



**Carmage Walls**  
**Commentary Prize**

**2019 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.)**

Public corruption accusations have now netted prison sentences and fines for several former politicians. In this last year, our newspaper has purposefully maintained a call for stronger ethical standards among lawmakers and serious limits on any state funding program that gives individuals control of spending decisions. We' tried to support lawmakers who stood up for principled representation while calling out practices, such as loans among lawmakers that could be used to influence votes, for change. We have encouraged continued investigation to ferret out those who would take advantage of their positions of power.

It is often difficult to pinpoint direct changes arising from editorials, but the state Legislature has adopted new ethical standards. Legislative leaders took up the challenge to invoke integrity in their inaugural speeches. And we have attempted to use the power of our editorials to warn of the damage made possible through corruption and to encourage honest lawmakers to embrace their vital role as standard bearers. How much credit we deserve for changes is up for debate, but we're certain that our voice has been a vital part to setting Arkansas legislative culture on a better track.

EDITORIALS

The verdict is in
Conviction a sad reflection on leadership

NWA Democrat-Gazette
convicted felon Jon Woods.
As of Thursday, that became
the sad but accurate description
for a man voters in Northwest Arkansas,
once upon a time, invested with
the public trust through a much more
honorable title, that of Arkansas state
senator.

The public unraveling of Woods'
political career got underway
Nov. 7, 2015, just a few days before
the filing deadline for candidates seeking
a spot in the next year's election. Woods
had served as a state representative
from Springdale from 2007 to 2013 then
as state senator from
2013 to 2017. He loved
the role and appeared
to embrace it practically
as a full-time job. His
2015 announcement
that he wouldn't seek
re-election shocked
the political world of
Northwest Arkansas. And thus began
the questions about why.

The private unraveling had begun
a couple of years earlier as Woods or-
chestrated the allocation of state gov-
ernment General Improvement Fund
money to Ecclesia College in Springdale
and a nascent nonprofit conceived by an
associate. On Thursday, a federal court
jury convicted Woods of 15 charges tied
to public corruption in the form of kick-
backs — an elected official receiving
payment in exchange for using his in-
fluence to send taxpayer money to the
tiny, private Christian college and his
buddy's creation, AmeriWorks. That
friend, Milton "Rusty" Cranford, sits in
a Missouri jail, awaiting his own trial for
public corruption on unrelated charges.

The same jury that convicted Woods
also found Randall Shelton Jr., of Kemp
Texas, guilty of 12 charges. He's a con-
sultant/lobbyist who stood accused of
being the middle man in arranging the
payments from the college to Woods
and another Republican state lawmaker,
former Rep. Micah Neal of Springdale.
Neal pleaded guilty more than a year
ago for his part in the schemes and co-
operated with prosecutors.

A fourth man charged, Ecclesia Col-
lege president Owen Paris III, pleaded
guilty to one count of conspiracy on
the eve of the trial and agreed to work
with prosecutors. None of the men have
been sentenced.

It is beyond the space we have avail-
able today to detail the 32 charges on
which Woods and Shelton were indicted.
The jury by all accounts performed
admirably in the weeks-long trial, which
they concluded after two full days of
deliberation. It says something about
how earnestly jurors did their jobs that
they determined prosecutors had
not proven their case on two charges
against Woods and three against Shel-
ton. Both men were, however, found to
be guilty of conspiracy to commit fraud
and related wire or mail fraud charges.
Jurors also found Woods guilty of money
laundering.

"Today is a bittersweet day for the
people of Arkansas," U.S. Attorney
Duane "Dak" Kees of the western dis-
trict of Arkansas said after the trial. "We
should always rejoice when our justice
systems work, but it is nonetheless
painful when that justice system has to
be directed at those individuals we have
placed our trust and confidence in."

Bittersweet is the word, isn't it?

Thousands of voters have put their
trust in Woods, a Republican, since his
first campaign in 2006. His conviction
Thursday gives no cause for celebra-
tion, even if there was some satisfaction
the justice system had risen up to attack
abusive practices by people holding
elective office, ostensibly because they
wanted to work toward a better Arkan-
sas. The General Improvement Fund
investigation, rather than revealing the
integrity of Arkansas lawmakers, deliv-
ered multiple examples of dishonesty
and abuse.

Beyond Woods and Neal, state Rep.
Jake Files, Republican of Fort Smith,
pleaded guilty to fraud
and money launder-
ing charges related
to misuse of General
Improvement Fund
money intended for
Fort Smith's
complex, Pine Bluff's

Henry "Hank" Wilkins IV, a Democrat,
pleaded guilty last month to "conspir-
ing to accept over \$80,000 in bribes in
exchange for influencing Arkansas state
legislation and transactions," according
to the U.S. attorney. Wilkins accepted
bribes through donations to a church
where he served as pastor. Wilkins was
county judge of Jefferson County when
his transgressions became public. He
has since resigned.

