to rise, our job opportunities will be diminished, our taxes will go to support the quagmire in Iraq, small farmers will continue to lose their lands, and our smallest rural communities will continue their long suffering demise. I could go on and on.

John Kerry has announced his plans to help middle-class Americans by creating jobs and making health care more affordable. You do not hear Bush consistently talking about these issues because his stewardship of the American economy has been a miserable failure.

It is time for conservative Oklahoma residents to wake up to the reality of the right-wing lies. And it is time for Oklahoma progressives to quit backing down in the face of the right-wing juggernaut and speak up.

October 1, 2004

Oklahoma Blogs Change Media Landscape

Local writer Deborah Benjamin has an interesting article this week in the *Oklahoma Gazette* (October 6, 2004) about the growing influence of blogs. My blog, Okie Funk, was one of eleven state blogs listed in a sidebar accompanying the article.

Benjamin's story essentially shows how bloggers have become an important factor in covering politics these days. She points out how bloggers were responsible for the Trent Lott story that brought about his demise after he made racist comments at a Strom Thurmond birthday party and also for the recent CBS debacle over the disputed National Guard documents.

The story also points out the tension between mainstream, corporate media apologists who caution readers to watch out for those bad, bad, misinformed blogs and those who see blogging as a much-needed revolution in how American culture will now report the news and tell its story.

I am with the second group. I believe blogs are changing the media landscape in powerful ways, and this is a healthy, significant trend that may ultimately ensure our democracy. (That is not hyperbole, people. That is the cold and bitter truth about the current condition of our federal government and its corporate media toadies.)

For example, I wonder how quasi-fascist and theocratic our one-party federal government would be right now without populist blogs and without the influence of current net-centered grassroots political movements, such as Moveon.org?

Look at the corporate media in Oklahoma right now. *The Daily Oklahoman*, *The Tulsa World*, and all the mediocre news programs on our television stations in Oklahoma City

and Tulsa are out-of-touch, boring, most often repulsively and divisively right-wing, and indifferent to their audience. Their only motive is to make as much money as possible.

For example, where has the mainstream, corporate media in Oklahoma been the last few months as voter registration has risen in our state and as students on our college campuses have become more politically active? I do not pretend to have broken this story, but Okie Funk reported on this issue in June.

The so-called mainstream media in Oklahoma and throughout this country is old, broken, and becoming increasingly useless for those of us wanting to stay truly informed. Everything it presents is filtered through an outdated frame of conservative and backward-looking ideology, and that includes newspapers such as *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. (I wonder if even these powerful newspapers would have the guts to stand up to sedition laws like editors and publishers did in 1798.)

In addition, the Internet is changing the rules about how the most intelligent and informed people in our culture get their news. Anyone with Internet access and the desire to stay current can read an almost infinite number of publications and political sites from throughout the country and world each day.

You can expect blogs to continue their growing contribution to American news and culture. That is our future.

October 6, 2004

Heartland Progressives Need To Keep Fighting

The only thing clear about Tuesday's election results is that progressives need to keep fighting, and we need to fight for our true values and ideas, not for some type of insipid, centrist ideology that only serves to validate the right-wing. If we cannot do that, then our ridiculous pseudo-conservatism ultimately becomes the error of our destruction. Let me explain.

Nicholas Kristof, writing in the *New York Times*, argues like me--and let me say I have been screaming this for years and years and years--that Democrats need to reconnect with what he calls the country's "heartland," an overused, romantic term for a segment of the country becoming increasingly poor as it votes against its economic interests in favor of so-called cultural issues, such as banning gay marriage. This heartland includes places such as Oklahoma, Texas, Kansas, Nebraska, Missouri, and even places such as Ohio and Iowa.

What Kristof and I vehemently disagree about is how the progressives get there. For Kristof, it is a matter of religion. He writes, progressives "should be feeling wretched about the millions of farmers, factory workers and waitresses who ended up voting - utterly against their own interests - for Republican candidates." This is true enough.

But then Kristof argues, "To appeal to middle America, Democratic leaders don't need to carry guns to church services and shoot grizzlies on the way. But a starting point would be to shed their inhibitions about talking about faith, and to work more with religious groups."

If Democrats were to take Kristof's advice, it would be the beginning of the end for the party. Why in the world would a conservative person vote for a watered-down version

of evangelical reality when George Bush and his cult are ready to hand you the farm by outlawing abortion, appointing ultra-conservative U.S. Supreme Court judges, and fighting religious crusades against a constantly shifting axis of evil? What religious moderates remain in the heartland have been silenced by their fears and their consistent duplicity with the religious extremists.

No, the answer is, and I know I risk sounding clichéd, education. Education levels remain lower in the heartland than on the coasts, of course, and that is an important issue for progressives. But, more importantly, coastal progressives, with their power and enfranchisement in major American institutions, need to help out the fledgling progressive movements in middle America. They can do this by empowering those of us who speak out for separation of church and state and economic justice against a tidal wave of right-wing extremism in places such as Oklahoma. They can help us get our message out on a day-to-day basis.

For example, I am an avid fan of the *New York Times* columnist and professor Paul Krugman for what he argues in his newspaper columns, but he does not have to fight against the conservative juggernaut on a realistic, personal level day-to-day. He warns us about George Bush in eloquent terms, but he fails, as do many, many others, to meaningfully support those of us who are fighting in the trenches. I am sure Krugman did not turn out one extra vote in Oklahoma this year. Look at the results.

This may well mean that coastal progressives need to actually visit the heartland, not as elite speakers or writers or professors or movie producers but as committed people truly interested in safeguarding democracy against an increasing theocratic political movement. In addition, coastal progressives need to help fund local publications, Web

sites, and radio programs. We need to build a movement that expresses core democratic and secular values. We need to stand for the opposite of religious extremism.

Yet I fear the only thing that will possibly move coastal progressives to real action in the heartland is if their way of life actually becomes threatened in some serious way. If the country continues to move to the right and flirt with a type of Christian quasi-fascism as it has these past four years, then that may well happen soon enough.

But by then it might be too late. There will be no progressive voices at all in the heartland. We will all be huddled in our New York apartments waiting for our next ration of Orwellian Victory Gin as the huge and growing Christian theocracy tramples our rights, destroys our individuality, and marches ominously eastward and westward with its miserable, dark ideology.

New York, California, listen up. Those are the marching sounds of a fanatical religious army on its way to get you.

November 11, 2004

Don't Just Stand There, Argue!

I don't know how many times I've been approached recently by a populist Okie who wants some advice on how to argue with those right-wing Oklahoma dimwits who would close all the public schools and give every bit of state money to rich people like the Gaylord family, which owns the ultra-conservative newspaper, *The Daily Oklahoman*.

So here are some pointers:

Turn The Argument Back On Them. Ask these Oklahoma dimwits what they expect to gain from policies that privilege the extremely wealthy over the middle-class in the state. Do they make more than \$200,000 a year? If not, ask these questions: Do you think weakening workers' rights will help you? Do you think declining salaries for working class people is a good thing for Oklahoma? Do you agree with skyrocketing health care costs and insurance? What exactly has Republican politics done for your pocketbook? Now some of these dimwits are going to lie and act as if they have a lot of money, even if you know they are unemployed. LET THEM LIE, but let them know in a subtle way that you know they know you know they are lying. You can't stop someone from hating themselves, but you can let them know—privately, of course—that you're there for them when they come crashing down from their nationalistic high.

Counter The Reductionist Sloganeering. Make these dimwits counter every right-wing slogan and cliché with facts and numbers. You be prepared with evidence. Read, read, read, and then read some more. Do not let one conservative lie or distortion go unchallenged in your presence. Cite newspapers and magazine articles. Be ready to provide authors' names and article titles. Follow up with an email that contains links to

your articles. You might say, “I can’t remember when it was published exactly but give me your email, and I will send you the link.” Then do it.

Do Not Back Down, And Bring Up The Issues. Now is the time to confront those people in your immediate circle who hold right-wing views. Do it, get it over with, and try to make a difference. There is no time to waste. You have work to do for your country. This is, perhaps, the most important presidential election in American history. You are individually responsible.

Don’t Argue With Idiots. If you have to leave to keep the peace with colleagues, then leave, so you can fight another day. Let the dimwits stew in their own ignorance. But, remember, these are times for dramatic and symbolic gestures. Be prepared to receive the full hatred and onslaught of the right-wing attack machine if you stand up for what is right.

Go Over Your Arguments. Make sure you know your arguments thoroughly, and you have logic and evidence. Practice with your populist friends. Don’t be afraid to make a mistake, and don’t be afraid to correct a mistake. We’re honest. The right-wing lies and distorts.

Specialize. There is simply so much wrong with the current government right now, that it is hard to keep up with everything. So pick three or four issues that you can argue. You might begin with this statement, “The four main reasons George Bush should not be reelected is” or “I’m against the torture of prisoners because . . .” or “I believe our country is headed towards fascism because . . .”

Keep It Local. What did Ronald Reagan or George Bush ever do for Oklahoma? Under both presidencies, the state economy tanked. Reagan’s deregulation policies were

directly responsible for the state's oil boom going bust (he supported OPEC and increased our dependence on Middle East oil) and the savings and loans banking scandals, which resulted in dozens of Oklahoma bank closings. Bush continued Reagan's policies that increased the disparity between the richest Oklahomans and middle-class Okies. Sure, you may have received a small tax cut, but tuition costs and health care costs are soaring. It's all rhetoric.

December 5, 2004

Okie Dilemma: Staying Sane In The Radical Right's Favorite State

The recent election and its ensuing fallout has left me confronting once again the issue of powerlessness of progressives and liberals in Oklahoma.

What is there to do? The election has brought home the fact Oklahoma seems light years away from embracing policies and ideas that would help the state residents prosper. In fact, with the new Republican majority in the Oklahoma House, and with Tom Coburn in Washington, we can only expect a continuation of weird and radical pronouncements and proposed legislation.

All of it would be real funny if so much were not at stake.

I envision the Oklahoma Republicans will focus their attention on issues such as limiting women's rights over their own bodies, creationist disclaimers for science textbooks that contain theories of evolution, tax relief for the most wealthy in the state, and school prayer. Watch for Republican-sponsored legislation calling for a constitutional amendment limiting state budget growth. The Orwellian-named Taxpayer Bill of Rights, along with other proposed legislation, would ultimately cut public school funding at all levels and give major tax breaks to a relatively small group of wealthy people in Oklahoma.

In addition, U.S. Senator Tom Coburn, already considered a freakish, right-wing extremist by the national media, will undoubtedly continue to advocate killing doctors who perform abortions or talk about the takeover of Oklahoma public schools by lesbians.

The Daily Oklahoman, meanwhile, will continue its editorial distortions and omissions, ensuring its immoral, extreme views help keep the state's residents in the dark

about the gutting of Social Security or the Iraq war. (Perhaps, we should rename the state Gaylordahoma. I wonder how much that would cost the Gaylord family?)

And, for the most part, Democratic leaders in Oklahoma will stay silent or join with the Republicans for the sake of ideology or expediency.

So, again, what is there to do?

Listen. If you are a progressive from Oklahoma, there is really no reason to get depressed. Like me, you are used to the contradictions and ignorance that fuel this state's politics and support the state's wealthiest power brokers. You, too, have argued to no avail with those Okie right-wingers who have and will lose money, health insurance benefits, and job opportunities under the current conservative juggernaut in the state and throughout the nation.

So what I urge you to do, if you have not done so already, is extract yourself philosophically from the one-party, conservative system in Oklahoma and, along with other progressives, try to create something new here. We sincerely have nothing to lose. We are already completely marginalized and under fire by the state's power structure.

The state Democrats will certainly want us to work within the confines and ideology of the party, of course. But if the national trend is for Democrats to become even more Republican-light in face of the recent election, you can imagine what this means for the Oklahoma Democratic Party, which is headed by Jay Parmley. By all accounts, Parmley is a good man, but his public views are probably shaped far more by conservative legislators in his own party than progressive Democrats.

One good sign on the Democratic front is that Howard Dean has announced he is running for chair of the Democratic National Committee. But do not hold your breath.

We saw how the party ostracized him during the campaign. Party leaders could do it again.

At my university, we have formed a progressive coalition, the UCOPc, and anyone who shares our ideas is invited to join. I imagine there are other such organizations popping up throughout the state at universities or at other institutions not completely taken over yet by the right-wing.

In addition, I plan to continue to argue with those Oklahoma conservatives who have been blinded by deceitful right-wing rhetoric. This rhetoric is based on appeals to nationalism, patriotism, and religion. These are powerful concepts that have never been based on logic or rationality, so it makes our task extremely difficult.

Yet our continuing commitment to the rules of evidence, rationality, cause and effect, logic, and truth is what will keep us sane in this state.

January 10, 2005

***The Jungle* Has Contemporary Significance**

Upton Sinclair's classic 1906 novel *The Jungle* exposed the horrible working conditions of immigrant, meat packing workers and the health problems posed by mass food production during the early 1900s in this country. The novel's impact was so enormous it brought about the creation of the Pure Food and Drugs Act and a new awareness of the plight of workers in this country.

In response to the book, then President Theodore Roosevelt said, ". . . radical action must be taken to do away with the efforts of arrogant and selfish greed on the part of the capitalist."

The novel shows the sordid degradation of turn-of-the-century immigrant workers who were forced to work in grueling, unsafe jobs for ridiculously low wages. Sections of the novel dealing with the stench and filth of the meat packing houses are graphic and shocking.

But what strikes me as most significant about the novel these days is Sinclair's direct appeal to morality and values among his readership. Sinclair could count on readers who believed it was wrong to either treat impoverished people cruelly or to ignore their plight altogether.

Sinclair was a socialist. *The Jungle* was published during a time period in which red-states like Oklahoma were part of the broader socialistic movement in this country. In Oklahoma, the ideas of socialism and Christianity were intertwined to form a moral value system more compassionate than the Orwellian-named family-values ideology now embraced by the right-wing religious faithful who want to create a quasi-Christian government.

Jim Bissett's 1999 book, *Agrarian Socialism in America: Marx, Jefferson, and Jesus in the Oklahoma Countryside, 1904–1920* reminds us that the Socialist Party of America candidate for Oklahoma governor in 1914 received 20 percent of the vote. Oklahoma, arguably, had the most active socialist movement in the country during this time period.

But historical politics aside, Sinclair could count on a wide audience with shared values—virtually inconceivable in today's divided America—that cared deeply when poor people were treated like animals so wealthy people could become wealthier. So this is not an argument for socialism. Socialism, as a formal political argument, did not invent human compassion. Sinclair was relying on something much larger and older in terms of morality to connect with the morals and values of his readership.

I have re-read *The Jungle* a few times during my fourteen years as an Oklahoma professor. Never has the novel struck me as so remarkably different in terms of its 1905 values and prevailing contemporary values in the state than this time around as I read the novel again to prepare for a class I am teaching.

The novel leaves me wondering this: How did so many of our state's voters get so far removed and indifferent to a basic, intuitive value system that believes in providing for the less fortunate and treating all people with common dignity and decency?

How is it that the right-wing religious voters in Oklahoma allow the government to continue to cut aid to poor people, to children, to the elderly, as they sanction the redistribution of wealth to the state's richest residents?

How much is too much money for the Gaylord family or the state's millionaire oil company executives?

For the most part, Oklahoma Christian fundamentalists have turned away from any recognizable moral system, either one that is secular, historical and philosophical or one based on their own privileged document, the Bible. (I keep trying to find that passage in the Bible where Jesus says it is okay to let children suffer so rich people can live in mansions.)

Fundamentalists here in this state condemn, judge, and hate, using wedge issues such as gay marriage, but overall they leave the work of caring for poor people, disadvantaged children, and the elderly to religious and secular people on the left. In fact, the fundamentalists vote to ensure the most disadvantaged people in our culture suffer.

This brazen and open lack of morality is illustrated by a February 14, 2005 editorial in *The Daily Oklahoman*, the right-wing's favorite, morally-bankrupt newspaper. The editorial argues against two recent state proposals to raise the minimum wage, saying "some jobs will be lost" in the state. Yet the editorial does not provide direct evidence that this is the case because it simply is not true.

How can the ultra-rich, principal owners of this newspaper—a monopoly that can never be challenged under the prevailing reality of contemporary capitalism—allow the minimum wage issue to be so summarily dismissed in the newspaper's pages without at least allowing different points of view to be heard? Do they have no shame? Do they have no hearts? To the anonymous writer of the editorial I would say this: Next time an elderly person bags your groceries or checks you out at the drugstore, remember they probably do NOT want to work at a menial job for low wages.

Give me the still recognizable and time-honored values of human compassion taught by Upton Sinclair's novel, values validated by both the long history of human ideas and

compassion and any honest interpretation of the Christian religion. These values will never be dated. They will live on as long as humans can breathe and think.

February 15, 2005

Starving The Beast In Oklahoma

George Bush and the Republicans continue to betray those hard-working Oklahomans who reelected the president and gave the state's House of Representatives a GOP majority for the first time in decades.

You might think staunch red states such as Oklahoma would be flushed with federal dollars now that Bush has a second term. But then you would be wrong. Bush cares only about the super rich, the country's elite aristocracy, not people trying to eke out a living in a relatively poor state like Oklahoma. It is a part of an overall, GOP strategy to "starve the beast," which I will talk about later.

First, here is what red-state Oklahoma is getting for its overwhelming conservative votes:

(1) The president wants to drastically cutback on farm subsidies. Those subsidies are primarily granted to wheat, rice and corn farmers. As you know, Oklahoma is a major wheat producer. Family farms in the state are sure to suffer, along with rural communities whose businesses are dependent on farm income. In addition, the farm subsidy rollbacks are sure to put our country's food supply in jeopardy and make it more vulnerable to bioterrorism attacks. Do you really want to buy your bread from unmonitored and non-inspected exporters?

(2) The Oklahoma House Republicans announced a plan they later withdrew to study the issue of school consolidation. Their intention is to close as many schools as possible in the state. But closing schools in some rural, Oklahoma towns would effectively close down the towns. That is not hyperbole. Local schools are the center of many rural communities in the state. The Republicans are sure to bring up the plan again this year

under some type of rhetorical disguise. Will the right-wing, Gaylord-owned newspaper, *The Daily Oklahoman*, even report on the issue before it is passed? Probably not.

(3) President Bush plans to eliminate the GEAR UP and TRIO programs, which help prepare low-income students for college. Oklahoma has a low college graduate rate compared to the national average. These programs can help Oklahoma create more college graduates, which, in turn, helps the state compete for businesses. These are relatively inexpensive programs that even have some local, Republican support. But do not count on Bush listening to our ineffective, right-wing cabal of Washington politicians.

All these attacks on Oklahoma are part of an overall right-wing strategy to “starve the beast.” Some argue this term originated during the Reagan administration. Essentially, the starve-the-beast strategy is based on Republican ideology to reduce taxes on the country’s most wealthy citizens and then use the ensuing budget deficits as an excuse to cut programs aimed at the middle-class and poor.

As part of the strategy, the Republicans maintain taxes on the middle class, so average-income Americans develop an irrational hatred for the government. For example, much has been written lately about the Alternative Minimum Tax, which is a middle-class tax. Many middle-class Americans are finding this year that their taxes are rising dramatically because of the AMT. Do not count on the Republicans to do anything about it. They need a middle class with misplaced anger to destroy programs such as Social Security.

Now, no one wants wasteful government, and government spending and programs should always be closely monitored, but the starve-the-beast strategy is designed to create and maintain a small oligarchy of rich elites in this country on the backs of hard-working red-staters in places such as Oklahoma.

I am in favor of the least amount of government as possible, a belief I share with many of my conservative and libertarian friends, but I also know it is immoral for the super rich to get richer as family farms go out of business, small, rural communities lose their schools, and low-income people are denied an opportunity to go to college.

The Republicans in power in Washington and Oklahoma today want you to pay more in taxes, more for college tuition, more for health insurance, more for groceries, more in fuel costs, more, more, more, and they want to redistribute this money to the super rich. Then they want you to be angry at some non-existent and vague mythology about big government and progressives as you try to make ends meet and provide a decent future for your children.

Who do you think benefits the most under the Bush administration, red-state Oklahoma farmers or blue-state Wall Street bankers? The answer to that question says it all.

February 22, 2005

Oklahoma Progressives Need To Network

At a recent local event to raise awareness about women's reproductive rights, I introduced myself to Oklahoma political lobbyist, Keith Smith. I receive organizational emails from Smith, who is associated with Oklahoma's chapter of the Sierra Club, and he and I share the same basic political views. I respect and admire the work he does for local progressive causes. I thought I would shake his hands and thank him and maybe let him know about Okie Funk. It was no big deal.

So, needless to say, I was somewhat surprised when Smith immediately admonished me to get more involved in progressive issues. He said this in a pleasant way, of course, but it struck a sensitive nerve with me. This is because he does not know me. I am pretty sure he knows nothing about this blog, for example, or about the progressive coalition at my university, or about my progressive pieces in *The Oklahoma Observer*, or about my work with other progressive organizations and publications, or . . . I could go on and on. I guess this is Smith's shtick. I mumbled something back to him about how I was there contributing money at this particular function he supported and so what more did he want, really, and then I left his table feeling lectured and, frankly, a little bit patronized. My thoughts went something like this: Why doesn't Smith lecture all those people who DID NOT show up at the event? What is the point, really, about political participation in Oklahoma unless you are an extreme conservative?

And so Oklahoma progressives lose and the conservatives and right-wing extremists win.

I think this trivial incident—and it is extremely trivial—illustrates perfectly the need for all the growing progressive organizations and people in Oklahoma to start working

closely together. Obviously, I support Smith's work, and I will continue to do so. But we do not know each other, and we probably never will. Why would he automatically assume I am an apathetic political novice just becoming enlightened and activated by his emails? In addition, just because people like Smith send out a lot of emails does not necessarily mean they are actually doing anything but sending out emails. A listserv is easy, folks, and there is so much email clutter these days that it is becoming somewhat pointless as well. I do not think we can win back this country through emails. I do not think we can take Oklahoma back to its progressive roots through emails. No, and I seriously mean this, everyone has to actually show up in person. (Methinks, I hear a collective liberal gasp from Elk City to Oklahoma City to Tulsa.)

Right now, the progressive movement in Oklahoma is fragmented and splintered. We do not know each other. That is my argument, anyway. Take it or leave it. Maybe it will always be that way because, overall, we are a small group marginalized by the state's right-wing power structure. Maybe it is useless, and we should just shut up and get drunk or move to New York or Los Angeles like so many other former Oklahoma liberals. Maybe the quasi-fascists have won already and what we are doing here is just the last gasp of democracy before the coming theocracy. (Certainly, Oklahoma could be one of the first theocratic states in the union, right?) Soon, we could be sipping our Orwellian Victory gin in our tiny New York apartments waiting for the next religious edict to come down from the White House. Sometimes, that seems even better than living here in the red-state sea of "W" supporters.

Yet. And there is a very significant “yet.” Yet, and I speak with all my heart here, I have never seen this level of liberal and progressive activism in the state before. Never. Some of us are making connections, some of us are setting aside differences, some of us are not making generalized assumptions about people or exuding that tired leftist hubris. But there is much work to be done. The battle is going to be a long one, too. We will not win this on the cheap. There will probably be no single magic moment when it all comes together, just hard work and more hard work in the face of one disappointment after another as the Bush administration and the Oklahoma right-wing flaunt their power and rub it in our faces day after day.

Here are five pre-2006 election arguments I want you to consider:

(1) **The Party.** The Oklahoma Democratic Party needs to reach out to all progressives, even those it might deem too leftist for this particular state at this particular time. Please. I do not care if you are a leftist, semi-anarchist at heart or a centrist, right-leaning Democrat in the Joe Lieberman tradition. We all share many of the same beliefs. Everyone can play their part in the drama. Let’s set aside our differences to ensure Brad Henry is reelected, the Republicans do not get control of the state senate, and the Democrats win back the house.

(2) **Young People.** Let’s go out of our way to applaud the efforts of our young people when they take an active role in promoting progressive causes. For example, a group of UCO students recently published *The Progressive Voice*, a publication dealing with liberal issues and concerns. This publication and those who work on it deserve our support. But there are surely other state university groups working on progressive causes

as well. Find them, recognize them, and encourage them. I think it was James Carville who said, “Democrats eat their young.” I agree with that. It is time to change.

(3) **Blogs.** We need to recognize and support the many progressive and liberal blogs that are now online in the state. More and more people are getting their information online, and blogs are shaking up the conservative media landscape in valuable ways for progressives. This is a major opportunity for us.

(4) **Progressive Experience.** There are new progressive organizations in the state, and some of them are doing a great job, from the Red River Democracy Project to the Oklahoma Independent Media Center to the local spin-off organization of the Howard Dean meet-ups, but we should not forget those progressives who have toiled away in Oklahoma City for years. These people have validity and connections and pull and followers. I am thinking of people like Frosty Troy, editor of *The Oklahoma Observer*, the Rev. Robin Meyers, pastor of Mayflower Congregational UCC Church, and Nathaniel Batchelder, director of Oklahoma City’s Peace House. Obviously, there are others, but my point is we should draw on our experience just as we support our young people.

(5) **Find Your Niche.** I tell every progressive I know to find what they can do to contribute no matter how small or how specific. If you can write, then write. If you have some extra money, then donate to a progressive organization. If you have the time to walk the halls of the state Capitol, then do it. Maybe you can respond to a Oklahoma populist blog, or maybe your role is simply to argue with conservative friends and family members about your beliefs. Choose your role and be consistent. Make yourself aware about the issues, and then explain these issues to those people in your life who only get their news from right-wing cable television.

Obviously, this is not an inclusive list, and I am sure I have left out some important local organization or person or some particularly important issue.

These are grave times. That is not hyperbole or overstatement. We need to come together now. I do not care if the next significant election will be the first time you have ever voted in your life or if you are a long-time Oklahoma political activist in favor of liberal causes and issues or if you are the centrist Governor Brad Henry himself.

Everyone should be welcome at the progressive table in this state.

And, please, before we admonish progressives to do more, let's pat people on the back for what they have already accomplished.

April 21, 2005

Cash, Double-Speak, And Howard Dean

Here is the latest newsflash from Oklahoma to all you coastal progressives who wonder why the red-staters will not come to their senses and vote your way.

The number one reason we, the progressives, cannot win back the so-called heartland is because of the rancid arrogance of the national and local Democratic leadership, which systematically excludes decent, forward-thinking people who want to get involved. I just experienced a perfect symbolic example of the Democrats' exclusionary philosophy here in my conservative state.

See, in Oklahoma these days, it costs \$50 to maybe, just maybe, meet Democratic National Committee Chair Howard Dean. Unfortunately, that cuts out a lot of my middle-class college students who, along with me, supported Dean's presidential candidacy and then went full out for Kerry later. Obviously, Howard Dean does not care about them. These students, many of them politically motivated for the first time in their lives, simply do not have the \$50 to spare. They are currently faced with rising college tuition and living costs. Many of them work long hours at jobs to make ends meet. That \$50 is needed for food, clothes, books.

The \$50 come-see-Dean fee, charged by the Oklahoma Democrats, reeks of tacky elitism and hubris and money worship, all the things I despise about Republican ideology. This is utter nonsense to Oklahoma grassroots progressives, and we are growing in number, and we have something to say. You do not change ingrained mindsets with money. You do it by showing up, by paying attention to people's ideas, by being yourself, and by honestly arguing your convictions.

We find it absurd that anyone has to pay the price of a concert ticket to see and “maybe” meet Dean for a few minutes. (The local newspaper reported that he was at the event for a staggering thirty minutes.) Grassroots, my arse. This is the way the GOP operates. Pay up the bucks, and then buy some influence. What is ironic is that our \$50 or even our \$5,000 will not buy us anything, ultimately, because the Democrats are going down again if this remains our modus operandi.

Fifty dollars? For what? Why not just ask for contributions? Why set a fee? We thought the Dean juggernaut was about grassroots and reaching out to people. We thought Dean was going to take the party in the direction of inclusion and motivating young people. We thought Dean really meant it when he called himself the “Democratic wing of the Democratic Party.”

So this is how it went down, folks. I received an automated email from the local Democratic political machine. (Listserves mean you do not have to actually do anything or know anyone.) Here is the important part:

“We have received great news!

The Democratic National Committee just informed us that Chairman Dean has arranged his schedule to include a visit to the Sooner State. Let's make him feel welcome on his first visit to Oklahoma as our national chairman!

You Are Invited to Meet Democratic National Committee Chairman Governor
Howard Dean, M.D.

Thursday, May 12, 2005

IBEW Hall

1700 S.E. 15th Street

SE 15th and I-35

Oklahoma City, OK

6:30 p.m. - 7:30 p.m.

\$50 per person

Ahem. Fifty dollars? Reservations? (You now need to make reservations to watch the Dems go down again and again.) For one hour? And so thus spoke Okie Funk:

“Hi, ...

“I’m a local college professor who writes a local, progressive blog, <http://www.okiefunk.com>. I’m baffled as to why it costs \$50 to meet Howard Dean. I can certainly afford it, but my students cannot afford it. Can you imagine a regular, middle-class Oklahoma college student paying \$50 to maybe, just maybe, shake hands with the great Dean? I even offered to pay for one of my students, but he felt so weirded out about the cost that he wouldn’t do it. Why do Democrats hate their young?”

His response back to me was a terse formal email that said the \$50 was only a “suggested” contribution. But I quoted the initial email verbatim. There was nothing in it about “suggested” donations. So why didn’t the local Democrats send out a correction to the initial email? How come Dean’s people did not step in and say, “Hey, why don’t we let everyone attend? Why don’t we at least let the college kids in for free? Say, that college professor might have a point. Let’s give everyone a seat at the political table.”

I do not turn anyone away from my table if they are hungry or thirsty. This is Oklahoma tradition. It is set in stone and written in the blood of all those who suffered and died here in the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl era in the 1930s. It took moral Oklahomans such as Woody Guthrie and Will Rogers to get this country back to its

Oklahoma And The Immoral Corporate Model

The corporatization of all facets of life in Oklahoma—from corporate welfare through massive tax cuts and financial incentives for businesses to corporate models of education to corporate naming sponsorship of public stadiums, arenas, and buildings—mirrors what is happening throughout the country.

Yet I cannot help thinking this trend, like every other right-wing trend, is a bit more crass and obvious here. The mainstream, corporate media here, for example, allows no public debate of the takeover of the state by a relatively few rich people, a local oligarchy intent on increasing their personal wealth at the expense of the public good. Can you imagine the difference it would make in this state if *The Daily Oklahoman* and the local television and radio stations offered consistent alternative views to corporate worship?

Ironically, though, the corporate model and privatization movement can now only be considered as communist in its implications and identity. How else can it be defined these days? Corporate apologists have for years tried to associate their ideology with free, democratic markets and capitalism, but no rational-thinking person can now think the huge corporations in Oklahoma or the world's multinational corporations are vested in democracy. No, it is just the opposite.

Our modern, prevailing interpretations of post-World War II communism exactly describe the current corporate welfare movement in this country. Communism, not Marxism or socialism, implies a corrupt, centralized power structure that serves only its own needs for power and wealth. It regenerates itself. And that is what we have in Oklahoma and this country right now. The late French deconstructionist Jacques Derrida

and British writer George Orwell, who wrote *1984*, have been completely validated at the beginning of the twenty-first century. This has been predicted.

Let us take an initial look at some members of the current Oklahoma politburo, creating a subversive gesture or establishing what we might call, ironically, progressive think-tank fodder here in this archconservative state. Whatever we name our gesture, however, we do need a relentless, continuing analysis of the local oligarchy.

In the Oklahoma City area, you have a cabal of executives from three major energy companies, Larry Nichols of Devon, Aubrey McClendon and Tom Ward of Chesapeake, and Luke Corbett of Kerr-McGee. I think it is fair to say that the core philosophy of each of these companies is ultra-conservative and, overall, harmful to our country's planet and citizens. Millions upon millions of people throughout the country and world agree with me here. In addition, there is Christy Gaylord Everest, of the Oklahoma Publishing Company, whose flagship newspaper is still tied to archaic and immoral methods of production and anti-free speech ideology, and then Bob Funk of Express Personnel. Funk also owns the Oklahoma City Blazers and the Oklahoma City RedHawks.

Certainly there are others, and we should not forget those multinational and national corporations with plants and business here, such as General Motors (GM recently announced it is terminating 25,000 employees), Hertz, and Wal-Mart, and all the telecommunication firms, but I believe these people—Nichols, McClendon, Ward, Corbett, Everest, and Funk—are a good representative example of a particular immoral segment of the Oklahoma power structure. Let us name them and remember their names for the sake of open discussion, and let us consider them the inaugural subjects of our tentative analysis of the local Okie oligarchy, realizing we can later amend and certainly

add to our referential and now ironic post-modern communist list. These corporate welfare advocates have gained domination by expressing an ideology that criticized the parallel ideology of former communists. But, alas, their ideology is just an augmentation of communism, not an antithesis.

The only real aim of all these corporate executives is to transfer as much wealth as possible to themselves and their major stockholders. They want you to believe this is somehow a reflection of American mythology and American democracy when, in fact, it is a form of influence and power which can only be described as communist in the strictest Stalinistic interpretation of the word.

Here are four recent, local examples of how the oligarchy works in Oklahoma:

(1) McClendon and Ward each donated \$250,000 a piece to elect ultra-conservative Tom Coburn to the U.S. Senate. Coburn will now funnel as much government money as he can into the bank accounts of these two executives through tax breaks and financial incentives for their company.

(2) Larry Nichols was instrumental in passing the recent legislation that supposedly reformed the state's workers compensation insurance program. In fact, the legislation only rewards huge corporations like Devon.

(3) Everest's newspaper, *The Daily Oklahoman* does not allow progressive views on its editorial page, and many of the paper's reporters omit and distort the news to reward the corporate politburo. This is an old story, true, but it continues today. Let us not forget, as well, how the Gaylord family conned taxpayers into funding the construction of the Bass Pro building in Bricktown. The family are major stockholders of Bass Pro.

(4) Funk was considering launching (or rather, shall we say, funding?) a petition drive so his company would have to pay less in workers compensation insurance, and thus he could make even more money. His petition drive would have had the full endorsement of *The Daily Oklahoman* and the rest of the Oklahoma politburo. His petition-drive threat had to be instrumental in the legislature's recent passage of the anti-worker bill.

Here is how Oklahoma's own late Will Rogers once bluntly put it: "All these big moneyed people, they are just like the underworld—they all know each other and kinder work together."

As corporate welfare becomes more entrenched here in Oklahoma and the country, many people, like people did in the former Soviet Union, see things as natural or normal. Our quality of life declines—health care, health insurance, college tuition, energy, retirement, food costs go up—because of what the Oklahoma politburo will refer to as uncontrollable outside factors, such as Saddam Hussein's fictional weapons of mass destruction. Meanwhile, they manipulate the most ignorant people in our culture by financially supporting politicians who immorally use cultural wedge issues, such as anti-gay marriage amendments, to arouse hate and anger in people. (Hitler did the same thing in 1935.)

Meanwhile, the corporate model of education, based on the ugly, barnacle-spotted tentacles of corporate welfare, is destroying the chances of regular, middle-class Oklahomans to get a decent education. Public schools are tied to corporate-like, quantification assessment tests, under the name of reform, that ultimately hurt the schools that house our culture's most vulnerable and middle-class people. Teacher salaries are intentionally kept near poverty levels as Nichols, McClendon, Ward, Corbett, Everest,

and Funk make more and more money. That is the intention of the so-called reform, which is really not reform at all but destruction of the public schools system. And, as college tuition skyrockets and the federal government under President George Bush offers less money in financial aid, our public universities now offer less and less education for more and more money. Is it possible to achieve the American Dream, whatever that may mean to you, through education under these prevailing corporate ideologies about education? Many significant American writers and thinkers do not think so. I have my doubts as well.

Do you want to go see the Oklahoma Sooners play football? Well, you have to go to The Gaylord Family Stadium. Cowboys fan? How about your Boone Pickens Stadium? Want to take in a RedHawks game, then buy a ticket into SBC Bricktown Ballpark. Want to go see a \$100 concert? See you at the Ford Center or the Cox Convention Center? Or, hey, shall we go workout at the Devon Fitness Center at the Edward L. Gaylord Downtown YMCA. It goes on and on. It is suffocating.

This is just what it must have been like to live in Stalin's Soviet Union. Instead of Stalin statues and Stalin songs, though, we have corporate banners and corporate idolatry and fawning, obsequious, corporate sycophants.

It all seems so normal now, doesn't it? But immorality, in any form, is never normal, never natural. Mr. Nichols, Mr. McClendon, Mr. Ward, Mr. Corbett, Ms. Everest, and Mr. Funk, tear down this wall.

June 28, 2005

So here I was suspended in eternity, looking at me looking at me, and there's a spirituality, almost, to it, to see your reaction to your former self, and then to combine that with your current reaction. It's all the same, my reaction is all the same, every year, except, of course for 1997. Time isn't moving, and, though you know it's impossible, you've come close to stopping time, as close as you can, and it makes you take a deep breath, and it makes you wonder about really stopping time from screwing your life up, and it makes you dream of better machines, like video cameras, only magic cameras that can really stop time, and you can pick when you want time stopped, pick any time you want.

On the two-years-ago tape, which I could barely hear, I went, "I lost a pant size, everyone. I wear thirty-fours now."

On last year's tape, I went, "I'm back to thirty-sixers."

I turned to Sean's camera, an expensive Sony, positioned so you saw the television and my face when I turned slightly to the left.

I said, "Thirty-fours!"

Ray, also older, came over, gave me noogies on the head, danced The Twist, handed me a beer, even though I'm not supposed to drink because of the medication I take because I'm crazy (I drink all the time still). I love him, too, maybe the most.

Ironically, at that exact moment Ray appeared on the two-years-ago tape so he and I watched me a year ago watch him two years ago. He was drunk, holding a can of Coors Light. He was definitely thinner on the tape, though. Ray gets a kick out of me doing this every year, all except for the 1997 tape. No one in my family likes the 1997 tape.

Ray looked at himself, laughed, said, "Twenty pounds. I need to lose twenty pounds, that's all."

I was thinking, When did all this start to happen, all this worrying about our weight, jogging, all that? And kids, everyone's got kids now, and we're so predictable. Is this it? Turkey and Granddad's bowel movements? I think this way every year, and I ask the same questions. I do it for all of us. I watched myself think on the tape playing of me watching myself. I could tell because I got glassy-eyed, and did this chin-on-my-hand thing I do when I'm thinking hard. I made sure my current glassy eyes and chin-on-the-hand thing corresponded to the tape as the camera rolled. The last two years, I've really been into synchronization. I think it's part of my artistic maturing process, and that I am, perhaps, creating a new form of personalized art that I don't yet fully understand.

Okie Rebels With A Cause

Okie Rebels With A Cause, Part One

In Search Of Woody

On a December afternoon a few years ago, I was in Okemah, Oklahoma, the birthplace of the legendary musician and songwriter Woody Guthrie. Using information from friends and the Internet, I searched for a small park I was told possessed a small statue of Guthrie. Okemah, a small town whose city officials claim has approximately 3,000 people, is located about seventy miles east of Oklahoma City on Interstate 40. It has only one street really—a Main Street stretching a few blocks—devoted to business.

I was surprised I could not find Woody right away when I first pulled into town.

I drove up and down Main Street, and then through the city's small residential neighborhoods, which are marked by dilapidated homes. I noticed one of the homes was made of corrugated tin and attached to one-half of a double-wide trailer. Another home had been heavily damaged by a fire, but people still apparently lived in it. One home was next to the city's rusty water towers; in fact, the people who lived in the home obviously parked directly beneath them. More tiny homes, some in dire need of repair, dotted the hill upon which much of the town is built.

Still, I could not find Woody, and the town, frankly, was giving me this weird, discombobulated, old-newsreel vibe both horribly magnificent and freaky at the same time. Why? You see, it is apparent that, in some respects, Okemah has never really recovered from the Great Depression, which was the most inspirational topic of Guthrie's career. One of Guthrie's most famous records, for example, is titled *Dust Bowl Ballads*, and it describes the struggles of impoverished Okies evicted from their land during this time. Consequently, to visit Okemah, is to view, upfront and personal, the leftovers of a

cruel right-wing, political philosophy. To visit Okemah, especially if you are an Oklahoman, is also to become all at once a character in a Guthrie ballad, a person trapped by all the state's weird contradictions and carried along by its sometimes surreal, American-gothic beauty. There is a terrifying beauty in rural poverty if one has the patience and heart to face it.

Ignored and neglected, then and now, by the state's powerful people, and especially the conservative right, Okemah, like much of rural Oklahoma, is a particularly noteworthy symbol of the nation's contradictions, its cyclical miseries, and its inspirational but sometimes fraudulent mythologies. It becomes even more symbolic when one considers it is the place where one of the nation's most moral sons first created a music that provided the inspiration for a populist movement that seized the country's imagination and brought about decisive change through President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal.

That moral son, of course, was Woody Guthrie. But where was Woody? I couldn't find him anywhere. Dusk descended on the town. A mangy mutt crossed the street in front of me. Was that a coyote I heard howling in the distance? Was that an armadillo or possum that darted under a huge rock and down into a large hole? Did the young man walking down the street look at me strangely, or was I just imagining things?

Woody Guthrie, I thought to myself, where are you?

I had been told to look for a mural on the side of a downtown building. The park was supposedly next to it. I returned to Main Street, then, and began a new search. I found the mural at last. It was on the side of the Wright Kit barbershop. I parked, looked at the mural. But where was the park? Where was Woody?

And then from the corner of my eye, I noticed a small head of a statue poking out of a shabby, cardboard Christmas nativity scene, and I realized, then and there, I was actually standing in the park all this time.

The gaudy and oversized nativity scene completely obscured Guthrie's statue so only locals would have known that right behind the crass cardboard Jesus and Mary stood a tiny monument to one of the nation's most influential songwriters of all time. As I made my way to Woody by weaving through some weathered angels and the three wise men, my immediate reaction was, "This is what it would be like to live in a true theocracy," where symbols of social protest and art—the very substance of Guthrie's life—are replaced by the oppressive symbols of the prevailing religion. Maybe. But then I pinched myself, thought, "No, Woody Guthrie's political ideas always had strong roots in Christianity." Jesus and Woody both wanted to feed the poor. Both made it their life's work. It really is that simple. Obviously, Woody was right at home next to baby Jesus.

Woody Guthrie and the nativity scene is a powerful symbolic message for progressives as the nation's red-state, right-wing religious folk turn a peaceful, sin-forgiving, inclusive religion into a religion of hate and death. When people are starving to death, as they did in The Great Depression, as they do today, it is immoral to stand by and let it happen. Yet the religious right did just that then, and it does it again now. (Watch the powerful, religious right, for example, allow George Bush to steal your grandparents' Social Security check and give the money to his rich, stock market buddies. Ah, if only Woody was here to sing about this one.)

But the religious right did not always dupe people into voting and acting immorally in Oklahoma. Oklahoma and its surrounding states were once a hotbed of populism. There

was Guthrie, true, but also Will Rogers. In addition, the novelist John Steinbeck mythologized Oklahomans forever in *The Grapes of Wrath* by creating a heroic image of the beleaguered Okies through the character of Tom Joad. Joad and his family struggled against the brutality and immorality of right-wing Christian ideology that allowed people to turn their heads away from child starvation, massive homelessness, and widespread illness.

Today, even a casual reconsideration of Guthrie, Rogers, and Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* moves us to larger questions in the contemporary, political world. Why, for example, have so-called ordinary middle-class people of Oklahoma, The Great Plains, and portions of the southwest rejected their populist history and supported politicians with extreme, hateful conservative views when doing so is not only immoral within a religious framework but also is against their personal economic interests?

Current political and economic conditions in this country—one-party conservative rule that favors the super wealthy over the middle-class and poor, a weak job market, an erratic stock market, corporate corruption, media manipulation—make the time ripe for a reconsideration of another dark time in American history when a growing, deceitful conservative movement brought about misery and despair for millions of Americans until brave folks like Guthrie, Rogers, and Steinbeck stood up and fought the rich and powerful.

These three men created and used an Oklahoma mythology and an Oklahoma message to make things right again in this country. Guthrie, Rogers, and Steinbeck helped bring this country back to a moral center once before.

They will do it again.

March 6, 2005

Okie Rebels With A Cause, Part Two

Woody's Home Bittersweet Home

Oklahoma has a bittersweet relationship with the legend of famous songwriter Woody Guthrie, who was born in Okemah on July 14, 1912. For some Oklahomans, primarily the state's right-wing power elitists, Guthrie's reputation has always been tainted by his affiliation with the American Communist Party before World War II.

A *New York Times* article, published in 1972, just five years after Guthrie's death, points out that many Okemah, Oklahoma residents were against any public and civic recognition of Guthrie because they remember him as "a left-winger who betrayed the conservatism of rural, east-central Oklahoma . . ." (Aynes Drummon, Jr., *The New York Times*, December 14, 1972).

Oklahoma's largest newspaper, *The Daily Oklahoman*, operated by the ultra-conservative and wealthy Gaylord family, has also consistently dismissed Guthrie as a communist and radical. Just a few years ago, reports circulated in the state that the powerful Gaylord family refused to allow a Smithsonian Woody Guthrie exhibit to come to Oklahoma (David Averill, *The Tulsa World*, January 31, 1999).

But those Okemah residents and the state's rich and powerful who want to reduce the legacy of Woody Guthrie are intellectually dishonest about the message of Guthrie's music. In essence, these reductions are right-wing drivel and propaganda because they do not take into consideration what Guthrie actually wrote and the historical milieu in which he lived. This right-wing disinformation about Guthrie is ultimately the same immorality he fought against all his life.

Here are the facts. Woody Guthrie wrote a column for the leading communist newspaper in this country during the 1930s, though he actually never joined the party. In his writing and songs, he consistently called for equality among all people, and he spoke out for the downtrodden and poor and against the moneyed interests in the country.

Guthrie did not care if he was labeled a communist primarily because capitalism had left him broke and miserable like millions of other people in this country during the long and destructive financial depression of the 1930s. (Rest assured, the filthy rich owners of *The Daily Oklahoman* never went hungry during this time period.)

One verse of Guthrie's most famous song, "This Land Is Your Land," explains it all:

One Sunday morning
In the shadows of the steeple
By the relief office
I seen my people
As they stood hungry
I stood there whistling this
This land was made for you and me"

Subtle and simplistic as these lines may be, they argue succinctly for a moral vision for the country as they point out the hypocrisy and immorality of a right-wing religious movement, an ugly, national burden then and today.

(Today, I say with complete confidence, the last line of the above lyrics—"This land was made for you and me"—echoes again in Oklahoma and the Great Plains. You can hear it everywhere. Are you listening?)

Guthrie's lyrics in songs such as "Dust Bowl Refugees" and "The Ballad of Tom Joad" drew attention to the plight of millions of Americans whose lives were changed forever by the depression and dust storms that rolled into the Great Plains during the 1930s.

Yes we ramble and we roam

And the highway, that's our home

It's a never ending highway

For a Dust Bowl refugee (Guthrie "Dust Bowl Refugees")

Another famous Guthrie song, "Going Down the Road," depicts a defiant Okie looking for work:

I'm looking for a job

With honest pay

And I ain't gonna

Be treated this a way

In addition, Guthrie's lyrics celebrated the growing union movement in this country. In songs such as "Union Feeling" and "Union Maid," Guthrie offers unionism as an almost utopian vision of reality.

I can see my union like the sun, like the sun

I can see my union shining like the sun

Yes, it draws us all together,

Melts us into one

It's my good old union feeling in my soul ("Union Feeling")

In the song, "I Don't Like The Way This World's A-Treating Me," Guthrie criticizes the United States government in direct terms and speaks out against censorship:

I don't like the way this FBI's treating me

I don't like the way the spies are treating me

I just don't like the way these guys are treating me, poor me

It's the lockup if I speak my mind about it

In his autobiography, *Bound For Glory*, Guthrie humanizes the Okies who were evicted from their homes in the 1930s and who then headed west to California only to be greeted with contempt, hatred, and even violence by filthy rich, greedy landowners:

"You've seen a million like this already. Maybe you saw them on the crowded side of your big city; the back side, that's jammed and packed, the hard section to drive through. Maybe you wondered where so many of them come from, how they eat, stay alive, what good they do, what makes them live like this. Ain't much difference between you and them. If you was to walk out into this big tangled jungle camp and stand there with the other two thousand, somebody would just walk up and shake hands with you and ask you, What kind of work do you do, pardner?" (*Bound For Glory*, p. 249).

Listen to his music. Read his book and articles. You will find that, historically, Woody Guthrie is one of this country's great, twentieth-century moralists. A staunch patriot as well, Guthrie merged his particular American populist views with the politics of his time, and, of course, this included the growing communist and socialist movements in the country before World War II, which at the time blended perfectly with rural Christianity to form a distinctly American-style moral center. It is this moral center that is responsible for national programs such as Social Security and Medicare.

Guthrie believed fiercely in the mythology and big idea of America. He is the quintessential American man.

