



Carmage Walls
Commentary Prize

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Please give a brief explanation of issues discussed and the results achieved. (This space will expand as you type in your comments.)

Whether he writes about LGBT rights, guns, the death penalty, police shootings, terrorism (domestic and foreign), movies and literature, or personal heroes and memories, Philip Martin's columns all circle back to a key issue for all Arkansans – the need for adult behavior, compassion and reason. In the columns in this entry, Martin turns his attention to the 2016 presidential race – arguably a thoroughly local issue this political season.

COLUMNISTS

Sometimes you need an adult

Philip Martin

There are more than a few ways reasonable people might approach the American political process. Some decide to have minimal involvement. These folks don't vote and don't care. They might despair when they realize how much of their paychecks are withheld, they might hold opinions on how the police or the garbage collectors could better do their jobs, but they generally abstain from the process.

Some of these political Bartlebys find politics dull or noisome, others are simply more interested in other pursuits. They might suspect that they lack the wherewithal to have a meaningful impact on the process. Those of modest means who have a full complement of professional and familial obligations are probably right—they can't have more than a token effect on the way politics is practiced or governance is done.

Since Americans aren't supposed to feel powerless, there are plenty of voices to shame anyone who admits this, but politics is just one narrow channel of human endeavor and experience. We're free to ignore what we cannot change, we aren't compelled to choose one team or the other.

While there's plenty of people who'd argue the point, I'm not sure that if Jesus Christ came back tomorrow He'd be compelled to make endorsements. I think that He'd probably look at these earthly races for glory about the same way he'd regard the Cardinals-Cubs series. He might or might not find them diverting, but I doubt He'd stoop to pick a winner.

On the other hand, if you're the sort of person who reads columns on a newspaper's editorial page, you probably have a little more interest in whose lobbyists get first dibs on the ears of the most honorable. You might find all this stuff deeply fascinating, and if so, good for you. There is a way to actually bear down and grind out incremental improvements in the way we live. It is possible to make the lives of the miserable a little less so, to give children a little better opportunity to investigate the mysteries of the wide world. We're all in this together, and we need people who are willing to fight the good fight, to at least try to contain the narcissists, opportunists and financial alchemists who tend to view government as a vehicle they get to take home on the weekends.

Because we all know who feels compelled to run for office: people with big egos and big insecurities, bullies, and those who crave adulation. Sure, a lot of them are well-intentioned, a lot of them are service-minded, but like the man says, it ain't beanbag they're playing.

The best of them have to compromise and horse trade and accept that they will have to expend a lot of energy explaining their rationalizations and marketing their failures. The best of them are realists, informed by idealism. They understand that the real work isn't glamorous, and that it mostly consists of straightforward and boring work that serves to maintain the status quo. It's really not all that often that a politician is genuinely called upon to take a unequivocal moral stand—even questions of who is included or excluded from a zone of moral concern by a law or policy can usually be finessed (witness "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," or *Dred Scott v. Sandford*).

It seems like we can always find a way to resist doing what we eventually must for just a little while longer. That's the way things usually go—nothing really changes until it does. Richard Nixon's policies would be considered liberal today; George H.W. Bush and Barry Goldwater were patrons of Planned Parenthood. Bernie Sanders hasn't felt compelled to deny an ideological label that until recently might have been considered a "fighting word" in these precincts.

In one context, the crisis in the Republican-controlled House is fairly entertaining. Some people might argue that the

GOP courted this sort of karmic comeuppance by welcoming virulent anti-government types into their number, then expecting to govern with them. Not everyone is amenable to the favors and perks divvied out by the leadership, and maybe someone should have thought about how dedicated monkey-wrenchers might be made to conform with the precepts of party discipline. Poor John Boehner. Poor Kevin McCarthy. Poor Paul Ryan if he's required to give up his dream job as head of the Ways and Means Committee (one of those colorless posts to which only a true and faithful wonk could genuinely aspire).

On the other hand, as silly as politics often is, we need grownups to govern. We need to have a foreign policy, we need to pay for things, we need to honor our commitments and fulfill our obligations. We need people who understand that deep down this is serious, important work that, were it not for the shouting heads on the television, most people would find deadly dull.

That's easy to forget in an era when so much of our world seems to have become unstuck from reality, when we can select whatever set of "facts" suit our present purpose from any number of boutique websites. When you can find support for any position, when the default reaction to any challenge to smug self-flattery is that the messenger must be, at best, deluded, and more likely, a malicious liar with a dark un-American agenda.

