

# VIEWPOINT

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## OUR VIEW

# More horrifying insights into PG shooting

**OUR POSITION:**  
*Institutionalized incompetence. No checks. No double-checks. No responsibility.*

Anyone who thought the case of the August 2016 shooting death of Mary Knowlton could not become more disturbing got a jolt recently with the release of Punta Gorda Police Department interviews conducted by state investigators.

The transcripts showed an alarming carelessness toward gun safety at this public event. The apparent reality of responsibilities assumed but not actually designated.

Routine safety procedures — familiar to anyone with a modicum of firearms training — were ignored. The apparent reality that actual, formal protocols did not exist.

This was unimaginable. Horrifying. Inexcusable.

A story printed in the *Sun* on April 21 and written by WGCU News reporters Michael Hirsh and Amy Tardiff revealed details of the investigation by the Florida Department of Law Enforcement into Knowlton's shooting death during a Chamber of Commerce "shoot/don't shoot" demonstration on the evening of Aug. 9. The story is also available on the WGCU website. Also at that website (<http://tinyurl.com/lhwsyzq>) are long clips of the police interviews.

Knowlton was the citizen-participant at the educational demonstration. She was shot by Punta Gorda police officer Lee Coel as more than 40 citizens and police department officers looked on. Coel has been charged with felony manslaughter.

Among revelations from the interviews:

- Police Lt. Christopher Salsman, the director of employee development and training, said he didn't insert himself into a safety check routine because he arrived late to the scene of the demonstration and assumed it had been done already by others.

FDLE investigator: "Did anybody ... did they check the gun beforehand?"

Salsman: "I don't know which officer was checking the weapon with him when it was loaded."

Asked if that typically would have been his responsibility, or that of Capt. Jeffrey Woodard, Salsman said, "In this particular case ... it would have been incumbent on both of us."

Arriving late, Salsman said, "My presumption was that — that because everything was in place, that these safety checks had already been completed."

An assumption when, in fact, none had.

- Woodard, who oversees much of the daily operation of the department, told the FDLE agent that he knew Coel had

a .38-caliber revolver in his waistband. But he also did not conduct a safety check.

When asked who was in control of the "scenario," Woodard said, "I'm not."

The state investigator asked who, in fact, was.

FDLE: "Somebody owned that scenario. Who — who owned it?"

Woodard: "I don't think that was ever discussed."

An astounding admission.

And precisely the problem. Despite the presence of four senior law enforcement officers, it seemed no one had clearly delineated responsibility for public safety. No one had been specifically assigned to double-check Coel's weapon. No one did.

- Woodard subsequently told state investigators he knew of no written protocols for this type of demonstration.

They were, essentially, winging it.

- Further, he told the FDLE, the department devised its operating procedures from internet videos.

"They were YouTube scenarios that some other agency did," Woodard said.

And, according to Woodard, the YouTube-based video scenario was supplied by Chief Tom Lewis (before he became chief).

Among other disturbing revelations:

- No one thought to question why Coel was using his personal revolver.

- This wasn't the first time this happened. According to Woodard, this demonstration was conducted previously — at least once and perhaps as many as three times — with Coel in the shooter role, using his .38-caliber revolver, with ammunition Coel believed were blanks.

In Woodard's words, immediately after the shooting, Coel said, "I just don't understand what happened. These are the same rounds that I use all the time."

- According to Woodard's statement to the FDLE, there was no designated safety officer at the demonstration.

"Everybody acted as safety officer," he said.

Or, in this case, everybody believing someone else was responsible. No one assigned specific responsibility.

In sum, no one imagined this was possible, so no formal protocols were in place.

Which is mind-boggling. The use of a working firearm, a personal handgun, at that. Blanks or not. The assumption by Coel, and his supervisors, that the gun wasn't loaded with live ammunition. Assumptions without accountability. A slipshod system; death resulting. The city is conducting an

internal affairs investigation, and city officials have said they will wait until criminal charges are resolved before taking further action. How long will that be? Until that happens, the city of Punta Gorda cannot begin to restore public faith in the operation. Until that happens, four officers involved with the scenario remain at the highest levels of the department's command structure. One, Capt. Jason Ciaschini, is acting police chief.