Yet he wrote his songs and newspaper columns during a particular historical period, which was pre-Cold War. International opinion was still out on communism. During the 1930s, for example, millions of Americans, including Will Rogers, looked to the communist experiment in Russia as something that might give American government officials new ideas to help those whose lives were being systematically destroyed by the feudalistic and quasi-fascist policies of Republican President Herbert Hoover. Before Hoover became president, thousands of Oklahomans considered themselves socialists. In 1917, for example, the socialist candidate for governor in Oklahoma received 21 percent of the vote (Dunbar-Ortiz, *Red Dirt: Growing Up Okie*, 1977.). Facts such as these are conveniently ignored by the powerful right-wing in Oklahoma.

Woody Guthrie, then, was a product of his time, a part of a growing populist movement, which was always religious and family centered, that tried to help the most unfortunate in our society. Hunger allows little political choice for those starving to death. Guthrie knew that, and he sang about it, and he tried to find ways to help people.

So before the Cold War, before the Stalin atrocities were made public, before the failure of corrupt communist systems worldwide, millions of hungry and broke Americans looked to communism and socialism as possible answers to this very simple question: How can I get my next meal? Again, this is the type of information the Oklahoma right-wing neglects to mention when it argues against Woody Guthrie and his standing in Oklahoma and American history.

Twenty-three years ago, a University of Oklahoma professor put it this way: “The man was—at least lyrically—a musical genius . . . he was the foremost publicist of the Depression era. His influence on American music has been enormous. Yet we [Oklahoma] don’t mention him [in our textbooks] because of a couple of people in Tulsa claimed he was a communist” (Bonnie Speer, *The Daily Oklahoman*, November 14, 1982).

Still, even given this, it remains baffling that the Oklahoma power structure would not somehow embrace the legend of a man who some claim invented the American song ballad, who wrote more than 1,000 songs, many of which were not political at all, who wrote widely read newspaper columns and a quirky yet brilliant autobiography. The legend of Woody Guthrie, who also lived in Oklahoma City, could be a major tourist draw if nothing else. Yet state leaders consistently bemoan the lack of economic opportunities in Oklahoma. Even in the last few years, Guthrie has continued to be attacked by conservative writers in the state. They label him a “Stalinist communist,” a gross distortion. The Web site of the Oklahoma Constitution, a radical, right-wing group in the state, once commended its editor for helping “forces in Guthrie’s hometown of Okemah who did not wish to honor such a Radical (sic) as a hero” (Oklahoma Constitution Web site, January, 2003).

Conservative groups continue to promote a self-loathing among Oklahomans by denying the state’s residents access to their heroic and true history and identity. It was Guthrie’s Oklahoma roots and ideas that made him a moral compass for this country. It was not the political ideology of some Oklahoma oil company or big city newspaper that prevented starving children from dying along Route 66 during the great migration west. It

was the moral message of Woody Guthrie that brought the country to its senses. The people who own big corporations could care less about ordinary Oklahomans then and now, and any Oklahoman who thinks differently is either a conservative political hack or a rube in desperate need of a traveling carnival.

In the south, conservatives tolerate and even promote racist ideology as part of cultural history. Because it did not become a state until 1907, Oklahoma does not shoulder the racist burden of institutionalized slavery like the deep south, though the state's history is filled with ugly incidents of racism, such as the 1921 Tulsa Race Riot. But the right-wing conservatives do try to make the state's real history— of Guthrie, Will Rogers, John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*—seem repugnant and vile when, in fact, this history is heroic, just, and an embodiment of everything that is great about our country and state. Thus, the right-wing now celebrates racism and slavery as “southern heritage” or “southern pride” or “states' rights,” just as it presents the populist movements in the early twentieth century in Oklahoma and the Great Plains as “communist” and “socialist.” This right-wing distortion of American history is intellectually dishonest and immoral. It is time for progressives to take a stand against these lies.

Oh yeah, here is an example of Woody's take on the race issue in his song, “Death Row”:

If you're white you've got some chance to beat this death row

If you're white you might get loosed from off this death row

But a man that's partly black, partly dark, chocolate brown

He ain't got an earthly chance to beat this death row

Ultimately, it is difficult to calculate the effect this right-wing, anti-Guthrie propaganda has had on the Oklahoma psyche. It is part of a larger picture, true. Certainly, a people whose history is shamed and denigrated, as it has been by right-wing zealots for decades upon decades, will always feel self-deprecation and self-loathing. People pass this self-loathing on through the generations.

Now it has come time to stop the lies that create self-loathing Okies, and by Okies I mean the millions of people who live in Oklahoma and the Great Plains.

Woody Guthrie's art and life make him an American icon and a specific Oklahoma treasure. His legacy has withstood decades of right-wing lies and hate because he was a true American moralist in the tradition of classic writers like Harriet Beecher Stowe, Walt Whitman, John Steinbeck, and Ralph Ellison, another Oklahoma native. His influence and ideas will live on forever as the lies of the right-wing extremists wither and die on the vine.

Oklahoma's power structure has begun some tentative and long overdue recognition of Guthrie. Just recently, a new oil painting of Guthrie was hung at the Oklahoma Capitol, for example.

But the most positive sign that the state is reconsidering and reconfiguring its populist history is symbolized by the annual Woody Guthrie Festival held in Okemah each July. The festival gains in artistic and political significance as the years go on. The state's conservatives (and maybe all the country's right-wing zealots) must be scared as hell now that people are starting to pull together again under Guthrie's historical and lasting moral influence.

Here's what Woody once wrote about his hometown:

“Okemah was one of the singiest, square dancingest, drinkingest, yellingest, preachingest, walkingest, talkingest, laughingest, cryingest, shootingest, fist fightingest, bleedingest, gamblingest, gun, club and razor carryingest of our ranch towns and farm towns, because it blossomed out into one of our first Oil Boom Towns.”

That’s real Oklahoma history, not the right-wing’s homogenized, celebratory history of filthy rich oil company executives and immoral newspaper owners. Woody Guthrie makes me damn proud to be from Oklahoma.

March 8, 2005

Okie Rebels With A Cause, Part Three

The Radical Will Rogers

Just as it attacks the moral legacy of Woody Guthrie, the huge Oklahoma right-wing propaganda ministry attempts to distort the work and life of another great state populist, Will Rogers, who was born in 1879 near the small town of Oologah.

The Will Rogers of the Oklahoma right wing is a mere caricature, a cartoon cowboy with a twirling rope and a penchant for somewhat silly and untrue aphorisms, such as “I never met a man I didn’t like.” (Yeah, right.)

To set the record straight, even a casual reading of Rogers’ written work will show he was a pacifist, in favor of strict gun control, open minded about the early communist experiment in Russia, open minded about socialism, and in favor of wealth redistribution to those less fortunate in our culture.

Rogers, a Cherokee Indian, was highly critical of government policies that hurt those people mired in poverty during the Great Depression, and his power as a writer, humorist, and entertainer came from the millions of ordinary Americans who could relate to his progressive, populist message. This is what makes him important and lasting, not cowboy movies or rope tricks. His contribution to the distinct Oklahoma mythology and history of morality and justice is immeasurable.

The enduring mythology of Will Rogers, of course, is an ongoing discourse for his academic biographers and other writers who find in him the epitome of the American Dream. But those same Oklahoma right-wing radicals who vilify Woody Guthrie are conspicuously quiet when it comes to Rogers and his open mindedness about

communism. Some scholars are adamant that Rogers was not a leftist. Reba Neighbors Collins, a former curator of the Will Rogers Museum in Claremore, Oklahoma, once criticized another scholar for going too far “when [the scholar] calls Rogers a leftist populist and says he promoted redistribution of wealth” and for suggesting Rogers was sympathetic to communism. “Nowhere did he advocate we copy the Russian revolution,” according to Collins(*The Daily Oklahoman*, April 23, 2000).

But let’s look at the record. In a 1931 newspaper article, for example, Rogers writes about a recent visit his friend Bernard Shaw made to Russia and how Shaw came back impressed. Rogers ends his article with a simple acknowledgement that America should pay attention to Russia’s recently announced five-year plan to improve economic conditions.

Here are Rogers’ own words: “Ten men in our Country could buy the world, and ten million can’t buy enough to eat. So the salvation of all might come out of these Cuckoo Russians. If it does, it will have paid for itself whether the whole five-year plan works or not. So we ain’t going to get nowhere cussing ‘em. We better watch ‘em, and they got anything good, why cop onto it, and maybe we can feed everybody.”

(The references to Rogers’ writings come from *The Writings of Will Rogers: The Daily Telegrams, Series III-IV, 1925-1935*, or from the book *Will Rogers Speaks*, edited by Bryan and Frances Sterling.)

In the same year, Rogers writes, “So they can have all the theories and plans they want but till you get rid of something and put people back to work, you ain’t going to be able to fix it. You can call it co-lition, Republican, Democrat, or *Bolsheviki* [emphasis mine]. But folks got to work.”

In 1931 articles, Rogers writes, “Half our people are starving and the other half standing around a roulette wheel. If Russia succeeds it will be because they have no stock market.” He also gave sympathetic treatment to an American farm official who visited Russia and found there a “great people” whose ideal is “always America.” In another 1931 article, Rogers writes, “Every day brings a new scheme in the papers for relief. The Russians have got a five-year plan. Maybe it’s terrible but they got one. We been two years just trying to get a plan.”

An earlier 1929 newspaper column summarizes Rogers’ views of capitalism and may well explain his sympathy and interest for the then-communist experiment, which eventually failed. This, again, undermines Collins’ generic and reductionist view of him.

Shortly after the stock market crash, Rogers wrote:

“Sure must be a great consolation to the poor people who lost their stock in the late crash to know that it has fallen in the hands of Mr. Rockefeller, who will take care of it and see it has a good home and never be allowed to wander around unprotected again. There is one rule that works in every calamity. Be it pestilence, war, or famine, the rich get richer and poor get poorer.”

Can you imagine even *The New York Times* publishing such a statement today on its opinion pages? I do not think so.

The historical perspective is important here. Both Rogers and Guthrie (as I wrote before) were open minded about communism and socialism because (1) the so-called Russian experiment was ongoing at the time and international opinion was still out on the issue, and (2) people were starving to death in America and the country’s rich people were sitting idly by and allowing them to die. Rogers took a moral position about this

issue. Those people who define themselves as Oklahomans should be enormously proud that he took such a public moral position.

In other columns during the time period of the depression and before his tragic death in 1935, Rogers calls on Republican politicians to be “deloused,” writes about a mother who killed her seven children because she could not feed them, points out that “every millionaire we have has offered a speech instead of keeping still and offering a job,” and heavily praises a band of 500 “country people” who protested outside a small store in the South demanding food.

More columns point out starvation in Arkansas as “the worst need I ever saw,” remind his readers that starvation continues in the deep South despite a minor rise in the stock market, and criticize wealthy American elitists: “All these big-moneyed people, they are just like the underworld—they all know each other and kinder work together.”

Rogers’ sympathy for ordinary citizens is a common theme throughout his writings.

Today, with the nation’s frightening switch to a right-wing, anti-people, anti-rural, quasi-fascist conservative politics, Rogers’ work would have never been so broadly published. *The Daily Oklahoman*, for example, has not allowed real progressive opinions on its editorial pages for decades. Can you imagine *The Oklahoman* today publishing a writer who wrote things like, “There is not one unemployed man in the country that hasn’t contributed to the wealth of every millionaire in American. Every one of us that has anything, got it by the aid of these very people”?

And here is Rogers on gun control: “The automatic pistol, it’s all right to have invented it, but it should have never been allowed outside the army, and then only in war time.”

Would *The Oklahoman* or *The Tulsa World* publish that now? What about the state's conservative television stations, especially the Oklahoma City Fox affiliate, owned by the archconservative Sinclair Broadcasting Corporation? Would they air Rogers' take on the issue of war: "I am a peace man. I haven't got any use for wars and there is no more humor in 'em than there is reason for 'em," and, "When you get into trouble 5,000 miles from home, you've got to have been looking for it"?

Here is more from Rogers on war:

"Somebody is always telling us in the paper how to prevent war. There is only one way in the world to prevent war and that is for every nation to tend to its own business. Trace any war and you will find some nation was trying to tell some other nation how to run their business. All these nations are interfering with some other nation's personal affairs but with an eye to business. Why don't we let the rest of the world act like it wants to."

The above citations are just a tiny portion of what we can call the real Will Rogers, the leftist Oklahoma populist who spoke out for ordinary citizens during a terrible period in the country's history.

Yet this real Will Rogers is quite different than the caricature presented publicly by the right-wing today in Oklahoma.

The Will Rogers Museum in Claremore, Oklahoma, focuses on Rogers' most innocuous aphorisms and sayings, pushing visitors to acknowledge his cornball humor at the expense of his political message.

In a 1970s interview with professor Rosa Dunbar-Ortiz, an elderly Oklahoman who lived through the depression, explains it this way, "...in Oklahoma they like to pretend

the dust bowl never happened and that *The Grapes of Wrath* never got written or made into a movie. At least the powers-that-be-there, the sort of social set. Poverty is considered the shame of who are poor” (*Red Dirt: Growing Up Okie*, 1977).

I have been to the Will Rogers Museum a couple of times in Claremore, which is a nice place. But there is not a single exhibit which focuses specifically and exclusively on Rogers’ populist outcry during the depression, or at least I could not find it. Yet, during the depression, Rogers traveled extensively in the Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Texas region raising money for starving families. In addition, he consistently reminded his newspaper readership about the hunger problems in the country. What he wrote would be clearly labeled by the right-wing as class warfare today. But he saved a lot of lives.

The Oklahoma right continues to celebrate a homogenized, non-political version of Rogers. For example, a recent Oklahoma governor, the radical right-winger Frank Keating, published a short children’s book about Rogers during his last term in office. The book is filled with banal generalities and is primarily a picture book featuring the drawings of a local artist. Ultimately, through its reductionism and distortions, it is a book of lies.

Keating, considered by some to be a corrupt and ineffective governor, was once forced to pay back \$200,000 given to him by a wealthy benefactor who was trying to buy his influence. Rogers, who liked to pick on his home state’s governors, would have had a field day with Keating’s bizarre public excuses for taking the money.

And it brings up this interesting question: Would the man who constantly criticized John D. Rockefeller and the wealthy elite in the country, a man who favored gun control, who was an avowed pacifist, have approved of a corrupt, right-wing wealthy politician

distorting his personal legacy for political capital and influence even if he really did never meet a man he didn't like?

I have traveled far and wide in the state. I know a lot of Oklahomans consider themselves Republicans these days, but I also know Oklahomans in places like Hinton, Weatherford, Tulsa, Guymon, Madill, and Tishomingo (I have been to every one of these towns) would not allow children to starve to death if they could do something about it. Rogers expressed the genuine morality of Oklahomans then and now. In generations to come, Rogers' Oklahoma moral message will be remembered and celebrated. His work will live on long after the Republicans have dismantled Social Security, forced more and more children to live in poverty, and allowed credit card companies, Wall Street bankers, and oil company executives to steal our hard-earned salaries.

Will Rogers, like Woody Guthrie, is yet another great American moralist of the twentieth century. His progressive and populist message helped change things for the better in this country as the filthy rich, as they always do, turned away from the suffering of their fellow Americans during the Great Depression of the 1930s. The conservative, Republican, filthy-rich elitists did not care about ordinary Oklahomans during Rogers' day, and they do not care about us now. Delivered in the slow drawls and self-deprecations of the Oklahoma dialect, Rogers' populist morality was distinctly rational, family-oriented, and religious.

Oklahomans like to talk about an "Oklahoma spirit." This spirit is embodied in Rogers' moral message, not in some television commercial about how wonderful the oil and gas industry is to the state. The oil companies will be here until the last drop of oil is sucked from Oklahoma's red dirt, and then they will leave and never return. In the larger

picture, their historical significance in the state will be a small blip, a footnote in some larger narrative about the nation's energy concerns.

Will Rogers' words and moral vision, however, will echo forever in American history.

March 17, 2005

Okie Rebels With A Cause, Part Four

Okie Tom Joad

For most readers throughout the world, Oklahoma's Tom Joad continues to serve as one of America's most heroic fictional figures. He embodies Ulysses-like qualities in terms of a literary identity. Joad leaves the pages of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* an enlightened moralist who has dedicated his life to the fight for truth and justice.

The 1939 novel is an American classic, and it will remain so for centuries to come. Yet the right-wing in Oklahoma has always done everything it can do to distort its powerful legacy. Shortly after the publication of *The Grapes of Wrath*, an *Oklahoman* editorial writer, who admitted he had not read the novel, accused Steinbeck of "complete and absurd" untruthfulness. "Goldfish swallowing critics know nothing about the region or people [and] . . . accept at face value even the most inaccurate depiction (Berry Tramel, "April 1939 Steinbeck Pains State Image," *The Daily Oklahoman*, April 18, 1999).

This type of Oklahoma conservative attack on the novel has never stopped, creating a type of psychological warfare against ordinary Oklahomans, who, on the one hand, must deal with the novel as a huge cultural identifier, and, who, on the other hand, have endured more than sixty years of right-wing distortion about it. Consequently, the right wing has, intentionally or not, created a type of collective self-loathing among many Oklahoma citizens concerned consciously or even subconsciously about their own historical background.

Boiled down, it comes to this: The Okies depicted in the novel clearly possess the moral center; the right-wing tries to generate hateful feelings towards these moral

characters. The right-wing extremists, when attacking *The Grapes of Wrath*, are actually attacking our state's and country's basic shared value system. All hyperbole aside, it is an attack on the moral fabric and identity of America.

It is no wonder that Sallisaw, Oklahoma, the hometown of the fictional Joads, just recently got around to celebrating Steinbeck's achievement. In 2001, the small, eastern Oklahoma city held a month of festivities in honor of the novel.

(On a personal note, I am amazed at how many of my Oklahoma college students over the years I have had to tell, "The Oklahoma Joads were great people, morally superior to the rich Oklahoma and California landowners who treated them like animals. They are heroes." Perhaps, one reason I must remind them is because most Oklahoma high schools, which have a standard curriculum, do not assign the novel, opting instead to assign shorter novels. In the past, the state textbook committee, appointed by the governor, has been comprised of the type of people who want to insert creationist disclaimers in all high school science textbooks which present the theory of evolution. It is unlikely the committee would push to make *The Grapes of Wrath* standard reading, especially since the novel has been periodically banned throughout the country off and on since its publication.)

Yet *The Grapes of Wrath* was a commercial and literary triumph. Viking's first print run of the novel was an astounding 420,000 copies. The movie, made just a year later and starring Henry Fonda, solidified the novel as a classic.

So as the country became familiar with the Dust Bowl specifics, and as the mythology and morality of the novel—small farmers and workers fighting the wealthy who abused

them to line their pockets with immoral money—seized the country’s imagination, the Oklahoma right-wing power structure chose to denigrate the novel.

The anti-*Wrath* forces, according to one writer, were located primarily in Oklahoma City, and, at the time of the book’s publication, included then Oklahoma Governor Leon Phillips, Oklahoma City Mayor Richard Hefner, Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce President Stanley Draper, and *The Daily Oklahoman* editor Walter Harrison (Tramel, “1939 Steinbeck”).

The negative response to the novel has continued. Eighteen years after the book’s publication, then Governor Dewey Bartlett established an Oklahoma campaign to recast the state’s image. Bartlett’s program was directly aimed at the novel and the subsequent movie. (The movie was also critically acclaimed.)

One historian who grew up in Oklahoma explained it this way: “My mom would always grumble if the book was brought up. [She would say] Steinbeck smeared the state. It was a horrible book. To my knowledge, she never read it.” (Kelly Kurt, “Oklahomans Trying to Dust Off State’s Image,” *The Daily Oklahoman*, December 26, 1999).

In a 1999 interview, a University of Oklahoma professor talked about the novel’s lingering image: “I hate to assign it in the fall semester. They take it home with them for Thanksgiving, and Grandma sees it and starts raising hell” (Tramel, “April 1939”).

Ironically, the right-wing manipulation of the novel’s reception has less to do with literature and politics than it does with money. The rich, powerful right-wingers in the state continue to be concerned with how the state’s lingering Joad-image will affect their pocketbooks through economic development. That means, for right-wing rhetorical

purposes, *The Grapes of Wrath* is still a distortion and the Great Depression never happened.

In 1991, the state's Tourism Director, appointed by Republican Governor Frank Keating, spent \$3.5 million on advertising Oklahoma's man-made lakes—some of which were built in response to the drought years of the 1930s—not its rich and vibrant historical past. A conservative economist for the former Southwestern Bell summed up the effort this way: “A new generation of Oklahomans plans to leave the old images to the history books” (Kurt, “Oklahomans Trying”).

Meanwhile, many leftists, populists, and progressives have abandoned Oklahoma and The Great Plains for the coasts, and do little to counter the historical distortions. This creates a significant brain drain in the state that threatens the state's economic prosperity.

Even given all that, it still remains an enigma, just like with Woody Guthrie, that Oklahomans do not embrace the Joads, especially Tom Joad, the novel's moral centerpiece who becomes intellectually enlightened about the world around him. Contrary to the stereotypical image of an Okie as a disheveled, smelly, illiterate hick, Joad embodies the American dream of creating a destiny based on enlightenment, learning, and morality.

Joad represents one side of the duality of the American myth, the side in which “we the people” represent all people, all ethnicities, not just a privileged landed gentry who came together to write the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution.

Joad is a representative fictional character reflected in writer and scholar Michael Kazin's definition of populism:

“That is the most basic and telling definition of populism: a language whose speakers conceive of ordinary people as a noble assemblage not bounded narrowly by class, view their elite opponents as self-serving and undemocratic, and see to mobilize the former against the latter” (*The Populist Persuasion*, New York: Harper Collins, 1995).

In an earlier academic article, I argued that Tom Joad is Thomas Paine’s quintessential American man, the model of the American who emerged from his pamphlet, *Common Sense*. This is because Joad displays all the intuitiveness, opened mindedness, and moral outrage that Paine advocated for Americans. This is what critic and scholar Martin Roth has called Paine’s “new version of the true and good man, henceforth to be known as the American.” (Kurt Hochenauer, "The Rhetoric of American Protest: Thomas Paine and the Education of Tom Joad," *The Midwest Quarterly*, Vol. 25, 1995.)

As he leaves the novel’s pages, Joad tells his mother she will recognize his spirit “wherever they’s a fight so hungry people can eat” or “wherever they’s a cop beating up a guy” or “in the ways guys yell when they’re mad.” He has now turned his American individual identity into a force that benefits all of the disenfranchised people during the depression. He becomes revolutionary with all the force of an American mythology behind him. He speaks through the souls of Paine and Thomas Jefferson.

Although Steinbeck was certainly caught up in the Marxist rhetoric in the 1930s, it is apparent, as we read the novel today, that Joad's transition from a private, libertarian American to an activist ready to unite his people is rooted in American mythology and history rather than European socialism and communism.

Yet, as one local Oklahoman wrote, the right-wing power structure lambasted the novel. “Generally, they denied heavy migration, accused California of creating the

problem, and blamed Steinbeck for maligning the state. Their criticism laid the groundwork for the anti-Steinbeck feelings that eventually swept the state” (Tramel, “April 1939”).

Unfortunately for Oklahoma, those feelings still persist. In his 1999 interview, University of Oklahoma history professor William Savage talks about the problem of teaching the novel, a state that has become increasingly conservative in its politics, a state once called a “conservative bastion” by a right-wing editorial writer for the state’s largest newspaper.

Savage said, “Beside the fact that [Steinbeck’s] talking about people who are barefoot and illiterate, what’s bad about them? They weren’t hypocrites; they’re noble as hell. If the Joads were worthless, why did they keep trying to help everybody they saw. Why did they bother to get out and better themselves” (Tramel, “April 1939”).

This is an argument completely obscured by the state’s right-wing distortion of the novel, and it will continue to be obscured until more academics, critics and journalists take an interest in correcting the conservative rhetorical manipulation about it.

Overall, Oklahoma’s citizens can never advance the state in terms of education and economic opportunities until they embrace their own heroic identity, one filled with the diversity and plurality of leftist populism. If you want to diversify the seemingly always-struggling Oklahoma economy, you need to embrace diversity. That’s pretty simple.

Is there a better place to begin than by first celebrating the state’s rich, populist history? Is there a better place to begin than to embrace Oklahoma’s great moral mythology and legacy?

Long after the conservative juggernaut falls to pieces because of greed, hubris, and lies, John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* will live on in the canon of great American literature. The novel's moral message— Okie Tom Joad's enlightened view of the world around him—makes it enduring and significant. Its ideas are universal and connect us from one generation to the next.

March 19, 2005

Okie Rebels With A Cause, Part Five

Dissent Denied

The Oklahoma right-wing marginalization of Woody Guthrie, Will Rogers, and John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* is a significant, ongoing political strategy in the state. Ultimately, it shows how the "conservative bastion" of Oklahoma has no moral center, no compunction against rewriting history into conservative clichés that appeal to those people who have been duped by an immoral power structure into embracing the recent right-wing juggernaut.

Ours is a state with a rich, textured progressive history. This history is unique in terms of our national mythology as well. The term "Okies," for example, applies to more than just Oklahomans. It is a philosophical concept, a moral belief. It applies to all those displaced, ordinary people who had to fight against the wealthy during the Great Depression when Americans had to reconsider the unbridled and immoral greed of the country's huge corporations and right-wing politicians. Americans overwhelmingly sided with the Okies during the 1930s, not with the nation's oil companies and corporate monopolies. The issue of the homeless and starving Okies prompted the country's citizens to come together and make moral compacts with one another in the form of social programs such as Social Security.

Guthrie sang the pain of his people as he celebrated ordinary Okies. In his political columns, Rogers criticized the country's wealthy elite and tried to get the government to feed hungry people. Steinbeck's Okie Tom Joad found his life's meaning in the country's tragic Hoovervilles filled with starving, desperate people in the 1930s. Like today's progressives, Joad became enlightened, ready to fight.

It is immoral almost beyond comprehension that the Oklahoma right-wing wants the state's residents to feel ashamed at this history.

This is particularly significant today when there is one-party conservative rule in this country and when the state's intellectuals are growing increasingly afraid to speak out. Oklahoma is without question now the belly of the immoral, right-wing beast. If progressives from the coasts want to see their potential future, they should come here and study the right-wing historical lies, the anti-intellectual rhetorical manipulation, the crass and open immorality of the state's power structure.

(Would the coastal progressives think, "Oh, this couldn't happen in New York." Think again. There is a right-wing army marching in this country. It spreads east and west from the middle of the nation.)

A perpetual question, of course, is why so many Oklahomans have been duped into embracing the new, immoral conservative movement in this country when to do so is to destroy their children's futures, reduce their incomes, and to no longer have access to social safety nets such as Social Security and health insurance.

Two scholars, Michael Kazin (*The Populist Persuasion, 1995*) and Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz (*Red Dirt: Growing Up Okie, 1997*), argue forcefully that the post-depression racist politics of George Wallace made many so-called ordinary Americans reject the leftist and inclusive populism of their immediate pasts. Wallace's legacy, they argue, has been sustained by the conservative right.

Under this rubric, race, then, becomes the most significant mediating factor in the rejection of the moral vision embraced by Guthrie, Rogers, and Steinbeck. This also corresponds with a sense that leftist intellectuals are aloof and not in tune with the

realities of day-to-day life among middle-class, regular people. Wallace also helped create the now powerful Christian right through his hatred, and this anti-Christianity, this right-wing plague, now spreads like wildfire across the country as greedy false prophets in the guise of televangelists steal the hard-earned money of those poor folks who are apparently desperate to bring meaning to their lives.

Still, the race argument, the mythological construct of the aloof intellectual, and the appeal of the right-wing religious movement to the disenfranchised does not completely explain how Oklahoma, The Great Plains, and portions of the Southwest have become increasingly conservative while rejecting the rich heritage of the moral Okie.

You would never know this from the state's largest newspapers, *The Daily Oklahoman* and *The Tulsa World*, but Oklahoma was founded upon a rich history of diversity. American Indians, African Americans, Hispanics, Asian Americans and people from all types of European ancestries are a part of the state's heritage and current population.

Rogers was a Cherokee Indian and twenty-one percent of Woody Guthrie's hometown, Okemah, is American Indian. A book (*Not All Okies Are White*, 2000) published just a few years ago explores the story of African Americans forced from their land into migration during the 1930s. As these migrants moved westward from this region of the country, diverse communities popped up throughout the Southwest and in California. But those who remained were also a diverse group as well.

So, in the deep South, the primary political discourse—though immorally coded—remains race and the ongoing psychological burden of slavery. But this is simply not the case in Oklahoma, the Great Plains, and the Southwest, in places such as Texas,

Arkansas, New Mexico, Missouri, Kansas, Iowa, Nebraska, and Colorado. This is not meant to dismiss the historical and contemporary institutionalized racism in these places. It is just that racism is not etched into the historical DNA of the so-called heartland like it is in the deep South.

Ultimately, one can only conclude that right-wing historical distortion—an actual Orwellian rewriting and reconfiguring of facts and truth—is a huge component in the twentieth century and contemporary narrative of populism as it manifests itself in this region of the country. This is extremely significant in a contemporary sense because a majority of voters in this region of the country now vote against their own financial and personal interests. These voters are also willing to sacrifice their traditional religious and philosophical moral centers—as deep and rich as any moral system the world has yet created—for the cheap and momentary thrills of right-wing nationalism, religious indignation, and self-righteousness.

To take it one step further, perhaps another historical reason for the shift of populism from the morality of the left to the hate, anger and lies of the right in the Great Plains and surrounding areas may well come from the psychological tendency to avoid a painful past by dehumanizing it.

This alienation from a painful past makes it easier for the right-wing to distort or reduce the populist history of the twentieth century, to adopt rhetorical features of its powerful, American message even as it insidiously moves away from the social and moral foundation that created it in the first place. The right-wing has stolen the discourse of leftist populism through deceit and lies; the left, until now, has failed the Great Plains through its own intellectual hubris.

Walter Rideout, in his acclaimed 1956 book, *The Radical Novel in the United States*, argues that modern wars, in particular World War II, “alienate us from the recent past.” Those of us on “the other side” of World War II, he argues, “feel widely separated from the [years] of the Great Depression.” We can see the images of the depression—soup lines, dust storms, “the spurting ticket tape of the stock market crashes”—but we fail to recreate the nervous tension or emotion of that time. We want to believe this will never happen again and leave it at that.

We do not want to consider the bravery and personal risk of those people— Guthrie, Rogers, and Steinbeck—who stood up and spoke up for ordinary people. (Is there anyone in America who thinks the big oil companies would help ordinary people if there were another huge financial collapse in this country?) To do so is to face our painful but true history. This is always difficult and problematic on both a cultural and personal level.

No matter how painful it might be to relive the Great Depression, we are obligated to the next generation to remember it was leftist populism, with all its diversity and moral outrage, that swept President Franklin Roosevelt into office and by doing so, many argue, saved American democracy and the very idea and self-fulfilling symbol of the American Dream.

It was leftist populism that created critical social safety nets for the unemployed, the uninsured, and elderly American citizens.

It was leftist populism that eventually brought down the right-wing lunatic Joseph McCarthy.

It was leftist populism that ended our country’s nightmarish involvement in the Vietnam War.

And it is the leftist populism of Oklahoma's unique moral mythology inscribed historically in the music of Woody Guthrie, in the political columns of Will Rogers, in the story of Okie Tom Joad, that tell us America will rise up again to fight the tyranny, oppression, and the lies of the filthy rich, the false Christian prophets, and the quasi-fascists who now want to lead this country to its doom.

March 22, 2005

Okie Rebels With A Cause, Part Six

Ralph Ellison's Brilliant Moral Achievement

“So why do I write, torturing myself to put it down? Because in spite of myself I’ve learned some things. Without the possibility of action, all knowledge comes to one labeled ‘file and forget,’ and I can neither file nor forget.”—Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

Another great state moralist who impacted the world is Oklahoma City native Ralph Ellison, whose novel *Invisible Man* was published in 1952. The novel received instant national and international acclaim. The novel’s brilliance and sophisticated narration is often compared and ranked against renowned authors like Franz Kafka and James Joyce.

The novel's status as a world classic is assured because, among other things, it brilliantly exposed this country’s institutionalized racism during the hysterical McCarthy years of the 1950s. It also helped set the stage for the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. It stands as a great, artistic achievement in the aesthetic tradition of the novel.

Ellison’s novel will live on forever in our state’s and world’s historical legacy. It will only grow in stature. Ellison’s early years in Oklahoma City will be a subject matter for historians in centuries to come.

Invisible Man was Ellison’s first significant work. It tells the story of an unnamed African American narrator who tries to find his identity in a racist culture that refuses to really see him as a human.

At the beginning of the novel, the narrator says, "You wonder if you aren't simply a phantom in other people’s minds. Say, a figure in a nightmare which the sleeper tries with all his strength to destroy. It’s when you feel like this that, out of resentment, you begin to bump people back. And, let me confess, you feel that way most of the time. You

ache with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in the real world, that you're part of all the sounds and anguish, and you strike out with your fists, you curse and you swear to make them recognize you. And, alas, it's seldom successful."

(The quotes from *Invisible Man* are from the 1995 Vintage Books edition of the initial text.)

After his haunting prologue, the narrator describes his participation in a Battle Royal when he had just graduated from high school. The Battle Royal is part of an annual "smoker" or party held by a town's white male power structure. The booze flows, and there is a stripper. The Battle Royal, however, is the main event. African American teenagers are brought into the room, blindfolded, and forced to fight each until only one remains standing. The white men in the room toss the teenagers back into the ring if they try to leave. Drunk and out of control, the men shout out racial epithets as they demean the teenagers physically.

It is a horrifying scene, surreal and symbolic on one level, yet always literally real and grimly naturalistic in its specific details. It is an exhausting chapter to read. It raises serious questions about our existence. Why are people so cruel? What is behind the racism and hate of these men? Why is there so much hatred in the world? The questions are provoked by Ellison's artistic brilliance, and the Battle Royal chapter is published in virtually every twentieth-century American anthology of literature.

"The room spun around me, a swirl of lights, smoke, sweating bodies surrounded by tense white faces. I bled from both nose and mouth, the blood spattering my chest."

The narrator earns a college scholarship, goes to a southern African American college (Ellison attended Alabama's Tuskegee Institute founded by Booker T. Washington), and

then eventually ends up in New York where he is pulled apart by different aspects of the growing movement for equality for African Americans. After working at a series of jobs, the narrator gets involved briefly with a Brotherhood, which symbolizes the Communist Party at the time, and then with other activists. Throughout his life, he searches not for a "black" or "white" identity but for an individual identity, which the culture denies him again and again. The novel makes a lasting, powerful statement about individual human dignity and respect. These issues of "not seeing," of coming to terms with America's racist past and present, remain with us, and so the novel reverberates still.

After the novel was published, some critics contended Ellison's work was perhaps not loud or direct enough in terms of the day-to-day efforts to pass new laws guaranteeing equality for African Americans. (The white power structure here, of course, simply ignored it.) The years, however, have validated Ellison, who died in 1994. *Invisible Man* might not have been an action guide for a particular moment for a particular movement within the quest for equality, but it is an enormous, philosophical novel that shows how institutionalized racism destroys lives, and its impact passes from one generation to the next. The novel's brilliance and moral legacy cannot be overstated.

Ellison grew up in Oklahoma City and attended Douglass High School, which is named after the former slave and famous abolitionist Frederick Douglass. I visited the inner-city school a couple of years ago, and its dilapidated physical condition could not stop the energy and intellectual curiosity of his great teachers and students, but it tried and tried. (Douglass now has a new school because of a local, taxpayer-funded improvement project.)

His father, who was a small businessman selling ice and coal, died when Ellison was only three. His mother worked as a janitor, nurse, and housecleaner to make ends meet, and she raised a son with lofty ambitions and a moral center that would help change the world. Ellison's first interest, however, was in jazz music, not writing, and his novel is filled with language that has been compared to musical improvisation.

Like the great moralists Woody Guthrie and Will Rogers, Ellison had to make his way outside of Oklahoma. What was here for someone of his intelligence during the time period in which he lived? Ellison was born just seven years after Oklahoma became a state. Yet it is interesting to consider how his unique Oklahoma experience shaped Ellison's moral views of the world. His mother struggled so her son could succeed; it is a classic American story. Historians need to look here, not New York, for the reasons for Ellison's genius.

That is happening now. Here is an excerpt from a forward, written by John Callahan, to a recent biography of Ralph Ellison by Bob Burke and Denyveta Davis:

"Intellectually, Ellison developed his ideas about the fluidity and complexity of American culture and personality from the range of his experience in Oklahoma. He more than held his own among American writers and thinkers by virtue of the 'mammy-made' pragmatism engendered by virtue of his faithfulness to what he called his 'cold Oklahoma Negro eye.' In the last few years of his life, he wrote long reminiscences in the form of letters to old friends from Oklahoma, and, when asked to account for the strain of optimism and patriotism in his reading of America, he cited early experiences in Oklahoma as sources of that 'sanity-saving comedy' and tragicomic sensibility he saw as the birthmark of American possibility."

Oklahoma City's African American community has embraced Ellison's legacy. There is the Ralph Ellison Library in the city, and it recently celebrated the fifty-year anniversary of *Invisible Man*. The city's African American community has a rich history of fighting for social equality here.

But Oklahoma's right-wing power structure, of course, has done little to recognize Ellison's genius or embrace his moral message. Like it has done with Guthrie, Rogers, and Steinbeck's *The Grapes of the Wrath*, the right-wing distorts Ellison's legacy. It does so by ignoring Ellison's great literary achievement then and now and by continuing to sanction institutionalized racism in the state.

Edward L. Gaylord, the now-deceased publisher of the state's largest newspaper *The Daily Oklahoman*, was always considered a racist by his critics. Former editors have told stories about the newspaper's racist reporting that have continued to the present day. A 1999 series of articles in *The Columbia Journalism Review* about the newspaper revealed complaints about Gaylord's racist newspaper policies.

Here is a quote from one of the articles: "Former staffers say it wasn't long ago that the complexion of the front page, not just the newsroom, was influenced by race. 'When I was on the city desk in the late seventies,' says former city editor Splaingard, 'the rule was you didn't run pictures of blacks on the front page.' And while everyone says the 'rule' is long dead, it's not always easy to tell."

The newspaper's current editorial writers and new publisher, Christy Gaylord Everest, are more concerned today with making sure rich oil executives at Oklahoma City's Kerr-McGee get richer than with correcting the type of social injustice Ellison fought against

his entire life. It is difficult to determine what impact this obvious institutionalized racism has had on the state's psyche.

In addition, it took until the 1990s before Oklahoma could even begin to come to terms with the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921 because it was intentionally excluded from history textbooks. (This reawakening is an ongoing project.) Some experts estimate that close to 300 African Americans were killed by "truckloads of whites," and more than 1,400 homes and businesses were destroyed in the area known as black Wall Street in Tulsa after false rumors, published in a local newspaper, circulated that a local African American man had sexually assaulted a white woman.

This historical cover-up and what one might call the softening of horrific racial injustice is the legacy of Oklahoma's right-wing, immoral propaganda machine that still thrives today.

At the end of *Invisible Man*, the narrator feels somewhat beaten down by events out of his control. Yet he tells us, "I condemn and affirm, say no and say yes, say yes and say no. I denounced because though implicated and partially responsible, I have been hurt to the point of abysmal pain, hurt to the point of invisibility. And I defend because in spite of all I find that I love. In order to get some of it down I *have* to love. I sell you no phony forgiveness, I'm a desperate man—but too much of your life will be lost, its meaning lost, unless you approach it as much as through love as through hate."

So, ultimately, Ellison teaches us about the ability to love even in the face of great pain, such as racial injustice in the form of violent brutality and utter degradation. Like Steinbeck's Okie Tom Joad, Ellison's narrator leaves the novel pages enlightened and prepared to say something for the disenfranchised and the ordinary people of the world.

His personal struggle is our struggle as a nation, as a world, as we promote human dignity and love in the face of obvious injustice.

Ellison's narrator echoes the Oklahoma moral mythology that created a world moral view before and after World War II. This mythology brought about the New Deal and eventually the Civil Rights Movement. Oklahomans Ellison, Guthrie, and Rogers impacted the world, not just the country. For example, Europe, wrestling with its own demons in the mid-twentieth century, could once look to our country for the moral foundation created by these three great Oklahomans and the classic novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, which depicted heroic Okies fighting against right-wing injustice.

When one stops to consider, it is simply amazing that so many people from our relatively small state (and there are more) had such a major influence in constructing the most significant worldwide moral legacy of the twentieth century. It is a legacy that lives on today and will live on forever in the annals of world history. Ellison makes me proud to be from Oklahoma, not the Kerr-McGee Corporation, not *The Daily Oklahoman*, not *The Tulsa World*, not some morally challenged politician like former Oklahoma Governor Frank Keating, not some flag-waving, trashy country musician sellout like Toby Keith.

The next time someone from another state makes lighthearted fun of Oklahoma do not laugh it off so easily. Look them right in the eye and tell them about Ellison, Guthrie, Rogers, and John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. Tell them they still live in a democracy, and they are still free because the Oklahoma moral message and mythology that once swept the nation and world is still intact, if only precariously.

April 2, 2005

Okie Rebels With A Cause, Part Seven

The Moral Landscapes of N. Scott Momaday

In the introduction to his book *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, Oklahoma native N. Scott Momaday describes the harshness of southwestern Oklahoma's climate.

“A single knoll rises out of the plain in Oklahoma, north and west of the Wichita Range. For my people, the Kiowas, it is an old landmark, and they gave it the name Rainy Mountain. The hardest weather in the world is there. Winter brings blizzards, hot tornadic winds arise in the spring, and in summer the prairie is an anvil's edge. The grass turns brittle and brown, and it cracks beneath your feet.”

Yet the landscape created by these harsh conditions is surprisingly creative and productive.

“All things in the plain are isolate; there is no confusion of objects in the eye, but one hill or one tree or one man. To look upon that landscape in the early morning, with the sun at your back, is to lose the sense of proportion. Your imagination comes to life, and this, you think, is where Creation was begun.”

This tension between the bittersweet roughness of Oklahoma geography and its ability to generate and regenerate art, creativity, and life is the foundation of Momaday's moral landscapes. In *Rainy Mountain* and his other work, Momaday transcends narrow cultural definitions to show the essence of one's relationship to land, to geography, is much more than an aesthetic or a slight gesture. It becomes an ethic, too, or a powerful value, one lost to many people in the current Oil Age's last belch of hubris and under the Bush-era, anti-environment crusade.

In an Academy of Achievement interview, when asked about his early influences in his life, Momaday said, "I certainly can point to an understanding of the relationship between man and the landscape, for example. I grew up with that, and that's such an important equation in the Indian world. That has been of great value to me all my life."

These moral landscapes in Momaday's work teach us the importance of grounding ourselves in nature and our bodies. Once detached from the physical world, we lose the essence of human existence to artifice and the fraudulent. This world of artifice, then, is filled with corruption and lies without actual physical centers or foundations. Momaday's work argues for natural rhythms, art, and the spiritual or existential acceptance of the universal human condition filled with both tremendous pain and ecstatic life affirmation.

Momaday, a Kiowa Indian, echoes other great progressive Oklahoma moralists such as Woody Guthrie and Will Rogers. He stands in stark contrast to the state's right-wing power structure, which has been instrumental in promoting institutionalized racist attitudes towards the state's American Indians for decades. Writing in the moral tradition of Guthrie, Rogers, John Steinbeck and Ralph Ellison, Momaday remains a significant voice for valid and enduring Oklahoma culture and values.

In 1934, Navarro Scott Mammedaty was born in Lawton, Oklahoma. He then lived on the Kiowa Indian Reservation for a year until he moved to Arizona. He later earned a Ph.D. in English from the University of California, and his first novel, *House Made of Dawn* earned him the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1969. *Rainy Mountain*, a collection of Kiowa tales, was published in 1976. *Rainy Mountain*, of course, is located in Oklahoma. In his academic career, Momaday has taught at the University of California, Berkeley, Stanford University, and the University of Arizona.

In addition to his fiction, Momaday published a 1971 article, "The American Land Ethic," that helped create the contemporary environmentalist movement. In the article, Momaday argues for the importance of respecting nature.

Of course, the right-wing power structure in Oklahoma, represented by the CEOs of the state energy companies and *The Daily Oklahoman* has been late to recognize the importance of American Indian culture here. It has ignored or marginalized some of the state's and world's greatest moral voices because of its hateful policies to enrich itself at any cost, even if that means fueling and condoning racist attitudes.

Here is what Momaday has to say about such oppression in a 1996 Academy of Achievement interview:

"I belong to a race of people, a society, that has been oppressed. We, the Indians, have had a hard time, for a long time. We have had to endure a great deal, but the dream means as much to us as it does to anyone. You'll never find a greater patriot than an American Indian. It's not by accident that I, a member of the Gourd Dance society, go to Oklahoma to dance on the 4th of July, you know. It is not an accident that the greatest honor that can come to an American Indian in my generation is to serve in the Armed Forces. And the veterans who have given their lives are greatly honored by the Native people. So, the dream is very important to me, and it is, I think, to Native Americans in general."

Just as Guthrie sang the pain of his people victimized by the Dust Bowl era and just as Rogers attacked the wealthy elite who failed to help starving people during The Great Depression, so, too, does Momaday present a clear, moral vision transcending culture and politics. Momaday, like Guthrie and Rogers, creates and augments a twentieth-century moral Oklahoma tradition that remains vibrant and real. These are the people who make

our local culture unique in the world, not rich oil company executives or newspaper owners.

In one *Rainy Mountain* tale, “The Earth as it Really Was,” Momaday’s vision is clear:

“I remember coming out upon the northern Great Plain in the late spring. There were meadows of blue and yellow wildflowers on the slopes, and I could see the still, sunlit plain below, reaching away out of sight. At first there is no discrimination in the eye, nothing but the land itself, whole and impenetrable. But then the smallest things begin to stand out of the depths--herds and rivers and groves--and each of these has perfect being in terms of distance and of silence and of age. Yes, I thought, now I see the earth as it really is; never again will I see things as I saw them yesterday or the day before.”

The enlightened, moral vision will always have its roots in the physical and artistic world. Momaday’s work will live on for centuries to come.

June 6, 2005

I get the feeling, though, that other people are out there doing this same thing on holidays, but not all of them think about it as hard and long as I do, unless maybe there's a group in California or on the East Coast organized already, with their own journal and membership dues. If not, though, maybe those of us into holiday video synchronization (HVS) should form a support group.

Into Sean's camera, which by now, as always, he placed on a tripod, I said in a loud voice, matching the voice on the tape, "Let's get out the 1995 tape, and play it." I did this every year, too. Ryan, Sean's youngest boy, a fine boy I love like one of my own, found it right off, and played it.

There I stood in 1995, speaking into the camera. I said, "The important news is: Uncle Chester's dog has some form of rare dog cancer. And here next to me"—I point to the television set—"is a Gilligan's Island rerun."

As I watched the tape, I thought, That dog of Chester's is still alive, isn't she? I've thought the same thought every year since 1996. Incredible, I thought. I thought that thought every year since at least 1997 or 1998.

I yelled out to Ray, "Is Uncle Chester's dog still alive? You know, the one who had that rare form of dog cancer."

Ray said, "Yeah. I think so."

I watched myself turn up the volume of the rerun. Mary Ann and Ginger came on the 1995 tape to console Gilligan after he fell into a vat of green liquid. Ginger said to Gilligan, "Are you all right?" Mary Ann said, "Oh you poor boy."

I then said, in sync with the 1995 tape, "Klutz, schmuck, dumbass."

Ray joined in because he knew this part as well as I did, and it was part of the family tradition now, even if we got to play it back over and get it right, get it exact, every year.

I love Ray.

Fighting The Right: Taxes

OCPA Mush

The April 20, 2005 edition of the *Oklahoma Gazette* contains a misleading opinion piece by Brandon Dutcher, who describes himself as the vice president for policy at the Oklahoma Council of Public Affairs. The OCPA is an ultra-conservative organization bankrolled by the state's powerful right-wing political lobby. Dutcher's writing has appeared on the editorial pages of *The Daily Oklahoman*.

The piece, titled "Against government greed," is a typical Republican distortion. It is deceitful in that it tries to mask its political leanings under populist rhetoric. The piece essentially argues that we are taxed too much. But then it supposedly shows how former gubernatorial candidate Steve Largent gives more in charity than Oklahoma Governor Brad Henry. The point here, of course, is that Republicans are better people than Democrats, and we should always vote Republican. Ultimately, then, the piece is not a typical "libertarian" rant against taxes, but an endorsement of Republican ideology.

Here are a couple of things to consider about Dutcher's argument:

(1) He relies on information that is three years old, and he does not consider the overall income of both Largent and Henry. Supposedly Largent gave away 22 percent of his income in 2002 to charity whereas Henry gave away one percent, but overall who has the most money of the two? And three years ago? And look how much more money Largent (\$185, 758) made in 2002 than Henry (\$116,288). I, for one, think Henry can relate to average Oklahomans far more than Largent, and especially when it comes to income. And where is Largent these days?

(2) Judging by the OCPA website, Dutcher is a TABOR (Taxpayers' Bills Of Rights) Republican, which means he wants a standstill government budget tied to population

growth and inflation. And this is probably Dutcher's real point in the piece, though, again, he disguises it under populist rhetoric about taxes.

No one likes to pay taxes, and no one likes it when the government wastes money. Both Republicans and Democrats have been a part of government waste in the past, and they will be a part of it in the future. Dutcher makes it a partisan issue when it is not a partisan issue.

