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**Commentary Prize**

**2018 Entry Form**

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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.)**

In these editorials, The Times reviewed two key aspects of turmoil in the Hall County fire department. The first was regarding an ill-fated attempted to relocate medical units from a sparsely populated section of the county, which was met with a storm of disapproval from local residents. County officials soon backed down and reversed their course. The second summarizes a year-plus of upheaval in the department, including management malfeasance, personnel turnover, scandalous behavior, paranoia and morale issues. Our goal was to shed light on the department's poor management decisions on multiple fronts and offer a plea for better solutions and leadership for the public safety of the community.

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**The First Amendment:** 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.



JIM POWELL | For The Times

## Both desperate for a win and clueless, Trump shafts his party

The news that President Donald Trump abandoned Republicans to strike a deal with Congressional Democrats on a three-month extension of the debt limit yielded a predictable response from his predictable cheerleaders: It was brilliant and typically shrewd for the author of "The Art of the Deal" to take the very first offer the Democrats made and ask for nothing in return.

Less obsequious observers on the right claimed that this was the long-prophesied moment. The seventh seal had been broken. Donald Trump was "pivoting" at last.

"The pivot is real and it's spectacular!" proclaimed Ben Domenech, the publisher of The Federalist.

In the lexicon of Trumpism and anti-Trumpism, "pivot" has many meanings. But in this context, pivot means to reach across party lines and work with Democrats, giving the shaft to his own party, or at least to the conservatives in the GOP.

Such a move has been feared by many conservatives from the earliest days of Trump's candidacy. The former New York Democrat holds no deep love for ideological conservatism, and many of his favorite issues — protectionism, infrastructure, etc. — are more naturally part of the Democratic portfolio.

But those fears didn't pan out at first. The president and congressional Republicans tried mimic the Democrats in the wake of Barack Obama's victory in 2008 and run the table, particularly on Obamacare "repeal and replace," on a partisan basis.

Unfortunately, the GOP couldn't get it done. This infuriated many conservatives, Republicans and Trump himself, and to some extent, rightly so.

For years, Republicans said that if they could win both Congress and the White House there'd be nothing they couldn't do. Whether this was a lie or just wishful thinking is debatable. Regardless, they failed for several reasons.

The Republican majority in the Senate is much narrower than the Democratic majority was when Obama was elected. Many GOP leaders never thought Trump would win, and so they hadn't prepared for victory. Also, the Republican Party is divided along a host of fault lines, and a large swath of the Republican caucus has no experience at actually governing.

This is why Trump's decision last week to throw Sen. Mitch McConnell and Speaker Paul Ryan under the bus was greeted with such glee by many Trump boosters. They place the blame for all of Trump's myriad blunders on the GOP "establishment." They'd rather see Trump pivot and work with Democrats if it means Trump can declare victory about something — anything — and if it makes the establishment look bad. What was once a fear is now a hope.

The problem is there's another reason Congress has disappointed the president and his most ardent supporters: Trump doesn't know what he's doing.

Even under the best circumstances, major legislation cannot get out of Congress without robust presidential leadership. I wish it were otherwise, because the Congress is the first branch of government and should take the lead. But in the modern era, you can't outsource the big stuff to Congress. Trump didn't know this and refuses to learn.

For instance, earlier in the week the White House said Trump was ending the Deferred Action for Child Arrivals program, which lets undocumented immigrants brought to this country as children stay here. Attorney General Jeff Sessions came out and said it was unconstitutional.

But when the press — and Obama — castigated Trump as heartless and cruel, the president made it clear he wants Congress to restore the program by passing legislation. And if it doesn't, he suggested, he might keep the program via the same means his AG had just described as unconstitutional.

Mark Krikorian, the leading intellectual advocate for a more restricted immigration policy, should be a natural ally of this White House. He told the New York Times, "(Trump's) being pulled in a bunch of different directions, and because he doesn't have any strong ideological anchor, or deep knowledge of the issue, he ends up sort of not knowing what to do."