If we were to bet, we'd put money on
the likelihood of further developments
in handling of General Improvement
Fund grants. If this trial and other con-
victions have demonstrated anything,
it's that empowering individuals to dole
out money from a taxpayer-funded
"slush fund," as Neal called it, is an in-
vitation to abuse. Did some good come
from the grants? Yes, such as grants to
volunteer fire departments for needed
equipment. But such an unaccountable
system is like dangling red meat in front
of a hungry carnivore — those corrupt
of spirit will give in to their less-honorable
tendencies. Hopefully that the system
they've helped to create and sustain will
give them cover.

When it comes to those sometimes
called public servants, such abuses as
utterly disappearing because in seek-
ing public office, they've committed to
the people of Arkansas that they will act
according to a high standard, one that
puts the needs of citizens first. Instead,
they debate that original intent.

Arkansans must be able to put their
trust in the state's institutions of pow-
er. When that's gone, state governmen-
t will have lost its moral authority. It is
vital that all elected officials stand up
for integrity and accountability. Among
the saddest pieces of this tale is so many
people knew the General Improvement
Fund system was ripe for abuse, but so
many just went along to get along.

Any future system of state funding
for local needs must be aggressive in
protecting taxpayers and guarding
against corruption. That means no one
— not the governor or individual law-
makers — should be making decisions
about how the money is allocated. A big
pot of money is an invitation to abuse.

Arkansans desperately need the kind
of conviction among lawmakers that
builds trust in political leaders, not the
kind that leads to long, deserved prison
terms.

WHAT'S THE POINT?

In wake of a Northwest Arkansas
corruption trial, state leaders
must renew commitment to
integrity, transparency and
accountability.



COLUMNIST

Go East, young man



Rex Nelson

Jacob DeVall and his son Chappel found a
place along the lower White River in the
1840s and established a mercantile store
that would become DeValls Bluff in
Prairie County has had fewer than 1,000
residents since the Civil War. It reached its post-war
high-water mark with 924 residents in the 1910
census and was down to 609 people in the most
recent census.

But Bill Sawyer writes for the Encyclopedia
of Arkansas History & Culture: "Excluding Helena,
no other town in eastern Arkansas held such
strategic importance to the Union Army during
the Civil War as did DeValls Bluff."

DeValls Bluff has always punched above its
weight, as they say over in the sports depart-
ment. Of the towns listed in my US, 70 essay on
the cover of today's Perspective section, it's the
one I've found myself drawn to time after time
through the decades. I like history, and I like
food. DeValls Bluff has plenty of both.

Some of my best days as a boy were those
spent at my grandparents' big house in Des Arc.
Those visits often meant road trips south to
DeValls Bluff for barbecue at Craig's or fried catfish
at Murry's. Fortunately for Arkansas diners, both
restaurants are still going strong even though
Olden Murry and Lawrence Craig
are no longer with us. Craig's remains
in DeValls Bluff, while Murry's has
moved west to a spot on US, 70 be-
tween Hazen and Carlisle.

Mike Trimble—a gifted storyteller
who once wrote for the Arkansas
Gazette, the Arkansas Times and this
newspaper—described the original
Murry's as a place that "appears at
first glance to be a minor train derailment."

Trailers were strung together as dining rooms.
It was a brown-bag establishment in the tradition
of a lot of the old restaurants in Delta areas of
Arkansas and Mississippi. People in Little Rock
would rent buses to take them to DeValls Bluff
for feasts of fried catfish (Olden Murry might
throw in fried crappie for special friends), turnip
greens and black-eyed peas. Murry had opened
the restaurant in the 1960s after an injury forced
him to end his career as a U.S. Army Corps
of Engineers snagboat.

In his 1987 book Southern Food: At Home,
on the Road, in History, John Egerton described
the restaurant as "a rambling catabomb of inter-
connected coaches, trailers and prefabricated
rooms" and said that Murry was a "Rembrandt
of the kitchen." I happen to think that his son-
in-law, Stanley Young, is turning out even better
food at the current location.

Lawrence Craig opened his restaurant in 1947.
He had once cooked on boats on area rivers. In
an interview with Trimble, Craig said that even
though he was known for barbecue, he could fry
fish better than Murry. In a separate interview,
Murry told Trimble that even though he was
known for fish, his barbecue was better than
what Craig served. I've been known to have a
pork sandwich at Craig's (medium sauce for me)
as an appetizer and then head over to Murry's for
fish. Why waste a trip east on just one stop?

On its Southern Barbecue Trail website,
Southern Foodways Alliance says of Craig's:
"Three generations have supplied many satisfied
customers with a variety of smoked meats, most
notably smoked and sliced pork sandwiches
slathered with a sauce made with hints of ap-
ple and bell pepper. Their signature sauce was

developed over the kitchen table of the Craig
family home."

Robert Craig, Lawrence's son, said when
asked about the sauce: "My mom was just in the
kitchen one day, putting a little bit of this and put-
ting a little bit of that together. And my dad said,
'Well yeah, it tastes all right.' And so he obviously
introduced it to the public, and it has been sky-
rocketing ever since."

DeValls Bluff also was the home of Mary
Thomas' Pie Shop. Thomas, who's no longer
alive, sold pies across the highway from Craig's
for more than 30 years. In the 1990s, Lena Rice
began selling her own pies in DeValls Bluff. She
died in 2005, but Ms. Lena's Pies is still in busi-
ness, providing yet another reason for a trip to
DeValls Bluff.