It is disconcerting and somewhat frightening for Oklahoma's future to see the *Gazette* run a piece by a local conservative think-tank flak. Dutcher already has a voice in the state's largest newspaper, which is one of the most conservative newspapers in the country, and his organization has the money and people to get out the right-wing message in a myriad of other ways as well.

April 21, 2005

Hiatt Proposal Helps Rich

House Speaker Todd Hiatt (R-Kellyville) and his band of steal-from-the-middle-class-give-to-the-rich lawmakers tried this past week to seize some political initiative in the face of the conservative party's deteriorating condition by announcing they want to do away with the estate tax in Oklahoma.

They even held the typical doublespeak Republican press conference and put out a self-serving press release referring to Sweden of all places.

The Daily Oklahoman, as usual, did not provide adequate coverage of the issue by offering alternative points of view or showing how much exactly in tax dollars the state would stand to lose in coming years if the tax was eliminated. That is because the immoral newspaper, a state tragedy, is a completely biased, right-wing, fringe publication. Last year, the estate tax accounted for \$80 million, according to the press release. Only estates worth approximately \$1 million or more are taxed.

As it stands now, the vast majority of Oklahoma estates will never be subject to the tax.

The estate-tax issue is bogus, a publicity stunt really. I wonder how many state Republicans making under, say, \$35,000 or even \$50,000 a year are thrilled more rich people will be exempt from paying taxes. I wonder how many state Republicans making under \$25,000 a year—and sadly there are a lot of people who vote against their own economic interests here—are happy about this transfer of wealth to the state's richest individuals.

But the state Republicans, still pandering to a small segment of ultra-rich people in the state, have to come up with something to talk about because their leader, President

George Bush, is quickly taking the party into obscurity once again as he divides the country with his meaningless and botched war. So they repeat the mantra and goosestep under their immoral ideology.

Polls show Bush's approval ratings at all-time lows. Some show those ratings as low as 40 and 36 percent, the lowest of his presidency. Meanwhile, a majority of Americans are now convinced Bush lied about the reasons for the Iraq war and that he continues to lie about it. The death and carnage and chaos mount in Iraq, and Bush has no plan, no strategy, just the same lies and hollow metaphors.

In addition, gasoline prices are skyrocketing because Bush has no real energy policy. Virtually everyone in the state is complaining about gasoline prices, which are not going down anytime soon. Never has a president been so personally responsible for a terrible energy policy leading to direct financial hardships.

So it is *carpe diem* time for state Democrats. Here are some suggestions:

(1) Now is the time to abandon the Democrats-for-Bush or Democrats-for-the-war rhetoric in red-state Oklahoma. Just stop it, stop it, stop it now. Bush's approval ratings are sure to shrink more here and across the country unless he begins a major withdrawal of American troops soon from Iraq, and that is not going to happen anytime soon. Even if he does withdraw the troops before the 2006 elections, the fallout from his terrible war will continue to haunt him. Meanwhile, state Democrats should start bringing truthful facts about the war to the Oklahoma public. No one has to do this harshly or without consideration for those who have lost loved ones in the war, but people here need to be aware the majority of Americans and most of the civilized world disapprove of the way Bush invaded Iraq and has handled the occupation. Our corporate media here does not

report this simple fact. We need a concerted grassroots campaign to get around the biased, conservative Oklahoma media.

(2) The 2006 elections loom large, of course, and the Democrats should feel much hope about their chances because of the fallout from Bush's war fiasco, but we do have to get through another session with a Republican majority in the Oklahoma House of Representatives. The Democrats need to hold some press conferences of their own, explaining how they plan to improve education, fund programs to cut energy costs, work on reducing gasoline prices, and ensure Oklahoma has a vibrant economy. Hiatt and his freaky posse deserve no response. Simply put together real programs that will help middle-class Oklahomans. How about creating a larger initiative with a five-point plan to support it? Do this now, and stick together on it. Print bumper stickers, T-shirts, brochures. Get Brad Henry, a second-term shoo-in for governor, to announce the program.

(3) Then think big, not small, about the 2006 elections. The Democrats can win the House back and easily retain the Senate if the ideas are symbolically large. Do not engage the Republicans in their own doublespeak frames. The state Republicans right now support an immoral agenda that hurts Oklahoma's middle-class families. Do not engage in some absurd, Limbaughesque debate over the worn-out clichés advanced by the party of the war-liar Bush. Let them chirp their lies to each other as the state Democrats move Oklahoma and the country forward.

This is a crucial opportunity for state Democrats. The people, not the corporations, not the rich elite, have the advantage now and the advantage grows by the day. Do the Democrats have the guts?

August 26, 2005

Oklahoma Gets Fair Share Of Federal Tax Dollars

Salon.com published a recent article which made two important points about Oklahoma and other red states. The Tax Foundation reports our state gets back \$1.48 of federal money for every dollar it pays in taxes to the system, and a recent poll shows a majority of Oklahomans no longer support President Bush.

Both issues bring up the red state/blue state divide, which continues to polarize the country and will undoubtedly continue to do so.

Some blue states, for example, only get back 55 to 75 cents to every dollar they pay in federal taxes, and some blue staters are righteously angry it has taken so long for red staters to figure out that Bush is an incompetent liar.

Only three states, Utah, Wyoming and Alabama, still give the president majority support. Overall, Bush's approval rating has plummeted to the 36 percent.

The tax issue has long been a point I have mentioned here and elsewhere. It is a major contradiction middle-class people, especially in places like Oklahoma, support tax cuts for the rich when the state receives so much money back on its federal tax investment. Essentially, progressive tax rates and distribution lead to more money for our state.

You can only imagine what a real outback this would be if Oklahoma only received 55 cents back on every federal tax dollars. So much for the phony, rugged, individualist pose of the typical, right-wing Oklahoman. It takes extra federal money to keep this state going, folks. It takes progressive, liberal values to keep us afloat, not those so-called values espoused by the rich-come-first crowd.

The Tax Foundation study points out, "The correlation between donor states and so-

called blue states is fairly strong: 13 of the 19 states that Senator Kerry won in 2004 sent more to Washington in taxes than they got back in spending.

“Meanwhile, most of the so-called red states profit from federal taxing and spending: 25 of the 31 states President Bush won. ‘They pay their taxes too,’ said Tax Foundation President Scott Hodge, ‘but those payments are not as high because of the progressive income tax.’”

Meanwhile, a USA Survey poll shows that only 49 percent of Oklahomans now approve of Bush’s job performance. The state is ranked fourth under the three states that still give the president small majorities of support, but, hey, at least we are not in the top three.

As the blue-state/red-state divide grows and as Oklahoma continues its march to a quasi-theocracy under the religious dictates of state Reps. Sally Kern and Thad Balkman, the poll numbers give us hope there is an awakening in this country.

Will there be enough decent, intelligent, open-minded people left in Oklahoma to pick up the pieces if the country does come back to its senses?

March 20, 2006

Tax Cut Benefits Oklahoma's Richest

Proposed tax cut legislation will benefit the richest in the state and leave Oklahoma vulnerable to a future funding crisis.

The Alliance For Oklahoma's Future, a progressive organization dedicated to fair taxation and other issues, has released a paper showing Senate Bill 2022 will give 70 percent of a proposed tax cut to the top one-fifth of the state's richest taxpayers.

SB 2022, if enacted, would lower the state's income tax rate from 6.25 to 4.9 on January 1, 2007.

Written by David Blatt and Monica Barczak, the paper cites the results of a study on the tax cut conducted by the Institute of Taxation and Economic Policy. It shows how the richest will benefit the most under this so-called tax relief plan in Oklahoma's taxation system.

According to the paper, "Using a micro-simulation model of Oklahoma's tax system, ITEP's analysis reveals that cutting the top income tax rate would provide disproportionate benefits to upper-income taxpayers; very modest benefits to middle-income taxpayers; and virtually no benefit to low-income taxpayers."

The proposed tax cut would also leave the state without adequate revenue sources, and thus our educational systems would be seriously jeopardized during any type of future downturn in the state's economy.

According to the paper, "Supporters of dramatic tax cuts often claim or imply that cutting taxes will not impact the state's long-term budget situation because the economic growth that tax cuts will fuel will create enough new tax revenue to pay for the cuts. This claim, associated with the doctrine of supply side economics has been repeated for

decades but has also been widely and roundly refuted. N. Gregory Mankiw, former Chairman of President Bush's Council of Economic Advisors and a Harvard economics professor, likened the economist who says that tax cuts could pay for themselves to a 'snake oil salesman who is trying to sell a miracle cure.'"

Middle-class Oklahomans, facing stagnant wages, should not be appeased with small, token tax cuts in the face of rising living costs. A small decrease in taxes will do little to alleviate growing household bills and much to damage the state's educational system. The tax cut will mean increased college tuition and fees and woefully underfunded schools. Our dilapidated roads will mean more car repairs. State fees and licenses' costs will no doubt rise. You will pay for the rich to get richer as we dumb down the state even more. In essence, those who do the bidding for the rich at the State Capitol, primarily neocon Republicans under the leadership of House Speaker Todd Hiett (R-Kellyville), are trying to buy your silence on this issue for \$50 or so.

The richest, meanwhile, grow richer under "starve the beast" conservative ideology promoted by President George Bush.

Why an Oklahoman making \$50,000 a year wants to line the pockets of rich oil company executives and ensure their own children go to underfunded schools is a great mystery in the world today. (The rich are laughing all the way to the bank.) Part of the problem is that the state's mainstream media, tied to the vested interests of the rich, does not report the entire story. Thomas Frank's book, *What's The Matter With Kansas?*, deals with how voters in this area of the country often vote against their own economic interests.

This proposed major tax cut, if enacted, would ultimately decimate the Oklahoma economy. Even the rich power structure in this state has to realize this to a certain degree. Will there be a backlash once voters know they have been tricked? Yes, if we can retain our democratic structures under the imperial presidency of George Bush. But the damage to our relatively poor state will be done by then, and it will take years and years to recover.

April 26, 2006

We both yelled, in unison, along with me in 1995, "Pissant, woos, asshole."

Mama shushed in the background, just like she did every year. Sometimes her shushes correspond to the 1995-tape shush, sometimes not. We never press her to get it right because it's funnier when she does it on her own. This year she was a little off, maybe more than a little, but still close enough to make it sort of funny.

I thought, Is this it? Reruns of Gilligan's Island. Our lives? I've been thinking this every Thanksgiving since 1995.

I was depressed as usual. I mean really depressed, and I got the badge to say it. I'm clinically depressed, and also, I have an anxiety disorder, and this means that I take imiprimine and Xanax, and think about death a lot, and do things like tape myself watching myself the previous Thanksgiving on every Thanksgiving. My drug-tolerance levels are simply incredible.

If you want to know more about my disorders, or if you feel that you may need help yourself, I suggest David Sheehan's book, The Anxiety Disease (New York: Bantam Books, 1990). The unanswerable question: Does the anxiety cause the depression, or does the depression cause the anxiety? In other words, does thinking about your impending death cause anxiety, which then becomes depression, and then you want to kill yourself? Or does thinking about your impending death cause depression, which then turns into anxiety, and not only do you not want to kill yourself, you are, in fact actually scared you might die? I get both feelings when I wake up mornings: Some days I want to live; some days I want to die. I take the drugs then.

What's even crazier about me being crazy is that my loving family has accepted that I'm simply crazy. I love my family, but sometimes I think they could be a little crazy

themselves for not bothering me more about being crazy. But that could just be me thinking crazy. So I can never be sure.

I mean how many families in the world, how many typical families, would accept a son, brother, husband, father, as someone who is always going to be a little off, sometimes major off, always, and not make a big deal about it?

Fighting The Right: TABOR

Tabor Would Devastate Oklahoma

Proposed legislation that ties the budget of state government to population growth and the inflation rate is apparently still on the political table in Oklahoma. The Republican-sponsored bill, modeled after the Orwellian-named Taxpayers' Bill of Rights (TABOR) legislation in Colorado, would gut Oklahoma education, especially higher education.

The law has been a complete disaster in Colorado. Funding for higher education in that state has shrunk considerably, and employment is way down. The economy there is in decline, children and the disadvantaged suffer, and the elderly try to make ends meet with reduced social programs. But, of course, that has not stopped *The Daily Oklahoman* and many right-wing extremists in the state from supporting the measure. The bill, which would amend the Oklahoma Constitution, would require a vote of the people. It is sponsored by state Sen. Randy Brogdon.

Oklahomans would make a tragic mistake if they vote for this legislation if it does make it to the ballot. (There are some indications the bill is losing support.) Oklahoma is a small state with limited population growth. We even lost a congressional seat after the last census because of limited growth compared to the country's average population growth. Under the proposed bill's provisions, even a small downturn in the state's economy might lead to, among other things, massive teacher layoffs, school closings, and higher college tuition. In addition, its impact on our state's disadvantaged would be immeasurable.

This state desperately needs to invest our taxes in better education, not give our tax dollars to rich people. Keep in mind the rich power structure in the state—led by its immoral mouthpiece, *The Oklahoman*—is always lying when it claims it wants to

improve education in the state. No, what it wants is your hard-earned money through tax cuts for the wealthy and higher gasoline prices so the state's fat-cat oil executives can get even richer. (Look at the recent profits of oil companies in this country. It is obscene. Meanwhile, gasoline costs skyrocket.)

These TABOR Republicans, fueled by the right-wing extremist group, the Oklahoma Council of Public Affairs, are simply the most immoral citizens of Oklahoma today. Their aim is to redistribute wealth to the state's and country's richest citizens. Their clichéd rhetoric about less government or accountable government rings hollow and false. They do not give a hoot about this state or you or me. They do not care about your children or your grandparents.

These immoral rascals want your hard-earned money, and they will lie and distort to get it any way they can. They treat us like rubes, and then laugh all the way to the bank. The money they steal from us is blood money.

The Oklahoma TABOR Republicans are a part of what we might call the new immoralists in our country today. Hiding under cultural wedge issues, these new immoralists work insidiously to hurt ordinary people with their draconian laws and policies that shift massive amounts of wealth to people like the Gaylord family or Oklahoma's rich oil executives or the nation's Wall Street bankers.

Under any known and recognized moral system, whether it be conventional religion or traditional philosophy, it is wrong to intentionally harm large masses of regular people so the wealthy can get even wealthier. But that is just what the Oklahoma TABOR Republicans want to do.

In addition, Oklahoma TABOR Republicans are obviously philosophically aligned with those morally-challenged Republicans who now want to dismantle Social Security so Americans will no longer have a secured retirement. They want to take the retirement money you pay into the system and give it to rich, Wall Street stockbrokers who will then give some of it (“some of it,” folks) back in the form of campaign contributions to the corrupt politicians running our country these days. They want you to have less and less so rich people can have more and more. It really is that simple.

The new immoralists, these quasi-fascists, will bring our state and country to its doom if people do not wake up soon.

March 29, 2005

TABOR Would Harm Education

The state's conservatives recently launched an initiative petition drive to legally and forever ensure Oklahoma remains in the absolute bottom of national education funding.

The conservatives have brought their latest freak show, the so-called Taxpayer Bill of Rights, or TABOR, here not because state spending is skyrocketing or there is major government waste but because they know they can manipulate Oklahomans with lies, distortions, and the hackneyed and untrue right-wing mantras about big government.

TABOR is about reducing the taxes of rich people. Repeat it. TABOR is about reducing the taxes of rich people.

The petition drive to place TABOR on the ballot needs approximately 200,000 signatures. The drive is partially funded, of courses, from conservative groups outside of Oklahoma. These groups have ideological connections to TABOR because they want to continue President George Bush's massive program to transfer wealth to the country's richest citizens as the middle-class deals with stagnant wages and rising health care costs. TABOR is a part of this program on a state level.

If supporters garner enough petition signatures, Oklahomans will vote on a constitutional amendment that limits the growth of state spending each year to a formula that considers the inflation rate and population growth.

What the TABOR Republicans will say is that this is a good way to monitor and check government spending. They will say TABOR ensures government officials cannot spend more in terms of percentage than, say, an average family.

(Ironically, their iconic leader President George Bush is one of the most reckless spenders in American history.)

Here is what they will **NOT** say:

(1) TABOR has been a complete disaster in Colorado. It has wreaked havoc on the economy as educational funding has plummeted and the state became Oklahlomaesque in its treatment of infrastructure. The state was once known for its excellent quality of living. Now it is known for its stupidity in becoming the forerunner of the latest conservative tax-cut fad. The state will consider rescinding some of the features of TABOR in an upcoming election, but you will not hear that from those collecting signatures.

A recent *Denver Post* series on TABOR showed just how controversial TABOR has become in that state.

According to one article, “As a way to manage a growing state, TABOR is an unmitigated disaster, its detractors say.

“The amendment, they say, has left Colorado in a deep financial hole that jeopardizes the quality of life that once made the state the envy of the nation.

“‘Even something as good as TABOR always has unintended consequences,’ said Republican Gov. Bill Owens, who has been accused of betraying fiscal conservatives by signing on to Referendums C and D. ‘It works very well in a growing economy, but the challenge is you can't adjust for tough times.’”

Note this is a Republican governor talking about the “unintended consequences” of TABOR.

(2) TABOR does not allow for states to make up for severe down years in state revenues or to pay for big state projects with available cash. If a state goes through successive years of lowering budgets, it can then only grow its budget—when it can—by

the formula percentage. It cannot catch up. It must then refund the extra money to taxpayers as schools and health programs and road maintenance projects suffer huge cuts. The bulk of those refunds will, of course, go to the richest people in the state. Even if provisions are instituted to eliminate this obvious flaw in TABOR, its dogma and philosophy would create unnecessary political and legal trepidation to do the right thing for schools during a major funding crisis.

(3) Oklahoma is absolutely the worst place for TABOR. It is a relatively small state with chronic funding problems for education and infrastructure. It needs flexibility in the budget process. It also experiences regular downturns in state revenues sometimes outside of national trends. This means that when the rest of the country is flourishing, Oklahoma could be laying off teachers and ignoring its infrastructure problems in a major financial crisis, compounding its problem of low population growth and sealing its hick status. Remember, the state lost a congressional seat after the 2000 U.S. Census. In addition, Oklahoma already consistently ranks in the bottom ten of states in terms of per-student spending and teacher salaries. The state should at least move to average national educational funding before it considers such a radical, draconian tax-cut incentive.

It is proven nonsense now that today's Republicans—these immoral, greedy neocons—are somehow more concerned with accountable and fiscally responsible government than Democrats. Under Bush and one-party Republican rule, the government is running staggering budget deficits as it rewards non-competitive war and disaster-relief contracts to administration cronies such as Halliburton. The financial corruption of the Bush II government will live in historical infamy as the Bushies plunder the national treasure.

Anyone concerned with education in Oklahoma should not only refuse to sign the petition but also work actively to defeat this proposed amendment if it makes it to the ballot.

September 28, 2005

TABOR Would Destroy Oklahoma Higher Education

Those of us in Oklahoma higher education need to start speaking out aggressively against TABOR, the so-called Taxpayers' Bill of Rights, which will decimate the college and university system in this state if it is eventually enacted.

With strong support from the state's biased, right-wing corporate media, TABOR supporters are now circulating an initiative petition to get a constitutional amendment issue on the ballot next November. The petition needs approximately 200,000 signatures.

If approved by voters, the TABOR amendment would limit the growth of the state government's budget to a formula tied to the inflation rate and population growth. Anything collected over that amount would be refunded to taxpayers.

But some aspects of government, including higher education, often grow beyond this formula. For example, Oklahoma higher education has recently tried to meet the financial demand of growing enrollments. These growing enrollments are a good sign the state might soon begin increasing its low college graduation rate.

In addition, a relatively poor state like Oklahoma needs at least a little flexibility in improving its infrastructure in order to maintain a bare minimum of quality of life when compared to most other states and to attract outside business investment. Also, in most cases, when states use tax money collectively and wisely to improve quality of life, residents actually save more money than they would get from token tax refunds. That is because, among other things, they end up paying lower college tuition, have fewer car repairs, and enjoy better and less expensive health care.

So would you rather pay \$2,000 more each year in college tuition for your child, or get a \$50 refund check?

The right-wing may frame its tax-relief ideology in the language of populism, but it is based on the elitist, neocon concept of transferring wealth to the richest in our society as it eliminates educational opportunities for middle-class people.

Colorado government has operated under a TABOR amendment since the early 1990s, and it has been a disaster for the state, especially for higher education. It is so bad that voters are now asked by the state's Republican Governor Bill Owens (yes, you read that right . . . REPUBLICAN) to rescind TABOR for five years so the state does not become like, well, like Oklahoma or Mississippi or Louisiana. Colorado voters go to the polls November 1 to decide this issue.

So is this Colorado mess what we want to bring to Oklahoma, which already struggles with low educational funding rates, infrastructure problems, and underfunded social programs?

It is like limiting educational, social, and hunger-prevention programs in a Third World country because a handful of immoral, ultra-rich tyrants in that country want all the money for themselves.

Yet I suspect TABOR has a decent chance of passing here in the state.

The main reason is that TABOR's local supporters are given carte blanche access to the press while those who oppose it have to work outside the corporate media to explain the truth about how TABOR will make this state even more mediocre in terms of its educational funding and progress. This is why it is crucial those of us employed in higher education speak out now.

As *The Daily Oklahoman* laments the state's low college graduation rate, it runs biased, one-sided stories about those right-wingers pushing TABOR. Note how the

stories lead with TABOR supporters criticizing anyone who opposes them and give the opposing view only in the last three paragraphs. This is immoral. The newspaper could at the very least publish thorough and significant commentary from the opposition, which includes some college presidents.

But right-wing fanatics obviously carry more weight in the newspaper's pages than, say, University of Oklahoma President David Boren.

So, with that in mind, it is immoral as well for those of us in higher education to remain silent on such an important issue, which will ultimately impact thousands upon thousands of Oklahoma college students. If you care about students, about the mission of higher education, then you need to speak out.

Here are some facts about what TABOR has done to higher education in Colorado:

- (1) If current funding trends continue, there will be absolutely NO state funding for higher education in Colorado in ten years.
- (2) Overall, funding for higher education in Colorado has fallen from 19 to 11 percent of the total state budget.
- (3) The University of Colorado had its state funding cut in half since TABOR. (What do you think would happen to universities like the University of Oklahoma or the University of Central Oklahoma under a TABOR program? It would be exactly the same.)
- (4) College tuition in Colorado has skyrocketed, and thus those students from middle-class and lower-income families are hurt the most. The rate of college attendance has dropped in the state.

Here are some thoughts about TABOR from University of Colorado-Boulder
Chancellor Philip DiStefano:

"In many ways, CU-Boulder is facing one of the most challenging periods in its history. ... In fact, our very existence as a state-supported university is called into question by the fact that only 6.5 percent of our budget is supported by state tax dollars – and that amount is all but certain to decline further if voters do not grant a reprieve to TABOR spending limits in the November election."

So what would it mean to Oklahomans if both the University of Oklahoma and Oklahoma State University were private universities? It would mean that only wealthy people, for the most part, would have access to these institutions.

As we argue against TABOR, we must remind everyone that Oklahoma already has a constitutional amendment that severely limits the legislature's ability to raise taxes. In addition, the state government's budget growth has grown in line with the economy's growth over the last decade or so. The state cut its tax rate last year and even refunded tax money.

TABOR would do much to hurt Oklahoma in many areas besides higher education. But the state's academics have a special moral duty to speak out against it.

If we allow the right-wing to destroy the university system of free inquiry and research and enlightenment without a fight, we disgrace these very principles.

October 26, 2005

Fight Outside TABOR Interests Now And Later

If Oklahoma ends up adopting a TABOR amendment, the state's public education systems will be damaged for years to come.

Meanwhile, conservative political interests from outside the state will know for sure a majority of Oklahoma voters are puppets ready to sell away their own financial interests and their children's futures for hollow, right-wing ideology.

If adopted, TABOR will come to symbolize on a local level the wreckage left behind by neocons intent on transferring more and more wealth to the nation's richest citizens while cutting government programs that save middle-class people money and improve their quality of life.

Of course, the key word here is "if."

Supporters of TABOR, or the so-called Taxpayers' Bill of Rights movement, recently delivered their initiative petition to the state. They claim to have more than the approximately 219,000 signatures needed to place the issue on the ballot.

TABOR would limit state government spending to a formula tied to population growth and the inflation rate. Colorado voters recently rescinded their TABOR amendment because it had severely reduced funding for education there, and it would do the same here.

Oklahoma is the wrong place at the wrong time for TABOR. We already have severe restrictions on raising state taxes in Oklahoma, and many areas of our government, such as education, are terribly underfunded when compared to national averages. By restricting revenues, the state will have no chance at all to catch up to just average national funding.

The TABOR movement here is funded and supported primarily by outside political interests, and many petition circulators were paid two dollars for each signature they obtained. One TABOR petition circulator was even arrested when it was alleged he was not even a state resident. You must be a state resident to gather signatures for initiative petitions. There are TABOR initiatives in states throughout the country.

In a recent news release about the TABOR petition drive in which he argued a statewide investigation into the petition drive was needed to protect democracy, state Senator Jeff Rabon said:

“You have to wonder why they have to use out-of-state money to buy a statewide vote on TABOR. We cannot let special interest groups from Colorado, Illinois and Washington D.C. hijack our initiative petition process. Democracy is too precious of a commodity to allow it to be sold to the highest bidder and those willing to trample on our laws to accomplish their goals,” Rabon said. “A coordinated statewide investigation is the only way to preserve this most basic right of a democratic society.”

TABOR supporters, which include the state’s right-wing power structure, waged a dishonest campaign to get the required number of signatures, and the petition should face a legal challenge.

The Oklahoma Public Employees Association, for example, has issued an alert about people who may have been misled into signing the petition:

“If you signed a petition in the last two months it may very well have been the TABOR petition.”

I think it is fair to suggest that some petition circulators had a certain line or sales pitch get their two dollars per name, and that many people who signed the petition did so

after hearing distorted or even false information. This is what you get when you have to bring in paid lackeys to create a bogus political movement and when the local media is biased and lazy.

The right-wing power structure has been advancing an argument that those opposed to TABOR should just roll over, play dead, and allow the measure to get on the ballot. There will be time to debate the merits of TABOR then, they argue. Yeah, right, as if the corporate media and its toadies and apologists here will actually give a fair hearing to both sides of the issue.

We need to fight TABOR from the beginning to the end; we must remain diligent.

If it passes, those who oppose TABOR can say they acted in good conscience when the public education system becomes completely dismantled in a state that already leads the nation in paying the lowest teacher salaries and is often in the bottom five or ten of per-student funding in the nation.

December 4, 2005

Bricktown Canal, Ford Center, Hornets Expose Fraudulent Oklahoma TABOR

Ideology

The country's anti-tax proponents argue government always wastes our hard-earned tax dollars and there are no money bargains or savings for citizens when taxes are used collectively to improve our quality of life or our education systems or our health care programs.

This deceptive and immoral propaganda campaign, aimed directly and relentlessly at the middle class, has been waged by modern-day conservatives since the Reagan era, and it continues today. Nationally, it is known as the Republican "starve the beast" strategy promoted by right-winger Grover Norquist.

The success of the TABOR initiative petition drive in Oklahoma will rest entirely on creating this false mistrust in government spending. Its underlying ideology argues that paying taxes is always—not sometimes, not most of the time, but always—a losing proposition for taxpayers.

TABOR, which stands for the Taxpayers' Bill of Rights movement, would limit state government spending to a formula tied to the inflation rate and population growth. Any leftover money would be refunded to taxpayers. Oklahoma TABOR supporters, mostly funded by outside political interests, are hoping to gather enough signatures to place the issue on the ballot next year even though Colorado voters recently rescinded TABOR there because it decimated the state's education systems.

But you need to look no further than Oklahoma City's recent success with MAPS (Metropolitan Area Projects) to see the obvious deception in basic TABOR ideology.

In 1993, Oklahoma City voters approved a sales tax increase in order to give the city a much needed facelift. More than \$309 million was collected from 1993 to 1999, and the proceeds went to such items as construction of the Ford Center and the Bricktown Canal.

By virtually all measurements, MAPS is a great success. Bricktown is flourishing, we have a fantastic new downtown library, and the city recently become the home of the New Orleans Hornets basketball team after Hurricane Katrina forced the team to find a temporary home.

City officials are hoping the city can show the NBA that Oklahoma City is now big league, ready for a permanent team here once the Hornets return to New Orleans. That would have never have happened except for increasing, not cutting, taxes.

The funded projects have obviously helped to increase business recruitment here. Beyond that, Bricktown—for all its faults—is truly a vital and thriving entertainment district that is an Oklahoma City jewel. It improves the quality of life for us all. It also deepens the city's overall tax base, which helps us financially.

But I bet you will not hear TABOR supporters talk about how tax dollars were spent to improve the city.

I am sure TABOR supporters would argue that nothing in their proposed constitutional amendment would prevent taxpayers from passing a new MAPS-like initiative here or elsewhere in the state.

But that is not the point. If government always wastes money and we always need to reduce taxes and government spending, then why should we ever increase taxes? There is as much potential for waste and corruption with MAPS and city government as there is in state government.

Under TABOR ideology, in fact, Oklahoma City should have cut taxes, not raised them. That would have made Oklahoma City a better place, according to TABOR ideology. That would have created jobs here and improved the city's basic infrastructure, they would argue.

Relentless oversight of taxpayer's money is always crucial, but it is disingenuous to argue the members of the MAPS oversight board were somehow more moral and scrupulous than those people who oversee state spending, such as the state auditor or the attorney general.

Ultimately, state TABOR supporters want to starve state government of revenue, which will lead to much higher college tuition costs, higher fees, underfunded educational programs, and reduced programs for the state's vulnerable. Right now, Oklahoma leads the nation in the number of hungry people on a percentage basis, according to a recent study.

Set aside, for a moment, the intrinsic moral issue of cutting taxes that would mostly benefit the ultra-rich as the state cuts social programs, which is sure to happen if TABOR is enacted. Look at it pragmatically. Reducing funding for social programs costs us all in the long run through, among a variety of things, rising health care costs. When someone without health insurance—the country now has approximately 45 million uninsured people—shows up at a local hospital emergency room, we all pay more money for health care. Our co-pays go up and other medical costs for extensive cancer tests like mammograms skyrocket. It costs us directly and immediately.

The hidden and real reason for TABOR and all these current anti-tax movements, of course, is to decrease taxes for the country's ultra-rich. The ultra-rich have the money to

buy the publicity and the power to shape the news in ways that make many people wrongly believe government always wastes our money. Meanwhile, the rich play us against each other.

But MAPS proves them wrong as do such important federal insurance programs as Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid. When we pool our tax money with diligent oversight of government, we end up saving ourselves much-needed cash along with improving our quality of life. We are all in this together whether the rich elite like it or not.

December 15, 2005

The Rich Person's Stealing Bill Of Rights (RIPSBOR)

“ . . . TABOR's strict and rigid spending limits forced deep reductions to Colorado's basic services, including public schools, colleges, roads, and health care, and kept the state from emerging from its budget crisis. TABOR's negative effects led Coloradoans, on November 1st, 2005, to approve a statewide measure to suspend TABOR for five years.”—Alliance For Oklahoma's Future

I am still perplexed that more state leaders have not come out against TABOR, the so-called Taxpayer's Bill of Rights measure, which, if approved by voters, would decimate the Oklahoma economy and its education systems.

Why it is particularly important state leaders speak up is because those who support TABOR (SQ 726) lie consistently about its impact in Colorado. Even many of those operatives who gathered signatures to place the measure on the ballot could not or would not tell the truth about TABOR. The petition drive was paid for by out-of-state money.

(I talked to one young woman who signed the petition and then later tried to withdraw it when she found out TABOR benefited rich people and would gut education. State officials told her she could NOT withdraw her signature.)

TABOR would constitutionally tie the state's budget to a formula tied to population growth and the inflation rate. Any leftover money would have to be refunded to taxpayers. The richest among us would benefit the most, of course, and the rest of us would get underfunded schools, increased college tuition, skyrocketing health care costs, and dilapidated roads and bridges.

Colorado, the only state in the nation to adopt TABOR, had to rescind it recently because it had turned that state into, well, into a place like Oklahoma.

How can state leaders—Democrat or Republican—allow this measure to get through when Oklahoma struggles with some of the lowest education funding rates in the entire nation?

It is disgusting ultra-conservative, out-of-state elites have paid to get this measure on the ballot here to ensure rich people increase their wealth while the middle-class faces stagnant wages and increasing living costs.

As I have argued before, the state's voters face huge decisions about the hypocritical, gubernatorial candidate Ernest Istook, TABOR, and religious encroachment into government through intelligent design and other bills this election year. If we "win" this soul-destroying trifecta, the state will suffer economically for years to come.

When did family values come to mean providing an underfunded education for children, making sure senior citizens cannot get health care, forcing college students to pay exorbitant college tuition, and making sure students do not learn established scientific methods?

February 18, 2006

Okie Barons Come Out Against TABOR

When Oklahoma's richest, most powerful business people come together with the state's intelligentsia to form a quasi-political coalition, you know, well, you know pigs are flying and armadillos are directing traffic, right?

But a group of business people the Associated Press described as a "Who's Who" of power brokers in the state filed a lawsuit Wednesday challenging the TABOR initiative petition that would put a constitutional measure limiting the growth of the state budget on the November ballot.

Most educators and state educational organizations, from the Oklahoma Education Association to the Oklahoma Conference of the American Association of University Professors, have been outspoken in their opposition to the measure for months.

The new lawsuit claims the submitted petition is "deceptive and misleading" and does not include enough valid signatures. The protest was filed against the Oklahoma Supreme Court and Rick Carpenter, of Tulsa, who led the drive locally with out-of-state money.

Carpenter says the lawsuit will have no effect on the petition's validity, and that TABOR will be on the November ballot, according to local news accounts. The petition needs 219,000 signatures.

If the TABOR constitutional measure is approved, the state budget's annual growth would be tied to the inflation rate and population increase. Any money left over after this formula is applied would have to be given back to taxpayers.

The one state that has adopted TABOR, or the so-called Taxpayers' Bill of Rights, was Colorado. Voters there recently rescinded it because it had devastated that state's education systems and economy.

But the Colorado experience did not stop out-of-state elites from coming into Oklahoma and literally buying enough signatures to put the TABOR issue on the ballot. These people figured Oklahomans were so stupid, they could come in here and lie and manipulate, and no one would care.

But we did care, and we stood up. Meanwhile, Okie Funk and many others were wondering when the state leadership would stand up to really fight this issue.

How could they just stand by and watch the disgusting spectacle of out-of-state, ultra-rich elites with nothing but an ideology and a whim destroy the state's economy, education systems, and infrastructure? How could they stand by and watch Grover Norquist and his crowd use Oklahoma as an experiment in their quest to transfer as much money as possible to the wealthiest people in our country at the expense of elementary schools.

On Wednesday, that all changed. The group of business people who serve as "protestants" (protestors) against the petition include Clifford Hudson, CEO of Sonic Corporation and chair of the Oklahoma City School Board, Aubrey McClendan, CEO of Chesapeake Corporation, J. Larry Nichols, CEO of Devon Energy, and Luke R. Corbett, CEO of Kerr-McGee Corporation.

That's right . . . Sonic, Chesapeake, Devon, Kerr-McGee.

And another protestor is Clayton Bennett, who is an extremely powerful, local businessman married to Louise Gaylord Bennett, a daughter of the late Edward L. Gaylord, the longtime publisher of *The Daily Oklahoman*. Louise Bennett assists her sister, Christy Gaylord Everest, in running the newspaper these days, according to Wikipedia.

Count on *The Oklahoman* coming out against the petition soon, though its editorial page has leaned heavily in TABOR's direction, criticizing those who spoke up against the lies of those people gathering signatures for two dollars a name. Its mantra then was that everyone should just step aside and let the petition go forward so we could vote on it in November. As I recall, according to one editorial, people like me who spoke up were trying to stop American democracy or some nonsense like that.

Also, local civic leader G. T. Blankenship and Tulsa businessman John Brock signed on against the petition. Both are listed as trustees of the Oklahoma Council of Public Affairs, a local, conservative think tank which has been highly supportive of TABOR. I wonder what OCPA leaders Max Nichols and Brandon Dutcher think about the lawsuit? So far there is nothing about it on the OCPA Web site.

Other local people of interest on the lawsuit include V. Burns Hargis, vice president of the Bank of Oklahoma, and Kirk Humphreys, Oklahoma City's former mayor.

What is especially interesting about the lawsuit is that it pits some powerful right-wing business people against others in their camp who share their basic ideology and reality about the world. What is going on here? Is there a split among the cut-taxes-for-the-rich-no-matter-what crowd? Is there trouble in Rich City, folks?

More importantly, what were the political tradeoffs on this deal, and how will these tradeoffs affect ordinary people like you and me? Are more tax cuts for the rich forthcoming this legislative session? Count on it.

Oh yeah, the lawsuit was filed by the Crowe & Dunlevy law firm, one of the most prestigious and powerful legal firms in the state.

What is encouraging about this lawsuit is that it means the rich and powerful in this state do have a breaking point when it comes to ensuring we provide our children and college students here a decent education. This is not the typical, conservative lip service about improving schools with assessment tests and school choice and vouchers and No Child Left Behind. This is real action.

So, my fellow Okies, don't be surprised when you look up today and see the state's pig-filled sky or when an armadillo waves you through an intersection that has a broken stoplight.

February 25, 2006

Okie TABOR Saga Continues

As Okie Funk predicted a couple of weeks ago, *The Oklahoman* editorial page has come out against the initiative petition that could place a TABOR constitutional amendment on the ballot next November.

The newspaper did so after a group of prominent business people in the state recently filed a lawsuit to prevent the measure from making it to the ballot.

It will be interesting to see if the newspaper editorial board and business people also come out against state Rep. Ken Miller's TABOR bill, another measure that would tie the state's budget growth to the rate of inflation and population growth. This measure, if passed by the legislature, would also require voter approval.

Miller, an Edmond Republican, works as an economics instructor at Oklahoma Christian University. The college has been supported financially by the Gaylord family, owners of *The Oklahoman*, for years.

Obviously, one has to wonder if a political deal is in the works here.

Miller says his bill is different from the TABOR initiative petition, but it is extremely unclear how or why it is different, according to news reports. The inflation rate under Miller's bill would be considered differently than under the initiative petition. So what? Big deal.

Meanwhile, *The Oklahoman* editorial "This Tabor too much, too early," (March 5, 2006) made the point that TABOR "is the wrong approach at the wrong time."

On November 2, 2005, five months earlier, I argued, ". . . Oklahoma is the wrong state at the wrong time for such a measure."

The newspaper editorial went on to add, “This is a much poorer state [than Colorado] that has some catching up to do in education, infrastructure, health care, corrections, social services and other functions.”

On September 28, 2005, eight months earlier, I wrote that TABOR was bad for the state because “it is a relatively small state with chronic funding problems for education and infrastructure.”

Of course, I am not accusing the intellectual geniuses over at *The Oklahoman* of taking my or anyone else’s ideas, and I am sure they do not even know my humble voice even exists, right? But why didn’t the newspaper speak up earlier if it is so obvious now that TABOR is wrong? And why don’t the newspaper and the business bigwigs speak out against Miller’s bill?

The TABOR saga continues here in Oklahoma.

March 9, 2006

I continued, on the 1995 tape, my nose pinched by two fingers, in my best pseudo-academic voice, “Gilligan is just one of many weak male television characters who struggle to express themselves against an historical tradition that refuses to recognize their sensitivity, a sensitivity erroneously and historically associated only with women.”

I heard the 1995 Ray, my best audience always, laugh in the background. I stared at Granddad, asleep on the couch as usual. His skin was so white it seemed transparent; in fact, I thought it was transparent. I saw the reddish paisley pattern of the couch through his white arm. Maybe it was just a reflection or something, maybe not. This sounds like some important image. It's not. Well, it could be. I don't know.

I thought, I wonder what this man will think when he dies, and what will all my family members think when they die? I've thought this thought every Thanksgiving and, sporadically through the year, ever since I can remember, long before 1995, long before the drugs even, which I started taking in 1985 after I tried to kill myself by overdosing on LSD. The reason I tried to kill myself: Well, I was a stupid kid back then. Sean found me curled in a fetal position in my bedroom, barely breathing, saw the empty dots on the paper acid sheet, twenty dots in all, and my father rushed me to the hospital. The doctors pumped my stomach, and I was in a coma for two weeks, and when I woke, I got new drugs—better than any orange sunshine, any blotter, any cocaine, any whiskey, any brandy, anything you've ever had—prescribed to me by a doctor who specializes in dope. When the drug adjustment is just right, my feelings of euphoria are incredible, simply incredible. Believe me, this legal dope business, it's a thriving, beautiful industry in this country.

Fighting The Right: Intelligent Design

Intelligent Design Is A Losing Proposition For Oklahomans

Oklahomans need to look no further than Dover, Pennsylvania when it comes to the state's political movement to dumb down our students with faux creationism or intelligent design.

The newly-elected school board there recently rescinded the board's earlier decision to include a statement about intelligent design in science classrooms. This comes after a federal judge ruled it was illegal and the community ousted the former school board members who dragged their small district through an embarrassing debacle that will cost local taxpayers there thousands of dollars in legal fees.

The Dover case, and especially the ousting of the school board, has even caused the right-wing's darling, Pennsylvania U.S. Senator Rick Santorum, to back away from intelligent design after becoming one of its most visible, national supporters.

Intelligent design is a religious concept, not a scientific theory, which argues the natural world was created by an intelligent designer or God. It is creationism in disguise. Its supporters are primarily fundamentalist Christians.

Evolution is an accepted scientific theory that argues the natural world has evolved or changed over billions of years. It is accepted by an overwhelming majority of the nation's scientists and science educators.

There is a huge difference between an accepted scientific theory such as evolution and a simple conjecture or idea such as intelligent design. Those who support intelligent design cannot provide one shred of scientific evidence for their claims. They criticize the

overwhelming evidence of evolution without offering their own evidence or even a scientific methodology to prove their claims.

In the end, intelligent design cheapens religious faith because it is a hollow lie promoted by rhetorical deceit used by Christian fundamentalists to make everyone think like them. What type of religion is a religion that sanctions lying and deceitfulness?

None of this matters to Oklahoma Republicans, of course, who have announced they plan to introduce some type of anti-evolution legislation this upcoming session.

Apparently state Rep. Thad Balkman (R-Norman) will probably not introduce a bill this upcoming session mandating Oklahoma schools teach intelligent design as a competing theory to evolution.

Instead, he may support other anti-evolution legislation potentially sponsored by state Reps. Paul Wesselhoft (R-Moore), Sally Kern (R-Oklahoma City), and Ann Coody (R-Lawton), and state Sen. Mike Mazzei (R-Moore).

All of these Republicans may sponsor such legislation, according to recent information posted on the Democrats of Oklahoma Community Forum.

Oklahoma Republican Senators have already announced they will push for intelligent design in schools as part of their platform in 2006. Balkman was the first politician to announce he might sponsor the legislation. One can speculate he has backed away from it because he was worried some of his constituency in Norman, home of the University of Oklahoma and many scientists and scholars, might not support him on this particular issue.

There are several intelligent design movements sponsored by Christian fundamentalists in states throughout the country this year. The Dover case does not mean the end to these movements.

It is crucial that educated Oklahomans speak out against mandating intelligent design as a competing theory to evolution in public science classrooms. If anti-evolution legislation is offered this upcoming legislative session, the state's university presidents and faculty need to speak out against it as well as public school superintendents, principals and teachers.

Oklahoma should not dumb down its students by teaching religious concepts as science. Discuss intelligent design in religion or philosophy or contemporary news courses, but do not teach students that scientific methods and experimentation do not matter. They do matter, and they are vitally important to all of us.

In addition, state or local governmental bodies in Oklahoma should not spend one dime defending the teaching of creationism through massive legal fees like the Dover School District.

January 4, 2006

Kern's Religious Act

Why does state Rep. Sally Kern (R-Oklahoma City) and the Oklahoma Republican Party want to dumb down our students and validate the state's national image as an intolerant, backwoods place filled with kooky religious extremists?

Why type of business development can the state reasonably expect when the legislature seriously considers anti-evolution bills that show significant segments of our state leadership actually reject basic and proven scientific knowledge?

Under House Bill 2107, filed by Kern, Oklahoma teachers would be able to “present scientific information pertaining to the full range of scientific views in any curricula or course of learning.” The law would apply “when topics are taught that may generate controversy, such as biological or chemical origins of life.”

In essence, the bill would allow teachers to dumb down our students by teaching creationism under its new name “intelligent design” as a competing theory to evolution. Although the bill, if passed, would not require schools teach intelligent design, it would send a clear signal to school districts the state clearly wants to see intelligent design as part of the curriculum.

The bill, of course, never mentions intelligent design because the ID movement is anchored on rhetorical deceit and subterfuge and lies. Its proponents are primarily right-wing Christian fundamentalists whose medieval-like views, if adopted, would turn this country into a theocratic state. That is not hyperbole.

Intelligent design is the idea that the natural world is so complex that a designer (i.e., wink, wink, the fundamentalist Christian concept of God) created it. Although two “scientists” have written books supporting intelligent design, they offer no proof, only

criticism of the scientific theory of evolution. Intelligent design has no scientific evidence backing it. It is supported by six-day creationists who ignorantly belittle religious faith in their zeal to make everyone think as they do. It has only minuscule support in the scientific community. It is not a scientific theory, which is much different than the dictionary definition of the word “theory” or a simple conjecture or idea.

Evolution is the proven scientific theory that the natural world has evolved over time. It makes no claims about the origin of life. Many scientists, in fact, reconcile their beliefs in evolution and a Christian God. In the last 150 years or so, repeated clinical experiments, intense field observations, the fossil record, and relatively recent discoveries involving DNA, among other things, have proven evolution’s validity. The scientific theory of evolution has never been disproved.

A federal judge recently ruled that intelligent design could not be mentioned in the science classes of the Dover, PA school district after the district mandated students listen to a statement that deceitfully undermined the scientific theory of evolution.

Even if evolution would be proven to be a gigantic mistake, this would still not prove intelligent design.

In addition, most academics are already open to discussions about intelligent design, even in science classes. But it should NOT be taught as a competing theory to evolution because it is not based on science. We cannot dumb our students by discarding basic scientific principles to teach a religious-based idea about the world. That is the definition of theocracy.

If Kern’s bill is passed, an Oklahoma teacher could easily teach intelligent design as a competing theory to evolution.

In addition, a student could present her/his ideas about intelligent design in class without scrutiny because the bill states that “no student, in any public school, shall be penalized in any way because the student may subscribe to a particular position on scientific views.”

If you are a teacher in any discipline in Oklahoma and that last sentence does not send a chill down your body, then you should leave the profession or go teach in a religious school.

Let me translate it for you. If you are an Oklahoma teacher and some student wants to challenge the prevailing knowledge in your field—science, history, English, philosophy, sociology—under the guise of Christian fundamentalism, i.e., intelligent design, you better let them and you better not criticize their argument in class or you will lose your job and get sued.

Do you think for one moment the religious lunatics in this place will not test the law as soon as it is enacted, which, if passed, would be September, 2006? The law, if enacted and later supported by the courts, would give Christian fundamentalist students a way to never actually do anything in school but quote Biblical scripture and turn teachers in for violating what should be called the Oklahoma Religious Act.

One of the proposed law’s last statements shows how deceitful and immoral these supporters of intelligent design can be. It reads, “Nothing in this act shall be construed as promoting any religious doctrine, promoting discrimination for or against a particular set of religious beliefs, or promoting discrimination for or against religion or nonreligion.”

That is a lie. The proposed law fully supports the beliefs of extreme Christian fundamentalism at the expense of basic knowledge in science and other fields. The

fundamentalists will not openly support their own narrow-minded religious beliefs because they know they rest on faulty logic and ignorance and because the U.S. Supreme Court has already ruled against them (for now anyway) in *Edwards v. Aguillard*. They lie because their extreme beliefs are a lie. They crave power, control, not religious redemption.

Kern is the gay-hating, religious crusader who forced the Oklahoma County Metropolitan Library Commission to bend to her will. After she complained and threatened state funding, the commission voted last summer to reshelve nonsexual, gay-themed children's books so children cannot have immediate access to them. Her husband is a Baptist minister, according to her Oklahoma House of Representatives Web site.

The state Senate Republicans recently adopted a platform that, among its numerous anti-family, pro-corporate stances, would push for teaching intelligent design in Oklahoma schools. State Rep. Thad Balkman (R-Norman) recently announced he would also propose a bill supporting intelligent design, though some political observers say he has now backed off his initial statement. Thus, Kern's bill, which is Orwellian-named "the Academic Freedom Act," may be the first of other proposed legislation that would stop real science instruction in our state schools.

January 18, 2006

Legislation Could Stop Real Science Instruction In Oklahoma

Yet another bill designed to dumb down Oklahoma students and stop any science-based economic development in the state has been introduced in the legislature.

This time it is Lawton Democrat Abe Deutschendorf who wants to bring creationism under its new name “intelligent design” to the school’s science classrooms.

House Bill 2526 states: “In any public school instruction concerning the theories of the origin of man and the earth which includes the theory commonly known as evolution, a board of education of a school district may include, as a portion of such instruction, the theory of intelligent design. Upon approval of the board of education, a teacher in the school district may use supporting evidence deemed necessary for instruction on the theory of intelligent design.”