Instead, the president goes with his gut on everything, letting himself be baited by negative TV coverage.

There are many reasons why the pivot theory won't pan out. Trump has made himself too radioactive with the Democratic rank-and-file. Most of his agenda is equally radioactive.

But the main reason it will fail is that, contrary to wishful theories that Trump is playing "four-dimensional chess," the president doesn't really know what he's doing.

**Jonah Goldberg is an editor-at-large of National Review Online and a visiting fellow at the American Enterprise Institute. Charles Krauthammer remains out on medical leave; his column will resume in the near future.**



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### EDITORIAL

# Avoidable firestorm

## Hall County's mishandling of medical unit plan turned a tough decision into a debacle

Some day, government officials may figure out that often how they handle difficult decisions leads to more problems than the policy choices themselves.

The latest example: Hall County's decision to change how its Fire Services ambulance units are deployed, and its sudden reversal of that move on Friday.

The decision was made in late August to move medical units from Station 11 on Bark Camp Road in Murrayville, Station 10 on Ga. 52 in Gillsville and Station 9 on Poplar Springs Road serving more sparsely populated areas in East Hall to focus on areas with higher numbers of calls.

This plan wasn't revealed to the public; a press release instead touted technology updates to improve response times. Fire officials met with commissioners two at a time in private meetings to brief them on the plans, which may have been an attempt to circumvent open meeting laws and isn't in the spirit of open government.

Commissioners thus knew this was coming but didn't move to inform their constituents until Times reporters pressed for an explanation as residents began hearing news through the grapevine and raising concerns.

When news of it leaked out, Fire Services attempted to allay fears by insisting the units responding to emergencies in those areas would still include trained medical professionals and the necessary equipment to render any aid needed.

Emergency experts are best suited to decide how best to use their resources, and it seems to make sense that higher-density areas would get the most attention. But the way the decision was made, and then scrapped, was a four-alarm blaze unto itself.

The resulting anger was predictable from Hall Countians who face a hike in property taxes yet felt their safety was being compromised. Whether that was true or not, county

Your government officials

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officials did not take the extra steps needed to ease those concerns in advance. Had they sought public input, they still would have faced unhappy taxpayers, but may have started a dialogue that could lead to a compromise everyone could live with. The way it was handled instead showed both a lack of consideration for the public and a lack of commitment for the plan itself.

In the one public hearing held after the fact, Commissioner Scott Gibbs and Chief Jeff Hood got earfuls last week in Gillsville at a gathering that drew some 100 people, most angry about the moves but also how they were kept in the dark about the changes.

Now with the plan abandoned, county officials will have to fund some \$1 million in anticipated overtime pay to serve all areas fully, to be paid from the county's reserve funds.

"We feel like it was better to spend the money and keep everybody feeling safe," Commission Chairman Richard Higgins said Friday. "We listen to the people — we do try to listen."

That's admirable, sure, but had officials vetted the plan properly instead of trying to sneak it past everyone, they might have been able to avoid the firestorm that followed. Now it is left with a large bill to pay

and hurt feelings to smooth over.

Taxpayers have a right to expect a certain level of government services, public safety first among these. As Hall grows in population, those needs can stretch resources thin. Fire Services already is struggling to fill empty positions, having lost 38 employees this year through July with 51 vacancies overall. Public safety agencies have scrambled to stay ahead of turnover as trained professionals are lured away to other county agencies by higher salaries.

Meanwhile, commissioners swallowed hard to pass a tax hike earlier this year, the first in many years and overdue to meet growing demands and rising personnel and health costs that all public and private employers face. Any tax increase in today's political environment is a bitter pill that can lead to hard choices at the ballot box.

Elected officials have to make tough calls, and we don't envy them those dilemmas. The alternatives include raising taxes even higher to pay for more personnel already hard to recruit and keep, or make do with what they have and allocate it wisely.