As far as history, the town is filled with his-
torical markers, most of which outline the role
it played during the Civil War. Union forces
occupied DeValls Bluff in 1863. Sawyer
writes that when the water was low on
the Arkansas River, "many boats
couldn't reach the capital city. But they
could navigate up the White River to
DeValls Bluff. Men and material could
be transferred to the Memphis & Little
Rock Railroad's trains to be trans-
ported to Little Rock. For that reason,
DeValls Bluff's port area was heavily
fortified for the remainder of the war and was
home to many soldiers—black and white—and
refugees... The troops stationed at DeValls Bluff
patronized stores and saloons that rapidly sprang
up, many operated by Northern men such as
Daniel P. Upham of New York, who came to town
in the closing days of the war to open a saloon in
partnership with a man named Whyte."

River towns can be tough places, and De-
Valls Bluff is no different. Bars have long
been a fixture in the city's small down-
town. These days it's a place called Grasshopper's
with bright green paint on the building and this
motto on its sign: "Come grumpy, leave happy."

DeValls Bluff has attracted duck hunters and
fishermen since the 1800s. In the days before the
Corps of Engineers built large impoundments
across the state, the White River at DeValls Bluff
attracted wealthy families from as far away as
Little Rock and Memphis on weekends. They
had fancy houseboats on the river and built
expensive cabins along its banks. They hunted
ducks in the winter while fishing on the White
River and its oxbow lakes the rest of the year. A
sporting goods store called The Bottoms oper-
ates in downtown DeValls Bluff to serve those
who still visit.

Like other small towns in east Arkansas, De-
Valls Bluff has been losing population for years.
Its school district consolidated with Hazen in
2006. Yet it still lures those who love history, love
to hunt and fish and love to consume pork barbe-
cue and homemade pie.

Rex Nelson is a senior editor at the Arkansas
Democrat-Gazette.

Crystal clear

ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE
A WEEK ago, a panel of lawmakers
made some news when it decid-
ed to study the state's grocery
tax. By "study" we mean look into whether
to raise it.

By late this week, the governor was
heard from.

Actually, that's not fair. The governor
was heard from days before, but Asa
Hutchinson being Asa Hutchinson, he
apparently thought it would be sufficient
to note that his budget and figures didn't
account for an increase in the grocery tax.
But sometimes you have to give the press
the equivalent of an iron skillet to the
head of a Moe, Larry and Curly.

Which the governor did Thursday
evening. He sent a letter (and released it
to the papers) explaining his opposi-
tion to any grocery tax increase. Without

equivocation. Or as he put it:
"I do not support raising the sales tax
on groceries."

Not a whole lot of gray area there.
Which is good. He seems to understand,
as we do, that this panel studying taxes
wants the freedom to discuss everything.
Or as the polls often say, put everything
on the table. But this state has spent too
many years slowly but surely lowering
the grocery tax, aka The Shame of Arkan-
sas, so that folks don't have to pay more
for their milk and bread. Arkansas has fi-
nally reached the point where the tax is
only 1.5 percent. And it's supposed to go
down even more soon enough.

Let's stay on that path. Tax hikes on
groceries might be the equivalent of
glazed beets at a buffet dinner. Talk about
them only in jest. And don't put them on
our plate.

NWA LETTERS

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Carrier, others make
newspaper an asset

My husband and I have subscribed to and
read one or more daily and weekly newspapers
and news magazines since our marriage many
years ago, and have been grateful for all of them,
including, currently, the Northwest Arkansas
Democrat-Gazette.

Our gratitude spreads amply to all the peo-
ple whose diligence and work bring us news
and, sometimes, their well thought-out opinions
about important topics. (This is true, even when
we disagree with their conclusions.)

We have been longtime friends of Flip Puthoff
and read his every word in the Democrat-Gazette
though we have never been fishing and no longer
bike or hike. We learn a lot from Flip and enjoy

his outdoors vicariously (Tying flies? Yikes, what
an art!) We have also been fortunate enough to
meet and talk with Paul Greenberg and Becca
Martin-Brown at various writers' conferences
here in Arkansas. Others are not only in the
newspaper, but seem like friends.

One very special friend we have made is the
newspaper carrier who brings our paper to us
seven days a week. Carrie Spencer is outstanding
in what, I assume, is a very difficult job. I am an
early riser so sometimes see her car approaching
and go out to say hello and get our newspaper.
Carrie is always cheerful, and exchanging greet-
ings with her is a marvelous start to any day.

A big thank you to Carrie, and all the rest of
you working for the Northwest Arkansas Dem-
ocrat-Gazette.

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## EDITORIAL

### Make 'em pay

#### Violations of public trust demand punishment

**G**OOD ol' dad always told us it never hurts to ask.  
"You don't know if you don't ask," he'd say.

Former state Sen. Jake Files, or at least his attorney, apparently had someone teaching the same lesson. A federal judge last week sentenced Files, of Fort Smith, to 18 months in federal prison as a result of his crimes involving taxpayer dollars and bank loans he received after pledging collateral he did not own. The judge ordered Files to pay \$83,903 in restitution, including nearly \$27,000 in state General Improvement Fund money he obtained to help build the River Valley Sports Complex he had pledged to complete for the city of Fort Smith.