The problem here is that intelligent design is NOT a scientific theory. It is religious-based conjecture, just a new and deceitful way for Christian fundamentalists to advance creationism. Evolution is a proven scientific theory backed by 150 years of solid proof and evidence. We absolutely should not discard basic scientific principles or the scientific method in our schools to teach a religious idea. That is theocracy.

A federal judge recently ruled that the school district in Dover, PA could not require teachers read a statement advocating intelligent design as a competing theory to the theory of evolution. Eventually, all the school board members who voted to require the statement about intelligent design were voted out of office.

State Rep. Sally Kern (R-Oklahoma City) has already introduced another bill, what we might call “the Oklahoma Religious Act,” which could allow school districts to teach

intelligent design and might even enable students to sue teachers who might ask them to provide evidence for their religious arguments in a science class.

Those who support intelligent design belittle religious faith and deceitfully push their own narrow-minded fundamentalist views because these views themselves are deceitful. Many Christians accept the basic principles of the theory of evolution. Evolution makes no claims about religious beliefs, and many scientists reconcile their beliefs in evolution and the Christian concept of God.

Political observers said we can expect similar bills pushing for intelligent design from state Reps. Ann Coody (R-Lawton) and Paul Wesselhoft (R-Moore) and state Sen. Mike Mazzei (R-Tulsa). In addition, Oklahoma Republican senators have adopted an anti-family platform pushing for the teaching of intelligent design in schools.

In a recent mailing, the Oklahoma Evolution List Serve, which is doing an excellent job monitoring this important issue, says, "Citizens concerned about science education in Oklahoma and the attraction of scientists and science-based industries to Oklahoma should contact the authors of these bills, their legislators and the Chair and members of the Common Education committees in both the House and Senate."

January 21, 2006

Christianity, Not Science, In The Oklahoma Classroom

Yet another bill that would allow Oklahoma teachers to teach Christian creationism in public science classrooms has been introduced in the legislature.

State Senator Daisy Lawler (D-Comanche) has introduced Senate Bill 1959 that would allow public school teachers “to present information and allow classroom discussions that provide for views that may pertain to the full range of scientific views in any science course.”

What this means is that Oklahoma teachers would be allowed to present neocreationism, known as intelligent design, as a competing theory to evolution in the state’s public classrooms. Right-wing, fundamentalist religious zealots want to use intelligent design, which is not a scientific theory or even a significant scientific view, to dumb down our students and make everyone accept their narrow-minded, archaic versions of reality.

Lawler’s bill comes after similar bills were filed by state Rep. Sally Kern (R-Oklahoma City) and state Rep. Abe Deutschendorf (D-Lawton).

What is especially perplexing and frightening to me about Lawler’s bill is that it shows this issue, as of now, is nonpartisan. Surely, a majority of Democrats in Oklahoma recognize, if nothing else, what slippery legal ground these bills inhabit, given the recent decision by a federal judge in Dover, PA, that intelligent design could not be taught as a competing theory to evolution.

Obviously, all these intelligent design proposals, and more are expected, could become melded into one hideous anti-intellectual bill.

When will a Democrat stand up on this issue?

January 28, 2006

Kern's Deceitful Bill Makes It Through Committee

State Rep. Sally Kern's "Oklahoma Religious Act" was approved by a House committee this week without much fanfare.

The act is part of the Oklahoma City Republican's ongoing crusade to bring her own theocratic brand of doublespeak, deceitful Christian morality to the state.

In its story about the bill, *The Daily Oklahoman* did not even quote a single Oklahoman educator. It referred to the bill in vague, general terms using only Kern's frame of reference. The religious zealot Kern got to speak in the state's largest newspaper but not anyone opposed to the bill. Has the paper sold out intellectualism and real science instruction to support this religious zealot?

Kern has called her deceitful legislation (HB 2107) the Academic Freedom Act. It would allow, among other things, public teachers to present intelligent design theory, or neocreationism, as a competing theory to evolution. It also states that students cannot face punitive action for bringing up such theories in the classroom.

Even a cursory reading of the bill shows it would allow students to dismiss real science methods and principles in favor of religious dogma. If teachers bring this issue to the students' attention in any unfavorable way, they could be punished, even possibly fired.

The bill is deceitful because it never directly mentions intelligent design, only that a "full range of scientific views" can be presented "when topics are taught that may generate controversy, such as biological or chemical origins of life" (wink, wink, intelligent design).

This is really an insidious bill that, in my mind, goes way beyond the two other intelligent design bills that were introduced in the legislature earlier. Educators at all levels throughout the state should be petrified about this bill because it shifts classroom control of established scientific theories from teachers of any disciplines to religious students with agendas.

One of those intelligent design bills, which was proposed by state Rep. Abe Deutschendorf, (D-Lawton), was dropped in order to allow Kern's bill to get through the committee. Deutschendorf now will support Kern's bill, according to the Web site of Oklahomans for Excellence in Science Education. (Be sure to sign the petition.)

Another intelligent design bill (SB 1959), introduced by state Sen. Daisy Lawler (D-Comanche) is pending in the Oklahoma Senate.

And a pending House Concurrent Resolution (HCR 1043), which would not have the power of law, would encourage the State Board of Education to revise its curriculum to allow for presenting theories that run counter to evolution.

This one is sponsored by Kern, state Reps. Thad Balkman (R-Norman) and Paul Wesselhoft (R-Moore), and state Sen. Randy Brogdon (R-Owasso).

It is difficult to imagine the enlightened people down in the university town of Norman will continue to reelect Balkman after his statements about intelligent design and his support of an anti-intellectual agenda.

When will a Democrat step up and introduce legislation ("Science Freedom Act," "Science Bill of Rights," etc.) that will defend real science instruction in our schools?

February 15, 2006

Did I Just Read That?

The Daily Oklahoman's editorial page has come out against the teaching of intelligent design, or neocreationism, in the science classrooms of our public schools. This has to give people here a tiny sliver of hope the right-wing power structure of this state will stand up against theocracy and religious intrusion into government at some level. (The emphasis here, at this point, is on “tiny” and “at some level.”)

In a February 18, 2006 editorial titled, “Intelligent debate: Leave science classrooms alone,” *The Oklahoman* argued:

“The larger scientific community and the courts have made clear that intelligent design, also known as ID, is more philosophy or religion than science. Ultimately, it's up to parents and the religious community to guide children in spiritual and faith matters, of which the universe's creation is part.

“State test scores show Oklahoma's students already need help mastering other science material, so it makes little sense to expand the curriculum.”

The editorial went on to argue that state Rep. Sally Kern's (R-Oklahoma City) so-called Academic Freedom Act is also unnecessary, arguing that “the act wouldn't add intelligent design to the state's academic standards, but we question whether it's a backdoor attempt to present intelligent design as science anyway.”

I would only add here that Kern's bill is obviously and blatantly a backdoor attempt at bringing intelligent design, or neocreationism, to the science classrooms. Is there any doubt?

Oklahomans for Excellence in Science Education has done an outstanding job monitoring this issue. Please sign the organization's online petition against intelligent design.

Again and again I ask, when will a Democrat stand up and offer some type of bill that would prohibit the teaching of creationism in the science classrooms of Oklahoma schools? We can call it the "Science Instruction Freedom Act."

Even if the bill was defeated, it would at least show the nation our state actually was inhabited by some logical, rational people opposed to theocracy and religious extremism. And let us not forget this state law, Section II-5:

"No public money or property shall ever be appropriated, applied, donated, or used, directly or indirectly, for the use, benefit, or support of any sect, church, denomination, or system of religion, or for the use, benefit, or support of any priest, preacher, minister, or other religious teacher or dignitary, or sectarian institution as such."

February 22, 2006

Sally Kern's Christian Crusade Continues Onward

Okay, the bigwigs have come out against TABOR, and *The Daily Oklahoman* has come out against the teaching of intelligent design in our science classrooms.

So when will the state leadership come against the continuing Christian crusade of state Rep. Sally Kern (R-Oklahoma City)?

Kern's latest attempt to ensure Oklahoma becomes the first theocratic state in America is her "Student Freedom of Religious Expression in Schools Act." Yes, you read that title correctly, and the bill did pass out of a House committee Wednesday.

House Bill 2428 would allow students at schools to pass out religious material, pray, express their religious viewpoints, and be absent from school for religious events. Of course, the bill says "religious" not "Christian" (wink, wink).

Everyone knows this bill and others like it pending in Oklahoma and elsewhere across the country are part of the Christian right-wing theocratic agenda.

Can you imagine what it would be like at state high schools if this bill gets passed? I picture students accosted in the hallways by religious zealots and teachers of all disciplines unable to present material that might go against Christian viewpoints.

I imagine large groups of intolerant Christian students intentionally excluding people of other faiths in activities. I see a group of students holding hands in a classroom praying loudly and openly before a test, daring the teacher to say something, anything that might be construed as anti-Christian.

Our schools will become freaky, religious enclaves violating the separation of church and state separation.

The bill lacks commonsense as well. It would create all types of problems. How can anyone support such a weird, murky measure that does not take into account its real-world ramifications? How will the bill affect high school classrooms, the hallways, the lunchroom, the parking lots, etc.?

In today's volatile world of religious extremism and religious-inspired violence, the last thing we need is to add religious tension in our high schools.

Maybe we could just build a chapel in each state high school, pass a "Christian Students Do Not Have To Go To Class Freedom Act" and allow students to spend ALL school hours praying and discussing the Bible, especially Genesis. Then we could create and build secular charter schools for everyone else. These schools would honor separation of church and state. They would promote the study of science and math, English, technology, and other real academic subjects, not fundamentalist Christianity.

This is from Okie Funk's No Hyperbole Zone: If Kern's act passes and holds up in the courts, it could become impossible to get a real high school education in this state.

Religious moderates and secular people need to speak up. And where is the state leadership on this bill and on all the freaky religious legislation proposed by Kern and others? When will they truly come out against crackpots like Kern and say enough is enough? If Kern's bill passes, then, really, so what if TABOR becomes law? Who wants to fund religious extremism in our schools, anyway?

February 25, 2006

The Sally Kern Cult Club

A bill that will allow neocreationism to be taught in Oklahoma schools has passed through the House without major dissent. This is extremely discouraging news for our state.

Not one Oklahoma politician has come out forcefully and presented counter legislation that would stop the religious freaks from embarrassing our state, damaging our economy by branding us with the ignorant-hick logo, and turning our schools into quasi-churches.

Not one Oklahoma politician in this state has stepped up and said “enough is enough,” championing the cause of intellectualism and rationalism and logic and medical science, the hallmarks of modernity and enlightenment.

Not one Oklahoma politician has said figuratively and loudly to our college graduates now leaving the state in droves that the fight for intellectual freedom can be waged even in one of the reddest of red states.

Here is the bottom line: State Rep. Sally Kern (R-Oklahoma City) and a few other right-wing politicians, including some Democrats, are on a Christian crusade to ensure we bow down to their narrow-minded, medieval worldviews. Her legislation, House Bill 2107, would allow teachers to present intelligent design theory, or neocreationism, in courses dealing with “biological or chemical origins of life.”

The Okie theocrats are emboldened by a presidential administration that sanctions religious intrusion in government institutions.

If the bill, which passed on a lopsided 77-10 vote, makes it all the way through the legislature and is signed into law, many Oklahoma students will be taught creationism instead of evolution and scientific principles. It is that simple.

Kern says the bill does not address religion, but everyone knows its intention is to challenge evolution with a scientific version of the Biblical creation story. Kern has to distort and lie to get the bill passed for legal and political reasons. She lies and distorts because her own religious views apparently allow deceitfulness and thus immoral evangelizing. In my view, this immoral evangelizing makes Kern's brand of religion a cult.

One Democrat who voted in favor of the bill said that if legislators voted against the measure, "...people will see this vote as a vote for evolution and against God," according to a story in *The Daily Oklahoman*.

Intelligent design theory, or neocreationism, which is advanced only by fundamentalist Christians, argues the natural world is so complicated it had to be created by a designer, or, wink, wink, the Christian God. Evolution makes no claims about religion. It argues the natural world, as we can observe it, has evolved or changed over time. Evolutionary science remains the foundation of modern medical science and the scientific principle.

University of California Professor Robert Bellah, the noted sociologist of religions, recently said, "It's as if the Scopes trial is never over—we're back in the 1920s. It's unbelievable. And, again, it's so depressing because you could not find anything like this in any other advanced country in the world. What has happened in this country?"

Well, what has happened in Oklahoma is that not enough people have the guts to stand up for what is right and moral and life affirming. I ask those enlightened Oklahoma people who are sitting this out on the sidelines: When will it be too late to speak up? What are you waiting for?

March 4, 2006

Kern's Religious Act Dies In Senate, Christian Fanatics Thwarted For Now

“To accept a faith just because it is customary means to be dishonest, to be cowardly, to be lazy. And do dishonesty, cowardice, and laziness then appear as the presupposition of morality.”—Fredrich Nietzsche, *The Dawn*

State Rep. Sally Kern’s anti-intellectual bill has died in a state Senate committee, but political observers caution elements of the bill could still be attached to late-session legislation.

House Bill 2107, or what I call the Oklahoma Religious Act, would have allowed teachers to present intelligent design, or neocreationism, in the state’s public classrooms. It was an attack on science, the scientific method, and the theory of evolution. It struck at the heart of critical inquiry and discovery. It was designed to dumb down Oklahoma students so they would not have an opportunity to succeed in life or become enlightened.

Intelligent design ideology makes the claim that since the natural world is so complicated, it must have been created by a designer or, wink, wink the Christian God. The scientific theory of evolution, which makes no claim about how the world began, argues the natural world has changed over time.

Intelligent design ideology is almost exclusively supported by fundamentalist Christians or literalists who believe in the six-day creation story in the Bible. These fundamentalists, emboldened by the immorality and hypocrisy of the right-wing Bush administration and fueled by their own insecurities and doubts about their own religion, want to fashion government around their narrow-minded views. They lie and deceive in

an attempt to get their theocratic legislation passed. They are not forthright. They lie because their beliefs are based on a foundation of lies and mythology.

It looks like all the intelligent design measures are dead for this year, and the state Senate under steady Democratic leadership should be commended. Oklahomans for Excellence in Science Education and its listserv has done a great job monitoring the neocreationist bills and generating and uniting protest against them.

I continue to believe secular progressives need to challenge religious fundamentalists, pointing out contradictions and implausibility in the Bible and in their overall belief systems. The American fundamentalists started the fight when they politicized recently under a theocratic mandate. But if we are going to live in a Christian theocracy someday, maybe we should really analyze the belief system that creates it before we sign on to it, right? As many are arguing in America, it is time now to study the science of religion. The religious extremists started it. Let us not forget, one of their chief proponents, Ernest Istook, is running for governor here.

April 9, 2006

Granddad asleep on the couch, as it always did when I saw him asleep on the couch on the other tape at the same time, reminded me of the 1997 tape, so I told Ryan to get it down from the shelf.

I thought, We might as well get this thing over with. I have to do 1997. I have to.

*On the 1997 tape, I talked about death right after I saw a portion of a rerun of *The Road Runner*, and *THE EVENT* occurred. It was the coyote, and it turned into this big deal. And all of what I explain next comes down to this ironic point upon which the question of my sanity once again became the central issue.*

*In 1997, a few days before Thanksgiving, I saw a coyote dying on the side of old Route 66 near Bethany, just outside Yukon. When I came home to El Reno for Thanksgiving that year, first thing when I walked into the door, I saw one of Sean's kids, Sarah, watching a rerun of *The Road Runner* on a video tape. This is the ironic point, and what happened is that I freaked.*

My wife hates it when I play this tape as I tape myself. Everyone hates it, even Ray, even when he's drunk and sentimental, which is most of the time, especially holidays. I hate it, for God's sake. But certain traditions are sacred, and for some reason my family accepts me as crazy, nuts, wacko city. God in heaven, listen: I love my family.

So I watched my 1997 self. I said, on the 1997 tape, "A couple of days ago, I saw this coyote drag himself from the highway after a pickup truck hit him and just went on its merry way like nothing special happened. The coyote's haunches and legs were completely squashed, and I barely missed hitting him myself. I had to swerve, and all that. For some reason, after I passed him, I turned around, and went back. There he was, on the road's shoulder, haunches crushed, dripping tongue-slime, maybe reliving the

memories of his life because he knows he's going to die. Who am I to say? He's looking right at me as I get out of my car and approach him."

Fighting The Right: Big Okie Oil

Texas Tea Guzzlers

Want a real eye-opener to what is really the problem with the Middle East? Want to know the real reason young American soldiers are dying in Iraq? Want to really understand the anger and mistrust many Arabs feel towards our country?

Then take a drive through Dallas down I-35 in a high-occupancy vehicle (HOV) lane. The Dallas HOV lanes, for those who do not know, allow vehicles with two or more occupants to use a special left lane to pass all those one-person occupied vehicles in the other five lanes.

I did just that a couple of weeks ago, and it was an almost surreal experience. This is what I saw: Truck after SUV after minivan after truck after SUV after car, with air conditioners at full blast, stuck in snail-paced traffic with one lonely driver at the wheel. Their zombie-like eyes stared vacantly at the bumpers before them.

Mile after mile, five lanes stuffed with vehicles, as I cruised passed in a tiny compact. Zombies staring into ugly highway space, stuck, idling, using gasoline but going nowhere real slow. Meanwhile, I felt like a cheat and a fool, especially since I displayed Okie plates and a John Kerry for President bumper sticker. (It was probably so much of a contradiction no refined Texas lady could believe her eyes.)

How dare I actually have someone in the car with me so I could pass all these good, warm-hearted Texans who love our troops the most of everyone in the country? Was this right? Was I going to get myself killed?

I saw not one bus much less a commuter train or any other form of mass transit. I did see big, big, big vehicles.

Now before you truck and SUV owners label me a pinko, communist Mazda-driving, unpatriotic, peace-loving latte drinker, let me admit I have an older Chevrolet Suburban gathering dust in my garage. I actually once drove it when I coached a little league baseball team, and it was not uncommon for me to haul twelve kids, give or take a couple, to games and practices. I don't drive it now because I have no need for that much room, and I don't sell it because, well, because gasoline prices are so high right now I don't think it's even worth the hassle.

There's nothing intrinsically wrong with big cars, just like there's nothing intrinsically right about an American who is not paying attention to what is going on in the Middle East today.

Our country supports Middle East dictators with our military strength so we are guaranteed access to oil. Saudi Arabia, the world's largest producer of oil, is the perfect example. The Saudi dictators oppress their people so much that Islamic fundamentalism actually seems attractive to many of their citizens. (Remember, folks, virtually all the terrorists in the September 11, 2001 attacks were from Saudi Arabia.)

Our country encourages this dynamic, and then we invade a country without one iota of a connection to the terrorist attacks but with plenty of oil for all those lonely Texans in their Texas tea guzzlers. Folks, stay tuned to Channel Bush. Undoubtedly, the puppeteer Dick Cheney will soon install and support yet another oppressive regime in Iraq because we simply have no sensible policy to wean ourselves from Middle East oil.

What would happen if there were actually two people in each vehicle going down I-35 through Dallas? How many American lives would have been saved? What if our country didn't need a drop of Middle East oil, yet we still had our trucks and minivans? Those

Middle East dictatorships would crumble, and then, only then, would democracy and freedom have a chance in that region of the world.

John Kerry has a plan to get us off the Middle East oil teat in ten years. Dubbya, I suspect, has golf plans with members of the Saudi royal family.

June 10, 2004

Oil Executives Fund Coburn's Campaign

Why does Tom Coburn, the U.S. Senate candidate running against U.S. Rep. Brad Carson, want to make the state the laughingstock of the nation? And why is the state's corporate, conservative media ignoring Coburn's bizarre comments?

Coburn's recent gaffe came this week when he referred to "rampant lesbianism" in Oklahoma's schools.

According to an Associated Press article, "In the tape released by the campaign of Brad Carson, the Democratic candidate, Coburn says a campaign worker from Coalgate told him that 'lesbianism is so rampant in some of the schools in southeast Oklahoma that they'll only let one girl go to the bathroom. Now think about it. Think about that issue. How is it that that's happened to us?'"

This is a bizarre and untruthful remark. A southeast Oklahoma school superintendent, quoted in the article, laughed it off, but Coburn's remarks are anything but funny. They are hateful, and they make Oklahoma seem like a cesspool of ignorance, anger and intolerance to the rest of the nation.

Coburn's stupid comments about lesbianism can be added to his weird comments about applying the death penalty to doctors who perform abortions. (Coburn is a medical doctor.) It also adds to his uneven remarks related to one of his former medical cases in which he sterilized a woman who later claimed he did so without her consent.

The recent article was picked up by Salon.com, a national online magazine with a large readership. But you could not find a reference to the remarks in *The Daily Oklahoman* the next day.

That's probably because the newspaper was running an article about the huge amount of money two local oil executives have given to help elect Coburn.

According to the October 12 article, "The top two executives of Oklahoma City-based Chesapeake Energy Corp. have contributed \$500,000 to a group running a statewide television ad criticizing U.S. Senate candidate Brad Carson."

The executives, Aubrey McClendon and Tom Ward, each donated \$250,000 to the ironically named "Club for Growth," which is raising money and buying ads for Coburn. As I wrote previously, I cannot think of a time in more than twenty years when a political race in Oklahoma illustrated the state's obvious need to elect politicians, such as Brad Carson, who want to actually help the state prosper.

On one hand, you have rich oil executives trying to make sure a loose cannon kook like Coburn gets to take his hate and bigotry to Washington, so he can embarrass Oklahoma consistently over the next six years. (I wonder what these oil executives are going to get back from Coburn if he is elected.)

On the other hand, you have Brad Carson promising to work for middle-class Oklahomans to ensure we have decent jobs, good roads, and better health care.

If Oklahomans elect Coburn, they will have only themselves to blame as a handful of rich Oklahoma oil executives get richer and middle-class Oklahomans continue to struggle to make ends meet.

October 13, 2004

Oil Oligarchy Rules Oklahoma

In recent articles, I discussed how President George Bush's fiscal policies and priorities continue to hurt red states such as Oklahoma. My argument is that Bush manipulated emotional issues like American nationalism and religious wedge beliefs to get Oklahomans and other red-staters to vote against their economic interests. Now that the election is over, Oklahomans can expect a continuing stagnant job market, higher living costs, higher health costs, cuts in federal funding for education, Medicare, and Medicaid, cuts in farm subsidies, and a let-them-die attitude towards rural, Oklahoma towns.

But, of course, there is one small group of Oklahomans making out like bandits on the backs of the majority of hard-working Oklahomans in George Bush's America. That would be the top stockholders and chief executives of the local oil and gas companies such as Kerr-McGee, Chesapeake, and Devon. As gasoline prices reach record levels, one has to wonder if Oklahomans and all Americans will allow this massive shift of wealth into the hands of a few oil company executives and owners to continue without any oversight and regulation.

Let's call them the oil oligarchy in Oklahoma, the rich elites. It is a small, diminishing cabal (more and more large energy companies are moving from the state), and it is supported by the state's entrenched, right-wing power structure such as *The Daily Oklahoman*, the state Chamber of Commerce types, and a lot of Republican politicians—U.S. Senator Tom Coburn is one of them—who get their campaigns funded with the money you pay at the pump. Their mantra has always been that what is good for local oil

companies is good for the state because these companies produce jobs, pay taxes, and do charitable work.

I think this prevailing, conservative philosophy about oil companies is incredibly shortsighted, and it ultimately prevents the Oklahoma economy from diversifying and growing. It is bad for the vast majority of the state's residents, even those ordinary hard-working people who are employed at state oil companies.

Here's why this Oklahoma support-the-oil-companies-at-any-cost ideology is wrong:

The world's overuse of fossil fuels will ultimately be a short blip in world history. I can see future historians remembering the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as The Oil Age, which created a ripe environment for war, corporate greed, and the enormous neglect of Third World countries by the oil-rich countries. Simply put, we are running out of oil and natural gas. No matter how you look at it, the world's fossil fuel resources are finite. Now some oil experts contend the world has vast quantities of untapped oil and gas resources if we only drill deep enough, but drilling costs make that prohibitive now and in the future. Are we really ready for a reality in which we spend a half or more of our household income on energy costs, essentially to drive to work and heat our homes? Of course not. That's why some companies are now starting to develop viable alternative forms of energy. Look at all the new hybrid cars on the market today. That is our future. This development of alternative energy sources will only increase in the years to come. Oklahoma will eventually be abandoned by the oil companies once they have sucked out the last drop of profit-producing oil from the state's red dirt. We may all be dead by then, true, but what a terrible legacy to leave for those who come after us in Oklahoma.

This prevailing oil-companies-are-great ideology means the state will remain mired in regressive politics, which is bad for our economy. Only archconservative Republicans are going to support a national and state energy policy that supports oil monopolies and does not allow for competition by alternative energy companies. They will do so because their campaigns are funded by corporate America, including all the major oil companies. These conservatives, then, bring to the state this stagnant, status-quo politics which benefits only the richest citizens of Oklahoma. Can you imagine how much the price of oil would drop if the federal government announced a major plan to study renewable energy resources, or if it called on the automobile manufacturers to increase fuel efficiency? In addition, regressive politics do not allow for diversity in business or thinking or people. That, in turn, drives away some of the state's brightest residents who must leave for the coasts to expend their intellectual energy. We get left with a handful of rich oil executives who live in modern-day fortresses (gated communities) and who could care less about the state. They, in turn, influence the state politics through campaign contributions.

The oil-companies-are-great philosophy, along with one-party Republican rule in the country, means there is an increased likelihood that oil companies will price gouge. Pundits and oil company executives are arguing that recent spikes in gasoline costs are because of increased oil demand in India and China, along with a diminishing oil supply. Throw in the American summer driving season and we are paying \$2.25 a gallon for gasoline easy, and it is only going to get higher. But the Catch-22 here is that oil companies are announcing record profits, too. This also happened in the 1970s energy crisis. This cannot be explained away by outside factors. Are oil companies colluding?

Do they use perceived shortages and increased demand to price gouge Americans? Do not count on the Bush government to even touch this issue. When you fill up your SUV and it costs \$100 or so (and soon maybe \$125, \$150, \$200, \$300, etc.), do you ever think about those large campaign contributions that helped Coburn get elected? Do you really think Coburn or U.S. Senator Jim Inhofe care about your personal gasoline costs?

Ultimately, this state has been sold an historical lie by the right-wing power structure about how oil companies help Oklahoma. It has been a form of brainwashing since Oklahoma became a state in 1907. Oil companies benefit a few Oklahoma rich elites who then ensure their financial positions by contributing to morally-challenged politicians. This is not a political and economic system that will make the state thrive and give our children a decent future here. This is the old story of power and greed, and it is immoral.

Meanwhile, the cost of all consumer goods is going up as gasoline prices shoot through the roof. You can say thank you to Oklahoma's oil company executives who try to brainwash us with their sanctimonious propaganda about how wonderful they are for the state's economy.

April 12, 2005

Riding The Bus In OKC

About eight of us get on the Route 4 bus at 1:30 p.m. this Saturday at the relatively new Metro Transit bus station at 420 NW 5th Street, which is just down the street from Oklahoma City's National Memorial.

The Route 4 bus, which runs from downtown to the Belle Isle shopping area (Wal-Mart, Old Navy, Ross, Shoe Carnival, etc.), runs on an hourly schedule—at least for now, anyway—and its riders are mostly shoppers and people going to work

Oklahoma City officials recently announced that the Route 4 bus will run every two hours, instead of every hour, and other routes are changing as well, prompting valid protests in the community about class inequity. The cutbacks are essentially designed to save the city money at the expense of low-income people in the city.

I decided to take a Route 4 bus ride Saturday to check out the situation.

On this particular hot day, the Route 4 bus is a cool oasis from the sweltering heat. My fellow riders are a mixture of Oklahoma Cityans. The bus pulls out of the station, goes south down Hudson, then takes an immediate right on 4th Street. It then turns right on Walker, and we begin to make our way through the city to the Belle Isle shopping district next to Penn Square Mall.

Traveling down Walker, the bus first passes some typical inner-city sights such as overgrown, empty lots with weeds and fence scraps. The shimmering heat makes them seem even more dilapidated. The bus then passes Brown's Bakery, Kaiser's, and St. Anthony's Hospital, all longtime Oklahoma City landmarks.

But then it goes past 13th Street, and we are now in one of the city's wealthiest neighborhoods, Heritage Hills. This is when the ride, for me at least, becomes a metaphor

or a symbol. Riding Route 4, if you pay attention, gives you a real lesson in the new, hyper class-oriented Oklahoma and America.

Traveling through Heritage Hills is ironic, of course, because most of the complaints about eliminating bus routes or offering them less frequently is that our city's poorest residents will suffer the most. Most people who ride the bus do so because they do not own cars. This seems pretty obvious. Moving past the gargantuan Heritage Hills homes with their immaculate lawns, Route 4 raises larger questions about class issues in today's Oklahoma.

Why would our culture want to intentionally make it more difficult for low-income people to get to work? Many Route 4 riders are employed at Belle Isle businesses or the adjacent Penn Square Mall. This, too, seems obvious. In addition, why would our culture make it more difficult for lower-income people to shop at discount stores, such as Wal-Mart or Ross?

Once outside of Heritage Hills, the Route 4 bus heads north on Walker through the Paseo District, and then passed Edgemere Elementary School, and then to 36th Street, when it takes a left. We pass the Iron Star, the *Oklahoma Gazette* office, and then we move through the Western Avenue intersection. Soon, to our left, riders see the impressive community garden maintained by the Boys and Girls Club at Memorial Park.

A woman on the bus engages the driver in a conversation, and the ride overall is comfortable and relaxing. I have been taking photographs out the bus windows, and no one seems to even notice. At one point, I talk to a woman about an old building we pass, and we share some city memories.

Now we turn, turn, turn. We turn right onto Classen Avenue, then left on 39th Street, right on Georgia, another right on Mattern, then left on Blackwelder, to Northwest Expressway, then left on Classen again, and then we pass IHOP, Chili's, and then riders find themselves, at last, on Belle Isle Drive in front of the Wal-Mart.

Most everyone on the bus gets off here. The bus picks up twelve to fifteen people, who are mostly shoppers judging from their bags and packages. One woman gets on the bus with her young daughter, a baby in a stroller, and shopping bags. She gets busy entertaining and coddling her baby.

The bus moves on, and so we make our way back to the bus station. At the Belle Isle and Northwest Expressway intersection, we are held up at a long red light, and I count four SUV's around us. There is only one person—the drivers—in each vehicle and the symbolism becomes apparent once again.

Bus officials, for example, have blamed higher fuel costs for the cutbacks. Ironically, those of us on the bus are actually saving fuel in this age of decreasing oil supplies. The surrounding SUV drivers are wasting oil. So the world is running out of oil, yet our public policy is to punish those people who ride buses and reward those who drive Hummers. (The government gives business tax breaks for Hummer owners.) This is Bush-era philosophy, which has already precipitated one war and record high gasoline prices.

If anything, given the world's current energy situation, the city should expand its bus service and try to get more people to ride. Fuel costs will continue to rise, especially under the immoral and corrupt energy policies of President George Bush. Admittedly, getting people to ride the bus is especially difficult in a place like Oklahoma City, which

is geographically spread out in an enormous swath of SUV-friendly land and whose power structure is dominated by local energy company executives.

Yet the city has already made some great strides in this direction by building a great central bus terminal and maintaining a fleet of comfortable, well air-conditioned buses. Riding the bus in the Oklahoma City area is easy, relatively cheap (a one-way ticket is \$1.25, but there are discounted passes), safe, and comfortable. There is even a rumor that the city buses will soon have bike racks so cyclists can take buses to different areas of the city and then cycle back home or to other interesting areas. This will increase the numbers of riders on the buses.

Meanwhile, a local charity, Catholic Worker House, issued this alert about the bus cutbacks recently:

“According to information given to the Catholic Worker House, the city is appropriating about 91% of its expected income. State law only requires the City to setback 5%, but OKC is setting back nearly 9%. Oklahoma City's public transportation system may be at risk. The system is already a bare minimum service. There is no fat to cut, only services that are necessary for these people to get to work. They have no other alternatives for transportation to their jobs.”

The bottom line here is that rich people continue to get richer on the backs of the poor in today's world. Rich people probably do not much care if a low-income person can get to work or if they have to wait a miserable two hours in the scalding heat to get home. Caring about people who cannot afford cars is so passé under the Bush-era, conservative juggernaut.

June 11, 2005

Big Oil Welfare

A recent editorial on *The Daily Oklahoman* online site (“Deep throes: Controversial incentives justified,” June 19, 2005) shows just how shameless the right-wing doles out corporate welfare while destroying the environment.

In one of its classic, irrational editorials, *The Oklahoman* lauds the state legislature for passing a bill this past session giving Oklahoma City’s Chesapeake Energy Corporation and other energy companies \$62 million in tax breaks to fund the drilling of state natural gas wells below 15,000 feet. This is despite the fact the country’s energy companies are reporting staggering profits under Bush-era, anti-environmentalist policies. Chesapeake’s top executives stand to make the most from the public boondoggle because the company does much of the deep gas drilling in the state.

The editorial is a classic *Daily Disappointment* hatchet job because there is really no reason for it, except to gloat and try to mock reasonable people who have the vast majority of Oklahomans at heart when they argue the tax breaks are terribly unfair to ordinary, hard-working Oklahomans. We are taking money from schools to give to rich energy company executives. In its Orwellian fashion, the newspaper calls those who opposed the handout to Chesapeake “irrational.” As usual, the newspaper omits major facts when presenting its argument, and thus itself becomes the voice of irrationality.

Here are two facts you will not find mentioned in the editorial:

(1) Energy companies such as Chesapeake continue their relentless onslaught on the environment. Accepted studies have shown that, among other things, deep gas and oil drilling disrupts the land, causes surface and ground water pollution, causes air pollution

with Co2 emissions, can cause property damage, and certainly disrupts natural wildlife. Under Bush-era energy policies, not only do energy companies have less pollution restrictions but they actually are rewarded with tax cuts for destroying the environment. This is not a partisan issue. This is about saving the planet for future generations.

(2) The tax cuts effectively avert money to damaging, immoral technologies. The more tax breaks, the more public money, we give to companies such as Chesapeake, the less the nation and Oklahoma has to invest in developing alternative energy sources or developing methods to conserve fossil fuel use. We teeter precariously close to a major energy crisis as the cost of oil and natural gas skyrocket. We are engaged in an immoral war because of this looming crisis, a war in which innocent people have been killed and wounded by the thousands. Companies such as Chesapeake are tied to archaic methods of fuel production, and, as of now anyway, their business philosophies are tremendously shortsighted. They care about short-term profits, not long-term viability.

To the newspaper's credit, it does mention how politically active Chesapeake is in Oklahoma politics, but, of course, there is no direct mention of how two of its top executives recently donated \$250,000 a piece to U.S. Sen. Tom Coburn's campaign. There is not one Oklahoman who does not know that this political money buys votes and influence.

Perhaps, the most irrational part of the editorial, though, is that the tax cuts for Chesapeake are in the long-term interests of the state. Nothing could be further from the truth. These tax cuts are about rewarding filthy-rich energy company executives at the expense of our environment and our children's future. It would in the long-term interests of the state to develop a diverse economic infrastructure that did not rely so heavily on a

handful of energy companies. Energy companies are moving to Houston from Oklahoma, and they will continue to do so. When the last drop of oil, when the last cubic foot of gas, is extracted at a profit from the state's red dirt, the energy companies will leave here and laugh all the way to the bank. Their history here will be a nasty blip, much like the Dust Bowl.

And Chesapeake is not a "great corporate citizen" because such a thing does not exist in twenty-first century America. Chesapeake executives give to charities for the same reason they donate money to politicians. They want influence and power, so a relatively small handful of people can get rich on the backs of hard-working Oklahomans. They do not care about you or your family or your friends, and you are a rube if you think they do. They might donate some money to a cause or organization you think is worth supporting, but they only do it for the tax breaks and corporate influence.

Ultimately, though, the editorial is just part of a larger movement to shift money into the hands of rich people and to shrink the middle-class. Our state legislature has been swept into this right-wing madness for a number of reasons, but perhaps the main reason is how the so-called mainstream media in the state will only allow right-wing views and corporate worship in their columns and in their news programs.

This complete and utter monopolistic disregard for freedom of expression is coming back now to haunt the media as more and more people, both liberal and conservative, turn to alternative media sources on the Internet. Let us hope the mainstream media here crashes down soon to save our state from immoral and reckless policies.

June 20, 2005

Just then Ray walked into the room, saw I was watching the 1997 tape, and said, “Hey, let’s go to the store and get some more beer, and those little hot sausages you like.” I shook my head no. Ray left the room in a hurry.

I watched myself sigh before I continued on the tape, “And I did something completely out of character, I knelt and reached out, and scratched behind his left ear. And he let me, just like a dog, and he even closed his eyes for a minute as if he really enjoyed it. I prayed for him quietly. I know it sounds crazy, but I am crazy, and it’s true. It was a coyote, too, not some strange-looking German Shepherd, or some mutt, or whatever.

“And, of course, I’m crying, and I’m thinking I need to take some Xanax, but I stay there, scratching behind his ear. By now, a couple of cars have stopped. I heard someone behind me say, ‘Jesus Christ, it’s a coyote.’ Someone else said, ‘Someone should put it out of its misery.’”

All at once, Mama walked into the room, saw what tape I was watching, and said, “Lordy, son, don’t torture yourself. You know we forgive you.” She walked out quickly, shaking her head.

I got quiet for a moment on the 1997 tape. Meanwhile, I heard myself on the 1996 tape talking in the background about a student of mine who fainted (from boredom I suspected) in the intermediate algebra class I teach at the local junior college, and I’m lying to everyone about it, how I kept her from hitting the floor by jumping over four desks, or something like that, and how she had this special disease that made her faint. (It’s a small lie. All my lies are small, Mama. I love you. Forgive me.) It was hard to make out the words on the tape.

Fighting The Right: Grassroots Protests

Mo Protest Draws Big Crowd

The July 8, 2005 protest against the Mo Radio Show on Oklahoma City radio station 94.7 “The Buzz” drew about 100 people on the north lawn of Fifty Penn Place and was obviously instrumental in forcing the radio station to issue a recent apology on its Web site.

Here is the apology that was running on the station’s Web site on July 9:

“KHBZ does not condone advocating violence of any kind. We sincerely apologize to anyone who was offended by inappropriate comedy airing on the June 29th Mo Radio Show. Our goal at KHBZ is to entertain and not to offend. --Bill Hurley, VP/GM, KHBZ”

On his June 29 show, “Mo” Modzelewski asked listeners if they would prefer to wake up one morning and remember having beaten a woman or having had gay sex. Of course, some of his listeners responded with tasteless comments about violence against women and gay people.

Ultimately, Modzelewski’s comments show he advocates domestic violence against Oklahoma City women and he hates Oklahoma City gay people. Hate radio, shock jock radio, is an ugly manifestation of right-wing ignorance in the tradition of Rush Limbaugh or Michael Savage. It is dangerous when it becomes normal and average. Modzelewski’s jokes are nothing more than a new, albeit minor, addition to the systematic campaign to further the right-wing agenda, which tries to roll back women’s rights and creates scapegoat hatred against gay people.

It is important we note that Modzelewski's hate and advocacy of violence against women is now a part of this city's mainstream media. This is especially important for people who deal professionally with domestic violence and abuse.

Also, *The Daily Oklahoman's* new *Look@OKC* publication recently featured a full-page advertisement about Modzelewski. Promoting this type of ignorance and hate is the newspaper's specialty. And they even get money for doing so. The trying-too-hard-to-be-cool *Look@OKC* also recently celebrated the warmonger Toby Keith, whose new, tacky restaurant is stinking up Bricktown with its gaudiness.

I guess Toby Keith and Mo Modzelewski are what passes for cool people for *The Daily Oklahoman*. This is what it all says: Hey, Oklahoma City men, you can listen to some boot-shuffling, Iraqi-ass-kicking country music while you talk about beating your wife instead of having gay sex. Wow, now that is so cool, isn't it?

I was at the protest Friday. It attracted a variety of people from different communities in the city of all different age groups and politics. These people, some of the most intelligent and decent people in the city, should be admired for taking time out of their day to make a point.

July 8, 2005

Protestors Unite Against The War

More American soldiers and innocent Iraqi citizens continue to die for a war the president refuses to justify beyond hollow and propagandistic metaphors about freedom. Meanwhile, Bush continues his five-week, rich-man's vacation this month with corporate-media bicycling tours on his 1,800-acre estate in Crawford, Texas.

But there is good news for anyone with even a small bit of morality.

The country seems to be coming to its senses. Polls show a majority of Americans no longer support the war or Bush or his administration. A majority of Americans now accept the president lied about the reasons for the war. The national peace movement is growing. Cindy Sheehan's war protest has become the major story of this summer.

Even Oklahoma has a vibrant and growing peace movement.

Our position as one of the extremist of extreme red states makes the peace movement here tremendously significant on a local and national level.

On Tuesday, a group of protestors gathered outside the Back Door Coffee House at NW 31st and Classen Avenue, holding up signs protesting the war and asking for Bush's impeachment. This group has been protesting at this area on Classen from 5 to 6:30 p.m. Tuesdays for a few weeks now. The group's numbers are growing as has the support from those driving by who honk their horns and wave.

Two leaders of this group, Tara Feuerborn and Lisa Ghariani, say most people driving by these days are either neutral or support them. On Tuesday, only a couple of drivers showed support for Bush. They were far outnumbered by people honking and showing support for signs calling for Bush's impeachment.

Ghariani just recently came back from Crawford, Texas, where she met with Cindy Sheehan. Sheehan, whose son was killed in Iraq, has camped outside the president's estate. Sheehan has this question for Bush: Mr. President, for what reason did my son die so young. Bush refuses to talk to Sheehan.

(Sheehan left Crawford Thursday to be with her mother who suddenly suffered a stroke, but she vowed to continue her vigil.)

Ghariana said Sheehan continues to inspire people from around the country. Sheehan's message is a very personal one, and more and more Americans are relating to it as the war continues to claim innocent lives and the president refuses to discuss what the country hopes to accomplish with the war.

Another Oklahoman to make the trip to Crawford is Serena Blaiz, who has been filing reports through the Oklahoma Independent Media Center site.

Local war protestors are also organizing a "Caravan to Crawford" on August 23-24 to support Cindy Sheehan. The group will meet at 9:30 a.m., August 23 at The Peace House, 2912 N. Robinson, drive to Crawford, and then spend the night there.

Meanwhile, Oklahoma groups continue to protest the war on a regular basis. Democrats for Peace hold weekly noon vigils at the downtown corner of Park Avenue and Robinson Street on Mondays. On Tuesdays, from 7:30 to 8:30 a.m., anti-war groups gather at Villa and Northwest Highway.

In addition, a vigil will be held in Lawton for three imprisoned conscientious objectors at 1:30 p.m., Sunday, August 28th. The conscientious objectors are Blake LeMoine, Dale Bartell, and Neil Quentin Lucas. Those who want to attend the vigil should gather at 1:30

p.m. at The Peace House, 2912 N. Robinson. The group will drive to Lawton and hold the vigil from 4 to 6 p.m. outside Fort Sill.

And on Saturday, September 24, area peace activists will hold an “Anti-War Fair” from noon to 4 p.m. at Memorial Park, NW 36th Street and Classen Boulevard. This will correspond with a national peace demonstration in Washington, D.C. There will be music, speakers, booths, and a children’s area.

The number of peace activities and the growing numbers of people at these Oklahoma events show there is major discontent with Bush’s war policies even here in the belly of the right-wing beast.

Now is the time to get involved if you want to be on the moral side of history.

As Camilo Mejia, an Iraq War veteran who is now a peace activist, said: “You can either support the troops or you can support the war. But you can’t do both.”

The emerging war resistance and peace activism cannot come soon enough. Four more American soldiers were killed yesterday. That followed three car bomb attacks that killed 43 Iraqis and injured nearly 90 others in Baghdad the previous day.

August 8, 2005

War Protest Draws 1,000

The “Anti-War Fair” held at Memorial Park in Oklahoma City Saturday drew 1,000 supporters in a well-organized and powerful event that shows just how much Americans have turned against President George Bush’s immoral and senseless war in recent months.

Hundreds more honked their car horns in support as they drove past a long line of war protesters holding signs on Classen Avenue near NW 36th Street. Some of the signs read “Honk For Peace,” “Impeach W,” and “Bush Lied, Thousands Died.” The protesters represented a broad swath of society, from mothers and fathers with their children to grandfathers and grandmothers to young college students from the University of Oklahoma and the University of Central Oklahoma.

As children played in the Memorial Park fountain, speakers such Elizabeth Walters, the daughter of former Governor David Walters, urged the crowd to continue their efforts to pressure the Bush regime to bring the troops home. Walters, an OU student, read a statement written by her father and then received a thunderous ovation.

Booths lined the park with political activism information. Several bands provided music that lasted until 10 p.m. People roamed through the crowd with peace flags and signs that urged “Just Say No To Torture.” People could also visit Camp Casey, in honor of the son of the country’s most visible war protester, Cindy Sheehan, or walk past a line of soldier’s boots representing the human costs of Bush’s war.

One sign showed the names of all the approximately 1,900 American soldiers who have died so far in the war. (New reports over the weekend, however, told of several more American soldier and Iraqi civilian deaths.)

The local war protest was held in conjunction with a massive anti-war protest march in Washington, D.C. Saturday that organizers said attracted at least 100,000 people.

Other protest marches and events were held throughout the county and world.

Polls show that a majority of Americans no longer support the war or approve of Bush's handling of it. Most now accept the war has made the country less safe from terrorism. Writer Joe Conason recently pointed out how a new conservative-backed study shows "the precipitous, unjustified and destructive invasion of Iraq has further alienated the Muslim world and promoted Islamist fascism." Past polls have also shown the American public believes Bush lied or misled the American public about the reasons for the war.

The Oklahoma City event shows how much the war protest movement continues to gain momentum and determination even in red states such as Oklahoma. It shows the government is now fighting a costly, immoral war that lacks support from citizens throughout the heartland.

Many of those American soldiers who have died for Bush come from lower-income groups in our culture who have been summarily dismissed from equal opportunity in the country by the Republicans' continued war against the poor.

September 25, 2005

War Protestor Comes To Oklahoma

“You can either support the troops or you can support the war, but you can’t do both”

–Camilo Mejia, conscientious objector of the Iraq War

The Army unit was patrolling in Iraq when a child, perhaps ten, threw a rock at the soldiers. One unit leader grabbed the child and announced his intention to arrest him and take him back to the base.

But the father of the boy stepped into the middle of the confrontation and begged the soldiers not to take away the boy, promising he would punish him. How will you punish him? the unit leader asked. The boy’s father slapped his son in the face. But that was not enough for the unit leader, who started to take the boy away again. The father slapped the boy again; still, the unit leader shook his head.

The father then started severely beating the child in front of the American soldiers and a group of Iraqis who had collected around the troops. This apparently appeased the unit leader, and the boy was let free to be beaten to a pulp.

“Better for the man the beat up his kid, than for us to shoot him” said Camilo Mejia, one of the soldiers to witness the event.

This is just one of many war horror stories told by Mejia, the country’s most recognizable conscientious objector about what a majority of Americans now consider the immoral and meaningless Iraq War. Mejia spoke at the Mayflower Congregational Church in Oklahoma City Monday night.

Mejia served in Iraq for six months before he decided to become a conscientious objector while on leave in the United States in 2003. On March 16, 2004, Mejia filed for discharge as a conscientious objector, arguing he believed the war to be "illegal and

immoral." He later served nine months in a military jail at Fort Sill in Lawton, Oklahoma after his conviction on May 21, 2004 when the military decided to make an example of him.

After his conviction, Mejia's father, Maritza Castillo said, "Where is the justice? The American soldier who tortured Iraqi prisoners was sentenced to one year in prison and my son, who denounced these abuses and followed his conscience, was also sentenced to one year in prison. Is that fair? Is that just?"

Mejia is the first American soldier to actually serve in Iraq and then filed as a conscientious objector, though several more soldiers are now official and unofficial conscientious objectors (some have even gone to Canada) as the White House administration's lies about the war become more apparent to a majority of Americans and the military pursues interrogation techniques against captured Iraqis that many throughout the world consider torture.

Mejia has since become an outspoken anti-war activist. He spoke to about 150 people Monday night.

After his experience in Iraq, "there was a change within me," Mejia said. He said his unit killed thirty Iraqis during his tour, only three of whom were armed. He witnessed sleep deprivation techniques applied to arrested Iraqis. He knows one soldier whose life changed forever when he took shrapnel in his head that left him seriously debilitated.

And for what? Mejia points out he eventually came to realize there were no links between Iraq and the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, and no weapons of mass destruction were found in the country. He said he went from a gung-ho soldier to someone who considers the war unjust and meaningless.

Like Mejia, a majority of Americans now believe President George Bush and other administration officials lied to the American people about the Iraq-911 link and the weapons of mass destruction. A growing number of Americans are also demanding the president's impeachment for these lies.

Mejia said the Iraqis no longer welcome the American invasion, if they ever did. "Think as human beings," he urged the crowd Monday night. "Think of the tanks, war planes, a curfew, the areas covered with barbed wire. I don't think they want any military there."