Because we are fundamentally lazy, we have a tendency to receive everything as entertainment. But you cannot sustain a good society on cartoons and pro wrestling.

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The passion of Hillary Clinton

PHILIP MARTIN

I understand why people don't like Hillary Clinton. She is not cuddly and approachable. She probably doesn't understand why people like me even introduce the subject of her likability, for she understands that it ought not make any difference, that qualifications and experience, acumen and vision ought to be the reasons we vote for a candidate, not because we entertain fantasies of someday drinking a beer with them. Governance is hard and she's proven she can do it—why does she need us to like her?

Although I live in Arkansas, where everyone has a history with everyone, I don't know Hillary Clinton. We have friends in common, and her friends will tell you she is warm and thoughtful and fun to be around. I believe them, though it is one thing to be a companionable friend and another to be the sort of person who is perceived as “genuine” and “authentic” on television.

We have spoken once or twice, we've been in the same room a handful of times, I helped Rex Nelson write his book about her, but she doesn't know me. I know because two years ago I was less than five feet from her at a party in Manhattan and she looked right through me. She showed no recognition whatsoever.

I didn't feel offended but couldn't help but think about how in 1992 Bill Clinton somehow caught my eye across a crowded union hall in Phoenix and swam furiously through a crowd of hundreds just to ask a vaguely familiar face what it was doing in Arizona. But that's Bill.

Though the Clintons seemed to share a wonkish delight in the closely tooled calibrations of governmental systems, their talents were always different and complementary, and I believed she shaded more toward policy than politics. For years I doubted she'd ever be a candidate, and once I was proved wrong I doubted she'd ever run for president. I didn't think she wanted the job—I thought maybe she'd want to be on the Supreme Court. But like I said, I don't really know Hillary Clinton.

I do know that she's the sort of person that people find it easy to make up stories about. She's had a very public life, and she's had some very powerful and prominent enemies. She is married to Bill Clinton, and she's stayed married to him despite everything. Some things are none of our business, but that doesn't stop us from speculating about them.

The way I see it, there really was a kind of a “vast right-wing conspiracy,” and while it failed to evict Bill Clinton from the White House, it inflicted collateral damage. There are a lot of people who find themselves politically simpatico with Hillary Clinton who are unable to trust her for reasons they can't quite articulate. Part of that is due to an orchestrated campaign that went on for a couple of decades. It's interesting that some of Bernie Sanders' supporters have picked up this rightwing drumbeat, but most of the smoke that some perceive around Clinton has been blown in by professional operatives looking to obscure the truth.

I know some people don't want to believe that. They believe what they want, despite any and all evidence, and the Clintons are public figures used to hearing despicable things said about them. If nothing else, they've proved they're tough enough to face a little calumny.

I don't like her speaking fees either, though I understand why the once not-so-rich Clintons are interested in making money. (Everyone likes money—David Geffen once said Bob Dylan was as interested in money as anyone he'd ever known. That doesn't make Blood on the Tracks a cynical endeavor.)

It's also possible to honestly disagree with Hillary Clinton on any number of issues. She's a careful candidate, with a record of being less progressive on social issues than I'd like. I'm glad Sanders is in the race and that his candidacy is still (barely) viable. Not necessarily because he's going to pull Clinton to the left, but because he's demonstrated to future candidates that there's room on that side of the spectrum. He's doing his nation and his party a service by reminding us that we have options, that the range of possibility is far wider than what mainstream candidates usually consider.

Yet I don't think Sanders has ever entertained the idea that he will become president. While some of his acolytes—members of the One True Church of Bern—will probably not support Clinton under any circumstances, she seems the most likely eventual winner. And probably the person best equipped for the job.

She has the contacts file. She knows the environment. She won't be a disaster. I agree with Sanders supporter (and secretary of labor under Bill Clinton) Robert Reich, who recently said he thought she'd be the best president for the government we have, while Sanders would be the best choice for the kind of change we need. But unlike Reich, I don't sense revolution in the air. I think we'll see a regression to the mean before we get any great swing to Bernie- (or Trump)-style populism. Things change incrementally, until they don't. But we're a big country, and our very diversity argues for baby steps, no matter how angry the white men become.

I'm not sure any of the people who are presenting themselves as candidates will be a real disaster as president—the courts and Congress would frustrate Donald Trump or Ted Cruz as much as they have Barack Obama. Sure, things could be partially undone, mischief might be instigated, but most of us fortunate enough to read Sunday newspapers and argue about politics would probably feel little fallout. (Then again, some of us could be in camps come January. Hope they let us bring guitars.)