Meanwhile, Lewis has been charged by the State Attorney Steve Russell with misdemeanor culpable negligence, and he has been placed on paid leave by City Manager Howard Kunik. At this point, it is impossible to imagine he might return to the department.

In light of these revelations — and who knows what else to come — it seems fitting that strong disciplinary action will be taken against the other ranking officers who might have stepped in, conducted a simple safety check and prevented the shooting.

It is also inconceivable that anyone from within the department will be promoted to chief permanently. Someone from outside, untainted by this horrific incident, will have to be brought in to begin to restore credibility to a police department that has lost public trust.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Human nature to hate a winner?

Editor:

Isn't it curious that we want less taxes, easier reporting, more jobs and economic stimulation?

We are all in favor of the average person getting a break, but God forbid that the company building the cars, developing the drugs, searching for fuel sources, developing property so that people have a place to live, should make a profit.

We all want our taxes to go down, but we'll be darned if we are on board with anybody related to, or Donald Trump himself making one penny more.

So, how will that work? We'll embrace the new tax proposal if it has a clause saying it applies to everybody except those listed? Who else will be on the list? Where is the cutoff?

I know it is human nature to hate a winner, but, jeez, if a proposal is good for the country, it is good for all.

Don't people realize that if they have a few more dollars to spend at the mall, some bigwig somewhere might make a little more money? And if he or she makes a little more money, they might build a new store or hire some more people. But we wouldn't want that, would we?