Yet amid these challenging decisions, local officials have one variable fully within their control: Interaction with the people who elect them. It's not only smart management, but they owe it to those who elect them and pay their salaries — i.e., their bosses — and who deserve to know what's going on.

Those of us who go to work every day know keeping secrets from the bosses isn't a good idea. Eventually, when the truth is known, there is much more hell to pay. Honesty and transparency are the best policy and can ease the pain when hard choices must be made.

Perhaps from this incident and others, Hall County's elected officials will heed that lesson and open the door to public review earlier the next time an unpopular decision must be made.

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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.

## When will thinking like machines prompt a moral panic?

In Frank Herbert's "Dune" series (my favorite science fiction books), he made a bold writerly decision. In a genre famous for robots and computers (particularly in the 1960s), Herbert imagined a futuristic universe with neither. In his telling, some 10,000 years prior to the story of the book, there was galactic revolt called the Butlerian Jihad. This is where I first learned the word "Jihad" — the Arabic term for Islamic holy war.



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It can all get fairly nerdy, but the gist is that artificially intelligent computers and androids were banned. In one explanation, the Butlerian Jihad was named after a woman, Jehanne Butler, whose baby had been aborted without her permission because an artificially intelligent computer deemed the child unworthy of life. The resulting outrage led to a mass revolt, the banning of thinking machines and a new religious commandment: "Thou shalt not make a machine in the likeness of a human mind."

This idea has always stuck with me because of the fresh venues it opened in the genre and also for political and sociological reasons.

The phrase "moral panic" is almost always used derisively, to suggest an irrational over-reaction by people giving over to the mentality of the mob. When the media agrees with a moral panic — say, on guns — the last thing they do is call it one. Moral panics are always something those other people do. It's a bit like "censorship," a word people only use for the censorship they don't like.

But whether you call it a moral panic, a righteous people-powered movement or some other term of art, such visceral mass reactions are inevitable and perhaps necessary.

I got to thinking about this as two stories from Britain and one from China made waves here in the U.S.

A driver in North Yorkshire, England, fitted his car with a laser jammer that blocked speed cameras from giving him a ticket. He also showed the traffic camera his middle finger in a gesture that means the same thing on both sides of the Atlantic. The North Yorkshire police tracked him down, and he was charged with "perverting the course of justice." The jammer was illegal, of course, and he probably deserved a fine. But because he flipped Big Brother the bird, he got eight months in jail.

As outrageous as that story is, it pales in comparison to the story of Alfie Evans, a 23-month-old British boy with a rare neurodegenerative disorder. His doctors and the National Health Service concluded they couldn't do anything more for him and, against his parents' wishes, took him off life support. A Vatican hospital was eager to take him, and his parents were even more eager to transfer him there. The state refused, essentially kidnapping the child. The British courts support the NHS, offering not legal or moral rationales but sickening pabulum about the desirability of euthanasia or in this case infanticide. There's also much talk about how the NHS works with finite resources and is compelled by economic math to make hard decisions. The story is actually much more cruel in the specifics, but you get the point.

And that leads me to the third story. China made it official: By 2020, the government will fully implement a "social credit score" system that will use artificial intelligence and facial recognition technology to monitor, reward and punish virtually every kind of activity based upon ideological criteria — chiefly, loyalty to the state.

It doesn't take a science-fiction writer to imagine where these trends can go. Right now, the decisions made about the rebellious driver and little Alfie are being made by humans. But will that always be the case? AI systems can send people to jail and make decisions about withholding care quite easily. Just ask the Chinese. Indeed, the humans making these decisions are just following the legal and bureaucratic equivalent of algorithms anyway.

