

The Ledger editorial page

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EDITORIALS

LEDGER OPINIONS

[LAKELAND POLICE OVERSIGHT]

Officers Humiliate Women

Women questioned by many of Lakeland's police officers have

been required to lift their upper clothing, pull their bras away from their breasts and shake to see if anything falls out.

Part 2 of 4

This despicable-and-demeaning procedure came to light after Zoe Brugger, 28, of Lakeland was pulled over May 21 at 11 p.m. She was driving her domestic partner, Larry Fields, 35, home from work.

As the couple was driving along West Beacon Street, Lakeland Police Officer Dustin Fetz pulled over the car for having a headlight that was not working.

With the car at the curb, Fetz presided over the traffic stop by bullying and intimidating Brugger.

Fetz ordered Brugger out of the car. He ordered her to turn the pockets of her pants inside out. He ordered her to pull up her shirt to her bra. He ordered her to pull her bra away from her breasts and shake. Dissatisfied, he ordered her to pull her bra away from her breasts and shake a second time.

Humiliated and crying at the curbside, Brugger repeatedly refused insistent requests from Fetz to search the car. Brugger had borrowed it from a friend. At one point, Brugger gave in to Fetz's badgering and said he could search the car. Then she immediately took back the permission.

Despite being told repeatedly by Brugger that she did not consent to a search of the car — and despite withdrawing her brief permission before he could begin a search — Fetz ignored Brugger's pleas and searched the car without permission.

STATE ATTORNEY'S INVESTIGATION

The details of this indefensible rampage of authoritarianism are drawn from a report by Investigator Mike Brown of the 10th Judicial Circuit Office of the State Attorney. The report is based on sworn statements made by Brugger, Fields, Fetz and Lakeland Police Officer Jeremy Williams. He came to the traffic stop as a backup officer.

Much of what occurred can be seen on a video from Fetz's dashboard video camera: www.theled.gr/Pf. No sound can be heard, though, because Fetz left his Police Department-required audio equipment inside the police car.

The most concerning point — revealed by both police officers in their independent sworn statements to the State Attorney's Office — is that having women lift their upper clothing, and pull their bras away from their breasts and shake, is a common practice of Lakeland Police officers, even though it is not approved by the department.

The inappropriate traffic stop came to light after Brugger spoke to retired lawyer Richard J. Wiley of Lakeland, with whom she is acquainted. Riley wrote a letter to the editor about Brugger's treatment, published June 2.

Based on the letter, the State Attorney's Office conducted an investigation, completed June 14.

ALARMING REPORT

State Attorney Jerry Hill wrote a scathing two-page letter to Lakeland Police Chief Lisa Womack on June 17, based on the investigative report.

"The conclusions of this report should be alarming to you as chief and to Lakeland citizens," Hill wrote.

About the bra-search technique, Hill wrote, "This highly questionable search method is not only demeaning, but is ineffective and possibly dangerous." He warned that a weapon concealed in a bra could be used against an officer in such a search. "Even more alarming," Hill wrote, "the officer's conduct in this case is not an isolated incident, but appears to be accepted practice."

Hill concluded: "I hope these training and supervision deficiencies can soon be corrected. Continued use of these practices will have an adverse impact on the case involved."

Womack rightly ordered an investigation of the traffic stop directly after Wiley's letter was published.

However, the detestable treatment of Zoe Brugger by Lakeland Police Officer Dustin Fetz — and the like actions of other Lakeland officers — testifies to a cowboy contingent in the Police Department.

Womack is failing to control her department. She must root out impropriety and establish discipline immediately. City Manager Doug Thomas must ensure that this is accomplished.

The City Commission should then conduct or commission an independent review to evaluate the efficacy of Womack's action.



RIC LEONARD

VOICE OF THE PEOPLE

READER OPINIONS

Lakeland Commissioners Sitting on the Sidelines In Police Dept. Debacle

I'm not sure what is more shocking: Our Lakeland Police Department's incompetency in all areas of protecting citizens or Commissioner Phillip Walker's comment in The Ledger, "We are doing our part to make sure we have a viable police department."