Files' attorney asked the judge, who was required by federal law to send Files to prison, to sentence his client to only one day behind bars. Let's call it the "go big or don't go home" defense.

Thankfully, U.S. District Judge P.K. Holmes wasn't in the mood to be overly generous with a man who took advantage of his stature as a community leader and elected state official to advance schemes to get money. Holmes said the theft of public money by an elected official went beyond an average white-collar criminal by doing damage to the confidence Arkansans have in elected officials.

"To me, this is an egregious violation of public trust," Holmes said.

An attorney representing the Department of Justice's public integrity sector told the judge Files could be the first of several people sentenced in Arkansas public corruption cases. The sentencing range under federal guidelines was 12 to 18 months, and attorney Victor Salgado encouraged Holmes that the higher options would send a message that public officials should and will be held accountable.

Arkansans needs some accountability. It won't come from our Legislature. And the proposals for ethics "reform" we've seen don't inspire any confidence that they're serious measures. But more on that as election time rolls around.

The last couple of years have heaped disappointment upon disap-

pointment on Arkansans as they've seen several lawmakers caught with their greedy hands in the public coffers. Perhaps the most surprising — and the one who gave the public a first glimpse into the corruption associated with General Improvement Fund spending — was Springdale state Rep. Micah Neal. He pleaded guilty to accepting two kickbacks totaling \$38,000 for directing state tax dollars to Ecclesia College, a tiny private Christian college. In acknowledging his guilt, he agreed to testify against state Sen. Jon Woods, Ecclesia President Oren Paris III and an alleged middle man, Randall Shelton Jr.

**WHAT'S THE POINT?** Prosecutors and judges should make sure elected officials who act corruptly receive the punishment that fully recognizes their violations of the public trust.

Woods and Shelton went to trial and were convicted of a multitude of public corruption and fraud charges. As prosecutors continued pulling on the corruption threads, former state legislator and Jefferson County Judge Henry "Hank" Wilkins IV pleaded guilty to accepting bribes through a church he pastored in return for helping to pass certain pieces of legislation.

Sentencing awaits these men. And investigations continue. It is no time to go soft on sentencing. There is something particularly cynical and dastardly in seeking the public's trust at the ballot box then using the trust and authority to line one's own pockets while trading influence for money. Arkansans need to try hard to elect people of integrity, but when people use their office or position for criminal enterprises, the courts owe it to the public to crack down. If voters cannot have faith in those they elect, our system of government will not be long for this world.

One day in jail? No way. It is indeed heartbreaking that Jake Files' actions, and those of these other men, have adversely affected people who care for them. Such dishonesty always inflicts collateral damage. Public officials tempted to use their offices for private gain through illegal acts need to understand there is a stiff price to be paid, among their families and friends as well as within the judicial system.

## OTHERS SAY

### An industry of inhumanity

**T**HE house on Morris Street looked like every other house on the block in West Dallas, except that its fortified doors and windows concealed a dark secret too prevalent in our society.

The same news recently of a law enforcement bust and the secret spilled onto the street. The house was a hub for sex slavery.

For about three years, women were locked up in the 672-square-foot home, drugged, raped, beaten and forced to perform sex acts for money. Cameras monitored their movements and one of the traffickers allegedly slept by the front door with a weapon to discourage escapes. The courage of a passing ice cream vendor to aid one woman's flight to freedom finally shut down this house of horrors. The two accused traffickers, Desmond Kintwana Bethany and Bailey Jane Hance now face federal charges of conspiring to engage in sex trafficking. As a community, we should be repulsed by this modern day slavery, which ensnares 315,000 Texans, including 79,000 children, at a staggering \$6.6 billion cost to society, according to a study by the Institute on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault at the University of Texas. The Lone Star state ranks second in human trafficking, behind California, and the best available estimates tell us that hundreds of children are exploited for sex day and night in Dallas.

Sex trafficking is among the most vicious and difficult crimes facing our society. Traffickers prey on vulnerable people, including American kids who've

run away from abusive homes, undocumented immigrants, and others who fall into their clutches. Traffickers often create emotional dependency, destroy self-worth and isolate their victims.

At the Morris Street house, at least one woman who had fled was lured back by a woman working for Bethany. On another occasion, women at the house were blindfolded and taken to Miami where the sex traffickers allegedly used now-shuttered backpage.com, a site linked to trafficking, to solicit customers.

In short, this case highlights some of the complexities that law enforcement needs to overcome in order to wipe out human trafficking. For example, those who have been trafficked often do things that are inconceivable from the outside, such as returning to a house where they were abused. Trafficked victims also often refuse to testify in court.