**Malcolm Williams**  
Englewood

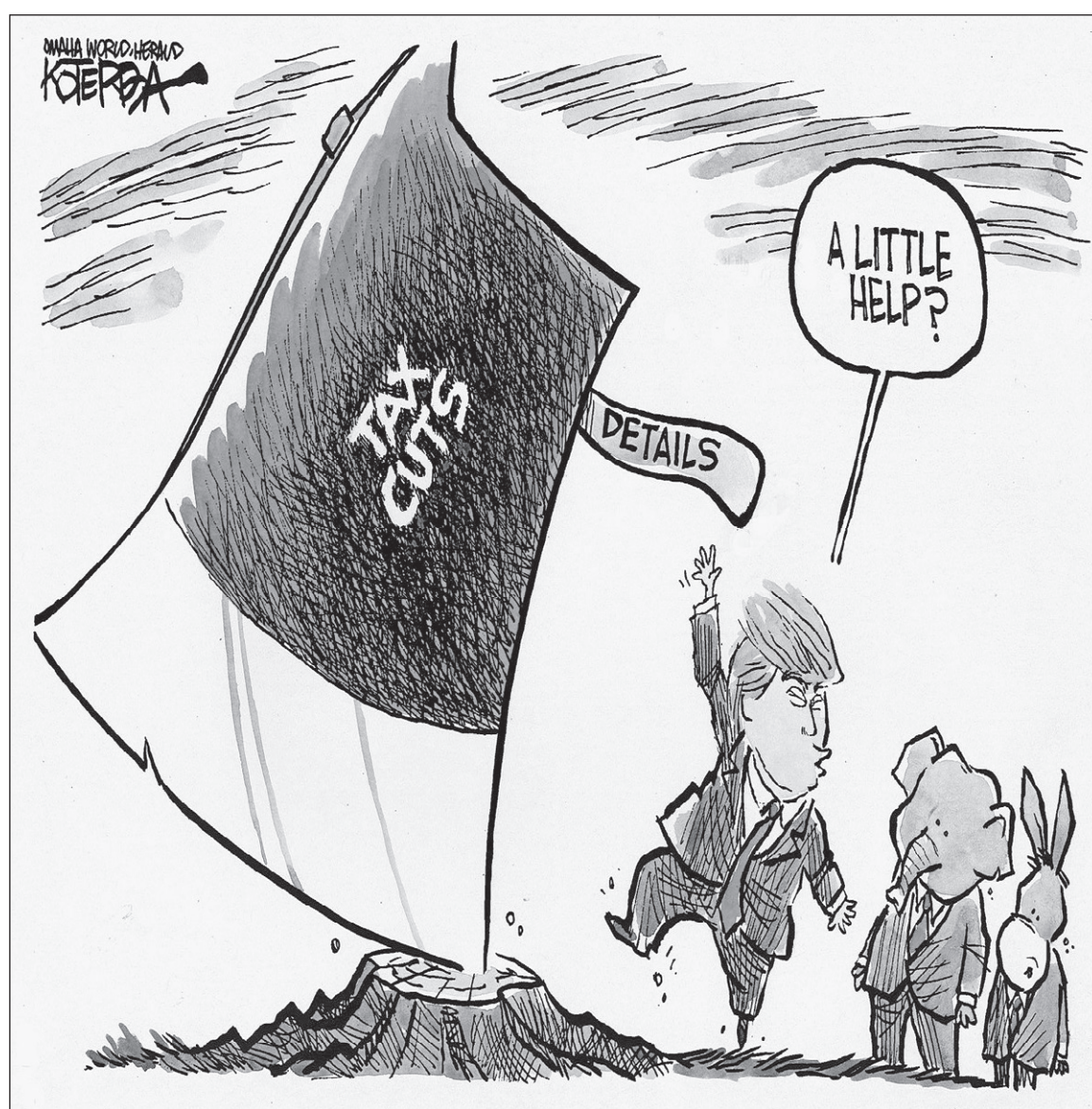
### Battle plan is working

Editor:

If it isn't broke, don't fix it. And the strategy of charging conservatives with sexual harassment is working.

No need for proof, no need for a man's day in court, no need for waiting to see the process played out.

These are textbook Saul Alinsky tactics who said, "Pick



the target, freeze it, personalize it, polarize it."

Why would they change their battle plan? It's working, folks, recently two big names have been brought down.

Whether or not the messenger is flawless, the message is still important.

With the help of Newt Gingrich, Bill Clinton was a pretty good president but a very flawed human being.

The problems in this country are too monumental to be focused on rumors and allegations.

Let's fix problems and let the tabloid stories play out as they will.

**Wayne A. White**  
Englewood

### From beards to fishing

Editor:

Why do we see, and worldwide, so many males sporting facial hair these days? Does this represent laziness to avoid the morning shave, association with these Islamic terrorists should they be captured or even a subliminal response to do something the female cannot as she moves steadily into areas previously all male?

The current regulation permitting equal access for bicycles on public highways is misguided and is resulting in deaths and injuries. Bicycle paths are one solution, but funding should be from the users and not the general public. Publishing minimum

speed limits on our public roads would also be a method to control who uses these roads.

Adult emotional display for loving a pet including face-kissing, taking walks in public with the dog in a baby stroller, dogs in public places, dogs fouling the public walkways, etc., all seem to display humans incapable of relating to their own specie.

If those topics do not excite perhaps this killing for entertainment, called hunting and fishing, could profit from some reporter's writing skills? Adults getting their jollies from killing some poor dumb fish is one thing, but making a party from this activity and teaching children to continue the practice seems odd. Fishing seems the prime motivation for these millions of dollars spent

to dredge Stump Pass, another strange human activity. Nature will win.

**John P. Derr**  
Port Charlotte

### Wonder what, who to believe

Editor:

Am I the only one in the world who didn't understand or really even know about bots until recently? And, I'm not sure I fully grasp the concept now. What I do comprehend is that one thing they do is manipulate data to get a desired result.

A survey can be blasted by bots to skew the results. So surveys asking our impression of everything from new products to political opinion can, and are, infiltrated by robotic results to produce a specific response.

Anything that you hear about public opinion on presidential performance to whether Americans prefer oranges or apples should be suspect in your mind. It is very likely the results are not based on actual human beings.

Which should leave you wondering what and who to believe.

**Andy Bishop**  
Englewood

### Thanks for treat at Easter dinner

Editor:

On Easter Sunday, my wife and I went to Outback for dinner. When I asked for the bill, the waiter told me it was paid for by a couple seated near us.

I thanked the couple and told them that I was wearing my World War II hat because they do not teach anything about World War II in schools. Young people do not know that 60 million people lost their lives in World War II and America lost 400,000 military. They don't know the enemy was Japan, Germany and Italy.

Thanks again to that couple.