Like what? You can't pick up The Ledger without reading yet another story about how horribly managed or trained or just flat-out incompetent the LPD has become.

But Mr. Walker wants to know what State Attorney Jerry Hill is doing "to collaborate with the largest department in the county?"

Mr. Hill has brought this subject to light and has deep concerns. As a citizen of Lakeland, I thank him for doing so.

What is Mr. Walker doing? He is a city commissioner, along with four others, who have been sitting on the sidelines watching this debacle and haven't done a thing to correct it.

Commissioner Howard Wiggs said: "We cannot lose confidence of the citizens. The city commission has to step forward and instruct [City Manager Doug Thomas] in this."

What are these guys waiting for? Another unnecessary murder victim such as Virginia Varnum?

Another harassing search, as with Zoe Brugger, who was left to weep after the officer instructed her to shake out her bra?

RICHARD CONNERS
Lakeland

Special Treatment for Police

I am writing in regard to the latest comments regarding the Lakeland Police Department in the June 21 Ledger article, "Prosecutor Calls For Change at LPD."

Why hasn't Officer David Edds been arrested? According to news reports and those of our state attorney, this officer and others at LPD have falsified sworn documents and had documents fraudulently notarized. At the very least, he is guilty of notary fraud, a third-degree felony.

Is this the blue wall of silence we are seeing here? Where is Sheriff Grady Judd? Why hasn't he rode in on his white horse and arrested these officers? I don't believe Sheriff Judd would condone these actions in his own department, so why is he allowing Police Chief Lisa Womack, who does nothing, to get away with it? Again, it's the blue wall of silence, taking care of their own.

Let's see, the woman the officer stopped for a broken headlight is asked to lift her shirt and shake out the contents, this could be considered sexual battery. It sounds like to me the officer was getting a cheap thrill. On top of all that, when the woman refuses to have her car searched, the officer does it anyway?

For all of this, Officer Dustin Fetz gets four days of paid administrative leave. Sounds to me like he got days of paid vacation. You or I would have been arrested for this conduct, but because he or she wears a badge, they can get away with it?

If the women who were treated this way by officers of the Lakeland Police Department got together and filed a civil rights class-action suit against the officers, Lisa Womack and the city of Lakeland, and they were made to pay monetarily for their indiscretions, you might see a change.

LEN YANKE
Davenport

'The Sins of the Father'

To quote Shakespeare, "The sins of the father are to be laid upon the

children." With the bard in mind, it is hard to even begin to understand the historical irony in "Stormin' Norman" Schwarzkopf Jr. recently being honored posthumously by Gov. Rick Scott with the title of "Great Floridian."

Let's ponder for a moment that it was Schwarzkopf's father, Norman Sr., who directed the CIA overthrow of a popularly-elected prime minister of Iran, Mohammad Mosaddegh in August 1953, and the installment of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the Shah of Iran, who would then ruthlessly torture and oppress his people with U.S. support until his overthrow in 1979.

I think we all remember what happened next — the takeover of Iran by an extremist Islamist regime, that we are now told daily represents the greatest existential threat to our safety and interests in the region.

Let us also remember that Mossadegh was targeted by the U.S. and the U.K. because he insisted on the nationalization of Iran's oil industry — an unacceptable threat to U.S. and British oil companies at the time.

The coup of 1953 not only took away Iran's right to control its own oil resources, but likely also removed any chances of Iran developing into a democratic society in our time, a scourge that we are still facing the consequences of today.

"Stormin'" Norman is being honored precisely because he led an army in the name of repelling Saddam Hussein from Kuwait, a dictator and mass murderer we had earlier supported to offset the growing power of the imams and religious fanatics of Iran, who in turn would not have been in power without the actions of Norman's father.

Can we not appreciate the historical irony? It's almost Shakespearean.

TRAE HOLLAND
Mulberry

Not On Board With Tax Hike

I pay \$25 for roads and \$12.50 for the Lakeland Area Mass Transit on my property-tax bill. If our Polk County sales tax rate increases from 7 percent to 8 percent, I will pay an additional \$240 annually (conservative estimate) in sales taxes.