In this case, we can celebrate that a handful of victims were rescued. But long term, we must get at the deeper problems that allow this cancer to exist in our society. What we've heard from people on the front lines is that it is exceedingly important to have hope. Without hope, there will be no action. And this is one area where enforcement often proves to be a significant deterrent. It is also one area where smart enforcement, such as quiet, stable and basically safe. Around 1993, three high-density apartment complexes went in on Date Street, and within two years the entire area was destroyed. The crime rate rose dramatically, stores closed, street litter gathered, and the schools turned into a cross between prisons and mental health facilities. The land developers, real estate agents, political activists and local politicians didn't seem to care.

In the absence of realism about human nature, idealism and sentimentality almost always lead to big problems and, sometimes (as in the case of San Bernardino), disaster. It was absolutely heartbreaking to witness the destruction of a city I loved.

I personally don't subscribe to the "growth is always good" religion, but I hope its evangelists will proceed with caution and wisdom.

### Canada legalizes marijuana...



## COLUMNIST

### The truth is out there

Press will always be thorn in side to those in power

**T**he press is, indeed, the enemy. President Trump isn't wrong. In his topsy-turvy view of things, anyone who isn't an ally equals an enemy. The press is certainly not an ally nor should they ever be.

The press is always going to be high on the enemies list of politicians who want their supporters to trust everything they say and nothing anyone else says. I certainly acknowledge in this diverse, oversaturated media market, there is some reporting that barely qualifies as journalism. In fact, if it's driven by an agenda rather than accuracy and the best obtainable version of the truth, I would say it's not journalism at all. Trump news, other Americans of all stripes, get confused from time to time about what constitutes news coverage and what constitutes commentary. That is, largely, the doing of the American broadcast media such as CNN, Fox News and the other 24-hours-a-day machines that feel the need to create drama to keep viewers watching. If they committed to straight-up reporting of the news, it would at times be a little boring. Think C-Span. And how many people watch that?

Remember CNN's early days with Bernard Shaw at the anchor desk? Breaking news meant something big was really happening. And there was a lot of solid reporting going on. But it wasn't nearly as exciting and the cable ratings like today's CNN, Fox and other outlets.

Most of the time if you turn on these round-the-clock news channels, more time is filled by talking heads (just like me) than by newsmakers and news reporters doing their jobs. Instead, they put on panels of "experts," although for the life of me I cannot figure out why a lot of them are considered such. In any case, their entire role appears to be "spin," so they're adding far more heat than light to the subjects they're exploring.

Based on the amount of time spent on reporting to journalistic standards and the expression of viewpoints, the channels should really be Cable Opinion Network and Fox Opinion Channel.

So yes, I'm throwing President Trump a bone by agreeing that what's delivered on the never-off news channels is less about news than about spin. Long before Donald Trump took office, I advised people to read stories from multiple news outlets, including international media, to get a clearer picture of what's going on in the world around them. And to read daily.

Why? Well, let's pretend you're given an assignment to cover, say, illegal immigration for publication. Do you believe it's possible to write a single story that fully captures all aspects of such a complicated and often controversial issue, which are often far less complicated, reporters may get only 15 or 20 paragraphs to explore that day's news. Decisions have to be made about what's included and what's not. Someone directly involved may have other information he wishes the reporter would have included in her story, but decisions have to be made about what stays and what goes, all with an eye toward giving peo-

**Greg Harton**



ple enough to understand what happened even though more details could flesh it out.

I don't want to sound like the opening of "The X Files," but the truth is out there. The more one reads, the more one can discern what that truth is. Not your truth or my truth, but actual truth. Journalists know their stories cannot include everything and it can be an agonizing process to decide what stays and what goes in each day's coverage. That's not an exercise in bias. Fairness is indeed part of the mix of goals. But for every story written by a reporter, someone else might have made different choices about what's most important to deliver in a limited amount of space, and what's not as important. When something gets left out, it's not usually the result of some dastardly plan to unfairly influence people's understanding. Can I say that's never been the case? No, there are some pretty famous examples. But most reporters are attempting to ethically and professionally cover the news. And when Donald Trump lies about something — and there's no question he lies and spins plenty — it's not bias to report information that makes him out to be a liar.

The best antidote to any bias, real or perceived, is seeking information from multiple sources and the application of critical thinking skills. A person 100 percent convinced need not be afraid of additional information.

Some will say they don't have time for that. Fair enough. But the less one reads — and the less diversity they include in their reading — the less valid their claims of a biased media can be.

Rely less on the noise and unsubstantiated chatter of social media. Pursue reputable news sources (i.e., quality reporting). Stop immediately dismissing information that conflicts with your point of view. Don't immediately embrace a statement just because it confirms your own beliefs. And don't trust any politician who advances the idea that his version of events or situations is the only version anyone can rely on.

One final thought: A friend last week suggested the press gave President Obama a pass during his eight years in office. I don't agree with that, but let's give the assertion the benefit of a doubt. If it was wrong then, it's wrong now. President Trump doesn't deserve a pass. And the country can hardly afford to give one to him, or any president.

Greg Harton is editorial page editor for the Northwest Arkansas Democrat-Gazette. Contact him by email at gharton@nwdag.com or on Twitter @NWAgreg.

## NWA LETTERS

letters@nwdag.com

### 'Responsible growth' needed to prevent harm to region

I appreciate the spirit of Alice Walton's June 16 essay, "NWA can shape housing future with bold action," and very much hope the phrase "responsible growth" is a guiding principle.