I've heard Hillary compared to Richard Nixon, and that's fair up to a point. She's Nixon before dishonor, before the dirty tricks and Watergate. She has been waiting her turn, she isn't particularly inspiring, but she may just be the best person who has put themselves forward for the job this term. That's not an endorsement, only an observation.

What seems odd is how little enthusiasm her race seems to have engendered. We're on the very brink of putting a woman in the White House and no one seems to want to talk about that other than Killer Mike. Maybe that represents progress, that we can be as uninspired by a woman in a pantsuit as we can an old guy in a power tie.

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COLUMNISTS

Dad's not drunk, he's on meth

Philip Martin

It is often said, usually by political conservatives intending to highlight the out-of-touchness of liberals but sometimes by others (maybe even me) for other purposes, that the film critic Pauline Kael once expressed bafflement at Richard Nixon's re-election in 1972 because she "didn't know anyone who voted for him."

This is a comment that can cut a number of ways—Kael might have been making a slightly self-deprecating joke; she might have been offering a critique of groupthink on Manhattan's Upper West Side; she might have been genuinely perplexed that Nixon was so popular with people who were very unlike herself. The words themselves only tell us so much; What was Kael's tone? Who was her audience? Did she smile when she said it?

The truth is she probably never said it at all. The truth is she said the following, during a speech she delivered at the Modern Language Association on Dec. 28, 1972:

"I live in a rather special world. I only know one person who voted for Nixon. Where they are I don't know. They're outside my ken. But sometimes when I'm in a theater I can feel them."

That is very different than admitting confusion at Nixon's election. It is a nuanced statement, one that takes notice of the essential insulation of every person from every other, and the privilege that she enjoyed. Kael is acknowledging not only the presence but the power of people who thought in ways other than she did. You can—and some have—wrench this statement into saying whatever you want it to mean, but it's harder to reduce the author of this quote to an elitist idiot with no feeling for the continent across the Hudson.

Of course it is. Kael's job at the New Yorker was to convince people, whose education and breeding may have led them to believe that pop culture was unworthy of their attention, that movies are vital cultural moments that can enlarge our understanding of the world and ourselves. She was the antithesis of the cloistered epicurean blind to popular taste and sentiment. If you think about things like this for more than an instant, you realize that every human being is complex. That, as Neil Young taught us, "even Richard Nixon has got soul."

If you go around reducing people to caricatures and memes, if you believe Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton are the characters they play on TV, you're buying into a dumbed-down and stage-managed version of reality. You're submitting to a lie.

It is our condition that we don't know what we don't know, and often what we think we do know is just wrong. The higher your tolerance for uncertainty, the less likely you are to default to the easier and uglier received notions you'll be presented. And the more uncertainty you're able to entertain, the more generous you might be with your fellow human beings, who after all are probably nearly as clueless as you are. The less convinced you are of the righteousness of your cause, the more open you might be to other points of view.

But advertising—which tells you what you want to hear and certifies your sense of selfworth—sure works better than philosophy, which despite whatever matchbook slogans you've seen attributed to Nietzsche (who's been as badly used as Kael), does the opposite. Most of us would rather not do the homework, so we lean toward what's easiest. So we believe in our own wonderfulness, our personal exceptionalism. (At least most of us do; human beings are infinitely complicated.)

All my life, the GOP has been like a sitcom dad; stern and only grudgingly accepting of change. And the Democrats have been the nurturing, at times overly indulgent, sit-com mom.

It's an oversimplification, and over the years I've admired (and despised) both Democrats and Republicans. I have friends across the (still relatively narrow) spectrum of American political thought and don't expect anyone to agree (but hope we can still listen to one another).

But this election cycle has demonstrated the dangers of decades of pandering to the baser instincts of people to win votes. Dad's not just drunk, he's developed a meth habit, and he's taken to selling himself on the streets to support it. And the party of Teddy Roosevelt, Abraham Lincoln and William F. Buckley has devolved into an uneasy coalition of mutually antagonist tribes. Trump is a Republican because he saw it as the easiest path to power; many of his supporters are attracted to him because they feel their status threatened by immigrants and minorities. And what remains of the Republican establishment understands this.