**John Arnott**  
Port Charlotte

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The Letters to the Editor section is designed as a public forum for community discourse, and the opinions and statements made in letters are solely those of the individual writers. The newspaper takes no responsibility for the content of these letters. Please send or bring correspondence to the *Sun*, Letters to the Editor, 23170 Harborview Road, Charlotte Harbor, FL 33980. Readers may email Letters to the Editor at letters@sun-herald.com. Further questions or information, call 941-681-3003.

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## OUR VIEW

### The time for healing still pending

**OUR POSITION:** Punta Gorda Police Chief Tom Lewis was acquitted of culpable negligence in the death of Mary Knowlton. But the bad dream is not yet over.

This should be a time for healing. Tom Lewis, one of Punta Gorda's favored sons, has been found not guilty of culpable negligence in the death of Mary Knowlton. Knowlton, a 73-year-old retired librarian, was shot to death last August by former Punta Gorda police officer Lee Coel in a civilian demonstration. He was one of Lewis' officers.

But the wound in the side of the city still seeps. Lewis' job as chief of police still hangs in the balance, pending the outcome of an internal affairs investigation by the city.

As long as the results are pending, so is the healing.

A jury's decision Thursday to acquit Lewis did nothing to bring together a town sharply divided. The trial lasted five days, but it was over in five minutes when Judge Devon George ruled the state would be required to prove that Lewis knew or should have known Mary would come to great bodily harm.

The day bled into lunch and the middle afternoon. The jury deliberated for three hours, asking to review the video of the shooting, doing its job. But there was no way those six jurors could have returned a conviction. Tom Lewis had known nothing of what would unfold that fateful night.

There are those who believe Lewis should never have been in court, should never have been charged in the first place. He acted properly in the wake of the shooting. A good man was betrayed by those he trusted, people he had worked with for years, an officer he had protected following an indiscretion involving a K-9 and a drug addict.

Lewis could not help it that his aides suddenly stopped doing their jobs, that safety protocols — written or unwritten — were shrugged off. He could not be blamed for Coel's lack of common sense in using his own revolver in the demonstration.

His supporters backed him with energy. They staged public demonstrations. They held fundraisers to help pay for his defense. They rooted for him on social media.

Mary Knowlton was not the primary consideration. And that offended her survivors — husband, Gary, and sons Steve and Bill — who believed it trivialized Mary's death.

Mary, after all, is the victim here.

Others believe Lewis is ultimately responsible for Mary's death because he was the man in charge. Period. It goes no further than that. A tragedy occurred on his watch. This was no dog bite. This was a shooting death.

He is 100 percent accountable. He said so himself.

Tom Lewis has been on paid administrative leave since he was charged in February. He may get his job back. He may go on to repay the city's loyalty by serving it. But no matter what the decision, his reputation is forever tarnished. He will always be the commander whose soldier shot an innocent woman to death.

Coel may have pulled the trigger, but Lewis allowed it to happen. How could he? How can Lewis be trusted to lead here again? Many believe he can't, that despite the verdict he should resign. This newspaper has presented this view in the past and remains steadfast in its belief. It's not a matter of guilt and innocence. It's a matter of right and wrong.

Until the right thing is done — until Lewis steps down or is let go — the time for healing must wait.



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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Democrats: Work to solve problems

Editor:

Borrowing the first four words from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., I have a dream; that Democrats will put aside hate and resistance and join together with Republicans to work on solving our country's problems. By joining forces look what they might accomplish.

Peace among all people, stop the racism and realize that there are good and bad in every race.

A health system that works for all people.

Work together on a good plan to protect our nation from terrorists.

We need a better system for helping people to enter our country legally and pledge their allegiance to this country.

We need to protect all life from conception to death. Killing unborn children is not the answer to irresponsible sex.

We need a better system of welfare that helps and encourages people to get jobs to support themselves and their families.

We need to be friendly but firm with foreign nations and protect our citizens who travel abroad.

My list could go on and on. We do not need party against party. We need to join

together.

Below is a saying I learned at a conference: TEAM — Together everyone achieves more.

Carol Mulholland  
 Port Charlotte

### Many questions to be answered

Editor:

Where were those calling for affordable housing when prices tanked and there were affordable properties at low mortgage rates? Is it, when we don't need it we have it and when we need it we don't have it, a reasonable answer?

What happens to the Charlotte Mall if most retailers close or leave?