A resource to consult is the population of Southern California refugees who have lived in the area more than 15 years. Among us, there seems to be a consensus that Northwest Arkansas is on the road to making many of the same mistakes that have done so much damage to quality of life in Southern California.

Through the late 1980s, the Del Rosa area of San Bernardino, Calif., was lower middle class but quiet, stable and basically safe. Around 1993, three high-density apartment complexes went in on Date Street, and within two years the entire area was destroyed. The crime rate rose dramatically, stores closed, street litter gathered, and the schools turned into a cross between prisons and mental health facilities. The land developers, real estate agents, political activists and local politicians didn't seem to care.

In the absence of realism about human nature, idealism and sentimentality almost always lead to big problems and, sometimes (as in the case of San Bernardino), disaster. It was absolutely heartbreaking to witness the destruction of a city I loved.

I personally don't subscribe to the "growth is always good" religion, but I hope its evangelists will proceed with caution and wisdom.

**PRESTON JONES**  
Siloam Springs

### People of faith have much to consider

In recent days we have witnessed an amazing turnaround in American politics and policy. The president had used scare tactics to generate support for his immigration policies, and in an attempt to silence the president's critics, the attorney general appealed to one of St. Paul's less-convincing teachings (most people stopped believing that kings rule by divine law a long time ago). But the words of both men were drowned out by the cries of infants and children being torn away from their parents. Public outcry, including impassioned statements from Christians and other people of faith, forced President Trump to reverse his policy — sort of.

But the public debate over immigration and the status of infants, children, and the Dreamers who were brought here illegally by their parents, is far from over. I hope and pray that my fellow Christians who are followers of Mr. Trump will ponder the events of recent days in light of the words and deeds of Jesus, who knowingly broke the law in order to heal sick people on the Sabbath and who said, "Let the little children come to me and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs."

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Fayetteville

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EDITORIAL

Legislative reckoning
Sentencings seek to protect public trust

When then-candidate Donald Trump promised during his soon-to-be-successful presidential campaign to "drain the swamp," Arkansans had no idea some of their state lawmakers were practically bathing in the malodorous, dark waters of their own political corruption.

Real swamps consist of vibrant ecosystems of plant and animal life. They're beautiful, in their own way. They serve as water purifiers and support a wide range of life. We have, thankfully, learned that swamps come with ecological benefits and aren't something to eliminate.

Still, swamps harbor some nasty, dangerous critters that it's best for us humans to avoid. So, we do understand the value of Trump's imagery. Truth be told, though, it's the politicians who lately have given swamps an undeserved reputation.

It's not the swamp that's to blame for the less desirable qualities of political animals. If our politicians are in a swamp, it's them who are fouling the waters. Government isn't a swamp, but its powers prove an enticing lure to human predators who view it as a place to satisfy their baser instincts.

In the last two weeks, Arkansans have seen in grim detail the consequences those political predators face — and should — when they venture into the swamp. U.S. District Court Judge Timothy L. Brooks used his authority not just to punish the guilty, but to also set a clear example for those who in the future might entertain thoughts of abusing the public's trust.

Former state Sen. Jon Woods, a Republican from Springdale, was sentenced to 18 years in federal prison for his role in a scheme to sell his influence and the powers of his public office. He must also pay \$16 million in restitution and forfeit \$1 million in assets to the federal government.

A jury found Woods guilty in May of 15 charges related to kickbacks from state grants he approved. "You were playing chess at a very high level, thinking three or four or five moves ahead," Brooks told Woods. "This wasn't a case of someone offering you a chance to make easy money and you taking it."

Beyond that, Woods was willing to rent out his legislative duties, writing bills for the benefit of himself rather than his constituents. When one \$400,000 grant didn't work out and was returned, Woods went to work reallocated into a scheme to make himself more money, the judge said.

"Your immediate, almost reflexive response was to re-steel the same money," Brooks said. "I find that amazing. I find that a great insight into the depravity of your heart."

Randell Shelton Jr. who aided in Woods' scheme, was next up. He pleaded for leniency, hoping for house arrest so he might watch his newborn child grow. Brooks said deterrence demanded a price: six years in prison and more than \$1.2 million in restitution and forfeited assets.

Then, it was Oren Paris III's turn. Paris was the president of Ecclesia College in Springdale, a small private Christian school that in 2015 and 2016 received \$550,000 in grants directly from Woods and Neal. Eight other lawmakers — at Woods' or Neal's urging — committed another \$165,500 to the school. Paris passed some of the money back to Woods and Neal through Shelton's business. Brooks ordered Paris, who changed his innocent plea to guilty the day before his trial was to begin, to spend three years in prison.

Then, Micah Neal's sentencing arrived Thursday. Brooks gave him credit, lots of credit, for his cooperation with authorities in securing convictions of the others. Prosecutors wanted to send a message: If you're guilty of a crime but come forward immediately and truthfully assist in bringing others to justice, there's a benefit.