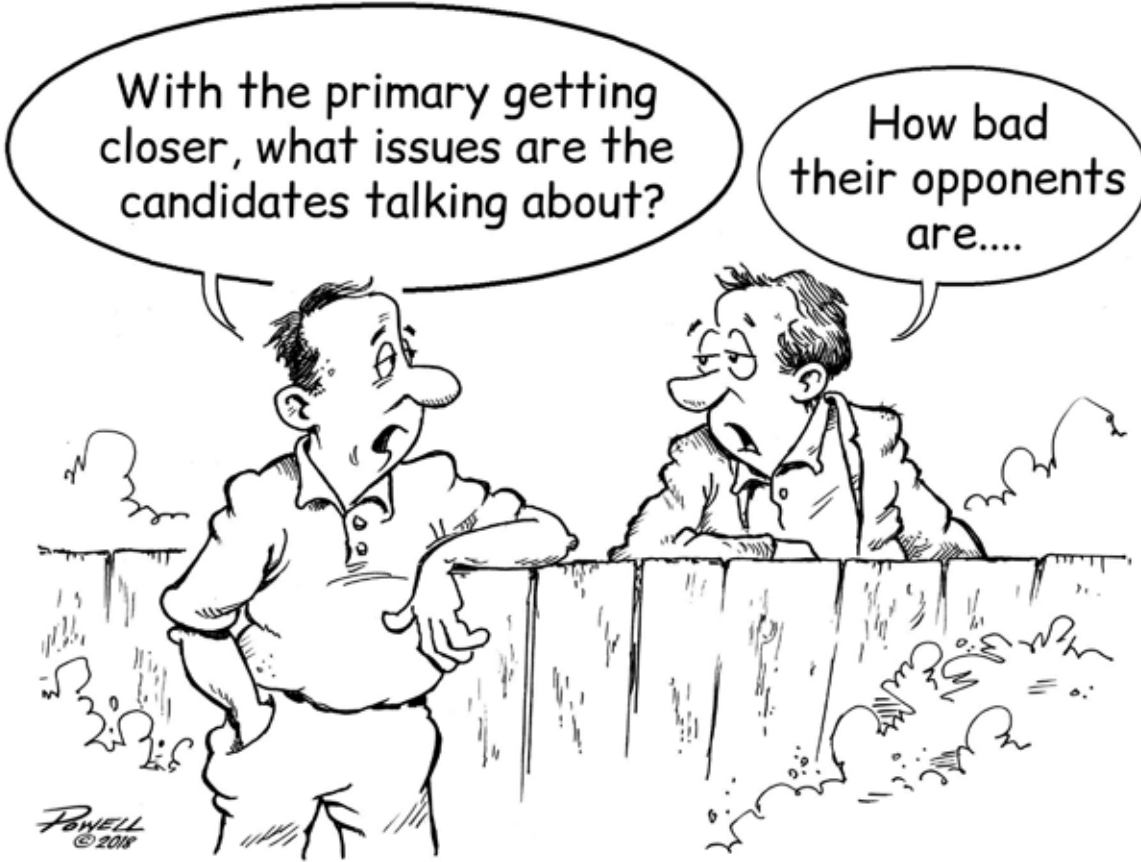
In other words, they're thinking like machines already. Why object to letting better machines take over?

In the fourth installment of the "Dune" series, one of the characters explains why the Butlerian Jihad was necessary.

"The target of the Jihad was a machine-attitude as much as the machines," Leto Atreides explains. "Humans had set those machines to usurp our sense of beauty, our necessary selfhood out of which we make living judgments."

That process seems well underway already, and I wonder what it will take before we get the moral panic we need."

**Jonah Goldberg is an editor-at-large of National Review Online. His new book, "The Suicide of the West," will be released April 24. Charles Krauthammer remains on medical leave.**



JIM POWELL | For The Times

### EDITORIAL

# Leadership emergency

## County must find right management to take helm of fire department in wake of scandals

If the name had not already been used, "sex, lies and videotape" would be an appropriate choice for the title of a docudrama about the county's beleaguered fire department over the past several months. Were the subject matter not so serious, the details would make such a production a comedy of epic proportions, something akin to "Police Academy" for the fire brigades.