Yet however much they'd like to deny him the nomination, they're probably too weak to do it. There have been any number of attempts by traditional conservatives (Mitt Romney, Bill Kristol, et al.) to scare voters straight, but Trump keeps winning delegates. So maybe Paul Ryan takes another for the team and supplies "real" Republicans with an alternative to Trump or Clinton (or not yet mathematically eliminated Bernie Sanders). Trump is not likely to win the White House—he's tremendously unpopular with everyone except his supporters—but it may give conservatives incentive to go to the polls, to vote in congressional races.

You and I may think we know Trump is on a kamikaze mission. But my in-box holds a message from another world:

"I don't know what you guys are talking about. Everyone I know is voting for Trump."

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Dear people of the future ...

PHILIP MARTIN

There are a lot of things we used to think and do that people don't think are all right now.

We don't treat human beings as chattel. We don't assume that there's a fundamental difference in the female psyche that makes women too emotional to perform effectively as world leaders. We no longer believe that smoking is good for the throat and lungs. We don't murder people we suspect of witchcraft.

And eventually—in 10 or 50 or 100 years—we'll accept that gay and lesbian folks are just part of the mix. You know, part of life's rich pageant, the grand design of the cosmos. We won't act silly about bathrooms or suggest that it's reasonable to treat them differently in public accommodations. We will look back on all this and shake our heads at how sad and frightened a few blighted and/or willfully ignorant folks were. Or maybe our children or our children's children will.

In any case, these people who would stand in doorways, who would deny people their dignity and their common-sense right to be treated with respect under color of some tortured platitude—these people who would pervert Americanism—will not prevail. The best they can hope for is a bit of short-term political benefit. They might be able to squeeze a little more juice out of exhausted dogma and irrational anxiety. They might be able to get a little more mileage out of hate.

Because after all, some people will vote their hate. Hate's a pretty good motivator, it gets folks out. It gets them to write checks. If you're the win-at-all-costs sort, if you don't subscribe to the idea of statecraft as soulcraft, if you don't believe in anything except your own ambition, then it's something to put in your political toolbox. Even if you don't get upset about what people you don't know do in the privacy of their own homes, you can always exploit the scared folks.

But that's the short view. If you bet on hate, you might win today, or tomorrow. You might get what you want. And it might feel good to have it. And you might be dead before history's judgment is handed down against you.

It's a sharp's play to choose that side and acknowledge that nothing means anything, so why bother trying to know the truth or do the right thing? If you're going to choose that side, to obstruct and detain, to work the dark alleys and appeal to the baser instincts of the people that you are after all supposed to lead, there's nothing any lawyer or preacher of Jesus Christ could say that's going to keep you from doing what it is you think you have to do. Good luck with it, I guess.

But I have a naive faith that it's all going to come out in the long run.

And if I'm right, if you're lucky, the worst thing that people might say about you is that you were a creature of your time. That you lived in an era when people thought silly things, that you couldn't be expected to rise above the easy cynicism of the society in which you found yourself. That you were by no means exceptional, that you were not one of the ones who stood on the side of right and decency, because most people didn't.

I know you don't care about those people of the future any more than you care about anyone who isn't likely to vote for you or buy you dinner. But I do, and I want them to know some things. I don't want them to excuse you, to think that this was just the way things were done back in the dark ages of the early 21st century. I know it's probably futile, because the people of the future may be a lot like us. They may not pay that much attention to history.

Anyway, listen up, you lazy people of the future. You shouldn't give these people—who want to argue that not allowing them to be hateful toward certain classes of people is a violation of their religious freedom—a pass. Because it's not hard to know what is decent and right. Because here in 2016 we're faced with a clear choice between love and hate.

Most of us understand exactly what these people are doing. People of the future, don't think that most of us don't understand that human sexuality is an incredibly diverse and mysterious thing and that it can be celebrated by consenting adults in any number of ways that are emphatically not our business.

People of the future, understand that the politicians who sought to cynically manipulate the emotions of voters in 2016 weren't really idiots and ranters. They hired consultants to help them craft fanciful false narratives about dangers that didn't exist. They selectively presented anecdotal information to feed a paranoia that could not be sustained by reality.

In a country where it would be political suicide for, in many precincts, a candidate for office to run unchurched, much less as an atheist, they invented a war on Christianity. They told people there were forces afoot that meant to outlaw their religion, to trample on their rights to believe how they believe and worship as they had traditionally done. They misrepresented the beliefs of the founders of the nation and selectively quoted from scripture to exploit the queasy discomfiture that relatively repressed folks sometimes feel around more demonstrative creatures.