Mejia also talked about how career officers in the American military try to intentionally instigate firefights so they could use the resulting combat experience to help them get promotions.

He also criticized the mainstream news media for not covering the war, leaving Americans with false impressions. He talked about how thousands of soldiers are coming back with post traumatic stress syndrome because of the violence and atrocities in which they have participated or witnessed. The military is now trying to find ways to refuse to treat soldiers who are coming back home with shell shock.

"A lot of them [American soldiers] may not come back in a body bag, but they are dead in other ways."

Mejia lives in Miami, where he plans to attend college soon. He has been speaking across the nation in recent months.

"I became free when I decided to not go back to Iraq," he said.

Postscript: *The Daily Oklahoman* did not cover the speech, though it did run a short story by the Associated Press on its Web site about Mejia before he spoke. How can

people get the truth about the war when the corporate media refuses to cover it beyond regurgitating White House administration lies? Meanwhile, this month is turning into a major bloodbath for American soldiers. Four more were killed yesterday. This follows the twenty-four soldiers killed last week. As the carnage continues, President George Bush declines to meet with Cindy Sheehan, whose son was killed in Iraq. Sheehan wants to know what her son died for, and she is camping out at Crawford, Texas in order to get the president to talk to her.

August 11, 2005

Ten Reasons Why Oklahomans Should Protest Bush

Here are ten reasons why you should attend the protest against President George Bush in Stillwater on Saturday morning. Bush is giving the commencement address at Oklahoma State University.

(1) The imperial Bush lied this country into a botched war, sanctioned torture of people in American custody, and ordered illegal wiretapping of American citizens. All of these acts are impeachable offenses, and they threaten our democratic structures. By attending the protest, you will tell the world you reaffirm American democracy and will hold American politicians accountable.

(2) You need to attend the protest so your children and future children can live in a democracy of checks and balances, not a quasi-fascist theocracy led by people who do not believe in science. This is a presidential administration that does not believe in global warming and wants schools to teach neocreationism. This is an administration that wants to dictate your lifestyle and how you can express yourself. This is an administration that wants to get into your personal life and tell you how you should live and what you can believe.

(3) This president has turned the country into one of the most detested and reviled nations in the world because of his unilateral, violent foreign policies. Your presence at the protest will show the world not everyone believes in Bush's immoral policies, which have led to the death of thousands upon thousands of innocent people. We can say to the world, "We are not all Bushbots in Oklahoma." This will give hope to the civilized world.

(4) It is not often Oklahoma progressives and liberals get such a large stage for a protest. Certainly, the local, conservative mainstream media—*The Daily Oklahoman*, for example—will downplay the protest Saturday no matter how many people show up. But the national media will be there as well. By attending the protest, you will make a statement that Oklahoma does contain people who read and think and are a part of the reality-based community. We can get decent national coverage if we show up in enough numbers, and this can send a powerful message to the rest of the country. If we can speak out in Oklahoma of all places, then it will make more people in all red states less afraid to speak up. Your attendance at the protest will make a huge difference.

(5) It will be easy and fun to attend the peaceful protest. It runs from 8 a.m. to noon southwest of the stadium on the corner of Athletic Avenue and Hester Street. Bush speaks at the commencement at 10 a.m. You can come early and leave early. The point is not to disrupt graduation ceremonies, but to show there is a thriving movement, even in the so-called heartland, against Bush and his cronies. Protestors will remain respectful of OSU's graduates, but, rest assured, many of those graduates are not pleased Bush is speaking at the commencement.

(6) You will be making history by attending the protest. You will be part of a growing grassroots movement in this country that wants to bring accountability and sanity back to the executive branch of our federal government. You will then hold and treasure this memory forever. This can be a story you tell your children and grandchildren in future years. Bring your cameras. You will want to record this moment.

(7) You can network with other progressives and liberals from throughout the state. Maybe you can find an organization that expresses your views. Maybe you can start an

organization with others who want to reaffirm democracy in today's turbulent times. Maybe you can find your role in democracy's drama on Saturday. Maybe you can just show up, and this will be the only act of protest you ever take. But you will definitely meet others who share your vision.

(8) You can create a sign that shows your biggest, individual concern with the Bush administration. Maybe it is the immoral Iraq war. Maybe it is Bush's lack of regard for the environment. Maybe it is illegal wiretapping. Maybe it is the torture issue. Maybe it is the assault on reproductive rights and science. Maybe it is Republican corruption in Washington. Maybe it is growing, right-wing, religious fundamentalism, which is promoted by this administration for partisan politics. Maybe it is Bush's fiscal irresponsibility. Maybe it is rising gasoline prices and living expenses. Maybe it is the tax cuts that favor millionaires over ordinary, middle-class Americans. Whatever the case, you can express your personal and individual views within a supportive community. Even if you do not create your own sign, and that is fine, you can express yourself clearly and specifically to those who agree with you.

(9) You can exercise the time-honored tradition of dissent and freedom of speech in this country. This country's current government was founded on dissent and protest. The country's founders had events like Saturday's protest in mind when they formed the government. The idea was to stop monarchical tyranny and allow for real representation of people. Speak out. It is what Thomas Jefferson would have wanted.

(10) Although you live in the reddest of red states, you can attend the protest knowing that a vast majority of people in the country and throughout the world agree with you. Bush's approval rating is down in this country to 32 or 33 percent in some polls, and his

policies are despised throughout the world. When you show up Saturday, you will be speaking a majority, logical and intelligent view. Show the world America can once again become a beacon of democracy and opportunity. Show the world by showing up.

May 5, 2006

Okies Protest Bush

Nearly 600 protestors, including students, military veterans, and peace activists, showed up to express their disapproval of President George Bush Saturday in Stillwater. Bush gave the commencement speech in Boone Pickens Stadium at Oklahoma State University. He was flown in by helicopter at approximately 10 a.m. after landing in Air Force One at Vance Air Force Base in Enid.

As Bush flew in, protestors shook their fists at the sky and chanted, "Bush lied, thousands died." The chant grew louder and louder during Bush's speech as well. Sometimes, chanters just yelled, "Liar" over and over, or "1, 2, 3, 4, we don't want your stupid war. 5, 6, 7, 8, stop the killing, stop the hate," or "Impeach, indict, imprison."

Bush lied the country into the immoral, illogical war in Iraq, sanctioned the torture of prisoners in American custody, and ordered the illegal wiretapping of American citizens. All these acts are impeachable offenses. Bush does not face any real investigations into these acts because the Republican Party, with its majority in Congress, has placed partisan politics above the country's interests. Meanwhile, Bush's approval ratings continue to drop, even in Oklahoma.

Protestors waved signs like these: "Bush is a liar," "Make levees, not war," "Democracy was getting old anyway," "Impeach Bush," "Bush step down," "Mr. Bush, stop the killing. Bring them home now," "Bush lied, kids died," "Liar, liar, pants on fire," "Who would Jesus torture?"

The protestors were allowed to assemble only a block or two away from the stadium. The crowd swelled from 8 to 11 a.m., as OSU students and others came and went, some participating in the protest before moving on elsewhere on campus. Protestors—some

even walking through the crowd and counting—estimated the come-and-go crowd at 500 to 600, though an exact count was impossible because the protest lasted from 8 a.m. to noon.

The Daily Oklahoman, of course, estimated the crowd at only 350 (“Demonstrators voice opinions,” May 7, 2006), and its coverage of the protest showed the newspaper’s conservative bias. The newspaper, for example, referred to a counter-protest to the Bush protest when, in fact, it was only one to three people. During much of the Bush protest, in fact, only one man protested in favor of Bush. To compare this to the Bush protest in any equal way is a lie. The newspaper also stressed it was primarily non-students who were at the Bush protest. That seems untrue as well. I believe OSU and other college students made up a sizeable portion of the protestors. I was there. I personally know some of the students and former students who were there. Certainly, peace activists from Oklahoma City and Tulsa attended the protest, but students from throughout the state attended as well. It was an extremely diverse group of people in terms of age. *The Oklahoman’s* editors and reporters want to write off the protest as the work of a “bunch of old hippies,” but anyone who was there knows that was not the case.

As students left the commencement, some either joined protestors or waved their support. Oklahoma may still be the reddest of red states, but Bush did not get a warm welcome in Stillwater Saturday. It was ambiguous at best. There were vocal, angry people demanding he resign for the sake of the country’s democratic structures. Some students wore protest material on their graduate caps. A few students—maybe four or five—joined the one counter protestor after the commencement, but they did not stay long, and it was certainly not organized or significant. (Who, in all good conscience, can

really support this president's policies now? Even traditional conservatives are turning against him.)

The protest Saturday was peaceful and fun. At one point the crowd chanted, "Ducks against Bush" in reference to a duck that stood next to the one counter protestor. Some students wore costumes and masks and held hand-painted signs. There was music and singing. Volunteers passed out water to protestors. The protest possessed vibrancy and unity.

I believe the Bush protest movement grew considerably in Oklahoma Saturday, both in size and spirit, but it will not stop there. We cannot let the mainstream media spin its lies about our events, and we must continue to challenge the conservative media with the truth. This much we know for sure: The protest against the imperial Bush grows here and across the country. It is a grassroots movement made up of ordinary, concerned citizens who are learning and relearning how to speak up for what is right. The protest Saturday was a beginning, not a culmination. It affirmed democracy and freedom.

May 7, 2006

Did Lone Protestor Make Bushbots Proud?

The lone counter protestor at the Bush protest in Stillwater Saturday is a registered sex offender, according to government documents on the Internet.

Consequently, Bush's most vocal support Saturday came from convicted pedophile Timothy W. Middleton. Middleton held a sign reading, "Welcome to Stillwater President Bush" and taunted the approximately 600 Bush protestors who showed up Saturday. He also shouted hateful, bigoted comments at the Bush protestors.

The site Tulsa Can't Wait contains links to government documents showing Middleton was convicted in 2000, among other charges, of procuring a child for a lewd and indecent act in Bryan County. He is now a registered sex offender in Payne County, according to the site. The site also contains a video of Middleton at the protest.

Middleton received about as much mainstream media coverage as the Bush protestors, which included students, professors, military veterans, and peace activists, following Bush's appearance in Stillwater Saturday at Oklahoma State University's commencement.

Here is part of the *The Oklahoman's* story about Middleton and the Bush protest Saturday:

"'God bless America,' shouted Tim Middleton, 41, who held a sign reading, 'Welcome to Stillwater President Bush.'

"'God bless the world,' the anti-Bush crowd screamed back.

"Middleton, who waged his counterdemonstration alone for most of the morning, became enraged when OSU student Tarren Shaw, 29, held up an impromptu sign reading 'Bigots 4 Bush' next to him.

“Middleton continued to yell: ‘Go home hippies! Go home homosexuals!’

“The OSU student was shoved in the stomach. Stillwater police surrounded Middleton and escorted him away from the protest zone.”

The Daily Oklahoman was too busy lying about the crowd sizes at the Bush appearance and wrongly stereotyping the protestors to really check out the lone counter protestor. It declined to interview more student and professor protestors as it gave sex offender Middleton more column inches than the vast majority of Bush protestors. But what can you expect from the country’s most conservative newspaper? This newspaper’s editors would probably rather support a fascist government—as long as it lines the pockets of the Gaylord family—before it would admit Bush and the Republicans have damaged and continue to damage this country.

Speaking of *The Daily Disappointment*, the newspaper published a recent editorial (“OSU gives Bush a warm welcome,” May 9, 2006) in which it argued Bush received a warm welcome in Stillwater Saturday and that protestors failed to stop that great Bush mojo.

This is a lie. The commencement itself only drew 20,000 or so people, according to one estimate. That was half of the number expected to attend. Many of those people—perhaps half or slightly less than half of the 20,000—walked by the 600 or so Bush protestors. Many of those people, most of whom were graduates, either showed solidarity with the protestors or simply walked by smiling or with neutral expressions. Anyone who was there—and I was there—knows that to be the truth.

We must remember the graduates were forced to listen to Bush if they wanted to attend their commencement. This was an important day for the graduates, but, rest

assured, most of them realize the reality of Bush's terrible reign of terror even if they are Republicans.

Also, if Bush got such a warm welcome, then where were the counter protestors besides Middleton?

The Daily Oklahoman will never answer this question. It lies for the personal gain of its owners, and its Bushbotic editorial writers are slaves to an immoral ideology that continues to wreak havoc on the country's democratic structures.

The editorial about Bush's visit shows how the mainstream media here continues to brainwash the Oklahoma citizenry.

Unless you attended the protest or the commencement or read blog accounts of that day, you would have no inkling of the truth. The mainstream media loses subscribers and viewers every day because they will not report the truth, but it continues to lie because it no longer knows another way.

May 10, 2006

On the 1997 tape, I continued, "I told everyone to get away. I said something stupid like, 'This is my pet coyote,' or whatever, and everyone—there must have been four or five people—backed away, but they stayed and watched."

As I watched and listened to me talk about the coyote in 1997, my wife, Kate, stretched her hand out to me, and in her palm were three one-milligram Xanaxes. I took the pills from her, and then she handed me some water. I swallowed the Xanax.

I said to Kate, "I love you, babe."

She went, "I really wish you wouldn't watch this tape. It upsets your mother, even though she doesn't show it, or say anything. I can tell it does."

Mama, everyone was in the next room because everyone hates it when I watch 1997 tape of me explaining the coyote.

When I got back to watching the tape, I listened to myself talk about how the local animal control guy walked over to the coyote and me.

"He says, 'Mister, I'm such and such from the blah blah blah blah, and that, sir, is a wild animal. I see you're upset, but I suggest you walk away from it, and don't make any sudden movements.' And I turn around, and see he's got a rifle. Then I feel these hands on my shoulders, and they are these old, shaking, wrinkled hands, and when I look up, I see this woman about seventy something, and she's crying, too. So I give the coyote one last scratch, and when I rise, this woman and me hug, and we cry together. We hear the thump of the rifle shot, and that makes us cling tighter, cry even harder, and so there we are, out on Route 66, and we're hugging each other, sobbing like two babies,"

I cried then as I watched myself cry in 1997 as I talked about myself crying out there on Route 66.

Fighting The Right: Workers' Rights

Fallin's Drama

It is always comforting, on an ironic level, to see Oklahoma politicians act like fools. It is a public validation of our day-to-day realities here because it shows just how screwed up most of the big-time leadership is in the state, and, well, frankly, it is always entertaining in a particularly slapstickish-yet-ghoulish way if you can stop yourself from looking into the existential meaning of it all.

This week, Lieutenant Governor Mary Fallin and the state Senate Democrats put on the legislative session's best show so far. Prior to their drama all we had for entertainment were the crybaby fits of Oklahoma House Speaker Todd Hiett (R-Kellyville), and even then once a few people paid attention to him he dried his tears and started playing like a sort-of regular kid on the playground. Here is what happened:

The state Senate Democrats and Republicans are fighting over dueling workers' compensation bills. As you would expect, the Republicans' bill is anti-worker and anti-middle class, and it plays into corporate interests. If workers get hurt on the job, the Republicans want the employer to choose the injured workers' doctors. The Democrats, supported by the American Medical Association, want injured workers to be able to continue to choose their own doctors.

So the two bills float around the Senate floor, one pro-corporation, one pro-worker. But since the Democrats still have the majority there, they are not allowing the Republican bill to gain any traction. Last I checked, that is how democracy worked. You go by the legislative rules and count the votes.

So Fallin enters the mess under an overreaching constitutional interpretation that says the Lieutenant Governor can preside over the senate. Supposedly, Fallin wants to bring

the Republican bill to the floor for what she says will be a straight up and down vote. As the president, she might be able to force a vote on whether the Senate will consider the bill, but as *The Daily Oklahoman* (John Greiner, May, 2, 2005) noted, “The vote would have to be on bringing the bill to the Senate floor to begin with. Accomplishing that would take a two-thirds vote of the Senate—32 votes.”

So the Democrats, who argue Fallin has no such constitutional power, took a walk on Monday. That’s right. They actually walked out on her. They just left her sitting there baffled. On its Web site the next day, *The Oklahoman* screamed, “Democrats Snub Fallin.” Poor Mary. Surely, there must be some bully law or procedure she can use to stop these mean, ol’ Democrats from doing the right thing.

Later, the Democrats magically reappeared, and state Senate President Pro Tempore Mike Morgan moved to end Monday’s session and to reconvene Tuesday. As he did this, he did not even look at Fallin. (I heard your gasps from here.) He completely ignored her. Later, Morgan mentioned he felt Fallin’s unusual move may be tied to her future political aspirations, though Fallin and her associates denied this and threw out their best hateful and deceitful clichés about Democrats and trial lawyers, blah, blah, blah. (Surely the lies and hubris of the right these days must get boring for even those true believers in extreme conservative doctrine.)

So, at this writing, it is a standoff. On one side we have Fallin and the Republicans trying to screw workers; on the other side we have a centrist and weakening majority party, which has abandoned many of its founding principles, losing its cool and playing into the hands of the right-wing extremists. In the middle is our stalwart governor Brad

Henry wringing his hands and asking everyone to just be friends. I think I see a pattern here.

And the worker? You and me and just about everyone else in this state? That is the last person you going to hear about from either side in this theater of the absurd, and that plays far more to the advantage of the right than it does to the left. Frankly, if I get hurt on the job, I want to choose my own doctor, not some sold-out, old corporate shrill who wants to deny me access to adequate health care to save the company a few bucks. What kind of doctor would even serve in this capacity? Why, of course, it would be doctors like our own U.S. Senator Tom Coburn or the U.S. Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-Tennessee).

So now Okie Funk will give the more serious side of this issue. As is its modus operandi, the Funk will give its arguments in numerical form. (Caution: These will be progressive arguments. In these here parts, we call them “liberal” idears and such. Careful, one of ‘em might just reach out from the page and bite you in the ass.)

(1) As usual, the Republicans are inconsistent and illogical. Emboldened by the conservative juggernaut in this country that is supported by a relentless right-wing media machine, the GOP is now convinced they can just suspend law whenever they want. Fallin’s actions are in the same spirit of an upcoming move by Frist and the Bush administration to change U.S. Senate rules eliminating the centuries-old filibuster to allow for up and down votes on judges. (Both Fallin and Frist use this “up and down” language, as if this is some type of rallying cry for the masses. That is not true, people. It is deceitful propaganda being employed to mess you up bad.) The problem is that the Republicans, as the minority party, used procedural rules all the time to stop former

President Bill Clinton's judicial nominees. And, oh yeah, Mary, the Republicans do not have a majority yet in the Oklahoma Senate, but do not fret because this will happen sure enough if the Democrats do not locate their guts soon and speak out for the ordinary, hard-working people who elected them.

(2) Note how the workers' compensation issue is already framed by the local right-wing media and the Republicans. The assumption of the right-wing press is that everyone should be disgusted by these terrible Democrats who, alas, want to hurt the poor, struggling corporations like Chesapeake Energy or Kerr-McGee or GM. These Democrats actually snub and do things like that. Yes, folks, they are snubber and double snubbers, too. (Don't cry, Todd.) What a crock! The Republicans want to take away your right to choose a doctor if you get hurt on the job. They want to do this so corporations can hire doctors who will make sure the injured worker pays out of her/his own pocket for medical expenses. This will mean that the owners and principal stockholders of these big corporations will get even richer. Meanwhile, your wages will remain stagnant as you pay more and more in health costs and health insurance. So, under the current Oklahoma Republican ideology, you will not even get a fair shake if you get injured on the job. Why would any of us, except the very richest who will never have to care one bit about a doctor's bill, want to go along with this madness? Have you ever had a really big medical bill even if you have health insurance? Well, then, you are lucky. I have had one before, and it is not fun because you have to actually *pay* it, month-by-month, year-after-year. Workers need protections from corporations because this country has a long and sordid history of big businesses acting unethically to benefit only the elite wealthy in this

country and this state. These businesses do not care about you, and Mary Fallin does not care about your medical bills even if you get hurt on the job.

(3) Okay, I agree, the Fallin and Democrat issue has some, ahem, how shall I say, some panache, some energy, some Okie quirkiness in that good ol' Oklahoma square-dancey way? It deserves a laugh or two, sure. But the larger symbolism here is that the Republicans are power mad on both the state and national levels. They will not give up, nor will they back down until the people rise up against them, and it is time we rise up against them. Many of my liberal and centrist-type friends keep speaking of a mythical correction in the political landscape when suddenly the country will shift back to a more centrist and reasonable government. After my friends do this, they usually hand me a beer. "Relax," they say, and then they turn up the stereo. But I do not think the correction mythology holds true today for many reasons, and I think this Fallin incident is a good example of why I think this. Here we have a showboating state Republican politician disregarding workers' rights, and she gets a free pass in the so-called mainstream media. Fallin's cheap, theatrical move, for all its down-home Okie comedy, is an example of how quasi-fascism grows in leaps and bounds in red states like Oklahoma. Watch out New York, watch out Los Angeles, it is coming your way.

May 3, 2005

Workers Comp Bill Will Hurt State

I mention Thomas Frank's book *What's The Matter With Kansas* several times in this book, and I will keep on mentioning it until Frank's political premise gets some serious discussion here in Oklahoma among progressives.

Frank argues people from his home state, Kansas, vote against their own economic interests because they now support Republican politicians who only care about ensuring the nation's wealthiest people get wealthier. All studies show that Kansans with regular, middle-class incomes increasingly get left out of the American Dream. Frank's book, of course, applies to Oklahoma as well.

I am reminded of the book once again by the recent special session of the state legislature to supposedly pass a "reform" bill that would help businesses and corporations pay less for workers' compensation insurance. The Republicans, of course, are doing everything they can do to ensure average Oklahoma workers have less protection and rights and a small group of big business owners get more money.

One of the sticking points over the legislation is that the Republicans want your employer to choose your doctor if you get injured on the job. The Democrats want you to keep the right to choose your doctor, but they have already jumped on the so-called "reform" bandwagon. Now it is probably too late. The current compromise bill would deny workers the right to choose their own doctor but allow them to legally object. Right. What Oklahoma judge these days would side with an actual person over a corporation?

The compromise bill also gives workers a new schedule of benefits (translation: less money for injuries.) This "reform" means if you work at Wal-Mart and something falls on you and, say, crushes your leg, you will get less money for medical expenses. Oh

yeah, because Wal-Mart does not provide health insurance for most of its employees, you will probably be completely out of luck

(I wonder how much money Oklahoma Wal-Mart's will save under this bill?)

How does the word “reform” get associated with screwing over workers and benefiting big business? It is mainly because the Republicans have lied it over and over again. Their argument is that cheaper workers’ compensation insurance will mean Oklahoma will attract more business. Perhaps, in some type of abstract way, some (and I emphasize “some”) Republicans might actually believe this.

But most Republicans and Democrats alike know the bill will do little to improve the business climate in the state. The state has a bevy of reasons why it does not attract certain types of quality businesses. The main reason is its underfunded education system and its relatively low college graduate rate.

Meanwhile, Oklahoma is locked in a dangerous pattern in which the state’s politicians are transferring great amounts of wealth to the richest corporations as they pass legislation that hurts ordinary people. Somehow, again, this has become “reform” within the conservative and Democrat lexicons.

It is not reform in any definition of that word. It is hateful, immoral politics that is hurting ordinary, hard-working people with families.

Ordinary, middle-class Oklahomans, the people who slave for the state’s wealthy elite each and every day—Will Rogers once said all rich people get rich off the backs of hard-working people—must work at jobs with less insurance protection of all types these days. The big oil companies here, Chesapeake, Devon, Kerr-McGee, and our corporate manufacturers, will get richer. Wal-Mart’s top executives and stockholders will get

richer. The savings of workers' compensation insurance will go directly into the pockets of a small group of horribly immoral people who, in their greed and hubris, deny adequate health care to people who work for them.

I know a lot of people throughout Oklahoma of all political persuasions. All of them want to be able to choose their own doctor if they are seriously injured. But, see, now we have "reform." Maybe that word is all most people hear when it comes to the workers' comp issue.

One of the reasons that is all they hear, as Frank points out, is because the conservative media, in Kansas, in Oklahoma, and throughout the nation, will not allow all voices to be heard. The mainstream media is vested entirely in the transfer of wealth to our society's richest.

Here is an idea that was not presented by the local mainstream media on this issue: *I mean, come on. The state politicians are actually taking away your right to choose a doctor if you are hurt on the job. Do you really want that to happen?*

Would anyone actually support such morally-bankrupt politicians because of some vague promise that this could lead to a better business climate here? Of course not. But the local media, *The Daily Oklahoman*, the television stations, do not explain it. They have their own conservative political agendas. They cite industry organizations and the immoral academic flacks of the state Chamber of Commerce to supposedly show why hurting workers and rewarding a handful of corporate executives is good for Oklahoma. People here never get another view.

Sometimes I still get perplexed when a politician such as House Speaker Todd Hiett (R-Kellyville) can get elected on such an anti-people platform.

I know good people in the state who are so caught up right now in the immoral conservative juggernaut with its celebration of wealthy people and war they will vote to ensure their children have no future here, no health insurance, and no decent jobs. Now they sit idly by as the state Chamber of Commerce types take away their own and their children's right to choose a doctor if they are injured on the job.

They know not what they do.

June 1, 2005

Republican Ideology Closed GM Plant

Do not let the state's immoral right-wing power structure get any traction on the urban legend that those awful unions closed the General Motors assembly plant in Oklahoma City.

GM announced last week it was closing the plant, which will result in the direct loss of 2,200 jobs in the area. The impact on the local economy will undoubtedly be devastating. Some economists estimate the plant is responsible for \$1 billion in local revenue.

Like all urban legends, this union myth is easily dispelled by a simple look at the facts.

But facts will not stop local Republicans from maintaining it was the awful, terrible people who made \$50,000 or so a year and had halfway decent health insurance who brought about the plant's demise. Here's the true trackback of their immoral ideology: *If only Oklahoma City's GM workers would have, heck, taken a big cut in pay to minimum wage and not taken their kids to the doctor, then maybe things would be different.*

(Current Republican ideology: Low wages, no health insurance, rising living expenses = patriotism, moral values, religious faith. Is anyone in Oklahoma still buying into this?)

Any honest reckoning will show that it was short-sighted and morally-bankrupt, right-wing ideology that closed the plant.

So the next time someone brings up the union urban legend about the plant's closing, throw these ideas back in their face.

(1) **No energy policy.** The Republicans, which govern all branches of the federal government now, have an energy policy based on one central idea. The idea is to enrich

the top stockholders and executives of the nation's energy companies at the expense of ordinary Americans, who now struggle to make ends meet because of higher energy costs. A decent energy policy promoting conservation or better vehicle fuel mileage might have kept the price of gasoline down. Oklahoma City's GM plant makes two larger vehicles, the Chevrolet Trailblazer and the Envoy. The lack of demand for these vehicles because of high gasoline prices has been cited by GM as the main reason for the plant's closing.

(2) **Non-accountable corporate governance.** Under the new American neocon corporate system, top executives of companies are paid exorbitant salaries for short-term rises in the value of stocks. If stocks do not rise immediately, then so what? Let the company go bankrupt, lay off thousands of workers, and then restructure. The top executive of GM, Rich Wagoner, Jr., makes \$4.8 million a year, for example. He received \$5.1 million in stock options last year. Under the neocon system, top executives like Wagoner are rewarded no matter what terrible decisions they make, and it goes without saying Wagoner made awful, horrendous decisions about what type of vehicles would be in demand by the American public. Can you imagine getting paid millions and millions of dollars for making stupid decisions? But that is exactly the basis of the new corporate management systems in American business. Top executives are not paid anymore to enhance the long-term solvency of the corporations they operate. They are not held accountable under the prevailing Republican ideology.

(3) **Skyrocketing health insurance costs.** The Republicans are directly responsible for the millions of Americans without health insurance in this country. More than 45 million people are uninsured, yet our one-party government refuses to do anything about

it. (Oklahoma has one of the largest numbers of non-insured children in the country.)

This lack of health insurance coverage drives up health costs for everyone. It affects us all. GM executives have often cited rising health insurance costs as a major problem for their company.

A non-existent national energy policy that only rewards the ultra-rich, non-accountable corporate governance, and skyrocketing health care costs, these are the direct result of five long years of complete Republican dominance in American politics. Without a doubt, this triad of immoral incompetence is what closed the GM plant in Oklahoma City, not the hard-working people at the plant, not unions.

And, in Oklahoma City, we are all going to pay. Local economists believe the loss of the GM plant will depress wages for everyone, except the ultra-rich, in this area for months and months to come. One economist predicts the closing will eliminate 15,000 jobs. That is not good for anyone.

Republicans could care less about ordinary, hard-working Oklahomans. People here need to wake up and vote differently next November on the local, state, and national level before we lose another 15,000 jobs in the Oklahoma City area.

November 25, 2005

Okies Should Give Themselves A Raise

Let's say you live in Oklahoma and you make \$35,000 a year or so. Your partner makes \$25,000 a year. By watching your budget closely and making good financial decisions and barring any serious medical problems, you can live fairly comfortably here on this combined money.

The rich and their lackeys, of course, get the expensive homes and cars, and the long, expensive vacations and the security of wealth, but you struggle along with what you have, and you try not be envious. You are somehow appeased by the culturally-ingrained idea that if you work hard, then good things will happen for you.

But then a few years go by under a presidential administration dedicated to transferring as much wealth as possible to the wealthy.

Wages, according to the U.S. Census, have been stagnant for five years, and even if you have received more than token cost-of-living raises during this time they have been eaten up by added health insurance costs and rising energy prices.

So the American dream slips further and further away. You can ask for a raise, but your corporate bosses are so tied to the new immoral Republican ideology about wealth transfer they will laugh at you. They might even imply that it is unpatriotic to ask for a raise. They might even say, in so many words, "Hey, we're all Bush Republicans here in Oklahoma, aren't we? You know I get the money, and you get a hard life. That's the post 9/11 rule. George Bush said so."

So, finally, the catharsis happens, and you get it. The wealthy, as usual, are getting richer on the backs of hard-working people like you. But now you do not know what to

do. How can you secure a decent wage for your hard work and restore the American Dream for yourself and your children?

One answer to that in Oklahoma is to get behind a new initiative petition drive that would place a minimum wage increase measure on the ballot. A minimum wage increase would boost the state's economy and help raise all our salaries through business growth. Business owners will benefit by increased sales and profits as the state's quality of life slowly but surely improves.

It would also give low-income people a much-needed financial boost , and the extra money they will spend will go directly into the local economy.

Raise Oklahoma is the new organization behind the petition drive. The measure would increase the \$5.15 minimum wage by \$1 the first year, by another \$1 the second year, and then subsequent increases would be tied to the Consumer Price Index. The petition needs 117,101 valid signatures. The group recently filed the petition with the state's secretary of state.

This is "trickle up" economics, and it works. Let's get behind the drive so we can tell the rich and the immoral power brokers in this state—after five long years of stagnant wages and skyrocketing gasoline and heating costs—that we love ourselves enough to want decent salaries and a decent future for our children.

April 24, 2006

Sean walked into the room. He went, "Shit, not the '97 tape. And he got out of the room quick. I heard him yell out, just to make sure everyone knew, "He's got the '97 tape on!"

Sean knew, they all knew, that after I watched this tape, I would once again apologize for THE EVENT. I would go around to everyone, and I would cry, and I would apologize. This year, it was particularly bad because it seemed like an off year or something, you know, when things just don't feel right, like the deal with Tricia being more embarrassed than pleased about Granddad's bowel movement because he told her sorority friend about it, or the fact Mama didn't get her shush just right with the 1995 tape, or that we couldn't find the meat thermometer to check the turkey to see if it was really done or not.

I went back to watching the 1997 tape. On the tape, I said, "So, when I saw The Road Runner on, when I got here, I just freaked. I overreacted.

"I apologize for ripping Sarah's tape to shreds, for tearing the drapes, for breaking the kitchen window by throwing the turkey through it, you know, for the big connoption fit, and maybe I need my medicine adjusted, okay Kate? I'll call the doctor first thing in the morning.

"It just seemed a little bit too ironic to me, that's all. After the deal with the coyote, and then for this cartoon to be on, all that seemed like a message to me, or something, an omen, a sign, maybe. Also, I was in a state of depersonalization (read Sheehan, pages 30-31 for a fuller treatment of this topic), and I felt outside of myself, like I was watching myself do all these terrible things even though I didn't want to do them."

I thought, Even now, no one gets it, but me. Since 1997, I've thought this every Thanksgiving. I admit, it's all still blurry to me, but I figure I was given a clue or

something out there on Route 66, and that the bit with The Road Runner on Thanksgiving only reinforced it.

**Fighting The Right: America's Most
Conservative Newspaper**

When Will *The Daily Oklahoman* Allow Dissenting Views To Its Ultra-Conservative Opinions?

(This article was originally printed June 25, 2004, in a slightly modified form in *The Oklahoma Observer*. *The Observer*, edited by Frosty Troy, has been the state's consistent beacon of populist truth and insight for decades.)

It has been more than a year since the death of *The Daily Oklahoman* publisher Edward L. Gaylord.

Since April, 2003, the newspaper has dramatically improved its layout and adopted a softer tone on its editorial page. It has slightly improved its coverage of the state's minority communities. No media outlet in town can even come close to competing with the sheer volume of information on its award-winning Web site.

Yet the newspaper still has a long way to go to earn even a modicum of mainstream respectability.

First, the editorial page, though somewhat softer in tone and style, remains extremely unbalanced and biased in its extremist, right-wing views. My complaint about the paper's editorial page is two-fold: (1) The editorials engage in rhetorical deceit and subterfuge, and (2) no dissenting voices are given consistent and adequate space. The post-Gaylord editorial page still validates my complaint.

For example, a recent editorial ("Better Pay, No Reform," May 28, 2004) reluctantly praised a new state bill raising teacher salaries and insurance benefits, but it also used the editorial to argue for merit-based raises. The editorial never mentioned two important facts. The state now ranks near the bottom nationally in teacher pay, and a majority of Oklahomans want teachers to receive raises.

To leave out this information is deceitful. How disheartening for the state's teachers, many of whom must feel suffocated by *The Oklahoman's* rhetoric of ignorance and distortion. As usual, the newspaper's right-wing ideology replaces basic common sense and decency.

Here are some questions for the *The Oklahoman's* owners and editors. When will the newspaper hire a liberal or even moderate local columnist? When will it consistently run columns by national writers such as Paul Krugman or Molly Ivins? Is it really in the best business interests of the newspaper to leave out some of the country's major political voices? Wouldn't it actually increase readership and revenues to offer a diversity of opinions?

Second, the newspaper does little enterprise journalism, yet it is quick to criticize government corruption when it ultimately and always raises its ugly head in our state. Where are *The Oklahoman* reporters? Who is checking out our local and state agencies? Where are our watchdogs?

Perhaps, the editorial page would have more credibility if *The Oklahoman* reporters were watching out for the public's interests. Instead, the paper's readers get after-the-fact reporting, and then the editorial page howls in righteous indignation. When is the last time the newspaper published a compelling series of stories on a particular Oklahoma issue or agency?

Third, most people who read a variety of newspapers and publications on any consistent basis know that the newspaper is incredibly boring.

Certainly, the newspaper provides mundane but important services, such as classified ads, death notices, and sports scores. But the overall news coverage is handicapped by

too many rewritten publicity releases and spoon-fed announcements from government officials and agencies. The newspaper almost never tries to get behind a story or elaborate on particular issues.

It is a real chore to find something compelling to read in the newspaper unless you are a sports fan, perhaps, and then only during football and basketball seasons.

The systemic problems at *The Oklahoman* can be traced, at one level, to the small amount of space it allots for news and unproductive reporters.

In the first case, the paper's owners continue to define the newspaper's primary mission as running advertisements rather than producing a product that must compete for readers. This is what happens with monopolies; quality always suffers and the consumer gets burnt.

In the second case, many talented journalists leave the state and even the newspaper itself because the newspaper offers little in the way of creative challenges. Just as many of our teachers must leave our state for better jobs, so, too, do intelligent, energetic journalists.

Unfortunately, the newspaper continues to define the state through its own mediocrity. It calls for diversity in the economy even as it rejects diversity as a philosophical concept. Yet I suspect it represents the viewpoints of fewer people than it did in the past. This is only anecdotal, but even most conservative people I know are now bitterly estranged from the newspaper at some level. When I use the term, *Daily Disappointment*, everyone knows what I mean, and everyone agrees.

Also, the state did elect Democrat Brad Henry as governor, not *The Oklahoman's* choice, the right-wing extremist Steve Largent.

And maybe the newspaper will continue to improve and allow a plurality of views and opinions in its pages, or maybe the Gaylord family will sell it someday. Until then, though, the newspaper leaves us with a small but basic lesson of capitalism and the media: Monopolies like *The Daily Oklahoman* are never in the public interest.

July 6, 2004

Reducing American Mythology To Conservative Clichés: *The Oklahoman's* Deceitful Propaganda

For the past twelve years, I have taught a college course titled Protest Literature that deals with the American history of protest from the country's revolutionary inception through the counter-culture movement in the 1960s to the globalization and war protests of today.

In the course, students and I first grapple with how an American mythology was created by such documents as Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*, the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights, and then we note how the mythology and rhetoric (not always a true, stable set of facts, but an arguable history) has influenced literature and politics for more than two hundred years in this country.

What clearly emerges each time I teach the course is the prevailing tension between those people in our country who believe these documents have plural meanings subject to interpretation when applied to contemporary times and those who present themselves as strict interpreters of the founding fathers but who really just distort the meaning of the documents into simple and deceitful emotional appeals. (I am not speaking of my students here, but of two distinct political camps in this country.)

These deceitful emotional appeals reinforce the reductionist and purely celebratory American history now taught in many elementary and high schools in Oklahoma. I make this claim based on personal anecdotal evidence and from seventeen years of talking to Oklahoma university students about their earlier educations.

Essentially, the emotional, right-wing appeals reflect some version of this model these days: The founding fathers were simple, plain-speaking great men who loved America

and were truly patriotic to only one cause, the creation of the United States of America as a Christian nation. You see, they were fundamentalist Christians, strict six-day creationists, who hated Europeans like the French and Germans, and, oh yeah, the British, too, but do not think about that very much right now. They wanted everyone to own guns and go to church on Sundays. That is what they INTENDED.

And on and on it goes. It is all rubbish, of course. Thomas Paine, for example, ultimately became an atheist, and Thomas Jefferson, who wrote the DOI, was most certainly a deist in his beliefs. And we have argued for years in this country what the DOI signers might have meant by "all men are created equal." Did they mean women, too? Did they mean their own slaves, too? Does it matter? What about the idea that one of the rights of people is the "pursuit of happiness." Can we ever agree on what that means?

I bring this issue up as a prelude for more criticism of *The Daily Oklahoman*, which has been another major culprit in dumbing down our state's students since the now-deceased Edward L. Gaylord decided that as the state's richest aristocrat he would use his monopoly to stifle any dissent to his immoral and deceitful interpretations of the founding fathers.

Unfortunately, his daughter, Christy Gaylord Everest, continues the newspaper in his hate-mongering and reductionist tradition. *The Oklahoman* has done more to impede educational progress in this state than any other institution, person, or ideology in the state's history. And no amount of Gaylord money, not \$22 million, not \$5 billion, donated to the University of Oklahoma or wherever will erase that enigma.

What *The Daily Oklahoman* has done for years on its editorial page, and in its story selection and in its distortion of the news, is to tap into the watered-down historical and

literary education of the state's students even as it argues educational standards should be improved. As it has done so, it has consistently presented itself as a champion for Christian fundamentalist views of the founding fathers and their documents.

I get to these old but valid arguments about the newspaper's impact on our state today via a recent editorial in *The Oklahoman*, which on its surface seems innocuous enough but upon closer scrutiny reveals the trademark rhetorical deceit and subterfuge of its editorial writers.

In the January 24, 2005 editorial titled "Done deal: Route chosen for 1-40 is best," *The Oklahoman* argues that those who oppose the planned route of the new 1-40 alignment through the city should quit protesting even if the alignment does preempt another proposed plan to form a light-rail system in the city.

This seems a fair enough editorial stance but read how the newspaper approaches the issue: "Just as some people can't accept the reelection of President Bush, some opponents of the Interstate 40 relocation in Oklahoma City can't accept the planned route."

And then this: "Remember the liberal advocacy group that was born during the Bill Clinton impeachment era, a group calling itself MoveOn.org? Its simple message to Clinton's political opponents was to move on. But the group itself has never been able to move on from the defeat of Al Gore by Bush in 2000."

And finally this: "Those who can't move on find comfort in sharing their misery with others of like mind. It was their right to view the president's second inaugural as a national day of mourning. In the end, though, it signified nothing. Continuing to oppose the I-40 route is likewise pointless. Move on."

There is nothing wrong, of course, with a newspaper taking a position about a local road project, but this type of deceitful, rhetorical transference is illogical and ultimately immoral. The two issues—Bush’s reelection and the road project—are totally unrelated.

Consequently, here is the underlying message of the editorial: If you oppose the new road plan (and I, personally, have no opinion on the matter) you are just like those sore losers who do not support President George Bush. You might even be a liberal and a progressive who voted for Al Gore or John Kerry. (Don’t forget, you liberals, Clinton was impeached.) We do not need or want people like you to voice your opinions around here. The facts of the issue do not matter. Do not speak up. Do not get involved.

The editorial is angry and hateful, especially since it is about a local issue that obviously deserves some modicum of thought and consideration. It is dictatorial, mean and rude. It is illogical and irrational. More than that, it is tragic, on a small but symbolic level, because an entire generation of people in this state have either been marginalized or brainwashed by this immoral type of rhetorical rubbish produced by *The Oklahoman*.

Yet, on an even larger level, this editorial represents how you can get from simple, emotional, select, and narrow interpretations of our founding fathers’ initial documents and lives to the deceit and distortions of current conservative ideology and rhetoric. Why argue over facts or evidence about the I-40 relocation project or, say, the Bill of Rights or Jefferson’s views about slavery when you can tap into reductionist emotional appeals and clichés while counting on the consistent conservative indoctrination of your readership? This is how the right-wing argues, and *The Oklahoman* remains the provincial poster child of narrow views and deceitful propaganda, which are embedded in even the most innocuous material it publishes.

January 25, 2005

The Oklahoman Attacks AARP

A shameless editorial today (February 22, 2005) in *The Daily Oklahoman* attacks the American Association of Retired People for its logical opposition to George Bush's plan to destroy the country's Social Security system.

In one of those weird twists of logic unique to the newspaper's editorialists, the editorial calls the AARP "hypocritical" because it offers deals on mutual funds for its members. Titled, "Hypocrisy? AARP straddles Social Security furor," the editorial cites a right-wing columnist, James K. Glassman, who hands the immoral newspaper its GOP talking points for the day.

The editorial cites the columnist's argument that ". . . AARP is talking out of both sides of its mouth, because while the organization is busy trashing Bush's private accounts plan, it offers its members investment opportunities in 38 mutual funds from which it receives a financial cut from each sale."

There is simply no logical disconnection between AARP trying to protect the country's main retirement system and also encouraging a plurality of investments for its members. The AARP is not taking an anti-investment or anti-business position in the debate. It is not taking an anti-Bush stance. The organization simply wants to ensure the solvency of Social Security.

In addition, the person writing the editorial had to be aware of these two facts: (1) Glassman is connected to the conservative think tank, The American Enterprise Institute, and (2) a group connected to the mudslinging Swift Boat liars are planning a coordinated and highly funded campaign to attack the AARP. Undoubtedly, the editorial writer

deliberately chose to omit these two crucial details because *The Oklahoman* will not argue its positions truthfully.

The editorial is part of an coordinated GOP attack on the AARP, but do not hold your breath waiting for *The Oklahoman* to acknowledge its rhetorical deceit and immoral position as it participates in the coming onslaught against the organization. There is no debate on the *The Oklahoman*'s editorial page, only a consistent cacophony of distortions, attacks, and right-wing propaganda that serve the money interests of the rich Gaylord family and nothing more.

Oklahoma's elderly need to be warned not to take their cue on the Social Security debate from the coming immoral hectoring on the pages of *The Oklahoman*, once dubbed "The worst newspaper in America" by *The Columbia Journalism Review* (January/February 1999). Watch for local articles disguised as objective journalism that attack the AARP and more editorials that omit and distort information about the Social Security issue.

Please help me warn Oklahoma's elderly about *The Oklahoman*'s insidious campaign to help George Bush destroy Social Security, which does not face an immediate funding crisis.

February 22, 2005

The Oklahoman Distorts Law

A March 15, 2005 editorial in *The Daily Oklahoman* celebrating the immoral bankruptcy legislation now making its way through the federal government contains all the usual distortions and omissions characteristic of a publication once labeled “The worst newspaper in America” by *The Columbia Journalism Review* (January/February 1999). Titled, “Long Overdue: Bankruptcy reform about to happen,” the editorial lauds the legislation because it will “encourage personal responsibility.”

The editorial notes how our two U.S. Senators James Inhofe and Tom Coburn voted for the legislation, and then describes the bill’s means test to figure out who is allowed to go bankrupt as fair.

What is missing from the editorial, though, are two important facts: (1) Oklahoma has one of the highest bankruptcy rates in the country (ninth in the nation in 2004, fourth in 2002), and (2) banks and credit card companies have poured millions upon millions into lobbying efforts to get this legislation passed.

Here's a paragraph posted on FreeRepublic.com about the issue:

"The main lobbying forces for the bill - a coalition that included Visa, MasterCard, the American Bankers Association, MBNA America, Capital One, Citicorp, the Ford Motor Credit Company and the General Motors Acceptance Corporation - spent more than \$40 million in political fund-raising efforts and many millions more on lobbying efforts since 1989, according to the Center for Responsive Politics, a nonpartisan organization that studies the role of money in the political process. By definition, the critics of the legislation had limited lobbying resources."

You won't find anything like that in *The Oklahoman's* editorial, will you?

So let's get this straight because this type of thing can only happen in a red state like Oklahoma. The state's largest newspaper and our two senators are in favor of removing a safety net for ordinary, middle-class Oklahomans struggling to make it in today's turbulent, financial climate. They want to make sure the filthy-rich investment bankers in New York can steal your hard-earned money. Yet the state has one of the highest bankruptcy rates in the country. People are hurting financially here for a variety of reasons. What about that fact? What about taking care of people right here in Oklahoma and not the wealthy elite in New York?

And Oklahomans vote for elitist, rich Republicans because . . . ?

If you live in Oklahoma, and you think Citicorp or the Gaylord family or some oil company cares about you, then you are truly a rube of all rubes. They want your money. They could care less about you or family values or what is fair and right. They want your money.

Whoever wrote this editorial for *The Oklahoman* should be ashamed. The editorial not only fails to tell the entire story, but it also argues an immoral position based on traditional religious and/or philosophical frameworks.

Here is what the editorial says: Rich people need to get richer on the backs of middle-class, ordinary Oklahomans.

March 16, 2005

The Decline Of The American Media

The conservative columnist George Will had an enlightening piece published in *The Washington Post's* online edition this past Sunday about declining hard-copy newspaper circulation. I do not much care for Will, who has been proven to be unethical, overly pedantic in a stylistic sense, and tied to a regressive ideology that threatens American democracy. But this piece pretty much sets aside politics momentarily for a discussion of facts about the newspaper industry. I could care less what conclusions Will draws from these facts, but everyone should pay attention to one main argument:

Newspapers in hard-copy form, as Will argues, are dying out.

Let me take this further. Newspapers are relics, dinosaurs, sinking ships, ugly, stupid reminders of a long ago era. They do not click or link or speak or show or amuse or astound. They line the floors of our houses when we paint inside, true. They are used in our packing boxes when we ship something, true. Some people still use them for paper machete creations. But if you want to know what is really going on, if you are really intelligent, if you are really self-aware, you have to go online. Newspapers—again, in hard-copy form, and this is a big distinction—slow us down because they put too much energy in supporting declining monopolies tied to the old technologies of newsprint presses and fossil fuels.

This, in turn, I will argue later is a major reason the mainstream media has become so conservative in the last decade or so, and this is also one of the reasons there seems to be this big disconnect between the fact a majority of newspaper reporters still apparently describe themselves as liberal even as their stories support one of the most conservative presidential regimes in the nation's history. As I have mentioned before, I think this

administration is now a quasi-fascist government. (Alas, we teeter on fascism, Funko Heads, and I do not care if you think that is hyperbole. I read somewhere recently that our first thought everyday when we wake up should be, These are not normal times. I need to do at least one thing today to protect democracy from the theocrats. I agree with that, and I hope you do, too.)

The declining circulation numbers and the growing conservatism of the mainstream media is especially important to us in Oklahoma, which is home to the largest, most conservative newspaper in the nation, *The Daily Oklahoman*.

I have many arguments, but first some numbers, as cited by Will in his article, “Unread and Unsubscribing” (*The Washington Post*, April 24, 2005).

Overall, newspaper circulation is down from 62.3 million in 1990 to 55.2 million today.

Only 23 percent of people between the ages of 18 and 29 say they read newspapers. People between the ages of 8 and 18 spend only 43 minutes a day with all print media, newspapers, magazines, books, but more than six hours a day with all media, including the Internet and television.

Experts claim, according to the article, that people do not change their reading habits significantly as they age. That just makes common sense.