Except, despite the ludicrousness of some of what we learned, there's nothing to laugh about.

Last Sunday we detailed how a former arson investigator convinced a former fire chief that he was under covert surveillance, with the investigator going so far as to fake the removal of a listening device from the chief's vehicle, and pretending to throw into Lake Lanier nonexistent cameras that were supposed to have been mounted on trees and aimed at the chief's house, but in fact didn't exist.

You can't make this stuff up folks.

Sadly, that event from two years ago, details of which just became public with the investigator's conviction and sentencing, is just one example of a seeming plague of unprofessional, boorish and juvenile behavior that seems to have permeated the upper ranks of fire department management in recent years.

Let's take a trip down memory lane and look at some of the fire department lowlights from the recent past:

**August 2014** – Fire Chief David Kimbrell is relieved of command of the fire department, a victim of the county's decision to buy a fire truck known to have mechanical problems, which ultimately led to the injury of three firemen. Kimbrell is retained, however, as head of the county's Emergency Management Agency. Jeff Hood is his successor as fire chief.

**April 2016** – Hood reports to the county sheriff's office that he is being spied upon by parties unknown, leading to the investiga-

tion that reveals as a culprit Arson Investigator Dax Lewis, who ultimately admits he made the whole thing up. The investigation into the fake surveillance involved detectives, deputies, the county's dive team and members of a multicounty task force, all of whom assuredly had better things to do than chase non-existent boogey men because of a tall tale spun by a gun-carrying arson investigator.

**October 2017** – Kimbrell is fired from his position with the county's Emergency Management Agency after videos surface of sexual improprieties between him and subordinates in the fire department. The videos, along with other porn, were backed up to county servers from Kimbrell's personal computer.

**October 2017** – On the heels of Kimbrell's termination, Hood, who previously had replaced Kimbrell as fire chief, suddenly vacates his position, offering no explanation beyond a terse letter of resignation.

**December 2017** – Skip Heflin, an assistant fire chief embroiled in a sexual harassment complaint involving a subordinate in the department, submits a notice of retirement that will be effective in February 2018, then works no more for the county, drawing some \$14,000 for doing nothing. The county in that case had its hands tied because the alleged victim of the harassment had died and was not available to add legitimacy to the complaint, which was brought on her behalf by others after her death.

All of the above happened during a turbulent period in the department that saw many of its employees complain of management issues, poor morale, inexplicable personnel decisions and general malfeasance at various levels of the organization. Some of those employees worked together to author a 72-page letter of grievances, allegations and complaints about the department and how it was being run.

We can only hope that letter, the

issues raised by the employees, and changes in both county and fire department administration now have things on the right track and the ugly and sordid events of recent history are stories for the archives that won't be repeated in the years to come.

The department is currently without a permanent chief and has been since Hood's departure Oct. 31. Mark Arnold was appointed as interim chief at that time, and continues to serve in that capacity.

The county has shown no urgency in filling the position, and given the effort necessary to remove recent stains from the department's reputation, it seems more important to be sure in selecting the right leader than rushing to fill the position just for the sake of doing so.

To his credit, county manager Jock Connell does seem to be taking the complaints and concerns of rank-and-file employees seriously, having conducted numerous one-on-one interviews with members of the department in preparation for launching a formal search for a new chief in the months to come.

One of the common themes throughout the grievance letter were ongoing efforts to cover up inappropriate actions by those at various management levels within the department, as well as elements of paranoia and conspiracy found within the management team. We can only hope new leadership for the department has resulted in more openness at all levels, and a willingness to address personnel and morale issues in a proactive manner rather than trying to find rugs under which to sweep problems.

What's really sad is that the poor behavior and bad decisions by a few people at the top of the management chain has overshadowed the exceptional work done by the rank and file within the department, men and women who willingly risk their lives for those they serve in the community.

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