Neal will spend the next year confined to his home for everything but work, church and medical needs. Two years of probation will follow, but he avoided jail time. Repayment of

\$200,000 will be required along with 300 hours of community service. All these men are now convicted felons.

The actions of these four men, and others, have put a dark cloud over Arkansas state government. In the process, they've also brought pain to people who trusted them, whether it's family and friends or voters who believed in them and put them in the positions of responsibility they abused.

None of these men had just a momentary slip mitigated by temporary weakness. Theirs was a complex scheme involving the orchestration of a lot of moving parts. Every day it lasted, they renewed their choices to defraud Arkansas taxpayers.

The risks of corruption continue to spread. Five former state lawmakers have pleaded guilty to either misusing state grant funds, accepting bribes or both since Neal's January 2017 plea. Another, Sen. Jeremy Hutchinson of Little Rock, was indicted for filing a false tax return and using campaign funds for personal use. Two lobbyists and three former executives of companies that received favorable state treatment in return for kickbacks have also entered guilty pleas.

What a horrible, sad era of corruption in Arkansas politics. There's plenty of reason to believe the repercussions will continue as investigations continue. We're thankful for the federal prosecutors. Had all this been left to Arkansas authorities, Woods might still be in the Senate, Neal might be Washington County Judge and the influence-peddling schemes might still be undetected.

Perhaps most heartbreaking is the massive impact their greed has had. The tentacles of their schemes, along with the acts of other unprincipled people entangled in a broader field of corruption, reach far beyond their own families in their adverse influences.

Preferred Family Healthcare was Arkansas' major behavioral health provider, but announced this month it will cease all operations by October as a result of the corruption scandals in this state and others. The business brought in more than \$33 million a year through its Arkansas Medicaid contracts, but the state ended those once the fraudulent practices became clear and led to prosecutions of company executives as well as Arkansas lawmakers. Dishonesty and greed that influence lawmakers and others somehow justified to themselves have disrupted a huge portion of state-supported medical care in Arkansas.

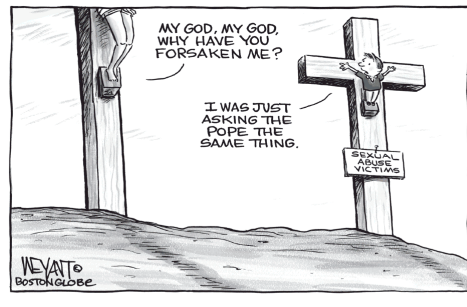
Neal was the first Arkansas lawmaker to admit guilt and he cooperated with investigators. That's why he avoided prison time. But how much money would have ever made the scheme worth the damage it has done to his reputation and the harm to his family and friends? Same goes for Woods, Paris and Shelton.

"Strange, isn't it? Each man's life touches so many other lives, and when he isn't around he leaves an awful hole, doesn't he?" asked Clarence, the 292-year-old Angel Second Class hoping to earn his wings in It's a Wonderful Life.

George Bailey, in that movie, had lost faith in himself and all the good he had done. The people involved in this Arkansas political corruption represent a kind of anti-George Bailey. Unlike him, they lost their way and chose the wrong paths. And yet every man's life touches so many other lives.

"Your honor, I will spend the rest of my life trying to redeem myself," Neal told the judge last week.

Those sentiments are heard a lot in state and federal courtrooms. We hope he's sincere and the rest seek redemption as well. By their actions, though, they've made it harder for the people to trust their elected representatives. They've damaged more than just themselves; their corrupt behaviors have scarred our public institutions.



COLUMNIST

Unifying a state



Rex Nelson

Under Yurachek, the relatively new athletic director at the University of Arkansas, is scheduled to address the Little Rock Touchdown Club on Monday. I look forward to meeting him and thanking him for making a sincere effort to understand this unique state, its people and what makes us tick. The fact that Razorback football teams will continue to play games at War Memorial Stadium in Little Rock tells me a lot.

Yurachek is a native of Richmond, Va., who earned a bachelor's degree in business management from Guilford College in Greensboro, N.C., in 1990 and a master's degree in sports administration from the University of Richmond in 1994. He was a four-year basketball letterman at Guilford and came to Arkansas from a similar position at the University of Houston.

Before the official announcement in May that the UA will continue to play football at War Memorial, Yurachek had made it clear that he realizes Razorback football is about more than money. It's something his predecessor Jeff Long never seemed to comprehend.

"It's not just a decision about the University of Arkansas and our football program," Yurachek told KATV back in February. "I think this impacts our entire state and a variety of constituents. It's just a decision based on dollars and cents, it's an easy decision for a director of athletics to make. But there's a lot more that goes into this decision than just pure dollars and cents."

Tuesday marks the 10th anniversary of the first football game played at War Memorial. It was built for the Razorbacks. In a story on the cover of this section, I detail the history of the stadium and the role it played in making the Razorbacks a statewide brand. At a time when so much revenue comes from television contracts, ticket revenue doesn't have as big of an impact as it once did. When recently released evidence showed that fewer than 40,000 people were in the stands for several games at Fayetteville last season, it made it even easier to justify the continuation of Little Rock games.