Hmm, \$37.50 vs. \$240. I'm not onboard, pun intended. It is estimated that an additional \$64 million annually will be raised if voters approve the increase.

It seems the rhetoric on the national level regarding spending hasn't resonated with our local politicians. We've had increases in the local-option fuel tax a few times over the past 30 years, but it is never enough.

As for sticking it to the tourists, aren't we all tourists somewhere at one time or another? Who buys your gas and makes your car payments?

RICK BEALE
Lakeland

WRITE TO US

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

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COLUMNIST OPINIONS



Dana Milbank

THE WASHINGTON POST

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A Perfectionist Caucus Out to Pasture

House Speaker John Boehner stopped by the Hyatt Regency on Capitol Hill on Thursday afternoon to pitch a gathering of the National Association of Manufacturers on the Republicans' plans for jobs and growth.

"While my colleagues and I don't have a majority here in Washington," the speaker vowed, "we're going to continue to pursue our plan."

Or will they? Not an hour after those words were uttered, Boehner's House Republicans dealt him the latest in a series of humiliations. Sixty-two Republicans voted against the farm bill, defeating a major piece of legislation Boehner had made a test of his leadership by pushing for it publicly and voting for it personally — something speakers only do on the most important bills.

The dispute this time was over food stamps and agricultural subsidies, but the pattern was the same: House leaders lost Democratic support by tilting the bill to satisfy the Republican base, but a group of conservative purists remained upset that the legislation didn't go far enough.

Much the same dynamic confronts Boehner as the House prepares to take up immigration legislation next month.

In all instances, Boehner faces a choice: His job or his legacy. He can enact landmark compromises, but lose his job in a conservative coup. Or he can keep his job

House Speaker John Boehner can enact landmark compromises, but lose his job in a conservative coup.

but get nothing much done.

With a few exceptions — the "fiscal cliff" deal, Hurricane Sandy aid — Boehner has chosen job security over achievement. He did it again on immigration, announcing that he doesn't "see any way of bringing an immigration bill to the floor that doesn't have the majority support of Republicans."

That promise, which is essentially the same as saying he won't allow the House to take up legislation that includes a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants, puts him on a collision course with the Senate, where a fresh compromise on border security negotiated by Republican Sens. Bob Corker of Tennessee and John Hoeven of North Dakota make it likely that chamber's legislation, which includes citizenship, will have a large bipartisan majority.

Boehner's stance blocking an immigration compromise may preserve his speakership, but it would keep his party on what Sen. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina calls a "demographic death spiral" as Latino voters shun the GOP.

Beyond the party, Boehner's position raises the likelihood of failure on another high-profile issue for a Congress that continues to reach new lows in public esteem. Gallup last week found Americans' confidence in Congress at 10 percent, the lowest recorded for any institution.

The measure, which had been awaiting action for a year, was never going to get much Democratic support because of \$20 billion in cuts to food stamps.

But Republicans lost what support they had on Thursday when they passed an amendment, opposed by all but one House Democrat, adding new work requirements to the food stamp program. That left only 24 Democrats on board, not close to enough to offset the dozens of Republicans who wanted the deeper cuts demanded by conservative groups such as the Club for Growth.

After the bill went down, Majority Leader Eric Cantor came to the floor to blame Democrats, neglecting to mention the poison-pill amendment his Republican colleagues had passed.

Steny Hoyer, the minority whip, reminded Cantor that "25 percent of your party voted against the bill," and he invoked Newt Gingrich's 1998 speech deriding conservatives as "the perfectionist caucus."

Gingrich did indeed call hard-line Republicans perfectionists and "petty dictators." He soon lost his job as speaker, in part because of that remark, but by then he had negotiated compromises with a Democratic president that steadied the government's finances.

Before the farm bill's collapse Thursday, Boehner told reporters: "I didn't come here to be speaker because I needed a fancy title and a big office. I wanted to be speaker so I could do something on behalf of the country."

If so, he might reread Gingrich's speech.



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