Do "planners" consider drastic changes in our shopping habits to determine how much retail/commercial space we need?

If traffic circles are a good idea, why all the confusing approach signs?

Does anyone monitor park usage reviewing results for closings, expansions or new uses?

Have you benefited from the huge increase in value of Amazon, Apple, Google and other tech stocks, or are you just increasing their value by using their products and services?

Can Englewood Beach be expanded by acquiring adjacent properties?

How can visitors to our area find the new All Veterans Memorial Park in Placida?

Will North Port suck surviving major retailers from Port Charlotte?

Can West County be a regional destination for tourism and home buyers if separated from Charlotte County with a good marketing plan?

Did you know searching our county appraiser's site for all types of vacant lots you get 134,000?

Is the 1 foot difference in the driving lanes on Boundary Boulevard and Rotonda Circle causing so many damaged mail boxes?

Andy Leonard  
 Rotonda West

### Treasonous acts in the White House

Editor:

We know that Russia tried to influence our election and that they favored candidate Donald Trump.

Trump openly encouraged Putin to hack Clinton's emails and display them for the world to see. Once in office, Trump mocked the intelligence agencies for doing their jobs in exposing the interference and has tried to block the investigation.

He fired the FBI director and twice stated his reason being the Russia investigation. He handed classified

information to Russian officials in the Oval Office. Before and after the election, Trump praised Putin and other despots while insulting many of our allies.

In a few hours, I compiled a list of over 20 individuals, including Trump, his family, appointees and campaign officials and their connections with Russia, including business dealings, representation of Russian interests or frequent contacts with Russian officials, often unreported and sometimes secretive. The list of individuals and their connections with Russia runs 17 pages, single-spaced. Many of those people now have security clearances that allow them access to classified information necessary to protect America, if that matters anymore.

Trump's lack of curiosity about the Russian attack on democracy may be because he already knows all the answers. Yet, his chumminess, past and present, with Russian spies/diplomats, oligarchs and Putin doesn't faze his supporters.

Had Obama or Clinton acted anything like Trump and his inner circle, either would have been accused of treason — for good reason. He or she would have been called a Russian agent — for good reason.

Tom Butler  
 Port Charlotte

## ANOTHER VIEW

### Using Twitter as an act of kindness

The following editorial appeared in the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*:

Minneapolis Star Tribune  
 Another View

Within 24 hours of President Donald Trump's disgusting Twitter outburst targeting MSNBC's Mika Brzezinski and Joe Scarborough, two stories making the rounds on social media provided a very different take on life in America in 2017.

That got us thinking: What if Trump used Twitter as a tool to hold up acts of kindness and generosity instead of as a vehicle to attack those who have in some way offended his delicate sensitivities? What if he used Twitter to highlight what's already great about this country?

Sure, it's naive to think a

Trump social media transformation will begin anytime soon, if ever. But let's just ponder those two aforementioned stories for a minute and consider the impact they might have had on the president's nearly 40 million Twitter followers.

There's motorist Andy Mitchell, who could have ignored Justin Korva, the young man in a fast-food uniform he recently noticed walking along a road on a 95-degree day in Rockwall, Texas. Instead, he offered Korva a ride and learned that

the 20-year-old made the 3-mile walk to and from work each day. Mitchell recounted the experience on Facebook, prompting strangers to donate more than \$5,000 to buy Korva a new car.

Then there's Major League Baseball umpire John Tumpane, who instinctively grabbed a 23-year-old woman who had hopped over the railing of the Roberto Clemente Bridge in Pittsburgh on Wednesday and appeared to be planning to take her own life.

"You'll forget me tomorrow," the woman said, asking Tumpane to let her go. "I'll never forget you," he told her. "You can have my promise on that."

The woman was eventually

lifted back over the railing, and Tumpane tried to comfort her before paramedics took over. "I told her, 'I didn't forget her, and we'd be here, and she's better off on this side than the other side.' I just want her to know that," he recalled in an interview with the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*.

Trump's use of Twitter amplifies his voice while revealing much about his character. He too often comes across as a self-absorbed, insecure bully. In other words, the antithesis of Andy Mitchell and John Tumpane — two everyday heroes whose stories would have provided a refreshing change of pace for realDonaldTrump.

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