Locally, *The Daily Oklahoman*'s hard-copy circulation continues to decline overall as evidenced by their recent and drastic price cut a couple of years ago. I am sure it is no different at *The Tulsa World* or any other newspaper in the state. I am also sure hits are increasing at all the online newspaper sites in the state. The new model, then, is free online newspapers supported by ad revenues. Many metropolitan newspaper publishers

recognize this, but they are moving slow, slow, and slower because these monopolies want to suck the last piece of subscription change from your pockets.

What few pundits or media critics talk about is how this slow changing of newspapers to online models has created an extremely conservative mainstream media. I would argue that, overall, newspaper editors and reporters are still tied to a regressive, monopolistic model of journalism. This, by definition, creates conservative politics. Plunging into the online world for many reporters and editors must be a tad frightening for these reasons: (1) You have to work harder if you must update your story constantly, (2) you have more competition from bloggers and other sites who challenge your job on different levels consistently, and (3) you might not know much about the technical side of computers and code language, and you might be right that you are way behind the curve of a major media revolution in the world.

All this means that newspaper editors and reporters will consciously and subconsciously protect the status quo, and the status quo is always conservative, always tied to the good ol' days philosophy that omits this one important fact: Back in the good ol' days no one really thought it was that good. No, in fact, there were times when it was downright ugly and immoral in this country. Take slavery, for example, or how about the lack of women's rights in the nineteenth century and before?

Hard-copy newspapers are tied to regressive politics in these ways as well: (1) Tons upon tons of newsprint must be produced annually to sustain a dying industry, and (2) huge trucks using large amounts of gasoline must be used to deliver newspapers to their destinations. Killing trees and using the last vestiges of fuel in The Oil Age can hardly be described as forward, progressive thinking. Again, I think editors and reporters, and even

those who might describe themselves as political liberals, subconsciously support other dying industries that are harmful to the world's ecosystem.

It simply amazes me newspaper editors and reporters can describe themselves as progressive when they are anti-progress and tied to old technologies. In fact, they are not liberals. They are deluded. By definition, if you work as a reporter or editor (not necessarily as a progressive political columnist) for a major, metropolitan daily newspaper on the hard-copy side, then you are a conservative, backwards-thinking person. If you were not and you had any sense of morality and justice, you would be scrambling to get to the online side, or you would quit altogether and work for a progressive, online publication. That would be a life-affirming decision, and you would sleep better at nights as well.

What all this means is that newspapers today want to remain as boring and meaningless as they now are. Newspapers, then, frame the issues in ways that are already conservative. *The Daily Oklahoman* is a perfect example of this. Our state's largest newspaper already assumes that virtually all the state's residents naturally support oil companies, big business, monopolies, a continuous reliance on fossil fuels, tax breaks for the wealthy, the whole ugly litany. What readers encounter then is a closed, conservative system not only on the pages of *The Daily Oklahoman*, but also on the pages of *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*.

Of course, *The Oklahoman* will support launching nukes in Afghanistan to get Osama, of course *The Times* will send their ringer and careerist Judith Miller to distort and exaggerate to ensure our country starts an illogical war, of course *The Post* will give Bush a free pass. These monopolies exist to make money. Conservative ideology supports

monopolies. These newspapers could care less about you, or what you have to say, or what you want to know. Are you against using nukes? Well, then you must be out of the mainstream. Are you against unethical and lazy journalists making up information that allows a dangerous, religious presidential administration to get this country mired in a senseless crusade/war? Then you must be out of the mainstream. Are you perplexed as to why the country's newspapers will not go after Bush when he lies and lies and lies? Then you must be out of the mainstream.

No, folks, it is the country's newspapers that are out of the mainstream. They have become conservative, boring, old ugly fuddy-duddies. They are out of touch. They ignore or silence any voice that does not fit into their monopolistic madness and corporate-sanctioned immorality. And their hubris is creating their own demise. Any future or any role hard-copy newspapers may have in the ongoing media revolution will have to be backed by the American liberal intelligentsia who actually read, not the morons who get their news from Rush Limbaugh or Bill O'Reilly or Fox News. Yet those in charge, as usual, are too ignorant to see it. They support the Fox News crowd, and then say get lost to people who actually read. Now that is a great business model they need to discuss at the Harvard Business School. It would be a splendid, ironic show to watch newspapers die out—sort of like it must have been a real treat to see the old railroad barons lose out—if so much was not at stake right now in this country.

Meanwhile, bloggers and independent media Web sites, such as Salon.com, continue to change the world. It cannot happen soon enough for me, and let us hope it happens soon enough to save American democracy from the quasi-fascists who hope to install a Christian theocracy here.

April 26, 2005

***Oklahoman* Attacks Senior Citizens**

Okie Funk will continue to monitor *The Daily Oklahoman's* editorial distortions about the ongoing Social Security issue. All Okie Funk asks for is a full vetting of the issue when the newspaper's editorial writers go at it. I agree with *The Oklahoman's* editorial writers that this is a singularly important issue, but the newspaper's omissions about the issue are deceitful. At the very least, they should allow dissenting opinions. I guess I should be happy the paper has stopped attacking, for the moment anyway, the AARP, right?

In a recent editorial, "Just saying no: Democrats no help on Social Security," *The Oklahoman* makes the point that the Democrats are rejecting President George Bush's Social Security plan for private stock market accounts without offering a plan of their own. This is true enough, and if I thought Bush's point was to really lead on the issue in some non-partisan way, I might think the Democrats should come up with some ideas.

But I argue, and many, many people—with far better minds and significance than me—argue the president is exaggerating the Social Security funding problem to dismantle the most important social insurance program this country has ever seen. He wants to do this because Social Security was created by Democrats who cared and continued to care about middle-class people. When it comes to leading, our president cares only for rich people. I am not the only American to make that argument. How can the Democrats, or anyone for that matter, engage the presidential administration in debate when it is obvious that there is no good-faith effort to really discuss the issues?

The editorial is filled with unsupported claims about Bush's plan. It argues that "it's a better deal" for younger workers, that "private accounts . . . likely would have a better rate

of return,” and that investment accounts “could total more than \$500,000 for those 30 and younger.” But the editorial offers no support for these claims.

In addition, here are two major items the editorial excludes from its argument:

(1) Bush contradicted himself during his recent press conference when, on the one hand, he said Social Security’s treasury bonds represent worthless IOUs from the U.S. government and, on the other hand, he said that treasury bonds are “backed by the full faith and credit of the United States government.” So which one is it? Such an obvious contradiction or lie, in my judgment, does not seem like it would be part of a good-faith effort to me. It seems like politics as usual.

(2) The editorial does not mention how the system will fund the formation of these private accounts. If you think that the money would come from what you have already paid in and from reduced benefits, then I think you have a valid argument. At least, you deserve a more thorough response from the president.

All you find on *The Oklahoman*’s editorial pages these days are whiny, unsupported claims. Undoubtedly, its editorial writers are afraid to try to present supporting information for its claims.

May 3, 2005

The Lies Of The Oklahoma Corporate Media

The corporate media in Oklahoma has always presented us a version of the chicken-and-egg question about state's politics.

Are a majority of Okies just ultra-conservative extremists, and the state's corporate media reflects its narrow-minded views in order to sustain their businesses?

Or are Okies actually, like everyone else, in a search for truth about the world but are bombarded with conservative propaganda at every turn by publications such as *The Daily Oklahoman*, which has only its monopolistic, corporate interests at heart? This propaganda, in publications and on televisions and radio stations, then brainwashes Okies into self-defeating and hateful and hackneyed philosophies in life.

Although I have always argued for the second of these views, this question has always been ultimately unanswerable until now. But that has now changed. Obviously, current events show us the right-wing media monster in this state has orchestrated a vast brainwashing campaign.

Here is a prime example: *The Oklahoman* once published lengthy legal transcripts—complete with explicit sexual material—related to former President Bill Clinton's affair with intern Monica Lewinsky and supported impeachment proceedings against him. Today, it refuses to even cover the Downing Street memo, which shows President George Bush lied to take the country into a war which has resulted in thousands of deaths and injuries and the bankrupting of the country.

This disparity in coverage will go down in history as (1) the marking point of the demise of the corporate media in America, including *The Oklahoman*, and (2) a lesson in

how a one-party government in America can easily turn fascist through its complete control of the media.

There is not one conservative Okie I know, and I know a lot of them, that can look me in the eye and argue truthfully that Clinton's affair with Lewinsky should have been investigated but Bush's lies and distortions about Iraq should be left alone. Certainly, Okie conservatives are happy on some sheepish, self-serving level that Bush does not face an investigation for lying to the American people, but their happiness and their financial rewards under the Bush administration come at the expense of democracy.

For those of you living under a rock, the British Downing Street memo, and other related documents, show the Bush administration was fixing the intelligence about Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction. The memo shows Bush had made up his mind to invade Iraq even as he was telling the American people that war was not inevitable. The memo and other documents were obtained by a British reporter and have been authenticated by high-ranking British intelligence officials.

Bush invaded Iraq on a lie, without appropriate planning, and now thousands are dead and injured, and the country is mired in a long death march that is costing us billions of dollars a month. Yet there is no investigation because we have a one-party government. We spent millions of dollars investigating the oral sex life of one president, but not one dime investigating a president who lied about taking the country to war. It is mind-numbing, horrific, and immoral.

Lying about taking the country to war is the absolute, most heinous crime an American president can commit. For the sake of our democracy and our freedom, the country needs to launch an immediate investigation. This investigation is sure to result in

impeachment proceedings against Bush and other criminal charges against many in his administration.

The Oklahoman has good company in its participation in the greatest, immoral journalistic boondoggle in history. Both *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* have given the memo scant attention, though like *The Oklahoman*, they were relentless in their pursuit to expose Clinton's sex life.

This double standard can be explained in these ways: (1) A decision has been made far outside the nation's newsrooms to embrace the conservative juggernaut for financial gain. (2) As a business practice, *The Times* and *Post* have given up on their main readership base, the liberal intelligentsia, in order to exploit a monopoly-friendly government intent on shifting wealth to the rich. (3) Today's reporters and editors throughout the nation, for the most part, are arrogant sellouts.

The future in truth is through the independent media, both liberal and conservative, which is not tied to the politics of the wealthy.

I recently received an email from *The Times*, which listed the top ten most-read online stories over the past two weeks. Virtually all them were stories or columns in which liberals would be interested. Yet the newspaper sells out our nation on a daily basis by not covering the most important political story of our lives. Do not tell me the fix is not already in on turning the newspaper into a bastion of conservative propaganda. Look at its refusal to confront Bush with his lies and distortions. Look at its recent advocacy coverage of the Christian crusader Rev. Billy Graham. Look at the lies of its conservative columnists.

Meanwhile, *Post* media critic Howard Kurtz had this telling gem in a recent rah-rah, pro-Bush column about how we should not count out the president in his second term. “Things in Iraq are not going swimmingly . . .” Swimmingly? What arrogance. What a disconnect from the reality of violence. American soldiers and innocent Iraqis are blown to bits virtually every day because our country went to war on a lie, and we had no plan, and the corporate media’s criticism is things “are not going swimmingly.”

June 25, 2005

The Oklahoman's Propaganda Machine In Full Throttle On OEA Lawsuit Issue

I wonder if any professors at OU's Gaylord College of Journalism and Mass Communication will study the new textbook examples of extreme conservative bias in the news and editorial columns of *The Daily Oklahoman*.

It has been done before in the journalism field's prestigious journal *The Columbia Journalism Review* in 1999, and it should be done again. Soon. Maybe some Gaylord College assistant professor can even get tenure by telling the truth about this immoral, right-wing propagandistic publication.

But you can be fairly sure the Gaylord family's gift of \$22 million to build the new journalism school at the University of Oklahoma will silence any attempt to report the truth about it on campus just as you can be sure the school's journalism students will be indoctrinated in the right-wing fold.

Heck, why even worry about this at all, folks. Just grab you a beer at O'Connell's in Norman on game day before heading over to watch the state's beloved Sooners football team in . . . Gaylord Family Stadium.

The Gaylord name at OU makes for a real bad and real unhappy version of the movie *It's A Wonderful Life*. The operative word here is "real."

The recent textbook example (and I do mean this in a literal way in that the newspaper should be studied and exposed once again by journalism scholarship) of how the newspaper distorts the news has been its biased news coverage and commentary about the lawsuit filed by the recent Oklahoma Education Association (OEA) and three state school districts to provide adequate and commonsense funding for state schools.

The state is often in the bottom five in the nation in terms of per-student funding. Some schools, according to the lawsuit, do not even have enough textbooks for its students. Salaries for our state teachers now rank 50th in the nation. The state's teacher retirement program is one of the most underfunded pension programs in the country.

Kansas spends more than \$1 billion more on school funding than Oklahoma each year. Nebraska spends more than \$900 million, according to the lawsuit.

None of the basic facts, however, get prominent mention or appropriate explanation or placed in context in the basic news coverage of the lawsuit in *The Oklahoman*. In the newspaper's editorial avalanche that has come after the lawsuit we only read the typical union-hating, anti-family, pro-corporate message that has defined the newspaper's central philosophy for years and years under its publishers and owners, the late Edward L. Gaylord and now his daughter, Christy Gaylord Everest.

The state schools have been chronically underfunded for decades. Anyone who argues otherwise is an ideologue, like those Texas freaks who argue public school education is communist or deceitful, like *The Daily Oklahoman's* editorial writers, who present lies and distortions to selfishly protect the newspaper owners' vast wealth from what they perceive as a tax threat to rich people.

Here are the three ways the stories about the OEA lawsuit have seriously violated basic accepted tenets of journalism:

(1) As I have mentioned, Oklahoma has underfunded its schools for years and years. Look at the annual studies by the U.S. Census. Take some time to look over our state's history in these studies. For years, the state has been one of the laughingstocks of the nation, like Mississippi, for refusing to invest in decent education for its children. Recent

studies show Oklahoma is ranked 45th nationally in per-student funding, but it has been lower. Teacher salaries are often the lowest in the nation in any given year. This is how it has been in the state for decades. *The Oklahoman* news stories about the OEA lawsuit fail to provide a thorough view of these facts or any type of historical context for its readers, an easy task for any experienced reporter or editor with immediate access to *The Oklahoman* archives, nor do they feature extensive comments from the lawsuit supporters. In addition, the newspaper's stories and editorials have brought up the idea the lawsuit can lead to school consolidation. This is a scare tactic. Only the legislature can consolidate school districts. And there is a real problem of journalism ethics here. *The Daily Oklahoman* has supported school consolidation in Oklahoma for years and years, but now it uses the issue to frighten people in rural communities to get them to oppose the lawsuit.

(2) At least one of the stories quoted Brandon Dutcher, who works for the anti-family, pro-corporate Oklahoma Council of Public Affairs (OCPA), a right-wing think tank dedicated to policies enriching the wealthy at the expense of the middle-class. The paper quoted Dutcher without mentioning his organization is a conservative organization. In addition, the newspaper ran Dutcher's bogus comment that the per-student funding in Oklahoma is actually nearly twice that of various stated figures. His simplistic premise, based on a "study" he conducted, is that the teacher's pension program should be considered a part of per-student funding. Remember, this is one of the most underfunded pension programs in the country. It ranks in the bottom five. The political message of his study is clear: We should do away with pensions for teachers, even shoddy low-paying pensions, and we should keep student funding here the lowest in the nation. At the very

least, the newspaper could identify Dutcher as a conservative spokesperson. At the very least, the newspaper could reveal the amount of money it or the Gaylord family has donated to the OCPA through the years if it is going to use it as a supposed neutral source.

(3) One story, under the Web headline, “Teachers group opposes lawsuit,” quoted Ginger Tinney, the executive director of the Association of Professional Oklahoma Educators, without explaining the group is a conservative, anti-union organization. It did not explain Tinney is a shrill for Republican ideology. In a recent story, the newspaper did explain Tinney’s group was a rival to OEA. I guess it had to since Tinney echoed gubernatorial candidate Ernest Istook’s criticism of the lawsuit in the story.

Meanwhile, the newspaper’s one-sided editorials about the issue keep coming even as the newspaper obviously refuses to offer thorough and consistent space to educators, academics, and writers who support the lawsuit, or at least favor greatly increased funding for education. These are people who have the state's interests at heart and who know about education. (OEA President Roy Bishop was given some token space January 20.)

There have been at least three one-sided editorials so far, (the suit was filed January 12, just two weeks ago), and unless OEA withdraws the lawsuit or it gets dismissed soon, you can count on countless more. (Update: A fourth editorial was published January 26, a day after this was initially written. Also, an editorial about teacher raises that mentioned the lawsuit again was published January 27. At this rate, *The Oklahoman* will publish an estimated 156 editorials in one year on the issue with little or no dissenting views allowed.) Opposing views will only get a miniscule amount of space in the newspaper's

news and editorial columns, and the editorials themselves are filled with scare tactics, contradictions, distortions, and unsupported claims.

This is an important issue, but, as usual, we cannot count on the state newspaper to provide fair coverage much less an adequate forum for debate and discussion. That is a fundamental reason why, in my view, OEA, has to take the issue to a court. There can be no state debate about chronically underfunded schools when the right-wing propaganda machine led by *The Daily Oklahoman* consistently opposes fair, adequate, and commonsense school funding and will distort the news to get its way.

Our four major local television news programs in Oklahoma City, especially News 9, which has a convergence agreement with the newspaper, most often follow the angle of *The Oklahoman's* political stories or simply do not do the stories at all. Thus, viewers never hear the simple and truthful angle that a state teachers organization is trying to do something about our terribly underfunded schools for the sake of your children or your grandchildren. What they hear is the echo of *The Oklahoman's* biased coverage as the television stations' news editors shove a newspaper clip about the lawsuit in some reporter's hands and says, "Go do a follow-up." It is insidious.

I guess you could turn to the radio. Wait. There is nothing on the local radio but right-wing Bush-Is-Lord talk radio and bad music these days.

The Oklahoman's trickle-down propaganda that heavily influences television and radio news here is repugnant and immoral. It even has its own journalism school now to train its robotic, neoGaylordians, the new Okie Fascisti, out to ensure every child is denied a decent education in the state. Its news stories about politics heavily favor

extreme conservative ideology and the Republican Party. It never allows consistent and in-depth dissenting voices on its editorial pages.

It is an immoral monopoly operated by a family that does not care about and never will care about ordinary, middle-class Oklahomans trying to eke out a living and a life for themselves and children here on the prairie.

January 25, 2006

What's Up At The Oklahoman?

Have the editorial writers gone sane over at *The Daily Oklahoman*?

First, they come out against TABOR, and now they come out against intelligent design legislation and a bill that would pull funding from libraries that provide regular access to gay-themed books.

Let us picture two or three *Oklahoman* editorial writers running around high-fiving each other in the Gaylord fortress on the Broadway Extension, yelling, “Free at last! Free at last!”

One writer, a dashing, young Murrow-like newshound with Marlboro Light, fedora, pen and notebook, says, “And George Bush IS a liar and HAS broken the law, and he SHOULD be impeached. Can I write about that, too? Please.” His editor gives him a really cool thumbs up.

All form a conga line and dance through the building, and other writers and editors join them. Music blares. Everyone at the newspaper suddenly becomes honest and decides to provide fair news coverage. The newspaper’s top editor, quoting George Orwell, says, “‘During times of universal deceit, telling the truth becomes a revolutionary act.’ We are going to start telling the truth. We are the revolution. It starts here today in Oklahoma, and it will spread like wildfire throughout the country.”

Okay, that’s probably an exaggeration, you think? But, come on, it’s nice to think about, and there are always a few secret liberals at *The Oklahoman*, getting clips, and looking for other jobs at newspapers concerned with fairness and reporting the truth.

The newspaper does have a logical reason for supporting intellectualism, which it does in the two editorials. Intelligent people read. Newspapers must have readers or they do

not exist. The two editorials support intellectualism and thus reading. So it is all in its business interests, right?

In a March 9 editorial about the intelligent design bill titled “‘Academic freedom’ bill unnecessary,” the newspaper argued, “This proposed law is unnecessary. Teachers are free to have discussions with their students, to help them think critically about important issues.”

The bill would make it legal for Oklahoma high school teachers to present neocreationism as a counter argument to the scientific theory of evolution.

The newspaper argued, “Oklahoma students are struggling enough with science without getting sidetracked. Teachers shouldn't feel like they have to change the amount of time they dedicate to evolution just because some lawmakers would like to see more emphasis on the alternatives.”

(On December 4, I wrote, “If mandated for the Oklahoma classroom, intelligent design will weaken the very notion of scientific methodology and experimentation and inquiry, which is responsible for, among other things, all real advances in medical science. It will teach our students to distrust real science. It will make them dumb and lazy. It will make our state look backwoods and ignorant.”)

The bill, sponsored by religious zealot Sally Kern (R-Oklahoma City), recently passed on a 77-10 (yes, that's the correct number) vote in the House. *The Oklahoman* urged the Senate to kill the bill and even gave Governor Brad Henry its permission to veto it.

In a March 10 editorial titled “Don't legislate library book access,” the newspaper argued, “A bill that could strip public libraries of state funding if they fail to cater to a legislative whim deserves to end up in the trash can, not the law books.”

The bill would require libraries to shelve books with gay or sexual content only in special adult sections. Libraries would have to show they are in compliance with the law or lose funding.

This is another Sally Kern freak show, of course. Under Kern's bill, even a novel like John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* could be put out of the reach of young readers. And we certainly want to keep classic literature away from young people in Oklahoma, don't we? Who do people think we are? Fools? Of course, we don't allow our kids to read in this state.

I agree with the two editorials, and also the anti-Tabor editorial it recently printed, and I appreciate them, but one has to wonder why the newspaper has waited so long to speak out against these measures. I have been writing about Kern's Christian crusade and TABOR for months on Okie Funk and in the *Oklahoma Gazette*, and so have many others.

Now the bills are passing, and all we get is after-the-fact remarks from the state's largest newspaper. If the newspaper would have been running regular commentary of liberal writers during the past few months, then the public would be more informed. Maybe the bills would have died an early death.

Maybe it would have helped legislators find the guts to stand up against Kern's crusade

Maybe *The Oklahoman* ownership and editorial board knows this and is just trying to have it both ways.

Maybe there is no thinking or logic or reason at all behind this short streak of sanity on the newspaper's editorial page.

But the question remains: Does the newspaper want Oklahoma City to be a real major league city or just another weird, stinky truck stop on the way to Somewhere Else, USA?

Why won't the newspaper really attack Kern's overall religious-intrusion-in-government agenda? Why won't the newspaper open its editorial pages to real, local progressive commentary? If *The Oklahoman* really wants to cultivate readers and expand its advertising base in an era of declining newspaper circulation, now is the time to diversify its editorial page.

March 12, 2006

So this is it, even though it's still blurry. I know what some people would think I'm going to say. Some people would think, Now he's going to explain how we are all just coyotes, and we never get our road runners, who represent God, and how there's no God, blah blah blah. And eventually we die on the great highway of life, represented by Old 66, and we drip tongue-slime, and have a bunch of people around us that we don't even know or love as we die. Beep! Beep! Wrong, It's just the opposite. I did think this at first, but then it changed.

Okay, this will sound corny, but it's like Ma or Tom Joad in The Grapes of Wrath going on about the people this and the people that, and how the people will survive somehow, and how the people need to stick together, and how it's that connection between people that matters most. I know it's corny, contrived, maybe stupid-sounding, but the old lady and me, we stuck it out together on Route 66, on that armadillo-plotted road, bawled our eyes out over a stupid coyote, saw something that mattered to us, made each other see it even more because we shared it . The Road Runner cartoon made me see it more, too, even if I had to throw a fit, a fit of no minor proportion that all my family forgave me the very same day I threw it; they, too, stuck with me, tried to understand, shared the coyote deal with me, shared my grief.

This year was special because as the 1997 tape played on everyone marched into the living room and circled around me.

Sean went, "We know what you're going to do now, so we decided to speed up the process, and get it over with quick so we can eat. Mama? Don't you have something to say?"

Mama (see, my father died of lung cancer two years ago or he would be doing this) stepped forward, said, "We forgive you. We understand about the coyote and the tape. It was sort of neat having pizza that year with all the turkey stuff. You know, the green bean casserole, the sweet potatoes, the cranberry sauce, the pumpkin pie, we still had all that, nothing was spoiled except the turkey."

Fighting The Right: Religion

Do Christian Leftists Deconstruct?

Reverend Robin Meyers had an interesting column in the *Oklahoma Gazette* recently that perfectly delineates the rhetorical war going on between the Christian faithful of the left and the right these days. Yet the column itself also symbolizes how oppressive religious proselytizing has become in Oklahoma.

In the January 26, 2005 column, titled, “The irony of a Christian inauguration,” Meyers essentially argues the spirit of Jesus Christ—on both literal and figurative levels—was not a part of the recent Bush inauguration even though evangelical, right-wing ministers participated heavily in the \$40 million party.

Meyers writes, “And finally, when the tab comes due for the most expensive inaugural in American history, who is going to stand up and say, ‘What would Jesus think of such excess?’ At a time of record deficits, which hang like a great millstone around the necks of our children, wouldn’t a moral president lead by example and have the most simple, austere and inexpensive inaugural ever?”

Meyers, minister of the Mayflower Congregational Church in Oklahoma City and a professor of rhetoric at Oklahoma City University, has been a consistent and tireless progressive voice in Oklahoma City for a long time, and I agree with his overall critique of the inauguration.

Yet I also know that Meyers’ position ultimately deconstructs, leaving out those of us—and, yes, there are many of us even here in Oklahoma—who do not want to frame morality and values within the left/right Christian dichotomy. Ultimately, arguing within this duality supports prevailing American nationalism and hegemony, and the right-wing has won this argument in slam-drunk style since Ronald Reagan’s presidency.

This is all old stuff, I'm sure, to someone like Meyers, who is a rhetoric professor and surely knows something about the deconstructionist Derrida. Somehow Meyers reconciles this with faith in God, I'm sure. And I'm not criticizing him.

But I wish the religious left here in Oklahoma would be more inclusive to people who frame their morality and values outside of the Christian framework, and I wish so-called liberal publications in Oklahoma like the *Gazette* would offer less religion and more intellectualism when it comes to commentary and ideas.

For example, I know many Oklahoma liberals and conservatives who are afraid of the growing religious fervor in this country. None of us want to see the battle over the country's direction center on the ideology of who can best sell their interpretation of Jesus. Why not use natural law or deistic philosophy? Why not use intellectual traditions and cultural laws of great philosophers dating back to the Greeks? Why not allow some type of mediation within the pluralistic, world history of morality and values? Civilized cultures wrestled with these issues long before the Bible.

What happens in conservative places like Oklahoma is that the so-called secular humanists get silenced and marginalized by both left and right Christian ideology. I see this operate in the state virtually every day of my life. The right-wing, which controls this state, absorbs the leftist, Christian protests, and then it tries to depict itself as democratic and inclusive. The lefty religious folks, I guess, are satisfied with the meager scraps of participation the right-wing throws them.

I read Meyers' column as I was drinking a beer at the Cock O' The Walk in Oklahoma City. Looking around the bar afterwards, I was struck by the lack of any obvious religious expressions among the clientele, yet there was Meyers' column in the cool,

local newspaper, which has its own rack right there in the bar's foyer area. It seemed so oppressive to me. In Oklahoma City, these days, you can't even go to a bar and get away from the Jesus talk.

What if we had a true discussion of ideas—secular as well as religious—in this state? That discussion would get this state back to its progressive roots.

February 1, 2005

Istook Amendment Foreshadows Theocracy

"To secure the people's right to acknowledge God according to the dictates of conscience:

"The people retain the right to pray and to recognize their religious beliefs, heritage and traditions on public property, including schools."—part of a Constitutional amendment submitted to the U.S. House of Representatives by Oklahoma Rep. Ernest Istook (R-Warr Acres)

The Oklahoma political scene has always been like a freaky carnival show that gives its audience a quick and voyeuristic glimpse into some fraudulent, eccentric world. Going in, we know we have spent too much money, and it is not going to be worth it. The state's latest freak show played out last week when U.S. Rep. Ernest Istook submitted to the Congress his annual, quasi-fascist Constitutional amendment that could re-create America as a grand theocracy.

The Orwellian-named "Religious Freedom Amendment" probably stands little chance of passing, of course, but it seems spookier this year because recent events show us we all should be extremely worried about a day when the fundamentalist theocrats have complete power in our country. Never before would I have even considered Istook's amendment more than a backwoods ploy from an ignorant hayseed gone to Washington. But now, with no end in sight to the right-wing, religious juggernaut, I can see a day when an amendment like this makes it to a vote of the people. In addition, news reports say House Majority Leader Tom Delay (R-Texas) is co-sponsoring the amendment this year.

It is frightening to contemplate because, if passed, the amendment could mean the first step in ending this country's 225-year-old or so democracy. Theocracies can be many things, mostly bad, but they are absolutely not democracies. Go check out Iran. You have to pray there, too.

Do a majority of Oklahomans in Istook's district, which is my district, really want our nation to become a theocracy? Do a majority of Oklahomans in his district truly want to be forced by social and cultural reasons to pray in a certain way in certain places by certain people? Do a majority of Oklahomans in his district want to be given religious lectures and guidance at their jobs? I do not think so.

"The people retain the right to pray and to recognize their religious beliefs, heritage and traditions on public property, including schools," according to Istook's amendment.

Imagine your boss opening up a meeting with a prayer, and if you do not go through the motions you will pay the cost in office politics. Imagine your professor praying to Jesus Christ before class and watching you to make sure your head is bowed and you say "amen" after she finishes. Imagine your child forced to recite a prayer you do not accept as meaningful or even religious according to your beliefs.

Although Istook's amendment only mentions "God" and "religious beliefs," rest assured it does not mean Islam or Judaism or Buddhism. The amendment would turn our schools into Christian churches.

Certainly, overall Oklahoma can be considered a religious state, but I am unsure the implications of Istook's amendment are truly understood here. The reason for that is the local media refuses to cover it in any meaningful way. *The Daily Oklahoman's* story about the issue was pretty much a rah-rah piece in favor of the amendment, though it did

cite token opposition from a national church/state separation organization. Istook gets a free ride because he supports the rich Oklahoma power structure which ensures he is elected year after year through campaign contributions. In addition, most members of the local media these days are lazy and shallow, too brainwashed by the state's right-wing juggernaut to worry about truth.

His bizarre legislative gambits help get Istook out of actually doing anything for his constituents and his state. So what about our shabby state highways, our soaring health care costs, our precarious retirement security, our stagnant wages? Well, Istook can just talk about the religious road and leave it at that. It is the typical subterfuge and deceit, in the name of the Lord, that the right-wing perpetuates on our culture these days. Good, decent people are taken advantage of by this religious charlatan and others who could care less about the real concerns of Oklahomans. It is disgusting for several reasons, but right at the top of my list is that it is so out in the open for everyone to see. It reminds me of those elderly people who send their life savings to immoral televangelists, and no family member or no friend tries to do anything to stop their financial ruin.

Istook's legislation also embarrasses the state because it makes us look like a bunch of barefoot, ignorant hillbillies who will sell away our children's future and our senior citizens' retirement for evangelistic theater. Yet, again, I suspect this type of right-wing, religious tripe, which has served the Bush administration so well, needs a closer scrutiny as the country edges further to religious-mandated legislation and judicial decisions.

The question now becomes whether a set of particular circumstances could actually compel people to approve such an amendment under the false rubric of nationalism.

In any event, to those so-called Christians who host pity parties over how religion is discriminated against, I say this: You are misguided at best and just downright liars at worst. Absolutely no one is trying to shut down your churches. No one is trying to get into your Sunday school classes to bring an element of honesty and reality to the discussion about why we are here in this world and what we are supposed to do now that we are here. No one is trying to come into your home to tell you how and when and if you can pray. No one is trying to stop you from building your casino-looking, megachurches with their cold, fake facades and their lying and contradictory philosophies about reality and life.

No, the people who are discriminated against these days are those who keep an open, healthy, skeptical mind about the world around them. These people, whether they attend church or not, whether they announce themselves as Christian or not, are constantly marginalized in Oklahoma by state and local political officials who play the religious angle to manipulate the ignorant and silence the intelligent.

As so many of us know in Oklahoma, it can be sometimes suffocating to live in a place in which sanctimonious, self-righteous, religious kooks like Istook get to express their views while rational, decent people are consistently told to shut up or leave the state.

July 7, 2005

Religious Fanatics Cost State Money

When will Oklahoma taxpayers get tired of paying for the legal costs of religious fanatics who insist on discarding basic constitutional protections and precepts?

The latest case involves a Ten Commandments monument that Haskell County Commissioners have put up on the courthouse grounds in Stigler in eastern Oklahoma. These officials had to know the monument would eventually prompt a lawsuit. They had to know the county and perhaps the state itself—if the Oklahoma Attorney General gets involved—would have to pay thousands and thousands of dollars in legal costs for what could be a losing cause.

But the religious zealots did it anyway, hoping to press their own narrow views on others who do not share them, and now we all have to pay.

The American Civil Liberties Union is representing Jim Green, who is suing the county for placing the religious monument on public grounds. According to new reports, his argument is this: the monument “sends the message if you don’t subscribe to this specific thought, you will have no access to government.”

An editorial in *The Daily Oklahoman* called the statement an “absurdity,” so then you know the statement is true and just and important. Anyone going into the Haskell County courthouse knows only one religion is welcomed there, only one religion is accepted, only one religion will be tolerated. There are other ways to think and/or believe beyond right-wing, evangelical Christianity, and millions of people in America and billions of people in the world do so.

So as Oklahoma schools go underfunded, as our roads and highways remain some of the shoddiest in the nation, government will be spending your hard-earned money on trying once again to break down the wall separating church and state.

The separation of church and state is fundamental in this country and should remain so. If we abolish this separation, America will cease to be the democracy intended by its founders, such as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Thomas Paine. It will become a theocracy.

Meanwhile, no one—and I mean no one—has to place their religious beliefs aside when they go on public property. No one can stop someone from praying privately on public grounds. If you are a Christian or a Muslim you do not cease to be a Christian or a Muslim when you enter a courthouse or school or a restaurant or wherever. Separation of church and state ensures the government does not establish an official religion.

Here is the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution:

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.”

By placing a religious symbol of only one religion on public, taxpayer-owned property, the government, in effect, is laying the groundwork if not actually establishing a national religion. The courts have been clear on this issue for years.

Think about how much it cost the government to defend the cross on the Edmond city seal a few years back, which was another losing cause. Then there was Oklahoma City’s decision to ban gay pride banners on a city avenue. This brought about a lawsuit, which

the city lost, and taxpayers got the shaft again. And what about the debacle over the Academy Award winning film, *The Tin Drum*, in which a local religious zealot found some local judge to deem the film obscene? That prompted a lawsuit, which the plaintiffs won, of course, and it cost taxpayers thousands and thousands of dollars and brought Oklahoma County ridicule across the nation.

There is a very real cost to religious fanaticism. I wonder what the per-taxpayer cost is here in Oklahoma once you add it all up. Someone needs to do a study, so we know how wasteful government can be when we put narrow-minded religious zealots in charge of public money.

I want a portion of my taxes refunded under a “Taxpayers’ Persecution Relief Act” for the costs of these ridiculous, symbolic actions by the state’s religious kooks.

October 18, 2005

Oklahoma Leads In Charitable Giving But Ranks Number One In Hungry Families

“Then I’ll be around’ in the dark. I’ll be ever’where—wherever you look. Wherever they’s a fight so hungry people can eat, I’ll be there.”—Tom Joad in *The Grapes of Wrath*

It has long been an established part of Oklahoma mythology that the state residents are caring, generous people who give to charities far above the national average.

The Generosity Index, an annual state-by-state ranking of charitable giving, often ranks Oklahoma in the top five states. The index validates our “caring, giving” mythology. It tells the nation we are decent and kind folks who look after one another.

So at first glance it is perplexing that our caring, giving state is ranked number one in terms of hungry families in the nation, according to a recent U.S. Census Bureau survey.

What do we make of the fact that from 2002 to 2004, more than one in 20 households or 236,000 Oklahomans went hungry at times? What do we make of the fact that many of these hungry people have jobs?

Does the hunger report show the state’s mythology a fiction? If we give so much in charity, then why are so many people hungry?

One issue to consider is the Generosity Index itself. The index bases its results on not just what the state gives to charities but also on a “having rank,” which is tied to state income levels. Oklahoma is ranked 42 in “having” and eighth in “giving.” Thus we end up with a number four ranking overall. That sounds fair enough.

But some people have criticized the index for its methodology, which creates a national narrative that poorer southern states, such as Oklahoma or Mississippi, are more

generous than Yankee states. Many see this as an untrue story, arguing that because of the index's biases a relatively wealthy state such as Massachusetts could never move above Mississippi or Oklahoma in the rankings simply because of its high income levels and the other states low income levels.

The Generosity Index also includes all donations to religious organizations, and this could definitely skew the results for Oklahoma and other southern states with large church attendance and affiliations. The Generosity Index Web site includes this statement about its methodology, "In using this data, we accept the federal government's definitions of what charitable giving is, and that includes giving to religious groups, churches and many other institutions." So perhaps we can speculate that a sizeable portion of the charitable giving in Oklahoma goes to new megachurch buildings, not feeding local hungry people.

The people who prepare the Generosity Index, created by the Catalogue for Philanthropy in 1997, argue their annual study was never meant to be a scientific study. It was merely meant as a way to create a discussion about giving to charity.

In other words, it means nothing in real terms. But it probably does more harm than good in places such as Oklahoma. It is harmful because the caring mythology, validated by the Generosity Index, allows some state leaders and individuals to feel comfortable the state is doing the best it can in helping the less fortunate.

It creates an Oklahoma story that goes something like this, "The state leads the nation in hunger and in other categories such as children without health insurance, but, on the other hand, it is a nurturing, caring place to live. People can find help here if they want it. So I'm excused from really looking into the issue and making informed decisions."

Consequently, Oklahoma has some of the highest rates of hunger and lack of health care for the less fortunate in the nation at the same time it can pat itself on the back that it is a caring, giving state. The Generosity Index gives some Oklahomans a copout, an excuse.

Around the time the hunger report came out, all the Republicans in our congressional delegation—Ernest Istook, Tom Cole, Frank Lucas, John Sullivan—voted to cut the country’s food stamp program. This was a heartless, immoral vote that could create even more hunger in Oklahoma. Essentially, they voted to deny food stamps to people in a state with the most hungry households.

But their immoral votes hurt us all here in Oklahoma. You do not need to read the latest study to know that hunger and its associated problems such as poverty and lack of health insurance among Oklahoma children lead to larger social problems and issues. All of us end up paying in the long run through funding social programs and prisons and paying increasing health care costs.

To compound the problem, state Republican politicians are now pushing new tax legislation, ironically named the Taxpayers’ Bill of Rights (TABOR) amendment that, if enacted, would lead to even more cuts in social programs for the poor.

And, “Oklahoma: We rank number one in hunger!” is surely not a good business recruitment slogan for the state, is it?

So do you want to lower the hunger rate in Oklahoma?

My suggestion for charitable giving this holiday season is this: Oklahomans should devote more time to understanding the real costs of a Republican ideology that privileges the rich over ordinary, hard-working people. Many of those who go hungry in Oklahoma

work two or three jobs. These are decent, hard-working people who cannot adequately feed their children.

So maybe Oklahomans give more in charity on a percentage basis than a lot of other states and maybe this percentage just simply is not enough to feed our hungry neighbors. Who knows?

One thing is sure, however, and that is the state's residents have sent too many worthless politicians like Istook, Cole, Lucas, and Sullivan and U.S. Senators Tom Coburn and Jim Inhofe to Washington recently who do not care about the state's people and issues. Voters also recently gave the Republicans a majority in the Oklahoma House of Representatives for the first time in four decades. I think it is fair to say the Republicans—either in Washington or here in the state—will not make the Oklahoma hunger issue a part of their legislative agenda.

Republican politicians sway many voters through divisive cultural wedge issues, but Oklahoma leads the nation in hunger and they will not lift one finger to help. They rail against the non-existent issue of gay marriage here, but they do nothing to help the state's hungry children.

November 30, 2005

Oklahoma Impoverished Remembered By Some Faithful

All this manufactured nonsense from the right-wing, religious fundamentalists here and elsewhere that Christmas is under attack pushed an interesting Oklahoma church story to the back pages last week.

The story, written by the Associated Press, featured some local ministers arguing that the federal government should not try to balance the budget on the backs of poor people.

According to the story, “Representatives of Jewish, Protestant, Catholic and Muslim congregations urged Congress to reject proposals that would cut appropriations for Medicaid, food stamps and student loans.”

In the story, a local priest, rabbi, and a representative from the Oklahoma Conference of Churches all weighed in on the religious immorality of cutting programs to the nation’s poorest to try to balance a budget out of control because of President George Bush’s and the Republican’s economic policies.

The House recently voted to cut Medicaid, Medicare, and student loan programs. Initially, the House proposed cutting food stamp funding, a measure that all the Republicans in Oklahoma’s congressional delegation supported. This is an especially telling issue in Oklahoma because the state ranks number one in hunger, according to a recent study.

U.S. Rep. Ernest Istook (R-Warr Acres), a Mormon who is an outspoken proponent of mandating religion in government institutions, was one of those who voted to cut food stamps to Oklahoma’s hungry citizens.

How does one reconcile supposed deep religious faith with actively ensuring poor people from your area suffer immense pain? Do not count on the local corporate media asking Istook this question as he prepares to run for governor next year.

Meanwhile, Republicans like Istook plan to keep extending tax cuts to the nation's wealthiest. Polls and election results show the country's religious fundamentalists in the tradition of Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson remain solidly behind these tax cuts and their major proponent, President George Bush.

Many right-wing Christian fundamentalists in Oklahoma spread hate against gay people, obviously support war and torture, practice a survival-of-the-fittest logic when it comes to poor people, and whine about how they are persecuted because some people have the audacity to say "happy holidays" instead of "merry Christmas."

Meanwhile, many of the country's megachurches, most of which are fundamentalist in belief, will not even hold services on Christmas because that would be too much of a burden on their flocks.

In Oklahoma, Church On The Move in Tulsa, with an announced weekly attendance of 10,000 people, will not hold services on Christmas. Lifechurch.TV in Oklahoma City also will not hold Christmas services.

Obviously, those local religious officials who want to help poor people are fighting an uphill battle in the nation's new religious moral wars, especially here in Oklahoma, a hotbed of right-wing, Christian fundamentalism. They should be commended for standing up for compassion and truth.

These religious folks, who see budget cuts to the poor as immoral, argue their faith requires them to take care of the most vulnerable in our society. That is a lasting moral idea that truly represents any definition of the Christmas spirit.

It is tragic this basic tenet of all the world's largest religions has been twisted and distorted by many Christian fundamentalists in Oklahoma and elsewhere. Where are their voices about the poor, the hungry, the vulnerable?

December 9, 2005

Library Commission Supports Religious Zealot

Local library officials can spin it how they want, but their recent action to create special parenting sections for certain targeted children's books violates the spirit of intellectual freedom.

In a stark act of anti-intellectualism, the Oklahoma County Metropolitan Library Commission voted Thursday to reshelve so-called "controversial" children's books so, well, so children cannot find them and read them

This all started last year when state Rep. Sally Kern (R-Oklahoma City) threatened to pull funding to our local library system if the libraries did not reshelve children's books with non-sexual, age-appropriate gay themes. These books are *King & King*, *Daddy's Roommate*, *The Duke Who Outlawed Jelly Beans* and *Heather Has Two Mommies*. Supposedly the local religious zealot was acting, at least partially, on a patron's complaint.

The commission then decided, perhaps fearing a lawsuit if they just targeted the gay-themed books, to reshelve not just those books but even more children books dealing with the realities of life, such as domestic abuse and alcoholism. These new parenting sections will be created in all of the system's seventeen libraries. The realistic books will be placed on high shelves out of the reach of children.

Essentially, the commission wants to ensure that our children here do NOT have an understanding of the world around them. Their philosophy must be that if we keep our kids stupid and narrow-minded, they will be successful and happy. I guess we have to keep them that way if we want them to stay here.

The library formerly had more than adequate controls over allowing children access to library material. Parents could easily choose what they wanted their children to read. And, oh yeah, the Oklahoma religious freaks who want to dictate all the laws and rules in our state could also actually go to the library with their children, but, hey, that would probably be asking too much of them.

This action was not a compromise as some members of the commission tried to spin it in local news accounts. It was a direct attack on intellectualism, open-mindedness, and free thinking. It was a complete capitulation to the whims of a religious zealot on a personal crusade to generate hate against gay people.

Taking realistic, age-appropriate books away from children is immoral, and anyone who somehow participated in this act without speaking up is just as responsible, just as immoral, as the religious zealot who initiated it.

Recently, longtime library director Lee Brawner passed away. A tireless champion for intellectual freedom, Brawner fought for the intellectual integrity of his libraries in a metropolitan area still held back by religious extremism and ignorance. I wonder what he would think about this decision? Who is fighting now for intellectual freedom in Oklahoma? Who at your local library cares now about intellectual freedom?

I am telling you, folks, theocracy looms here on the prairie. Do you think the fundies are going to call it theocracy? No, its name Thursday afternoon in Oklahoma City was “compromise.”

February 18, 2006

Deconstructing The Ten Commandments

It is difficult and annoying trying to keep track of all the religious-driven legislation this session in Oklahoma.

The right-wing Republican agenda has become exclusively theocratic. The local GOP bigwigs have apparently given up on secular, state government. They have allowed the religious kooks in their party to hijack their platform, and, of course, Oklahoma Democrats are helping them as much as they can.

The state's corporate media, as usual, is oblivious or somehow incredulously believes theocratic government will help their declining businesses thrive.

So here we are in Oklahoma, circa 2006. Republican Sally Kern's House bills would allow the teaching of intelligent design, or neocreationism, in schools and allow students to practice their religion during school hours. The local religious extremist has also floated a bill that will force libraries to keep books away from children she personally deems inappropriate because of her religious views.

There is another intelligent design bill making its way through the Senate. There are four bills that will restrict access to abortion pending in the legislature.

State Rep. Thad Balkman's bill allowing pharmacists to refuse to dispense the morning after pill has already passed the House. Balkman, a Norman Republican, has also been aligned with the creationism-in-schools movement in the state.

Some political observers say there are legislators waiting to introduce language into some random bill that would make abortion illegal in Oklahoma if the U.S. Supreme Court rules that states can make abortion illegal and the people vote to do so.

This is from the state's Progressive News organization:

“HB-2803 makes abortion illegal in Oklahoma if/when the Supreme Court strikes down Roe v Wade -- pending certification by the Oklahoma Attorney General and a vote of the people.

“The bill is dormant in a House committee and the deadline has passed for getting it out of committee. However, this language could be inserted into another bill on the House floor.”

Now the Oklahoma Senate has passed a bill sponsored by James Williamson (R-Tulsa), on a 45-1 vote, that would essentially give counties permission and money to place monuments of the Ten Commandments on public grounds. Only state Sen. Bernest Cain (D-Oklahoma City) voted against this ridiculous measure, and he should be commended for his action.

Under the bill, a fund would be established to give Oklahoma counties money to defend lawsuits brought by people who believe in the separation of church and state. Although millions upon millions of American citizens and thousands of Oklahomans believe in separation, we actually will have to use our own money in the form of tax dollars to defend religious intrusion in government.

A trial is set to begin in May over this issue in Haskell County, which has placed a Ten Commandments monument on courthouse grounds. A local resident, along with the American Civil Liberties Union, has filed a suit against the county. This bill would give counties like Haskell County taxpayers' money to fight the ACLU and others.

The Ten Commandments issue is cropping up throughout America. Emboldened by their immoral president and the GOP, the right-wing fundamentalists are on a Christian crusade.

I believe placing Ten Commandments monuments on public grounds is an obvious, direct violation of the First Amendment.

I want to approach this issue differently, however. I argue the Ten Commandments are morally repugnant, vague, and outdated. They have constructed a conventional narrative, a framework of reality, in the Judeo-Christian tradition that has led to immense suffering in the Western World. They have created deep psychological pain, contradiction, lying, and helplessness. They destroy lives, in very real ways, with their irrationality and paradoxes and expectations. We are better off without these ten hypocrisy-producing absurdities. I am not the first to argue this, of course. Others agree the commandments are immoral.

The Ten Commandments, or Decalogue, come initially from the Book of Exodus in the Bible's Old Testament. Moses goes up to the mountaintop, and God gives him the commandments. Here is the full passage:

"God spoke all these words, saying: I am God your Lord, who brought you out of Egypt, from the place of slavery. Do not have any other gods before Me. Do not represent [such] gods by any carved statue or picture of anything in the heaven above, on the earth below, or in the water below the land. Do not bow down to [such gods] or worship them. I am God your Lord, a God who demands exclusive worship. Where My enemies are concerned, I keep in mind the sin of the fathers for [their] descendants, to the third and fourth [generations]. But for those who love Me and keep My commandments, I show love for thousands [of generations]. Do not take the name of God your Lord in vain. God will not allow the one who takes His name in vain to go unpunished. Remember the Sabbath to keep it holy. You can work during the six weekdays and do all your tasks. But

the seventh day is a Sabbath to God your Lord. Do not do anything that constitutes work. [This includes] you, your son, your daughter, your slave, your maid, your animal, and the foreigner in your gates. It was during the six weekdays that God made the heaven, the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. God therefore blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. Honor your father and mother. You will then live long on the land that God your Lord is giving you. Do not commit murder. Do not commit adultery. Do not steal. Do not testify as a false witness against your neighbor. Do not be envious of your neighbor's house. Do not be envious of your neighbor's wife, his slave, his maid, his ox, his donkey, or anything else that is your neighbor's."