While there is plenty of evidence that Christians are being persecuted in other countries, what's going on in America is simply the emergence of other voices, something that was bound to happen in a country that took religious freedom as one of its first principles. Other voices have been empowered and are being heard. Christianity is still the dominant gene, but it's just one path available to Americans. The truth is our country is big and diverse and we are still an adolescent nation, with lots of things to figure out.

We're evolving as a people. And it's painful. Some folks want to believe that their troubles are the result of liberals, gays and atheists. They're desperate for someone to tell them they're not wrong, that the way they've always done things is the right way, and that they're good for resisting change. Those who've volunteered to placate them don't deserve the benefit of the doubt. They chose hate over love.

And they ought to own that choice for as long as they're remembered.

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COLUMNISTS

Why bullies win

Philip Martin

Every woman adores a fascist, The boot in the face, the brute Brute heart of a brute like you. —Sylvia Plath, “Daddy”

We were talking the other day about the worst bosses we ever had. I’ve been lucky; I’ve not suffered under many bad ones, and the bad ones I’ve had I didn’t suffer under long. There was one editor in particular who had a deserved reputation as a difficult man—he’d get in fistfights with writers and had the temerity to win them—but he and I usually got along fine. He raised his voice at me in a staff meeting once, and I raised mine right back at him, but it was over a trivial issue and neither of us crossed any Rubicon of disrespect. (It probably helped that both of us understood that while he was a slightly bigger boy than me I was quite a bit younger and had a reach advantage.)

I imagine others perceived him differently than I did, for many of my colleagues kept bottles of Xanax and Valium in their desk drawers and tiptoed gingerly past his office. While I did all right there, for others it was not a happy place.

But it did produce good work. My boss got a lot out of his staff, even allowing for inevitable casualties of burnout. Turnover was high but the daily pressure to do not just good but exceptional work resulted in lots of prizes and, more importantly, some great journalism. He did not run a Montessori school, he did not want to hear about your problems at home or with your student loans. Working for him did not automatically make him your friend.

I thrived under him, and I came to understand that he was an empathetic human being with issues of his own, so I’m reluctant to say he was a bully. But others have said that, and they may be right.

In the current climate “bully” is about as vile an epithet as you can hurl at someone, but that doesn’t mean it’s not an effective technique. While it’s fashionable to say that bullies are unhappy and damaged creatures who are often hurting as badly as their victims, there’s countervailing evidence that kids who bully other children in fact enjoy relatively high levels of social standing and self-esteem. Bullying might even be a path to popularity for some of them. There doesn’t seem to be much basis for the popular idea of the schoolyard bully as sad, self-loathing and frightened.

In the adult world, bullies often succeed because, as Stanley Milgram demonstrated with his shock experiments—where people were willing to administer painful electric shocks to others simply because a pretend scientist in a lab coat told them to—most of us are reluctant to question authority. We accept what the authority figure tells us, even when we might suspect that power is being abused. We even lionize our bullies: Patton might have been just as fine a general if he’d not slapped those soldiers, Bobby Knight might have been just as good a basketball coach had he not thrown that chair.

Before Human Resources civilized them, newsrooms used to breed lots of bullies, some of whom are now fondly remembered by some of the people they once terrorized. It’s a kind of Stockholm syndrome, I guess, the way we get nostalgic over how poorly we were treated by some little martinet. Or maybe just our way of saving face.

What’s hardly ever said is that bullies often get their way, that they often succeed through intimidation and force of personality. A lot of us are drawn to them, especially those of us who are most worried about our place in the world. Donald Trump was a famous bully before he ever embarked on a presidential campaign.

You can go a long way as a bully. There are a lot of people who are just looking for an order to obey. Maybe it’s not a majority in this country, maybe it’s just 35 percent of 35 percent, but it’s out there.

I don’t know that we’re all that different from other people. We like to think we are, sure. We like to think that we’re exceptional, both individually and as a nation, that if a situation arose where we needed to be brave we’d rise to it.

But most of us are pretty ordinary. Most of us wouldn't try to be the hero. Most of us don't stand up to bullies. Most of us don't challenge authority. Most of us just work here, we do what we're told.

Which is why it's important that we maintain the checks and balances we have, that we poke and pry into the lives of our would-be leaders, those crazy narcissists who actually want the impossible job of shepherding our big country into the future. Because it's easier to nip a certain kind of ugly nationalism in the bud than it is to uproot it after it's become entrenched in power. It's easier to defeat a bully before he gets his hands on the levers that move the state.