Before I deconstruct each commandment, I point out the immoral reference to slaves in the above sentence, "[This includes] you, your son, your daughter, your slave, your maid, your animal, and the foreigner in your gates." If we honor these commandments and believe in this Biblical passage, do we not also support slavery? This is morally repugnant. And if we qualify the slavery issue somehow—oh that was so long ago, etc.—then does it not follow that we can interpret each commandment as we wish, to read them in historical context?

Here are the commandments. I'm using an accepted Protestant version. Of course, the Christians, the literalists and fundamentalists, cannot agree on an accepted text because of translation and interpretation issues. Besides, all the commandments originally come from texts that predate the Bible. I give the commandment in bold, and then follow it with commentary in regular type.

(1) **Thou shalt have no other gods before me.** If this was such a great all-powerful, loving God, he would prove his existence, and then this commandment would be obsolete.

(2) **Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; And shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments.** This commandment shows the God we are supposed to believe in to be jealous, insecure, capricious, and revengeful. Do these values then create the framework of the morality and value system we are supposed to accept?

(3) **Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain; for the LORD will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain.** Again, this is a God of insecurity, an obsessive paranoid, a ruthless dictator. Why will he simply not prove his existence?

(4) **Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work: But the seventh day is the sabbath of the LORD thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates: For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it.** So next Sunday note all the people who profess to be Christian break this commandment. And if

it is okay for the Christians to say that some commandments do not apply to today's world, then isn't it okay to completely discard the entire package?

(5) **Honor thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee.** It is simply unbelievable the amount of pain and suffering this basic idea has caused in our culture. Are abused children supposed to honor their abusers at the cost of their lives?

(6) **Thou shalt not kill.** But is okay for American presidents like George Bush and his supporters to take actions that result in the deaths of innocent people and still stay aligned with the commandments. But it is okay the same people who want the Ten Commandments monuments on courthouse grounds are the main supporters of the death penalty in this country.

(7) **Thou shalt not commit adultery.** This commandment completely denies the reality of the world in both historical and contemporary terms. It gives language to a particular framework that has resulted in a countless number of ruined marriages and unhappy children of divorced parents. It gives adultery special-sin status and can create unreasonable expectations in relationships.

(8) **Thou shalt not steal.** But those who primarily believe in these commandments sanction stealing everyday, from price-gouging energy companies to politicians who take money from unethical corporate lobbyists to corporate executives who steal from stockholders.

(9) **Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour.** The lies of the right-wing in this country today will go down in world history as one of biggest con jobs ever perpetuated on a democratic republic. But, again, these are the same people who are

pushing to have the commandments placed on public grounds. The commandments then serve to validate their lies.

(10) Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is thy neighbour's. But isn't this capitalism, especially the right-wing, the-market-is-everything capitalism we have grown used to under the Bush administration? The right-wing Christians, within the framework of capitalism, support and even celebrate the idea of "coveting" in every aspect of their ideology.

The commandments construct an immoral, jealous, capricious God and a set of obvious contradictions among their supporters.

So then these "values"—jealousy, anger, lying, hypocrisy—will be the foundation of our government in the coming theocracy?

We need to really think about the commandments and discuss them truthfully and openly before we allow the right-wing to start plastering them all over our public institutions.

What the right-wing will say is the commandments give us a moral framework. Ironically, the most ardent supporters of the Ten Commandments are those that most often break the commandments.

Some of the commandments are fundamentally immoral and repugnant. Some commandments create hypocrisy and psychological contradiction. They are outdated, weird and vague. We should not allow them in our public institutions for these reasons alone.

March 15, 2006

Legislature Passes Anti-Abortion Bill

The Democratic-controlled Oklahoma Senate passed legislation this week that seriously intrudes on women's reproductive rights, and Democratic Governor Brad Henry will probably sign the bill because of political expediency.

Henry recently called some restrictions on abortion "reasonable," according to news accounts.

Everyone should remember this piece of legislation when people start calling Democratic politicians in Oklahoma liberal. This legislation, Senate Bill 1742, is right out of the right-wing playbook and sanctions the Christian right's theocratic mandates about abortion. The bill passed 38-8, with 15 Democrats voting with all 23 Republican senators.

The bill does four things. (1) It requires a minor to get parental consent before getting abortion. (2) It recognizes the fetus as a victim if a crime is committed against the mother. (3) It requires women seeking abortions are informed a fetus can feel pain during the procedure. This idea is not based on reputable science, according to some medical experts. (4) Doctors must offer to show an ultrasound image of the fetus before a woman can go through with the procedure.

All these measures are intended to restrict abortion in the state. The right-wing Christian movement has already made abortion illegal in South Dakota, a measure sure to be considered by the U.S. Supreme Court. There is a good chance the court will uphold the no-abortion law and overturn its landmark 1973 Roe versus Wade decision.

Many progressives have already written off abortion as an issue the right-wing has won. In the future, abortions will be offered in blue states, such as California and New

York, and Oklahoma women seeking the procedure will have to travel to those places. This, of course, discriminates between women who can afford to travel to those places and those who cannot.

What is particularly frightening about all this is that the right-wing religious movement will not stop with abortion or Ten Commandment monuments or requiring neocreationism be taught in schools. The movement, at its core, is designed to make every American citizen follow a strict Christian life, to make our country a theocracy. Lifestyle liberal Republicans here in Oklahoma—and I know quite a few—have sold out logic, rationality, and even democracy for influence and power. But they will not have power in a theocracy.

When will it stop? Some people say it is all going to swing the other way, and it is true that President George Bush's approval ratings in the polls are some of the lowest in modern history. The approval rating of the Republican-dominated Congress is even lower.

But there is nothing substantive that shows the right-wing Christian movement is faltering. Certainly, many Oklahomans will remain tied to fundamentalist beliefs because of low college education rates here, but even most fundies I know truly do not want to live in a theocracy no matter what they might say in public or at their megachurches on Sunday mornings.

Oh yeah, the Republicans have a good chance of capturing the Oklahoma Senate in November. This anti-abortion bill is only the beginning. We must envision a day when women will be unable to get birth control pills in Oklahoma, and stores will not be able to sell condoms or other contraceptive devices. Can you believe it?

May 20, 2006

Sarah said, "Yeah, and the tape was no big deal, really."

Ray said, "You don't even have to apologize about it again."

Sean, the business-minded one, said, "We replaced the window for less than twenty dollars, and the house needed new drapes, anyway."

My wife handed me some paper towels to dry my face. She said, "It's time to let it go, honey."

Erin, my older sister, said, "It was years ago."

Tricia, my baby sister, said, "I was so young I can barely remember it."

Someone placed my two-year old son, Eric, on my lap. He wasn't even alive when all that took place. I didn't know where my four-year-old, Samuel, was, but he was around there somewhere. He wasn't alive, either, when I threw the turkey through the window.

I said, "You know, I really hadn't planned on throwing the turkey through the window. It was just that it was so damn hot when I picked it up, and my hands started to burn, and I just threw it randomly. I wasn't aiming at anything in particular. I didn't know the turkey was fresh out of the oven.

Everyone went, "Okay, okay."

I said, "It's like we're all in this together, then, right?"

All of them nodded, went, "Okay, okay."

I cried, but somehow I managed to say, "And it's the people, us, that matter, no matter what. People sharing good times and bad times. Okay? That's what it's all about, All of us here. Okay? You can understand about me and the woman on Route 66, and how The Road Runner cartoon triggered something deep and powerful within me. I mean deep. I

mean powerful. I mean it hit on something extremely sensitive in the ol' inner parts. It might have been my only message from God, the only one I'll ever get." But I felt awkward this year because normally I got my speech in synch at least one time with the previous year's tape, and right now on the 1997 tape I just cried.

Everyone went, "Okay, okay."

I felt myself slip into a guilt coma all at once after thinking that, and everyone could tell because my face turned red, and then my ears, and the crying got real bad. When I went into a guilt coma, I could be a real bother to an ordinary person, and of course, I felt guilty about slipping into a guilt coma, and being a bother, which made it even worse. And then, of course, we would have to call the psychiatrist so she would call something a little extra in for me at the pharmacy, and tell me, do you know of any pharmacy open on Thanksgiving Day?

Fighting The Right: Istook

Ernest Goes To Cultural Wedge Issues

The most interesting Okie spectacle in the upcoming 2006 elections will be how U.S. Rep. Ernest Istook and the national right-wing noise machine attack one of the most popular Oklahoma governors in recent state history, Brad Henry.

Istook announced Monday he is running against Henry in 2006. Istook's bid for governor might show the Republicans are really serious about defeating the popular Henry, a moderate-to-conservative Democrat who enjoys broad voter approval, or it could also just be a personal decision for Istook, who might want to leave Washington, D.C.

Whatever the case, at this juncture, Henry seems unbeatable, and Istook seems vulnerable to criticism from moderates of both parties. Recent news accounts suggest Istook's campaign strategy will be to unleash the conservative, political attack dogs on Henry, but so far he is rather short on specifics.

Here are some ideas:

(1) Maybe Istook could criticize Henry for stabilizing the state budget after a national recession and pulling the state through an extremely dark time in the country's history after the terrorists' attacks.

(2) Maybe Istook could criticize Henry for his truly bi-partisan approach to leading, hammering out tax breaks for voters even as he made strides in increasing education funding in an attempt to get the state out of the basement in terms of per-student funding and teacher salaries.

(3) Maybe Istook could criticize Henry for his initiative to provide optional full-day kindergarten to the state's children.

The point here is that Istook and his outside political operatives will have to rely on right-wing, hackneyed clichés and nonsensical lies about how Henry is a (gasp, gasp) “liberal,” somehow threatening core Oklahoma values. Istook and his crew will stress general cultural wedge issues and general Republican talking points, not facts about Henry’s tenure.

But then this is what the immoral Karl Rove/Tom Delay Republicans do best. The Republicans attack with distortions and fictions, intentionally creating false divisions among people, promoting anger and indignation, turning mother against son, daughter against father, neighbor against neighbor.

This will mean Istook will adopt a pro-Bush-no-matter-how-bad-it-gets-in-America position. Count on a lot of outside visits from prominent Republican politicians if they are not in jail during campaign season. I am sure “W” will stop by on his way to his Crawford, Texas vacation home and stumble his way through some campaign driveline for Istook.

Istook’s greatest strength here is the local, conservative media, which will not cover the election fairly and honestly. In fact, the corporate media here—led by *The Daily Oklahoman*—should actually have to file contribution forms with Istook’s campaign.

(You can count on Okie Funk and Oklahoma Media Watch to tell you the truth about the local, corporate media’s distorted coverage of the campaign.)

Istook is vulnerable on three accounts: (1) Most Oklahomans are sick of the divisiveness that now pervades this country under the Bush administration. (2) Bush’s coattails are short as the president’s approval ratings plummet, the botched Iraq war remains a quagmire, and gas prices rise because of the lack of a real energy policy under

this administration. (3) Some consider Istook a wacky religious zealot who annually sponsors the so-called Religious Freedom Amendment, which would re-create America as a theocracy, modeling in some respects the fascist Islamic nations in the Middle East. This issue should be exploited by Democrats.

But Istook is a serious opponent, and no one involved with the Henry campaign or among the Democrats will take him lightly, especially since he will have strong national support from the one-party government in Washington. Istook has name recognition. He has unwavering local corporate media support. He will have no problem raising money. He undoubtedly represents the Republicans' best hope to replace Henry in the 2006 election.

Progressives will need to cut through the conservative media lies and tell the true story about Henry's strong and steady leadership the past four years.

October 2, 2005

The Other Oklahoma Lottery: Playing Political Pick Three With Istook, TABOR, And Intelligent Design

It might be tempting to believe immoral Bush World is coming to an end because of recent Democratic victories throughout the country and the president's declining approval ratings, but much work remains for Oklahoma progressives.

Consider that one year from now—no matter what is going on in the rest of the country—here is what it could be like in Oklahoma:

(1) Theocrat Ernest Istook could be governor. His first acts as governor would almost certainly pertain to cultural wedge and religious issues because playing into people's ingrained ignorance and advancing theocracy is his only chance of victory against popular Governor Brad Henry in the gubernatorial race. Istook could try to stop the education lottery, mandate religious symbols in school, and whip up hate against Oklahoma's gay community through more discriminatory legislation. Meanwhile, he would no doubt work to cut education funding and social programs and give the state away to big corporate interests through unneeded tax breaks.

(2) The state could have a TABOR constitutional amendment. TABOR, or the ironically named Taxpayers' Bill of Right movement, would limit the growth of the state government's budget to a formula tied to the inflation rate and population growth. It is another right-wing, tax-cut program that rewards the ultra rich as it increases living expenses for the middle class. It decimated the educational systems in Colorado, and that is why voters there recently rescinded it. Still, it has a good chance of passing in Oklahoma because the corporate media in the state will not cover the issue fairly by allowing extended dissenting views. TABOR supporters are now circulating an initiative

petition to get the constitutional amendment on the ballot next year. If passed, it will destroy Oklahoma education. That is not hyperbole.

(3) Oklahoma science teachers could be forced to teach Christian creationism in the classroom next fall as an alternative to the scientific theory of evolution, which has directly and indirectly led to great advances in medical science. Oklahoma House Representative Thad Balkman (R-Norman), a right-wing theocrat in the mold of Istook, has announced he will propose some type of legislation related to intelligent design this coming legislative session. Intelligent design argues that the natural world is so complicated it has to be the work of an intelligent designer, i.e., a god. This has never been proven. Since it is virtually only right-wing Christian fundamentalists who support intelligent design, you know they perceive the intelligent designer as their Christian God. If intelligent design makes it into Oklahoma classrooms, our students will be taught Christian dogma instead of scientific experimentation and evidence gathering.

So Istook, TABOR, and intelligent design, the forthcoming triad of the continuing Oklahoma conservative juggernaut, loom large over the state's politics this coming year. This is not to mention other important political races and legislation.

Huddled in our cold houses with our gargantuan heating bills and Orwellian Victory Gin this winter, it might seem logical that Oklahoma voters will begin to reject the ongoing right-wing dysfunction that privileges the rich over hard-working people. There is nothing wrong with being cautiously hopeful as you put on an extra sweater this winter to try to keep the gas bill halfway reasonable. It is true Oklahomans are sick of paying high gasoline prices and increasing health-care costs, and they will certainly grow weary

quickly of the high heating costs this winter. These higher costs are because of immoral Republican policies. Okies know that.

I also sense Oklahomans are sick of the divisiveness brought about by the Republicans over the last five years. Families here have been torn apart by Bush's lies and policies. Is it right, for example, that American soldiers and CIA operatives under Bush's policies torture people? Topics like attack dogs, water boarding, stress positions, and sexual humiliation, complete with photographs and video for your viewing pleasure, and, of course, Bush's previous and ongoing lies will be the Thanksgiving Day dinner conversation at some tables in Oklahoma next week. What fun for the family. Come on. Really. Everyone is sick of it. Let's stop torturing people. Let's get out of Iraq right now, not later.

Meanwhile, the news from Iraq is bad, terribly bad. Simply put, Bush has lost the war, and thousands of our soldiers and innocent Iraqi civilians are dead because of his hubris and lies. The slogan "Bush Lied, Thousands Died" will live forever in historical infamy alongside the 1960s chant, "Hey, hey, L.B.J., how many kids did you kill today?"

What type of massive, narcissistic ego must it take to send American soldiers off to a meaningless war for political gain?

The right-wing, psychological dysfunction is now increasingly rejected throughout the country. Democratic governors were recently elected in Virginia, a red state, and New Jersey. Voters in California turned down Republican Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger's four conservative ballot propositions, one of which was a TABOR-like measure. Voters in Colorado, as I mentioned, rescinded their TABOR amendment.

In addition, Bush's poll numbers continue to plummet as a majority of people now recognize he lied or misled the country into a botched, meaningless war, the most grievous act a president can commit. High-ranking Republicans, U.S. Rep. Tom DeLay and I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby, are under indictment. People have grown tired over how our moral reputation around the world has been destroyed because this presidential administration sanctions the torture of prisoners. America will perhaps never be able to claim the high moral ground again in geopolitics.

Again, it is tempting to think the recent votes and poll numbers bode well for progressives and the country. That may be true.

But this is Oklahoma. We have a biased corporate media, which overwhelmingly privileges conservative viewpoints. *The Daily Oklahoman*, for example, recently published an unsigned editorial arguing that Bush did not lie the country into war. It failed to mention, of course, how many people throughout the country disagree with its assessment. It failed to mention a lot of things like facts, previous Bush statements, the Downing Street memos, reputable left and right critics who say Bush lied, and it goes on and on.

And so, as usual, Oklahoma progressives will have to fight Istook, TABOR, and intelligent design without a real voice in the state's corporate media.

That means we will have to work harder here even as the country finally recognizes the lies of right-wing ideologues and how these lies have hurt the opportunities of the middle class and damaged our country's democratic foundations and ruined our world reputation as a moral beacon for years and years to come.

November 17, 2005

Tangled Like Tumbleweeds: The Ernest Istook And Jack Abramoff Money

Connection

So I wonder what \$29,000 buys you from U.S. Rep. Ernest Istook (R-Warr Acres)? A vote or two? Access? A signature on a letter or petition? Maybe. Is it enough to get Istook to place his sanctimonious, ultra-conservative principles in question?

The \$29,000 is the amount of money given to him by indicted Republican lobbyist Jack Abramoff and his associates, according to the Associated Press. Abramoff is also under more grand jury investigation for a variety of other alleged corrupt activities. Abramoff is a close friend of indicted, former House Majority Leader Tom Delay (R-Texas), who may face even more legal problems as the Abramoff scandal grows. In the past, Abramoff represented the gambling interests of Indian tribes. His lobbying actions for the tribes have drawn the scrutiny of prosecutors.

The plot thickened Monday. Michael Scanlon, a former DeLay aide and Abramoff associate, pleaded guilty to a political corruption charge and has apparently negotiated a plea agreement with prosecutors involved in the Abramoff investigation. Some believe Scanlon's testimony could ultimately lead to the implication of DeLay and Ohio Republican U.S. Rep. Robert Ney who received trips and other gifts from Abramoff's lobbying firm. Scanlon has been accused of conspiring with Abramoff to defraud the Indian tribes they represented.

But let's stick with Istook. (I know. I know. There are now so many influential and high-ranking Republicans either under indictment or under investigation that it is difficult to keep track of it all.)

Here are the streamlined facts as reported by the Associated Press:

(1) From 2001 to 2004, Istook took \$29,000 in contributions from Abramoff and his associates.

(2) Istook signed a 2002 letter sent to the Bush administration that would have helped lobbyist Abramoff with his Indian casino interests.

(3) Istook denies the letter had anything to do with Abramoff but was, in fact, some type of personal manifesto against gambling in general.

Only a rube would believe Istook's lame excuse. Okies know how the real world works, and they know Washington politicians listen to money, not ordinary people who have to work hard to make ends meet and do not have enough money to buy political influence. The only real excuse Istook might offer is that everyone else in Washington sells their influence, "so why can't I?" At least it would be honest.

But what is particularly disturbing about Istook's acceptance of the Abramoff money is that Istook poses as a self-righteous zealot with a pandering flair for meaningless but symbolic religious legislation. Istook, a Mormon, sponsors the ironically titled Religious Freedom amendment, for example, that would turn our nation into a theocratic fundamentalist state. But then he turns around and accepts money from an allegedly corrupt lobbyist representing gambling interests and then tries to make it all work together in some senseless narrative about how he represents ultra-conservative, religious values.

To paraphrase, it goes something like this: "I, Ernest Istook, took money from a lobbyist promoting gambling. I, Ernest Istook, am against gambling. Don't you get it?"

Of course, hypocrisy is a birthright and maybe even a duty here on the prairie. It is all just the same ol' tumbleweeds to me and you, right? It would be laughable if so much

were not at stake in terms of the country's basic democratic foundations because of the corruption and lies of the Republicans in power in Washington right now.

Here is a telling quote from a now public Scanlon memo that surely reflects Istook's and the Republicans' political strategies in red states like Oklahoma:

"The wackos get their information through the Christian right, Christian radio, mail, the internet and telephone trees. Simply put, we want to bring out the wackos to vote *against* something and make sure the rest of the public lets the whole thing slip past them."

Istook has announced he is running for governor against popular Oklahoma Governor Brad Henry next year. Expect Istook to run on cultural wedge issues, trying to get the state's rubes and "wackos to vote against something" even as he accepts money from lobbyists whose interests directly contradict his sanctimonious posturing.

Democrats need to expose this sitting turkey of hypocrisy and hubris and hatemongering. If Istook is so opposed to gambling, like Oklahoma's education lottery, then why does he accept money from people who lobby for gambling interests? It is an honest question.

But do not expect the corporate media here to press him on it because he is a Republican who supports the vested interest of the rich over ordinary, hard-working Oklahomans.

November 22, 2005

Istook Gives Away Some Abramoff Money, But His Explanation Rings Hollow

U.S. Rep. Ernest Istook's recent explanation about his controversial, multi-year financial connection with indicted Republican lobbyist Jack Abramoff is disingenuous and shows he is either lying or is a simpleton out of touch with political reality.

Istook (R-Warr Acres) recently became the second member of Congress to return or give away campaign money Abramoff donated to politicians on behalf of gambling interests in past years. Abramoff and his associates, representing the casino interests of Indian tribes, donated \$29,000 to Istook's campaign chest between 2001 and 2004, according to the Associated Press.

The Associated Press also reports Istook now says he is donating \$1,000 that directly came from Abramoff to the Oklahoma Medical Research Foundation for Indian health research. In addition, he is giving the organization another \$5,000 that Abramoff donated to a political action committee with which he was associated, the First Freedom Fund.

I guess the other money does not count to Istook because Abramoff did not personally sign the check, though the Associated Press reports the \$29,000 was tied to the lobbyist. Istook has not disputed this in his public comments about the issue.

Essentially, Abramoff's money has "sleaze" and "corruption" written all over it. Abramoff is the main target in a political corruption investigation that many people predict will lead to several indictments in the coming weeks. His partner, Michael Scanlon, has already entered a guilty plea in exchange for testimony in the investigation, and some expect Abramoff will soon do the same.

Abramoff, who has given money to several members of Congress, is already under indictment involving another corruption scandal in Florida. He has also been connected

to indicted U.S. Rep. Tom Delay (R-Texas) and U.S. Rep. Robert Ney (R-Ohio). DeLay is the former House majority leader forced to resign his position after his indictment on other political corruption charges.

One can understand in today's overall corrupt, money-is-everything political climate that most politicians receive money from sleazy people with sleazy political interests and that is difficult to keep track of all the money and its corresponding sleaze ratio.

Yet Istook's acceptance of the money deserves special consideration here in Oklahoma because he signed a letter that would have benefited one of Abramoff's Indian casino interests. Thus, the sanctimonious Istook, a Mormon who consistently sponsors legislation that would bring religious practices into government institutions, is right in the middle of helping gambling interests, well, promote gambling.

And, though Istook never does a damn thing of significance for Oklahoma, we do know he claims to be an extremely religious man who is against gambling.

But wait. Let us be fair and balanced. Istook has his story to tell. Istook said the letter he signed in 2002 that went to Interior Secretary Gale Norton, at the request of then U.S. Rep. David Vitter, (R-Louisiana), explained specifically that the undersigned were oppose to the spread of gambling, though it also mentioned it was against a specific casino proposed by the Jena band of the Choctaw tribe near the Louisiana-Texas border. There is no doubt now that stopping this casino would have directly helped one of Abramoff's clients with a competing casino.

But Istook told the Associated Press, "I signed the letter as part of my long-standing opposition to the spread of gambling, and for no other reason."

Vitter is currently a U.S. Senator who has even more connections with Abramoff than Istook. He is denying and qualifying everything about his Abramoff connection, too.

So one has to assume that if Istook is not lying—and this is a really really big “if” in my view—then he is so clueless he will sign any type of right-wing, ideological letter or document without understanding its overall ramifications. And, come on, he failed to ask why the specific casino was mentioned? Why not just write a letter or a manifesto opposing gambling if he was so morally outraged? Maybe he could have sent it to all those people who eventually voted for the lottery last year in Oklahoma.

“Hey, David,” Istook could have asked, “how come we are against just this one casino and not all casinos including Bill’s [former Education Secretary William Bennett] favorite places in Las Vegas?”

So Istook, who is running for governor here, is either a liar or a dupe in this ugly yet typical political episode. Take your pick. The local, corporate conservative media—such as *The Daily Oklahoman*—will not fully cover this important story because it is as much part of the lies and corruption as those politicians it supports these days. It is reminiscent of how the newspaper gave former Governor Frank Keating, another Republican, a pass on his major corruption scandal involving the \$250,000 he accepted from New York financier Jack Dreyfus.

It is disgusting and tragic. But that is our political reality in Oklahoma these days.

December 28, 2005

Partying On Stolen Money: The Lies And Hypocrisy Of Ernest Istook

U.S. Rep. Ernest Istook (R-Warr Acres) and his staff keep making disingenuous comments about the congressman's connections to disgraced Republican lobbyist Jack Abramoff.

Anyone who believes the political doublespeak coming from Istook's camp is a rube. This is a vital issue for the state because Istook is running for governor this year.

Last week, the Istook camp revealed the congressman was paying back \$5,126 to Sports Suites LLC, a company owned by Abramoff, for the use of Washington, D.C. stadium and arena skyboxes in 2003. The skyboxes were used by Istook for an "American Idol" concert and a Washington Redskins game.

Why is Istook paying back the money? Well, gosh, here it is some three years later and guess what? The Istook folks say they just now discovered they had never paid the bill for these skyboxes so they are going to pay up. Right.

How come the company did not send out past due notices if Istook was expected to pay?

This comes right after it was revealed that Istook received \$29,000 in campaign money from Abramoff or groups and people associated with the immoral lobbyist who has entered guilty pleas in federal court on corruption-related charges. Later, Istook returned some of that money to charities as he tried to distance himself from the growing Abramoff scandal.

Abramoff's charges accused him of bilking Indian tribes of millions of dollars. The Indian tribes hired Abramoff to promote their casino interests. Instead, he stole their

money. Politicians like U.S. Reps. Tom Delay (R-Texas), Bob Ney (R-Ohio), and Istook partied on the money.

The “casino” part of that last paragraph is important. Istook, for example, signed a 2002 letter, along with other elected officials, which was sent to the Bush administration. The letter argued the Bush administration should make a decision that would have helped one of Abramoff’s Indian casino clients. Istook said he had no idea the letter would have helped Abramoff and his clients.

The skyboxes, too, were a part of Abramoff’s program to steal from Indian tribes and give the money away to politicians like Istook. New reports say the skyboxes Abramoff provided politicians were funded by Indian tribes who were jilted by the corrupt lobbyist and at least one of his colleagues. It is obvious Istook would personally know the skyboxes were connected to Abramoff. Of course, his staff denies it.

Will additional information surface about the Istook and Abramoff connection? Will more lies follow?

What is especially disturbing about Istook’s disinformation campaign is that the congressman poses as a deeply religious, Mormon man who says he opposes gambling, even the Oklahoma Lottery. He has also tried unsuccessfully to get federal legislation passed that would set the stage for an American theocratic government.

Here is yet another classic case of Bible Belt hypocrisy. The sanctimonious Istook took money from a lobbyist who not only promoted gambling but ended up convicted in what is turning into one of the biggest political corruption scandals in American history.

So let's get this straight. It is okay for Istook to party in Washington, D.C. stadium and arena skyboxes provided by a lobbyist who everyone in the world knew promoted gambling. But it is wrong, according to him, for us to play the lottery in Oklahoma. Of course, now that he has been caught, Istook is backpedaling and returning money.

Republican Bob Sullivan's campaign for governor must be taking off given this recent example of lies, hypocrisy, and hubris, and he is sure to use it against Istook.

This also surely strengthens the campaign of popular Governor Brad Henry, who has served this state admirably the last four years and deserves another four years in office. I would not be surprised if Istook drops out of the governor's race soon, especially if more Abramoff connections surface.

February 5, 2006

Istook's Ethics Problems Mount

U.S. Rep. Ernest Istook's ethics problems continue to mount, and most state political observers must seriously wonder if he will soon drop out of the Oklahoma governor's race.

The Warr Acres Republican, who often proposes sanctimonious religious legislation and preaches so-called family values, has had to donate to charity money given to him by disgraced lobbyist Jack Abramoff, pay for the rental fees of two Washington D.C. skyboxes once controlled by the lobbyist, and was recently featured in the *Oklahoma Gazette* as one of the worst 10 members of Congress at maintaining campaign donation records.

Now comes word from local Democratic sources that Istook may be under investigation by the Federal Election Commission for not providing enough information about campaign donations and a leased vehicle.

This new investigation is not related to the ongoing Abramoff investigation. Abramoff recently was convicted on three charges related to political corruption. He essentially bilked the Indian tribes and casinos he represented of millions of dollars and then gave the money to politicians like Istook in the form of campaign donations and skyboxes. He is currently helping investigators.

Istook partied in the Washington, D.C. skyboxes, which were controlled by a company owned by Abramoff, who represented gambling interests. He refunded the rental fees nearly three years later, but only after Abramoff was convicted. Istook opposed the Oklahoma lottery.

Again, there is a huge disconnect between Istook's sanctimonious pose as a devout Mormon who wants to promote the practice of religion in public institutions and his actions in taking money from gambling interests and not reporting his campaign donations in an appropriate fashion.

And the Abramoff investigation is not even over yet, folks.

Tainted cheese is tainted cheese.

February 22, 2006

The Sad, Immoral Trash Of Ernest Istook

Oklahomans received their first real glimpse at U.S. Rep. Ernest Istook's gubernatorial campaign strategy this past week.

If you cut through all his boring, conservative rhetoric about tax cuts, and his sanctimonious posturing, corporate worshipping and hate-disguised-as-policy, here is what Istook really said in Repubcode at a Wednesday meeting of the Oklahoma Conservative Political Action Committee in Edmond:

"If elected, I will ensure ultra-rich people get even more tax cuts. I'm against the new lottery, even though everyone in this room knows I accepted money from disgraced lobbyist Jack Abramoff, who represented gambling interests. I want the state's energy companies to give me lots of campaign money, and if they do so I will work to ensure they pay less in taxes. Also, Oklahomans should hate Hispanic people."

Here is a direct quote from his speech, according to a local news account:

"I do not believe that you can tax and gamble your way to prosperity," Istook said. "We do not have leadership in the governor's office. I shudder to think where we would be if it weren't for the oil and gas industry right now that is holding up Oklahoma's economy. ... It's not anything that's been done at the state Capitol."

Do you really shudder, Ernie, or do you just want the same local energy company payout that kooky Tom Coburn received when he was running for the U.S. Senate?

So Istook says he wants to reduce and then eliminate the income tax in a state that has always underfunded its schools and universities. He does not have an actual plan to replace the money. No, he says he is going to rely on the policies of the geniuses at the Oklahoma Council of Public Affairs to guide him in spending cuts. OCPA is a

conservative, faux think-tank that creates phony studies and makes phony pronouncements that only support Republicans.

In addition, Istook says he does not want Oklahoma to become a “sanctuary for illegal immigrants.” This issue is part of the Republican strategy this year to generate hate against Hispanic people. Most of the illegal workers here in Oklahoma are of Hispanic origin. This is the standard GOP Two Minutes Hate program which has been constructed by the president’s main advisor, Karl Rove.

And, oh yeah, Istook wants Oklahoma to make English the official language because that is the burning issue on everyone’s mind here in this state. This is an obvious emotional appeal to the Republican base here. Hey, I got an idea, let’s teach our children to speak different languages. (I can hear the rednecks snicker at this idea as I write this sentence.)

There was a time in this country when someone like Istook would be laughable, but not anymore. Istook’s past record as a congressman shows him to be a theocrat and a supporter of the quasi-fascist policies of the current presidential administration. He only truly represents rich people and religious fanatics. If he is elected, I predict a mass exodus of professional and intellectual people from the state.

Do a majority of Oklahomans believe in Istook’s sad, immoral trash?

If Istook makes it through the Republican primary, and that is a big if, in my mind, he will face the extremely popular Oklahoma Governor Brad Henry, who deserves a second term.

I think the Henry campaign should make some preemptive moves against Istook and Republicans before the primaries. One of those moves would be to reach out in more

significant ways to the growing Hispanic community in this state. It would be the moral thing to do, of course, but it would be a great political strategy as well.

March 26, 2006

Ernie Gives It Back

U.S. Rep. Ernest Istook has donated more money to a charitable cause because of his connection to disgraced and convicted Republican lobbyist Jack Abramoff.

New reports say Istook recently donated \$18,500 to the Boy Scouts of America. That means he has now given the \$29,000 he received from Abramoff and his associates to charitable causes and organizations.

But lingering questions remain. Why did Istook, who says he is against gambling, take money from gambling interests in the first place, and does he think Oklahomans truly believe that he did not really know Abramoff personally as he claims?

Istook ate at Abramoff's restaurant, and he was given access to Abramoff-controlled suites at a Washington, D.C. sports arena, according to news accounts. He also signed a letter, along with other officials, that would have helped one of Abramoff's Indian casino clients. All this makes Istook's claim about his relationship with Abramoff highly suspect.

Abramoff was recently convicted of conspiracy, fraud and tax evasion in his schemes to bribe public officials and steal money from his American Indian clients.

Istook, who is running for governor, is surely hoping his connection to the Abramoff scandal does not cost him votes in the state, but Oklahomans deserve honesty from its top executive. The bottom line is that the sanctimonious Istook is just another politician trying to hide behind the right-wing, religious agenda.

People are getting sick of the rhetorical subterfuge, hypocrisy and doublespeak among Republicans. Recent polls show the Republican-dominated Congress and President George Bush have extremely low approval ratings.

April 22, 2006

Ray spotted it right off. He probably knew I could cling to him first because as the drunk and sentimental person he was the natural choice. So he said, "Come on, everyone, "Let's sing." This singing thing was an entirely new deal altogether.

And what they tried to sing was, "O Christmas Tree," but no one knew all the words exactly, so it ended up just being a bunch of humming before Ray stopped it by calling out for a new song. Then they tried, "Silent Night, Holy Night," and everyone knew the words, but Eric started screaming, and the song was ruined.

I had by now lapsed into a full-fledged guilt coma, into complete despondency, and I had that awful flushed face, and I felt my body temperature rise about two degrees (see "Hot Flashes," Sheehan, page 27), and I wondered if this singing thing was pre-planned, just another trick to make me believe that they really forgave me when, in fact, they didn't. Thinking that, of course, made my guilt feelings even worse.

I said, "See, maybe I was going for the kitchen sink with the turkey. I can't lie big. I don't know it for sure. But maybe I was just intuitively going for the sink, and then the turkey just sort of got away from me, sort of sailed off on its own. I've never thrown anything through a window before in my life. God, I'm sorry." I always said this on the tapes from 1997 on, but everyone coming into the room threw off my rhythm, and, of course, I wasn't in synch with another tape.

Everyone went, "Okay, okay,"

Just then, Granddad woke, and Patrick McGuire, whom I was named after, came to join the family circle, and my grandfather, the only one in the family who actually has some musical talent, proceeded to sing "Danny Boy" in this Irish tenor that made Mama cry and Eric quiet down, He probably hadn't sung for the past five years, but I guess the

family singing as he slept triggered something deep and important inside. I'm grateful for this, and it only proved again to me that the coyote deal was an important sign from above.

Granddad's voice quivered, and here he was, ninety-three years old, my own flesh and blood. His father, also named Patrick McGuire, was born in the slums of Dublin, and brought his family, when my grandfather was only three, to America, that's right, to Oklahoma of all places, for a better life, for food, for survival purposes only. And I wondered if I could do that.

Fighting The Right: Education

Small Towns Need Schools

In this book, I have often mentioned Thomas Frank's book *What's The Matter With Kansas?* that argues rural residents in states such as Kansas and Oklahoma vote against their own financial and personal interests when they vote for Republican political candidates on both the state and national levels.

Frank argues that by joining the conservative juggernaut, these rural residents ensure their school systems are closed or underfunded, their small towns are pushed to the point of financial collapse, and their children have no future in the place in which they were raised.

This paradox between people living and thus promoting small-town, rural values and life yet consistently voting for the elimination or financial weakening of small towns and schools is the contradiction that has created the red-state/blue-state dichotomy and has now given the Republican party a clear mandate to destroy rural America.

Frank asks the question, "Why?" Frank asks this question of Kansans. I ask the question of Oklahomans. "Why?"

I think about Frank's book again because of a recent proposal floated by the Oklahoma GOP to consolidate rural schools. The GOP-sponsored proposal, House Bill 1783, proposes the state create a special commission that would submit a list of school districts that could be consolidated.

As you know, Oklahoma voters recently gave the Republicans a majority in the House for the first time in eighty years so this proposal has a fair chance of being passed. Local schools are the focal points of many rural communities in Oklahoma. If the schools are closed, the town simply dies in some cases. Thus, in a larger sense, Oklahoma voters,

under the Republican banner and its Orwellian ideology, are demanding we abandon small towns in the state in order to provide more money for larger cities.

The school consolidation issue has a long and tortuous history in Oklahoma, but it has always been a conservative platform in terms of its ideological foundation.

So why would someone in a small Oklahoma town vote to ensure their local schools are closed by either voting for Republican state legislators or supporting Republican candidates for national office?

Is it the influence of the conservative media on both the state and national level, from the propaganda of *The Daily Oklahoman* to the hate-speech and racism of Rush Limbaugh? Is it that so-called cultural issues, such as gay marriage, trump the personal financial interests of rural voters? In other words, do Oklahoma rural voters really care more about whether a gay couple can get married than their own children's futures? Is it conservative and reductionist emotional appeals to nationalism or patriotism?

Or are many rural voters simply the continuing dupes, chumps, and rubes of an elite, wealthy Republican aristocracy that manipulates them into voting against themselves?

The only thing I know for sure is that until Oklahoma rural voters get back to the progressive roots and platforms upon which this state was created, they will reap what they sow: the slow, painful death of their communities.

January 25, 2005

Dank Wants To Shut Down Schools

Frosty Troy has an excellent article running in *The Oklahoma Observer* this week about Odilia Dank (R-Oklahoma City), the Oklahoma House member who wants to close down rural schools and towns in the state.

Dank initially filed two bills that could have ultimately forced the consolidation of some schools in Oklahoma. They have been apparently withdrawn, but Dank is the head of the Common Education Committee, so do not be surprised if these bills raise their ugly, town-destroying heads once again. We have seen this before.

As Frosty's article points out, some legislators found it ironic that House Speaker Todd Hiett (R-Kellyville), who is from a small town, would implicitly support this obvious attack on small towns, including his own small town.

I know it is a dog-eat-dog Republican world (or how about the ironic auto-cannibalism of the extreme right) these days, but this is getting so ridiculous it is almost funny. So let's get this straight because this sort of thing can only happen in red states like Oklahoma. Some local upstanding citizen (Hiett) runs for an office from a rural community he plans to destroy based on an ideology he embraces that is anti-rural town, anti-family farm, and anti-education. The people in the small town elect him because _____. You fill in the blank.

I wonder how well the schools are doing in Kellyville, a town that listed a population of 906 in the 2000 census. How are they doing with the NCLB requirements, another Republican mandate? According to information obtained on the Internet, Kellyville Schools has approximately 1000 students with at least one district-level administrator. This last fact—a district-level administrator—must have Oklahoma City's Dank

salivating at the thought of how she might get rid of him/her and right there in the speaker's hometown, too!

If I worked for Kellyville Schools or any smaller school district in Oklahoma right now, I would be mighty worried about what Dank and Hiatt had in store for me, no matter what is coming out their mouths these days.

And Dank? Well, her legislative profile on the net says she attended Casady School here in Oklahoma City. That's the school that is pretty much solely for the wealthy in this area, and it's a long, long way from Kellyville both in distance and philosophy. (The Casady administrators, I am sure, will tell you all about their wonderful financial aid program, blah, blah, blah, but it remains the school of choice for the wealthy in the Oklahoma City area.)

Oklahoma voters are getting duped in this disastrous conservative juggernaut that has seized the state and held it hostage to an ideology that is slowly but surely destroying our small towns.

I have traveled far and wide in the state, and I know people from small towns in Oklahoma do not want some Casady-educated, Oklahoma City elitist telling them they cannot have a high school in their community. But the problem here is that these same people continue to vote against their own interests.

When you elect politicians who are wedded to a conservative ideology that wants to shut down rural America, then you ultimately pay the price. This is what is happening all across red-state America under the George Bush administration and especially during this second term.

This is plain, common sense. Progressives have always supported strong public schools and strong family farms in Oklahoma, and they will continue to do so. Republicans only support the wealthy elite in this state and nation. Maybe Kellyville schools will be closed, and then that extra savings can be passed on in the form of tax cuts to those wealthy people in Oklahoma City who want to send their kids to Casady. It just does not get clearer than that, folks.

March 1, 2005

Oklahoma Needs Full-Day Kindergarten

Following the Oklahoma Legislature has always been sometimes frustrating but always a humor-producing activity as you read beneath the various agendas of the conservative state media to discover the multitudes of contradictions, rhetorical deceits, and pure right-wing propaganda that emits from our new domed Capitol building nowadays.

It is like making a mental journey to a traveling carnival filled with hucksters and tricksters. You know they are going to try to rip you off before you go in, and so you steel yourself against the coming sales pitches, lies, distortions, and omissions. Still, you can enjoy the lights, the cheap rides, the greasy food, the political spectacle. It is some of the best entertainment in Oklahoma City if you have a decent sense of irony and a strong stomach.

The big deal this legislative season, of course, was that for the first time in decades, the Republicans gained control of the Oklahoma House of Representatives. This was supposed to be a dawning of a new day in the state, something big and important, and, of course, in Republican terms, wonderful and extra wonderful with special extra wonderful sauce.

But what has happened is that our Democrat Governor Brad Henry has coolly, moderately, and deliberately taken away the Republican momentum and ensured himself a second term. Even the right-wing monster *The Daily Oklahoman* has found little to gripe about when it comes to Henry. The governor has truly emerged as a bi-partisan politician, a leader who simply wants to get something done here in the state, even if it can only be on a small scale. Henry is doing what he can. He is getting the lottery going,

for example, to improve education funding, helping colleges get new classroom space, and now he wants to provide full-day kindergarten for the state's residents.

This has left House Speaker Todd Hiett (R-Kellyville), who leads the new Republican majority, sounding like a typical carnival ring-toss huckster in news accounts. It has also put him in awkward positions, such as defending his reason for not necessarily supporting the funding of full-day kindergarten in the state.

Whenever you have been backed into a position that means you will not support Oklahoma kindergarteners, I think you have lost the political high-ground in some serious ways.

I know I'm on the left here in the belly of the right-wing beast, but I've traveled throughout this state for decades now, and I can tell you this: Oklahomans, generally speaking, support kindergarteners. In fact, here's a secret, Mr. Hiett: We downright love them. I stake my record as a famous state political expert and former little league soccer and baseball coach on this statement.

Hiett's claim, according to various news accounts, is that the \$24 million kindergarten money is not appropriate because the state should have a standstill budget. In essence, if you propose a new state program, you need to cut somewhere else in the budget to fund it. (Republican ideology: Give some money to kindergarteners, but take it away from sixth-graders or, better yet, nursing home residents.)

This is just a deceitful way to apply the Republican TABOR (Taxpayers' Bill of Rights) mentality to our state. This ideology effectively means you can never offer new, progressive programs to our budget. All the studies and common sense shows that full-day kindergarten helps get kids ready for school, especially at-risk kids who might not

come from such great homes. Our state desperately needs such a program. It will save the state millions of dollars in the long run. This is obvious and forward thinking.

So this year, maybe we need to help out the kindergartners. Next year, maybe we might have to do something about fuel efficiency because of skyrocketing fuel costs. The year after that, it may mean improving the state's technology so we can compete for business. It is just plain common sense. This does not mean, of course, you do not operate the state without good business practices, always looking for ways to cut waste or to streamline. This does not mean you cannot refund tax dollars. It just means you are pragmatic and real.

As I see it, this is the third time Hiatt's views have seemed really out of whack with Oklahomans.

Initially, for example, Hiatt allowed his party's school consolidators and closers to announce a program which was sure to shut down many rural schools. This seemed odd given that Hiatt describes himself as a rancher in Kellyville. Rancher seems like a rural occupation to me. Kellyville seems like a rural place to me. The plan was later withdrawn after a public outcry.

Then, Hiatt threw a fit over the higher education bond package. Even though Henry and the college presidents, and everyone else in the universe had a done deal, Hiatt went and threw a fit so he could put some Republican stamp on the whole thing. But no one was fooled. The higher education bond package was about reasonable people of all political views coming together for the good of Oklahoma. Hiatt just sounded mean and angry. Meanwhile, Henry was pure Okie Funk, folks, a cool, in every sense of the word, bi-partisan leader putting aside ideology for the state's good.

The headline describing the speaker's third political faux pas should read: Hiatt To Oklahoma Kindergartners: Drop Dead!

I'm sure Hiatt, the owners of *The Daily Oklahoman*, the people over at the archconservative Oklahoma Council of Public Affairs, and many of the state's Republicans cannot wait until virtually all of the state's wealth is in the hands of a few rich Oklahomans. If they have to take this money out of the mouths of kindergarteners, then so be it. But that might have to wait until the conservative juggernaut takes over all the branches of state government here like it has on the federal level.

Meanwhile, Brad Henry and Oklahoma's people might have something to say about that. I get the sense something progressive and populist is brewing in the heartland.

But let us go back to the carnival, shall we? (Picture yourself with corndog in hand as the Ferris wheel turns and the fortune tellers turn over the cards predicting good times ahead for Okie progressives.) The *Daily Oklahoman* continues to scream out on its biased editorial pages that we need to improve and better fund education at all levels in the state, with which I and any other rational, thinking person can agree. (In fact, I have been amazed at how adamant the newspaper has been about increasing higher education funding which has been shrinking as a percentage of the budget over the years.) But then they also, at least in principal, support obstructionist Republican politicians like Hiatt, too. So which side are they on here? Again, think of a carnival huckster trying to get you roped into playing a rigged game of darts and balloons. The newspaper's principal owners and publisher do not care about regular Oklahomans. Just like a traveling carnival huckster, they want your money, and then they laugh behind your back all the way to their next town.

April 17, 2005

We'll Put A Boot In Your Vocabulary, Y'All

Oklahoma iconography from the latter half of the twentieth century to today has been carefully manipulated by the state's corporate power structure for less than altruistic reasons. This has left the state with a weird, iconic cabal of ultra-conservative cowboy-singer types, from Reba McEntire to Brooks & Dunn to Toby Keith.

Our icons serve as models for Oklahomans, and they tell the world how to view our state.

So it is extremely unfortunate for all of us the state's power structure does not broaden its definition of what makes an Okie a famous icon.

I think of this issue after considering how the mainstream media recently conducted printed and visual worship services for Toby Keith, the state's warmongering country singer. On top of the list, of course, is *The Daily Oklahoman*, which devoted a chunk of its new publication, *Look@OKC*, to the opening of Keith's new Bricktown restaurant.

So this is what we are supposed to worship. Here are some lyrics from Keith's song, "Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue:"

Justice will be served

And the battle will rage

This big dog will fight

When you rattle his cage

You'll be sorry that you messed with

The U.S. of A.

'Cause we'll PUT a boot in your ass

It's the American way

And, of course, we have to ponder Toby Keith on posters paid for by the Great Oklahoma Library Association. There is Keith, lying down, with the vernacular expression “Read Y’ALL” next to him. There is much wrong with this poster, which is part of the fight against illiteracy in the state. First, there is Keith himself, certainly not a model of reading or academia. Then there is the expression, “y’all,” which contradicts any sense that this illiteracy effort is based on sound reading and writing principles.

So here is Keith serving as both the icon of American military might and empire and Oklahoma reading and intelligence. It is tragic. I think the Iraq war has proven it is wrong to base our foreign policy on “we’ll PUT a boot in your ass/It’s the American way.” And there are plenty of wonderful people in the world of Oklahoma academia who could serve as intellectual and reader models besides Keith.

Meanwhile, Oklahoma has plenty of true heroes, from Woody Guthrie to Will Rogers to Ralph Ellison to N. Scott Momaday. There are also the current performers, Kristin Chenoweth, who is apparently on one of the library posters, and Megan Mullally. Mullally stars on the television show "Will and Grace." (This show, of course, contains sympathetic depictions of gay people.) Or what about the legendary Frosty Troy, the tireless editor of the progressive journal, *The Oklahoma Observer*? He should absolutely be on a state library poster, not Keith.

But the relentless, self-serving Oklahoma power structure, made up of rich corporate owners and executives, choose the state icons carefully with their greedy interests in mind. They do not care if people can read. In fact, they would prefer you to remain stupid so they can steal your money.

Fortunately, some people in the state are starting to recognize this manipulation has left the state with shallow, fleeting icons who represent hollow ideology and commercial interests. The site, Oklahomans For Global Solutions, recently published articles related to Oklahoma's true heroes, virtually all of whom are progressive. I have also tried to deal with this problem in how we interpret Oklahoma history and the state's icons with my "Okie Rebels With A Cause" series. In addition, the Oklahoma Independent Media Center offers an alternative view to the local corporate, mainstream media.

It is simply immoral the right-wing corporate media ignores the state's true, progressive history. Oklahoma progressives helped to win all of us retirement, the concept of the five-day work week, and health insurance. Woody Guthrie and Will Rogers once worked to improve the lives of ordinary Americans, but the local, corporate, right-wing media distort their legacies.

Here are some Woody Guthrie song lyrics, written during The Great Depression, which will live on forever. These lyrics are from "This Land Is Your Land:"

One Sunday morning
In the shadow of the steeple
By the relief office
I seen my people
As they stood hungry
I stood there whistling this:
This land was made for you and me.

Guthrie's legacy lives on and will continue to live on for centuries. Keith is just a part of the prevailing corporate interests.

July 21, 2005

Education Funding Paramount Issue For Oklahoma

Oklahoma has never adequately funded its public schools and universities, and this has kept the state from prospering.

The issue creates the state's largest conundrum. How do you convince uneducated people, uneducated voters, that maintaining excellent education systems will create unparalleled economic growth and benefit everyone?

It is one thing if the state does not have the money, the tax dollars, to adequately fund education, but it is quite another to have the money but refuse to spend it. This is where we find ourselves under Republican leadership in the House these days. The state has a \$1 billion surplus, but the Republicans want to make sure rich people get big tax cuts. They could care less about your kids' education or how much more you are going to spend on college tuition.

Meanwhile, students sit in moldy classroom without textbooks. Teachers and professors, paid the lowest salaries in the nation, use their own money to bring equipment and supplies to the classrooms. The message all this sends to those outside of Oklahoma is that we are a state whose power structure does not privilege education. It paints a desperate, bleak picture of the state.

The Oklahoma Legislature has an opportunity this year to make a real dent in our educational funding problem. We will all benefit, whether we have any direct connection to education or not, if the legislature provides needed boosts in educational funding.

"I belong to a group that doesn't think this state will ever go broke educating its people," said state Sen. Stratton Taylor, (D-Claremore) to a reporter recently. Count me in that group as well.

April 14, 2006

Toby To State: Read, Y'All White Trash Okies

Oklahoma's library poster child Toby Keith has come out with a recent album, and its title is sure to make the official intellectual community here proud the musician claims the state as his home.

Library officials, in particular, will be extra proud they selected Keith for a recent poster campaign to promote reading in the state.

Copies of Keith's "White Trash With Money" should be given out to all Oklahoma school children, many of whom have already encountered Keith in his pornographic pose in the "Read Y'All" library posters plastered throughout the state.

When teachers pass out the free cds maybe they can then begin a discussion on the term "white trash" and its use.

Here is how such a discussion might go:

Teacher: Would someone define "white trash?"

Student: It means an inhabitant of Oklahoma.

Teacher: Okay. Anyone else?

Student: Doesn't the word "white" in the term "white trash" mean that people of other skin colors are automatically trashy people. Isn't that racist?

Teacher: Yes, it is racist, but you know we can't criticize Toby Keith.

Student: Why?

Teacher: Because he will put a boot in our . . .ahem . . . bottoms.

I want to put a too-fine of a point on it here. The term "white trash" does make a linguistic claim that "white" is somehow special to someone trashy. In other words, the prevailing culture's language has to qualify "trash" with "white" because it is somehow

unique that a white person could be trashy. I realize the term is commonly used to signify someone without culture, and some may argue the term is not racist. But there are trashy people with all types of skin colors. Why use “white” to modify “trash?”

Whatever your views on this issue, the use of the term white trash does conjure up a particular image that Oklahoma should try to avoid. Using white trash in the context of an album cover ultimately celebrates a group of uneducated, uncultured white people who tend to be more racist than other groups of people. These people will no doubt validate themselves by buying Keith’s album and celebrating their whiteness and trashiness. These same people would be more likely to listen to racist musicians as well.

What I find most absurd about it is how Keith has become such a big celebrity here in this state. His photograph on the “Read Y’All” posters was borderline obscene and the term deserved to be criticized for branding us with a hick image and vernacular.

And so now Oklahoma’s Ambassador of Intellectualism Toby Keith comes out with his white trash album after his jingoistic, nationalistic album. One song on the older album, “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue,” claimed, “And you’ll be sorry that you messed with/The U.S. of A/Cause we’ll put a boot in your ass/It’s the American way.”

Now three years into a botched war under a lying president who believes in Keith’s brilliant foreign policy ideas, things seem a little different, don’t they?

But then a lot of people made millions of dollars and continue to make millions from the Iraq War. Toby Keith is no different. It's the American way under George Bush.

April 15, 2006

Oklahoma Schools, Colleges Deserve Major Funding Boost

The Oklahoma Legislature has an historic opportunity to boost funding for education this year, but a proposed tax cut may mean the state will continue to lag behind the nation in maintaining its education systems.

With nearly \$1 billion in surplus revenue, legislators, for once, can make a real difference in the lives of ordinary Oklahomans.

The Alliance for Oklahoma's Future is calling on citizens to contact their legislators on Tuesday, May 16 to fight against a proposed, massive tax cut that primarily benefits the wealthy and leaves schools and universities underfunded.

In a recent letter to the legislature, the alliance urged lawmakers to put Oklahoma first: "It means taking care of our crumbling roads and bridges and paying our teachers a competitive salary. It means taking care of our higher education system so that Oklahoma students are able to afford college tuition and we can produce graduates trained to compete in the global economy. It means making strategic investments in research to secure our state's economic future. It means taking care of our health care system by providing access to affordable care and offering adequate reimbursement to providers. Investing in education, research, health care and public infrastructure is the surest path to sustainable economic growth and prosperity for Oklahoma."

The alliance points out the state currently ranks 49th in the nation in teacher salaries. Meanwhile, our college students have seen an 82 percent increase in college tuition over the last six years. Per-pupil spending remains low compared to national averages. Our state retirement systems, including the Teacher's Retirement System of Oklahoma, remain chronically underfunded.

A senate bill proposes to reduce the income tax rate from 6.25 to 4.9 percent. The alliance shows how middle-class taxpayers will receive token tax cuts while the richest one percent in the state will get a massive tax break if the bill is passed.

Money pooled together and used appropriately and efficiently saves ordinary Oklahomans much more in the long run. The proposed tax cut would erode our funding base and leave us vulnerable in economic downturns while rich corporate executives and owners laugh all the way to the bank.

May 13, 2006

Oklahoma Teachers Deserve Big Raise

It is absurd that teacher salaries ever become politicized in a state that pays its teachers less than 48 other states and sometimes less than 49 other states.

If the state cannot afford to increase salaries for teachers, then fine. We are a relatively poor state, and we can deal with it. We are Okies. But when the budget coffers are flushed with money, the state should make a real effort to bring teacher salaries up to at least regional averages. It would be a sign that the state cares about the intellectual welfare of its citizens and is committed to improving the quality of life here.

The Oklahoma Senate, controlled by Democrats, has offered a budget proposal this year that would give teachers a \$3,000 raise. The Oklahoma House, controlled by Republicans, has offered a plan that would give teachers a paltry \$1,200 raise. Governor Brad Henry has offered a compromise budget that would give teachers \$2,400.

All of this may seem like typical politics, and Henry's compromise may seem to favor teachers since it is only \$600 short of what the Senate has asked for. But teachers need a guarantee that everyone will receive a raise, and why not just give them the \$3,000?

The real issue here is that our teachers are terribly underpaid, and they need a decent raise this year and in subsequent years. The \$3,000 raise, which may seem substantial to some people, is actually not enough. It should be at least a \$5,000 across-the-board raise. Teachers will undoubtedly face rising health insurance and pension costs in coming years. The raise they receive this year, especially if it is only \$1,200, will simply melt into the giant morass of health insurance company profits, rising gasoline prices and an underfunded pension fund.

Why the state's citizens and politicians want to reward rich corporate executives of health insurance companies (not to mention oil companies) and not give their kid's first-grade teacher a decent raise is one of the great mysteries of the twenty-first century. The bigwig executives of these companies could care less if Oklahoma children can read. They are laughing all the way to the bank.

The state has a real opportunity this year to make a halfway significant difference in the salary structure for teachers. To not do so is to validate the state's hick reputation. To give the money to rich people in the form of tax cuts is immoral. Let's finally do something about this low salary issue, a chronic problem in this state. Give teachers the \$3,000 raise. Make sure all teachers get the raise, and then let's go from there.

May 17, 2006

I wondered if I could take my family thousands and thousands of miles away from here because I needed to do so just so they could survive? And I don't know exactly what happened, but something happened, because I felt a real connection with my family roots then, a frozen euphoric moment, and the Xanax kicked in, and I felt a weight lifted from my chest (see "Chest Pain or Pressure," Sheehan, page 24). I started thinking I could do it, I could somehow keep us all alive if we had to move to wherever, to Japan, Switzerland, the North Pole, Zimbabwe, you name it.

And it all seemed unreal, depersonalized (see former reference about depersonalization) to me, but my guilt coma went into remission as Ray held one of my hands, and my wife held the other.

In a quiet voice, I apologized for the tape, the drapes, the turkey, all that, for one last time, at least for this Thanksgiving, I thought, What are our lives really? But I didn't press it. I let it go, at least for then.

When Granddad finished singing, we moved to the table, all held hands, and prayed over the food. We prayed together, and I let my voice go loud so everyone would know that my guilt coma was over.

"In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy spirit, Bless us O Lord, and these Thy gifts, which we are about to receive from Thy bounty through Christ our Lord. Amen. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit."

And, of course, the video camera had been going this entire time, and I still cried inside because I knew I had frozen a great moment, and next year, if Granddad was still alive, we would get him to sing the song again, in synch with this tape, and then the year after that, and the year after that, and on and on and on until he died, and maybe he

wouldn't die until after he got his name on the Route N Scoot billboard west of town, and you have to be at least 100 for that; so, see, that was seven years right there, and as long as we kept Granddad regular, well, who knows, who really knows?

I could stop the tapes at anytime, too, any year since 1995 anyway, freeze a moment of myself, and now freeze a moment of my own flesh and blood, and I envisioned how great this tape would make all our future Thanksgivings. I even thought, Maybe it's time to let go of the coyote thing, just forget 1997, and move on down life's highway. But maybe not.

Fighting The Right: Bush

***Fahrenheit 911* A Must See For Oklahomans**

I have seen Michael Moore's film *Fahrenheit 911* two times now at the Tinseltown Theater in Oklahoma City.

The first time I saw it was at an afternoon matinee the day after its premier opening. The theater was sold out or nearly so, and there were huge lines waiting to see the next showing. I saw it again July 4, and, again, the crowd was quite large. After the film ended--both times--the audience exploded in sustained applause. (Remember, this is supposedly conservative Oklahoma.)

So my first reaction to the film is this: It is wonderful to see sensible people of whatever political persuasion coming together in Oklahoma, particularly in Oklahoma, to try to understand and make sense of the distortions, lies, and media manipulations of the Bush administration after the terrorists attack on September 11, 2001.

Once foolishly drunk on nationalism and Bush's fear mongering, many people, including a lot of Oklahomans, are waking up, and perhaps they feel badly hungover, knowing full well they have been taken advantage of by our current president and his destructive foreign and domestic policies.

I have two other reactions to the movie: (1) The film is artistically brilliant despite what many critics have claimed. (2) I think it is logical and probable the movie will persuade many voters to abandon the perpetual-war politics of President Bush.

My argument for the film's brilliance lies in its parallels and contrasts, which speak powerfully but subtly, perhaps even subconsciously, to the audience, and also to its overall technique, which abandons prevailing ideas of film genres like documentary or romantic comedy or suspense. This is a groundbreaking film that confronts the corporate

media and its movie critics head-on, and it will not be the last such film of its type. It pulls no punches. It is what it says it is. It never pretends to be anything but an argument to change the current direction of our government. Because it does not possess the pretense of art, it becomes the best type of art, the type that searches for truth.

If you want to see what NBC, CBS, ABC, CNN, FOX, MSNBC, CNBC, *The Wall Street Journal*, even *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* are not covering in terms of Bush, Iraq, and the war on terrorism, then go see the film.

One artistic parallel that stands out for me in the film is the difference between the ecstatic feelings of some interviewed American soldiers, all pumped with guns, mortars, and music, as they initially go into Iraq, and then the later subdued reactions from interviewed soldiers once they realize they are fighting a guerrilla urban war against people they simply do not understand and will probably never understand.

The difference in the pre- and post-invasion reactions serves as a powerful symbol for how the mainstream media, ignoring lies and distortions, constructed a national electorate that was heavily in favor of a war packaged for television, not the real thing. This difference defines the American people over the last year or so as the media failed to confront the distortions of the Bush administration. On one hand, we relive the ease and even the glee, among some people, with which we invaded Iraq. Then we deal with the stark reality of our actions, the continuing Iraq quagmire, the mounting death tolls, the amputee soldiers, the charred and maimed bodies of Iraqi children, the destroyed homes and businesses.

The film asks simply, "For what?" The clichés and sloganeering of the right-wing extremists in this country offer no answer to this basic question.

Another parallel, and perhaps the most powerful, is the juxtaposition of an Iraqi woman who has lost family members in an American bombing with Lila Lipscomb, the Flint, Michigan woman who lost a son fighting in Iraq.

The emotional reactions of both women are universal. Language differences cannot separate them. We are left with the powerful story of a bereaved mother in America, yet her grief serves to humanize the Iraqi woman's suffering. One prays to Jesus and collapses on her knees. The other raises her hands to Allah and asks why. They become one. This is yet another artistic triumph in the film for Moore.

The film's basic premise—the Bush administration spread and exaggerated fear generated by the September 11, 2001 attacks to manipulate American people into supporting an illogical war not tied to world terrorism—has not been soundly refuted by the administration or any supporter of the administration, nor can it be.

Instead, we have the usual personal attacks of the right-wing. (Moore's weight seems to be why many right-wingers want to discredit the film as if the right-winger Rush Limbaugh couldn't also use some low-carb diet advice.) Not one fact presented by the movie has been refuted. Not one. The right-wing has claimed the film contains errors of minor facts that are so removed from the movie's premise and basic ideas the claims become ludicrous.

Who cares, for example, if the film suggests members of Osama bin Laden's family (the financial connections between the bin Laden and Bush families are somewhat old news) were flown out before air space opened after the attacks? The film does not actually say they were flown out before air traffic resumed, and it is certainly not central to any of film's major arguments. These sorts of ridiculous attacks are for the benefit of

closed-minded people who will probably never go to the movie in the first place. Go see the movie and judge for yourself.

Although history will be the final judge, what Moore has achieved is remarkable. This film openly argues for immediate political change, strives for truth within the relatively mundane and average context of the middle and lower classes, and absorbs its audience in a type of "Mr. Everyman" narrative even as it constructs brilliant artistic epiphanies. It has the emotional texture of a James Joyce or a John Steinbeck novel.

Finally, it is difficult to understand the hackneyed arguments of corporate media pundits who say this film will have no effect on voters. If it merely serves to ratchet up the growing disenchantment with Bush, and I think it will, then that alone will have a significant and powerful impact on the election. What you are hearing on television are Bush apologists and extremely rich corporate media entertainers trying to denigrate millions of average Americans who simply want to know the truth.

I think Moore, in attempting to make up for the failures of the mainstream media, has created something quite new in film. It's New New Media, avant-garde, gutsy, truthful, real, exciting. I hope we see more films like it.

July 8, 2004

What Does George Bush's Second Term Mean For Oklahoma?

As George Bush begins his second term as president today, one of the lingering questions for Oklahoma progressives is this: How much will his second-term presidency help push Oklahoma politicians to adopt even more radical, right-wing positions in terms of economic and cultural issues?

Another question is this: What will it take to convince a majority of Oklahoma voters to discard the irrationality of American nationalism and religious fundamentalism and vote for their own financial interests and personal freedoms and liberties?

I will give my answers later, but, first, I want to talk about Thomas Frank again.

In this book, I have often referred Frank's book *What's The Matter With Kansas?*. Frank tries to figure out why a majority of people in the so-called heartland have dismissed their leftist pasts and joined forces with the recent conservative juggernaut. He points out how a majority of Kansans, like Oklahomans, vote to ensure their rural towns will not survive, their small schools will close, and their children will have bleak futures.

Frank believes the takeover of mainstream media by the conservatives has much to do with this, and I agree with him on this issue. Oklahoma progressives are especially sensitive to this issue. *The Daily Oklahoman* has for years distorted the news and given only one-sided, conservative views about the state's politics. The newspaper, without any sense of justice, openly and consistently supports Oklahoma's wealthiest citizens over the middle class and impoverished.

Yet I would argue other issues are in play here in Oklahoma. For example, college educational levels in Oklahoma remain low, so one might surmise that many voters are easily manipulated by simple appeals to emotion. Also, those fundamentalist religious

ideas first politically sanctioned by former President Ronald Reagan have spread here in Oklahoma as much as they have in the Middle East. And George Bush now validates all extreme religious views throughout the world one way or another, either by celebrating fundamentalist Christianity in Oklahoma and elsewhere or by describing as a crusade his intention to do away with Muslim religious fanatics. In the long run, what is the difference?

(It's important to note Bush's personal views can hardly be described as extreme. He merely politicizes extreme religious ideas to manipulate voters and ensure power remains vested in the Republican Party.)

We have seen Bush's direct and indirect influence, I believe, in helping the Republicans take over the Oklahoma House of Representatives for the first time in four decades. There are now no brakes on the conservative onslaught in this state. Already, the state Republicans, emboldened by their victories and the president's reelection, are plotting how to redistribute tax income to the state's wealthiest residents (i.e., the Gaylord family, oil company executives, etc.) under Orwellian named programs such as The Oklahoma Prosperity Project or the Taxpayers' Bill of Rights.

And so my answers to my initial questions are not positive for Oklahoma progressives. Yes, the state can become even more radically conservative in the coming years as the Republicans take the country, incrementally, into the abyss, gutting Social Security, redistributing income to the country's wealthiest, and blurring distinctions between church and state.

What could change this, of course, is a huge, national financial disaster, which might serve as a wake-up call, but I suspect the country voters can limp along with mediocre

but not catastrophic job and income growth as long as the right can manipulate people with fear and lies and appeals to nationalism and religion. Look how national economic policies forced our state schools into major cutbacks a couple of years ago with little or no protest from the media or the voters. The Oklahoma City Public School District still has not recovered from that disaster. The district is now short 200 teachers because many teachers undoubtedly have gone on to other states who pay them better and treat them better.

And what will it take to convince Oklahoma voters their financial interests and personal freedoms are not represented by the radical right?

This is a more difficult question. I do think many libertarian-like Republicans are secretly and sometimes openly afraid of the influence of religious fundamentalism in our state politics, and so it remains our mission to bring this issue to the forefront whenever we can. This one issue can siphon enough votes away from conservatives on a national level to swing the balance of power in Washington.

But how do we approach the rest of those Oklahoma voters who hate themselves and their children so much they vote to ensure they have low wages, fewer job opportunities, inadequate health care insurance, all in the name of fundamentalist religion and fervent nationalism?

My belief is progressives need to stay consistent with logic and rationality and hope for the best, but we will not accomplish much, frankly, if national progressives continue to write off red states, such as Oklahoma. Many have done so since the election, judging by articles published on Web sites such as Common Dreams, and this is not good news.

Much has been made in the press recently about George Bush's accountability moment. Bush, in an interview with a reporter for *The Washington Post*, said his policies have been vindicated because voters reelected him, and thus he does not have to be held accountable to any criticism of his administration. The major problem with this thinking is that many people never received a balanced assessment of the impact his policies—whether the Iraqi war debacle or tax cuts for the most wealthy—have had on the country and on the world because of biased media coverage.

We have to try to provide that balance even knowing that doing so in Oklahoma, with its immoral, unbalanced mainstream media, is probably a losing cause right now.

Yes, we are marginalized here, at this particular moment in history, but I believe progressive voices will prevail again in the state as they did once before in the early 1900s.

January 20, 2005

Okie Democrats Stand Up Against Bush

We should all commend those three Democrats in the Oklahoma Legislature who are trying to pass a state resolution that would ask Congress to reject President George Bush's plan to dismantle Social Security by privatizing the system.

The three legislators, state Reps. Ryan Kiesel (D-Seminole) and Richard Morrisette (D-Oklahoma City), and state Sen. Kenneth Corn (D-Howe), have the courage and tenacity to stand up against Oklahoma's entrenched, right-wing power structure on this important issue. (The Okie conservative, fat-cats are already howling about this one.)

Their resolution simply asks Congress to reject Bush's risky scheme that would allow younger workers to set up private investment accounts with their Social Security money. The point is not necessarily to tell Congress what to do but to show the legislative body that there is a growing grassroots movement—even in Oklahoma's Bush country—against the president's plan to transfer billions of tax dollars to wealthy Wall Street bankers.

Ultimately, some argue, the president's plan would mean reduced benefits for everyone in the country, including those retired people now collecting Social Security. The system cannot sustain the costs of the private investment accounts without major cuts of some type.

This Republican plan to destroy Social Security is part of its continuing immoral scheme to transfer even more money to the wealthiest people in our country. Since Bush has taken office, the rich have gotten richer off the backs of hard-working people in Oklahoma and elsewhere. Meanwhile, the job market remains stagnant, health costs are up, and the price of gasoline is skyrocketing.

The Daily Oklahoman, of course, is already howling about the state resolution. An April 5 editorial, titled “Leave it alone: State Security effort is off base,” argues that the three are “pandering to the AARP (American Association of Retired People) wing of the Democratic Party.” The “AARP wing?” Give me a break. This is deceitful and immoral. (I ask you to picture some weird *Oklahoman* editorial writer hectoring a poor, elderly person in a wheelchair. That, essentially, is what is going on here.) The AARP is not a political organization. It simply opposes Bush on this particular plan and rightly so. It has supported the president on other plans.

But, of course, the editorial will not mention that because the newspaper is part of a ongoing smear campaign against the AARP.

Do you think Christy Gaylord Everest, a principal owner and the publisher of *The Daily Oklahoman*, will ever have to rely on a Social Security check to make ends meet? Of course not.

So why won't she call off her editorial dogs on this issue? Does she not have any conscience whatsoever? How much more money does she need?

And what about our right-wing U.S. Senators Tom Coburn and Jim Inhofe, or how about the rest of Oklahoma's morally-challenged Congressional delegation, including Representatives Ernest Istook and Tom Cole? Will they ever need a Social Security check to buy groceries or life-sustaining medicine or make a mortgage payment? Of course not.

Everest and our right-wing Congressional delegation do not care about you or your future or your children. They want your money, as much as they can get, and they are laughing behind your back all the way to the bank.

So I think it a good, healthy sign in Oklahoman these three courageous state politicians will brave the scorn of the state's largest newspaper and the entrenched rich and right-wing power structure to protect the future retirement of ordinary, hard-working Oklahomans. It takes guts to stand up to the Oklahoma power structure, which is constantly squelching dissent in subtle and obvious ways.

Let's hope it is a part of something larger here.

April 5, 2005

A Botched War Based On Lies

“In times of universal deceit, telling the truth will be a revolutionary act.”—George Orwell

We are the hollow men

We are the stuffed men

Leaning together

Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!”—from T.S. Eliot’s poem “The Hollow Men”

With twenty-one U.S. Marines killed in Iraq over the last three days, it is crucial we continue a relentless look at the lies leading us into this botched war. Our American soldiers are paying the highest price for these lies, and no amount of “We Support Our Troops” car ribbons will bring them back to life or give their deaths more meaning.

As many progressive commentators have noted, the political scandal now called Rovegate has a larger meaning than the various nuances and mishaps of its principal players and whether Karl Rove broke the law when he apparently outed covert CIA agent Valerie Plame to a *Time Magazine* reporter or whether jailed *New York Times* reporter Judith Miller should be fired for her lies about weapons of mass destruction.

A more important issue is that the scandal shows how the Bush administration deceived the American public in taking this country into a war that has now turned into the worst military debacle in the country’s history. Rove was just one of many White House officials who abandoned the truth so “W” could have his meaningless war over weapons of mass destruction that were never found.

The war has increased the world terrorist threat and costs billions of taxpayers’ dollars. More than 1,800 American soldiers have been killed and nearly 14,000 have been

wounded. More than 25,000 civilian Iraqis have been killed. The toll goes higher every day. Now our guys in Iraq are forming alliances and agreements with Iran, another axis-of-evil nation.

We have not won the war under the terms given to us by our president, and we will not win the war no matter how the Bush administration spins/lies a victory. We are losing. Let me say this again. We are losing. We are getting our butts kicked by the Iraqi insurgency, just like we got our butts kicked in Vietnam by the Viet Cong. Meanwhile, those we support in Iraq are joining forces with a nation hostile to the United States. Any other reading of the war facts is yet another White House-sponsored lie.

Taking the country to war on lies is the most grievous act a United States President can commit. This is a non-partisan issue. It transcends party politics. We cannot, or at least we should not, let our presidents lie us into wars.

But there is an even the larger issue of how Bush's war lies represent the growing fragility and vulnerability of American democracy.

Millions of Americans, for example, still will not demand an investigation of Bush's war lies. Some of these people are certainly ill-informed, brainwashed by the ultra-conservative Fox News or any other number of right-wing, corporate mediate outlets that spew Bush propaganda and have the audacity to call it journalism.

But some, it is fair to say, are lifestyle liberal, political conservatives who frankly do not care an American president has lied the country into war. (They would call me naïve.) They are reaping the rewards of corporate worship and lower taxes on the wealthy. Others are religious zealots who also do not care about the president's lies as long as their fundamentalist, medieval views—which emulate the views of Islamic extremists in so

many ways—are validated by the White House. Then there are those in the mainstream corporate media who refuse or are afraid to discuss the lies at any length or depth.

These last three groups of people are not only immoral but also short-sighted. By allowing a president to take the country to war on lies, they have, in essence, removed any barriers, any threshold, of presidential power. They have done immense, immeasurable harm to this country.

It is not hyperbole to say that after George W. Bush, American presidents, Republican, Democratic or whatever, will be able to lie at will about anything without repercussion. The question, then, is this: Will we have a democratic government after George Bush, no matter who is elected?

In their zeal to support the president despite his war lies, many Republicans have lost sight of what will happen when Bush is no longer president. It is quite possible a Democrat could be our next president. What will prevent this new president from also lying about anything, even another war? Given Bush's ultra-divisive politics, what will prevent millions upon millions of Democrats from ignoring these hypothetical lies in order to overturn some of the more insidious and immoral acts of the conservative agenda or advancing progressive programs?

I want to say the Democrats have more honor, more respect for democracy, and there is truth to this in the left-leaning sections of the party. But I also fear the new political climate will be so firmly entrenched by the time Bush leaves the White House that lies and distortions and doublespeak from our presidents will be the new architecture, the new platform, the new frame of American government. And that simply means we will longer live in a democracy.

Oh yes, American presidents lie. Nixon about Watergate, Reagan about the Contras, and Clinton about Lewinski. In retrospect, though, these lies were minor, historical blips showing lack of character and hubris. But lying the country into a major, unilateral, meaningless war is the coupe de grace of lies, the ur-lie, the uber-lie, the quintessential lie. After this presidential war lie, any presidential lie will pale in comparison and will be so judged. Already, for example, we have to deal with the disparity between how the media attacked Clinton over lying about his relationship with Monica Lewinski and how it gave a free lie-at-will pass to Bush about war. It remains incomprehensible to millions of Americans and people throughout the world how and why this has happened.

Ultimately, then, the future of democracy in this country is in the hands of people who are placing partisan politics and short-term, personal gain above democracy. When these people wake up, there can be hope. But not until then.

All roads then lead back to Rovegate which shows, once again, undeniably that the administration lied to go to war and continues to lie about it afterwards by attacking those who told the truth. In his quest to smear Ambassador Joseph Wilson who was reporting the truth about Saddam Hussein's lack of weapons of mass destruction, Rove was merely participating in the conspiracy of lies sanctioned by the president and perpetuated by Vice President Dick Cheney, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, Secretary of State Colin Powell, and National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, all of whom will live in historical infamy for their assault on American democracy.

Each of these people sold out their country for personal power and gain. Let us hope our history textbooks will one day reflect this because it would then mean we were able to rescue democracy.

The lies leading to the Iraq War and the acceptance of these lies by some American people will become known as the turning point for our country's short-lived run with democracy unless Republicans step up soon and demand an independent investigation, possibly leading to Bush's impeachment. Those who turn away from this difficult task turn away from their country in one of its most dire times.

August 3, 2005

The Lies Of Bush, McKinley, Murdoch, And Hearst: Remember The Miller!

Historians and political experts have pointed out recently that President George Bush's war lies have some parallel with war-related fibs told by U.S. Presidents William McKinley, Woodrow Wilson, and Lyndon Johnson.

Bush's lies, though, are simply more pernicious, obvious, and costly for American freedom and foreign policy. In some respects, there is no parallel in American presidential history for Bush's lies. He lied this country into an unprovoked and meaningless war that is quickly becoming the country's worst military debacles ever. He did so to consolidate and extend the country's current one-party government, which threatens our democratic foundations.

Yet Bush's relationship in history to the war-liar McKinley, another Republican, has some uncanny parallels, especially in how both Bush and McKinley used sensationalist journalism to advance their lies.

McKinley's action to begin the Spanish-American war of 1898 by attacking the Spanish in Cuba was precipitated, in part, by a New York newspaper owned by William Randolph Hearst, forever immortalized by Orson Welles's classic movie, *Citizen Kane*.

Many historians argue Hearst wanted a war to help sell newspapers, and thus he portrayed the Spaniards as evil, barbaric animals in his newspaper. After an explosion on the battleship *USS Maine* that turned out later to be caused by perhaps a malfunctioning furnace, Hearst and others turned up the war propaganda with consistent sloganeering such as "Remember the *Maine*," and McKinley went along.

Eventually, America took over the Spanish colonies in Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippines, but not after thousands had died. Consequently, American imperialism replaced Spanish imperialism.

Bush, too, has a Hearst or two helping to advance his lies. One is the conservative media baron Rupert Murdoch, whose right-wing Fox News has gleefully supported Bush's lies since the war's inception. The other, of course, is Judith Miller, the disgraced and now jailed *New York Times* reporter who consistently lied about Saddam Hussein's fictional weapons of mass destruction before the war began.

Without the support of Murdoch's Fox News and Miller, Bush's lies would have withered on the vine. We would not be in this mess, and the country would not be as divided.

The Times continues to support Miller who has refused to divulge the name of the person who outed covert CIA agent Valerie Plame to her. Miller, some now argue, was actually trying to find and spread information to smear Plame's husband, Ambassador Joseph Wilson, who wrote an article contesting Bush's lies about Hussein's weapons before the war began. Wilson's article, in fact, challenged the type of extreme right-wing ideology and warmongering that made its way into Miller's stories.

On some level, both McKinley and Bush lied for imperialistic reasons as well. McKinley lied to push so-called American interests in the Philippines, for example, just as Bush lied to push America's interest in Middle-Eastern oil reserves. Neither president was straightforward with the American public about the real reasons for the war.

Historians also point out how President Wilson lied us into World War I and how President Johnson used lies about attacks from the North Vietnamese in the Gulf of

Tonkin to continue the country's involvement in the Vietnam War quagmire. But Wilson was responding to a 1915 German attack on a passenger ship that killed many Americans, and Johnson did not start the Vietnam War through a sudden, unprovoked invasion. This is not to excuse their actions. It is only meant to put Bush's war lies in appropriate perspective.

But here are the two major reasons why Bush's lies are worse than his predecessors':

(1) Bush's lies were primarily used to consolidate one-party, quasi-fascist rule in the country by dividing the country through horrific propaganda. As Fox News and Judith Miller fixated the American public on the sensationalism and emotionalism of war, the Bush regime began an immoral, systematic campaign to attack democratic principles through its unending support of right-wing religious fanatics and by transferring great amounts of wealth from middle-class people to the country's richest people. No one could suggest that McKinley's lies were somehow altruistic in comparison to Bush. He did use the success (another "Mission Accomplished" stunt) of his unneeded war to win a second term as president. But the fog created by Bush's war lies, with the help of Murdoch and Miller, have created an American era in which the public does not know how or why or when White House decisions are made. Under the darkness of secrecy created by war propaganda advanced by their corporate media stooges, the Bush administration pushes its right-wing agenda.

(2) Bush, unlike his predecessors, has been able to completely manipulate the corporate media in the country with his war lies. Certainly, the Internet has helped those opposed to Bush, but the mainstream press has completely capitulated to Bush's immoral governing philosophy of lies and distortions, and there is no end in sight. No previous

president has been given a free pass like Bush when it comes to obvious, in-your-face-and-I-don't-care lies. No one. True, the media is much different today than in McKinley's time, but Bush enjoys universal support from the commercial media, even though a majority of Americans (and it grows by the hour) now think he lied about the war and even though a vast majority of people in the world have always known and accepted he lied.

It is one thing to be duped by audacity and the trappings of power. It is another thing to ignore a huge majority of people in your country demanding the mainstream media investigate and expose about the lies of our president. This is simply unprecedented and should be cause for alarm among Democrats and Republicans alike. It lowers the bar of our country's values, sets a new precedent for immorality, and threatens to end the world's respect for the American symbols of freedom and democracy.

Sure, we know American presidents lie all the time. Look at Richard Nixon's lies about Watergate or Bill Clinton's lies about Monica Lewinski. But lying a country into war is the most grievous act an American president can commit. It transcends other lies. This country's intellectuals should continue relentlessly to examine Bush's war lies in the context of their unique place in American history. If they do not, democracy here remains in peril as American soldiers and innocent Iraqis continue to die for a rich man's heinous lies.

(Postscript: The anti-war movement continues to galvanize around the amazing Cindy Sheehan, whose son died in Iraq. Sheehan pulls no punches. She says Bush lied, and she says he knew he lied.)

August 21, 2005

Bush And Katrina

President George Bush's administration is already trying to shift blame away from itself for the federal government's deplorable and immoral reaction to Hurricane Katrina, especially to the living hell that once was New Orleans.

This time, Bush's blame-game shift, the rhetorical subterfuge, the in-your-face Orwellian lies, will not work for the simple reason that Americans can see and feel the destruction and suffering in New Orleans. It is not hidden in the violent streets of Baghdad where no reporters will venture. This is a large, important American city. Even right-wing Fox News, which declines to cover Bush's bloody war lest we know the dirty truth, is forced to acknowledge the Katrina carnage.

Americans know only the federal government has the equipment and manpower to respond to such a large-scale disaster. They will no longer listen to Bush's excuses and lies.

As survivors tell their heartbreaking stories of waiting and waiting for help as dead bodies floated by their dilapidated homes, Bush's political fortunes plummet. He failed those people in New Orleans, and many are dead and injured just as he has failed the troops in Iraq.

Yet the disaster ultimately transcends partisan politics. What we now live in—Democratic, Republican, whatever—is a country that is obviously not safe from terrorist attacks and a country unable to respond quickly and efficiently to a national disaster because of a senseless war some say will create a Iranian-style theocracy and haven for terror training in Iraq. The people in charge of our country at the federal level are incompetent because this is exactly what they have done. They should be fired.

One more large hurricane or another natural disaster, another horrific terrorist attack, and our world significance becomes even more negligible. Already the federal government's snail-like response to Katrina has shown the world America is certainly not your father's superpower. Perhaps, it is no longer a superpower at all, only a hollowed-out shell of its former self because of what the leadership of Bush has wrought in our great country.

To say we are vulnerable is to state the most obvious. Can you believe we are in such a precarious position? Can you believe what the Bushies have done to the greatest country on the planet? It is surreal. Will the mainstream media finally wake up and tell the truth?

In five years, Bush has single-handedly taken the world's only real superpower, the former beacon for democracy throughout the world, and squandered it away on prizes for his war-profiteering friends. (Already Halliburton is lining up at the Hurricane Katrina trough, according to news reports.)

Although it may seem ludicrous on its surface and the right-wing noise machine will scoff, more and more people in coming days will call on President Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney to resign their positions so the country can move forward, so America can be strong once again. The impeachment movement, always a long shot, will kick into overdrive. All of us need to be diligent on this issue.

I also believe Americans will now no longer stand by and let this administration turn the country into a second-rate, quasi-fascist, theocratic nation vulnerable to attack by enemies. New, renewed and sustained political action will ensure Bush and company cannot continue to systematically destroy the security and safety of this country.

Consequently, the 2006 elections loom large in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Bush's lack of leadership, his inept decisions, his lies, from the Iraq War to tax cuts for the rich in a time of war, will be the major factor in the elections. Bush will never regain any semblance of his once burgeoning popularity, which was based entirely on lies and spin anyway, and his administration should be reigned in starting today by congressional and media oversight.

Again, it is not a matter of partisan politics. We all must stop this immoral presidential administration from plundering America's riches and treasures as it reduces the safety and security of all its citizens. This is an old morality tale, the one in which the corrupt despot unable to see beyond his hubris, turns the mighty empire into a land of squalor and poverty unable to defend itself. History will show this unless we have a major political correction.

What the tragedy has also exposed is Bush's immoral indifference to middle-class and poor people who suffered the most in the disaster. The white people got out of New Orleans before the flooding because they had the money to do so. Many in the city's poor, predominately African American communities, without money, without cars, were forced to stay behind, and they suffered unbelievable horrors that should shame us all as Americans.

On the television, in images seen throughout the world, America looks like an uncaring, corrupt, third-world country.

What the world will also hear and read is that Bush's policies have increased poverty in this country to shameful, staggering rates. It will also hear that wages for all average Americans have remained stagnant for five straight years, the most consecutive years

since records have been kept by the U.S. Census Bureau. It will hear the rich here have become richer through tax cuts and government policies favoring corporations. These are facts, not political statements.

Bush, meanwhile, was on five-week vacation he would not end even as the death toll mounted in Louisiana and Mississippi, as a thousand Iraqis died on a bridge because of his indifference and inept leadership. He was on vacation. Americans were dying and suffering. He was on vacation. People are not secure here, and they are not secure in Iraq. It is now time to bring the troops home from Iraq to protect and defend our country. Americans now ask: How many more deaths will it take? How much more suffering is enough?

The answer to those questions can be seen in the horrific stories and images coming out of New Orleans.

September 4, 2005

The Liar-In-Chief Should Resign

'Listen, I know of nobody -- I don't know of anybody in my administration who leaked classified information. If somebody did leak classified information, I'd like to know it, and we'll take the appropriate action. And this investigation is a good thing.'—George Bush, Sept. 30, 2003.

President George Bush has been caught in yet another deception. The question now is whether Bush is simply a pathological liar with a personality disorder or a misguided, pathetic puppet controlled by immoral weasels. Either way, he should resign so this country can return to some semblance of normalcy.

It was revealed last week that I. Lewis “Scooter” Libby has testified to a grand jury that Bush authorized a leak of sensitive intelligence information to former *New York Times* reporter neocon Judith Miller. Meanwhile, Bush has been claiming for months he wants to find such leakers and punish them. Perhaps, he should punish himself now by resigning.

According to news reports, Bush wanted to leak the information to bolster his fictional case for the Iraq War. Bush wanted Americans to believe Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction when he did not. Bush was directly involved in trying to manipulate the media to report his intentional lies and deception. It is despicable, and it shows, again, more immoral acts leading to a botched war.

Libby, who is under indictment, was the top aide to Vice President Dick Cheney before he recently resigned.

Iraq is now engaged in a major civil war because of the lies and short-sighted policies and incompetence of the Bush administration. Iraq is falling to pieces, disintegrating, and

the entire region will be affected by the chaos. Thousands upon thousands of innocent lives—American soldiers and Iraqi citizens—have been lost. Even more have been severely injured with wounds that will last a lifetime. Billions of American tax dollars have been spent to fight a war that has no meaning, no purpose.

Bush and his handlers are sure to put their spin on this new revelation. For now, they decline to comment, which only confirms Bush did authorize the leak. But here is the truth: Bush lied this country into a war that has turned into one of the largest, ugliest and most immoral debacles ever in American history. The country needs to reconcile this fact with its democratic structures. The best and easiest way to do that would be for Bush to resign the presidency.

April 9, 2006

Bush Should Be Impeached

You would not know it from the mainstream media and especially here in quasi-Bushland, where *The Daily Oklahoman's* editorial page still licks the cowboy boots of a president with a mere 29 percent approval rating, but there is a strong, growing movement in this country to impeach George Bush.

Congressional and other candidates throughout the country are actually running on the impeachment platform. For example, Bill McClosky, a candidate for the U.S. Congress in Los Angeles says:

“A President cannot commit a more serious crime against our democracy than lying to Congress and the American people to get them to support a military action or war. It is not just cowardly and abhorrent to fool others into giving their lives for a nonexistent threat; it is that the decision to go to war, in a democracy, must be made by the people and their representatives. Given that the consequence is death for tens of thousands of people and the diversion of billions of dollars to the war effort, the fraud cannot be tolerated. The President should be impeached for committing fraud.”

For the record, Bush lied this country into a botched, illogical war, sanctioned the torture of prisoners in American custody, and ordered the illegal wiretapping of American citizens. All these acts are impeachable offenses. The only reason the Republican-dominated Congress does not investigate the president is because they have sold out the country's interests to partisan politics.

This country must have some type of reconciliation for Bush's actions or our democratic structures will be jeopardized. It is understandable, given the fear mongering of this administration, that the country's citizens are just now realizing the magnitude of

Bush's actions, and this is reflected in the president's declining poll numbers. We must reaffirm democracy and freedom in this country.

May 17, 2006

Notes

Versions of all the articles in this book have appeared on my blog, Okie Funk: Notes From The Outback, www.okiefunk.com. With minor exceptions, I have retained the same title for each piece. I also removed the hyperlinks and edited the posts for consistency and style. You can search for the blog posts in the Okie Funk archives or under the categories section. Most of the posts contain links to other material on the Internet.

My short story, "Route Coyote," that appears in the intercalary chapters between each section was initially published in *The Missouri Review*, Volume XVI, Number 1, 1993.

The references to Rogers' writing in the Okie Rebels series come from *The Writings of Will Rogers: The Daily Telegrams, Series III-IV, 1925-1935*, or from the book *Will Rogers Speaks*, edited by Bryan and Frances Sterling. The sources for other quotes in the series are explained in the text. Here is a list of the cited sources: Averill, David, "From California to ...". *The Tulsa World* 31 Jan 1999: 5; Brown, William. *Imagemaker: Will Rogers and the American Dream*. Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1970; Casey, Patrick. "Okemah Tunes Up For Woody Guthrie: Not Everyone Thrilled By Songwriter's Fame." *The Daily Oklahoman* 14 July 1998: 8; Collins, Reba Neighbors. "Book Shares Depression Stories of 'Black Okies.'" *The Daily Oklahoman* 23 April 2000: 9; Crow, Pat. "Okemah Recognizes Controversial Song: Woody Guthrie's Kin Visits Hometown." *The Tulsa World* 15 July 1971: 5; Dunbar-Ortiz, Rosa. *Red Dirt: Growing Up Okie*. California UP, 1977; Guthrie, Woody. *Bound For Glory*. New York: Dutton, 1943; Guthrie, Woody. *Woody Guthrie Folk Songs*. New York: Ludlow Music, 1963; Hochenauer, Kurt. "The Rhetoric of American Protest: Thomas Paine and the Education of Tom Joad." *The Midwest Quarterly* 25 (1994): 392-404; Kazin, Michael. *The Populist*

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The article, "When Will The Oklahoman Allow Dissenting Views To Its Ultra-Conservative Opinions?," was published in a slightly modified form on June 25, 2004 in *The Oklahoma Observer*.

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Look@OKC
Los Angeles
Lott, Trent
Louisiana
Lucas, Frank
Lucas, Neil Quentin
Mankiw, N. Gregory
MAPS
Marlboro Light
Marxism
Massachusetts
Mastercard
Mayflower Congregational Church
Mazzei, Mike
MBNA America
McCarthy, Joseph
McCarville, Mike
McClendon, Aubrey
McClosky, Bill
McEntire, Reba
McKinley, William
Media
 -Corporate
 -Mainstream
Medicaid
Medicare
Megachurches
Mejia, Camilo
Metro Transit
Meyers, Rev. Robin
Middle-East

Middleton, Timothy
Military
Miller, Judith
Miller, Ken
Mississippi
Missouri
Mo Radio Show
Modzelewski, Mo
Momaday, N. Scott
Moore, Michael
Morgan, Mike
Mormon
Morrissette, Richard
Moses
Moveon.org
MSNBC
Mullally, Megan
Murdoch, Rupert
Muslim
National Guard
NBC
Nebraska
Neocon
Neocreationism
New Deal
New Jersey
New Mexico
New Orleans-Oklahoma City Hornets
New York
Newkirk
Ney, Robert
Nichols, Larry
Nichols, Max
Nietzsche, Fredrich
No Child Left Behind
Norquist, Grover
Norton, Gale
Not All Okies Are White
Novak, Robert
O'Connell's
O'Reilly, Bill
OCPA (Oklahoma Council of Public
 Affairs)
Ohio
Oil
Oil companies

Okemah
Oklahoma City
Oklahoma City Blazers
Oklahoma City Memorial
Oklahoma City RedHawks
Oklahoma City University
Oklahoma City's Peace House
Oklahoma Conference of Churches
Oklahoma Council of Public Affairs
(OCPA)
Oklahoma County Metropolitan Library
Commission
Oklahoma Education Association
-Lawsuit
Oklahoma Evolution Listserv
Oklahoma House of Representatives
Oklahoma Independent Media Center
Oklahoma Lottery
Oklahoma Medical Research Foundation
Oklahoma Public Employees
Association
Oklahoma Publishing Company
Oklahoma Religious Act
Oklahoma Senate
Oklahoma Sooners
Oklahoma State University
Oklahoma Supreme Court
Oklahomans for Excellence in Science
Education
Oklahomans for Global Solutions
Old Testament
Oologah
OPEC (Organization of Petroleum
Exporting Companies)
Orwell, George
Orwellian
Owens, Bill
Paine, Thomas
Parmley, Jay
Pennsylvania
Phillips, Leon
Pickens, Boone
Plame, Valerie
Polling
Ponca City
Populism

Prayer in school
Protest
Pure Food and Drugs Act
Rabon, Jeff
Raise Oklahoma
Reagan, Ronald
Red Dirt: Growing Up Okie
Red River Democracy Project
Religion
Religious Freedom Amendment
Reproductive rights
Republican Party
Rice, Condoleeza
Rideout, Walter
Right-wing armadillos
Roads
Robertson, Pat
Roe v. Wade
Rogers, Will
Roosevelt, Franklin D.
Roosevelt, Theodore
Rove, Karl
-Rovegate
Rumsfeld, Donald
Safire, William
Salon.com
Santorum, Rick
Savage, Michael
Savage, William
SBC Bricktown Ballpark
Scanlon, Michael
Scarborough, Joe
School closing
School consolidation
Schwarzenegger, Arnold
Science
Secrecy
Senate Bill
-1742
-1959
-2022
September 11
Sexual humiliation
Shaw, Bernard
Sheehan, Cindy
Sinclair, Upton

Sinclair Broadcasting Corporation
Smith, Keith
Social Security
Socialism
Sonic
South Dakota
Soviet Union
Spanish-American War
Speer, Bonnie
Splaingard, Randy
Sports Suites, LLC
Stalin
Steinbeck, John
Sterling, Bryan and Frances
Stigler
Stillwater
Stowe, Harriet Beecher
Stress positions
Students
Sullivan, Bob
Sullivan, John
SUVs
Swift Boat
TABOR
Tainted cheese
Tax
 -Cuts
 -Refunds
Tax Foundation
Taxpayers Persecution Relief Act
Taylor, Stratton
Teachers
 -Salaries
Terror alerts
Ten Commandments
Texas
The Bible
The Columbia Journalism Review
The Daily Oklahoman
The Duke Who Outlawed Jelly Beans
The Jungle
The New York Review of Books
The New York Times
The Oil Age
The Oklahoma Gazette
The Oklahoma Observer

The Progressive Voice
The Radical Novel in the United States, 1900-1954
The Tin Drum
The Tulsa World
The Wall Street Journal
The Washington Post
The Way to Rainy Mountain
The Writing of Will Rogers: The Daily Telegrams, Series III-IV, 1925-1935
Theocracy
Thurmond, Strom
Tinney, Ginger
Tom Joad
Tramel, Berry
TRIO
Troy, Frosty
Tulsa
Tulsa Race Riot
Tuskegee Institute
U.S. Supreme Court
UCOpC
Unemployment
University of Central Oklahoma
University of Colorado-Boulder
University of Oklahoma
USS Maine
Vance Air Force Base
Victory Gin
Vietnam
Virginia
Visa
Vitter, David
Wagoner, Rich, Jr.
Wall Street
Wallace, George
Wal-Mart
Walters, Elizabeth
Ward, Tom
Warr Acres
Washington Redskins
Washington, Booker T.
Washington, George
Water boarding
Weapons of mass destruction
Wesselhoft, Paul

What's the Matter with Kansas?

White Trash

Whitman, Walt

Will Rogers Museum

Will Rogers Speaks

Will, George

Williamson, James

Wilson, Joseph

Wilson, Woodrow

Wiretapping

Women

-Rights

-Violence against

Workers Compensation

World War II

Wyoming

YMCA

Young voters