Because power, however attained, confers a presumption of legitimacy.

I don't have a lot of political litmus tests, and I understand that reasonable people can disagree on things. I don't think anybody has a patent on the truth. But I know better than to think it can't happen here.

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Masked and anonymous: sounding off in America

PHILIP MARTIN

I ain't hiding from nobody, nobody's hiding from me.

—J.J. Cale, “Call Me the Breeze”

Along time ago, before any of us knew much about the World Wide Web, I worked at a newspaper that kept, in a dark corner of the newsroom, a telephone connected to a Code-a-Phone, a tapebased answering machine made of metal and walnut.

The Code-a-Phone was a substantial piece of equipment, about the size of a stereo receiver of similar vintage. And it was expensive, about \$550 in early 1980s currency. It looked heavy, though I never picked it up. It might not be an exaggeration to say that it was the most important piece of equipment in the office.

There was a single phone line connected to the device dedicated to receiving untraceable calls from anyone who happened to notice the number for the “Sound Off” column we published in the newspaper. We encouraged people to call in and vent about whatever was on their minds. We didn't require, or even ask, them to leave their names.

Around 2 p.m. every afternoon, a clerk (I remember a grandmotherly lady, but that might be wishful confabulation) would slip on a pair of headphones and transcribe the messages left on the machine during the previous 24-hour period. A copy editor then vetted her transcript for libel and obscenity and we slapped down the most outrageous and entertaining comments on the front of our metro section, the part of the newspaper that would correspond with this newspaper's Arkansas section.

Sound Off was the best-read feature in the newspaper.

It was also horrible and indefensible, seeing how it was in the main a barrage of anonymous vitriol and gossip delivered mostly by drunks and cowards.

Sure, there was some standard civic bellyaching, people complaining about potholes on their street or the editorials, but I don't remember it ever yielding a solid news tip. Instead, people felt free to dump all their pent-up rage and hatred onto the line. While you might have expected them to rail against elected officials and public personalities—local TV news folks were especially ill-used—there were also calls that made very specific, very nasty allegations about their neighbors and other people living quietly out of the spotlight.

I admit that I, like most of the people who worked for the newspaper, loved the column. I enjoyed the raw tapes even more. Those of us who worked lonely hours would sometimes turn up the volume on the answering machine so we could hear the messages as they came in. You'd hear a mechanical click and a beep, then tune into the sputtering howl of American Id, to hear the spittle flecking and sizzling on bakelite as somewhere, elsewhere in our gonedark city some wounded self-identified victim let loose his frustration. Listening to the Sound Off calls could be—to the ears of a 20somethings who imagined themselves cynical observers of the human condition—a bittersweet delectation.

I shudder at the memory.

Maybe most of us remember ourselves as being crueler in our youth. I was dumber then, yet I was smart enough to come up with all sorts of reasons that the Sound Off column was a good thing. Maybe if they could scream into the telephone they wouldn't feel the need to grab a gun.

All I know is that these days I feel ashamed of my voyeurism, and that I once found entertainment value in the pain of people naive or desperate enough to think that offloading their grievance onto an answering machine might somehow help them.

Everyone laughed at the Sound Off column. No one took it seriously. It was a scum of faceless, nameless malcontents. It was ugly and I now believe publishing it was borderline irresponsible. It added nothing to the public discourse other than a core sample of fringe opinion.

I think of it every time I read online comments sections.

And I do, against my own better judgment, usually read the comments. As the Internet has matured, two sorts of social spaces have evolved, arenas like Facebook where people largely represent themselves with their own names—or personal “brands”—and other places where no one knows whether or not you’re a dog.

There are all kinds of good reasons to remain anonymous, especially when most political and economic power is concentrated in the hands of a relative few, when a lot of mischief can be made remotely. Anonymity is crucial to would-be whistle-blowers. And anonymous and pseudonymous speech is constitutionally protected. (See *McIntyre v. Ohio Campaign Commission*, in which the Supreme Court ruled that an Ohio statute prohibiting anonymous political or campaign literature was unconstitutional.)

Anonymity might protect us when we’re doing something brave, but we’re all bolder when we believe we’re safe. The culture of the Internet is such that anyone who ventures online should expect rougher treatment than they’d experience IRL—in real life. A lot of us have become so habituated to our masks we don’t even realize we’re wearing them.

We’ve developed habits. Of anonymity and reflexive snark. And cruelty. Now everyone has a Sound Off line. And we’re all listening in to the wailing and gnashing of teeth.

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