I traveled the state a great deal, which is the most enjoyable aspect of this job. I'm fascinated by current trends in which the state is gaining population overall at a time when two-thirds of Arkansas is losing population. There are three primary growth areas: northwest Arkansas, the Little Rock metropolitan area, and the Jonesboro-Paragould corridor. How do we continue to unify this state of only 3 million people in an era of drastic demographic changes? I've written before that I see three major unifying forces in Arkansas: the Razorbacks, a strong governor, and a quality statewide newspaper.

I mention the unifying power of Razorback athletics with all due respect to my friends at Arkansas State University in Jonesboro. I've never understood why it's so difficult to pull for all four of the state's NCAA Division I programs at the same time. After all, Arkansas is in the Southeastern Conference, Arkansas State is in the Sun Belt Conference, the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff is in the Southwestern Athletic Conference, and the University of Central Arkansas is in the Southland Conference. They aren't battling each other for conference titles, as is the case with the University of Alabama and Auburn University.

With that said, I hope the UA's recent decision to play UA/R and UA/PB in baseball will open the door for competition between the flagships

university and ASU. I'm among those who believe that a football game between the Razorbacks and the Red Wolves to open each season at War Memorial would be a good thing. It could serve as a unifying rather than a divisive force.

The wonderful thing about Razorback games in Little Rock is that they resemble a giant family reunion. I can stand at a tailgate party behind the press box and see friends from every part of the state due to the central location of the capital city. I'm confident that Yurachek will consider such a game as he learns more about the state.

As far as a strong governor, we're fortunate that Asa Hutchinson has been chosen to govern in the same pragmatic style as predecessors Mike Beebe and Mike Huckabee. Hutchinson appears to be craving to re-elect

tion in November, and rightfully so. Even though he was raised in the far northwest corner of Arkansas, Hutchinson has spent a great deal of time as governor in south and east Arkansas. He played a key role in ensuring that Razorback football games will continue to be played in Little Rock. He knows what those games mean to residents of the Delta and the pine woods of south Arkansas.

We've had a good run of governors for more than half a century, ever since Winthrop Rockefeller was elected in November 1966 after 12 years of Orval Faubus in the governor's office. Since Rockefeller was sworn into office in January 1967, there have been five Democratic and four Republican governors. None of them have been extremists. All have governed from the middle. They've listened to voices from every corner of Arkansas. Given the current culture of corruption in the Arkansas Legislature, we're fortunate to have a chief executive such as Hutchinson.

WHAT BRINGS us to a quality statewide newspaper. I was fortunate this summer to have been asked to represent the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette at civic club meetings in several counties where we're moving from home delivery of the print edition to online delivery for subscribers with iPads the newspaper gives them. It's a bold experiment in this period of transition for the newspaper industry, and people across the country are watching us to see if it succeeds.

In all of those speeches, I made clear that this newspaper will continue covering all 75 counties of Arkansas. There once were a number of statewide newspapers in places like Des Moines and Louisville that covered entire states. The Democrat-Gazette now stands as one of the few newspapers that attempts to do that.

It's good that people in Texarkana can see obituaries from Blytheville. It's good that readers in Little Rock know what the school board in Fayetteville is doing. There are so many factors out there these days that divide us as Arkansans. We should cherish and hold onto the handful of things that unite us.

Rex Nelson is a senior editor at the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette.

NWA LETTERS

letters@nwadg.com

Americans must realize where country is going

Divide and rule, or more commonly known as divide and conquer, is a fact of life today.

"They" — the 1 percent or whatever you want to call the financial powers today in this country — are successfully dividing and conquering while "we" the people, as defined in our Constitution, fight and bicker over our politics and different beliefs. They skim the cream off this great country, while the country and the vast majority get further and further behind monetarily. We need to take off our blinders, come together and get this ship of state back on course, or our democracy will be replaced by oligarchs who are orchestrating the demise of our democracy.

It's not too late, we need to vote in individuals who will work together for the good of us all. "All for one and one for all" is a whole lot better than the different camps we have divided ourselves into. Remember "Divide and Rule."

burned. We bicker while our infrastructure crumbles around us. The United States, one of the richest countries on this planet, is starting to look like a third-world country with crumbling bridges and streets and roads sorely in need repair, etc. Stop this divisiveness long enough to look around at what we are going to be leaving our children. I, for one, do not want my children and grandchildren to be beholden to oligarchs for crumbs from their tables.

It's time to wake up as to what is really happening here.

Stop accepting labels like Red State and Blue State. We are all Americans of the United States. When we totally forget that, it will be the end of our democracy as we have known it. Wake up, America. We are being used by individuals who want to replace our democracy with an oligarchy.

Stop worrying so much about Big Brother government, and worry about the real threat, Big Boss oligarchs who want to rule us.

JIM NICELY
Bella Vista

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EDITORIALS

Give it back

Bible college should return criminal enterprise money

NWA DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE
Crime, if about anything at all, is a pursuit of ill-gotten gains.

and dealing was designed to be Ecclesia College.

WHAT'S THE POINT?

Ecclesia College in Springdale should return money obtained from state government through public corruption.

It took a series of convictions and sentences before Gov. Asa Hutchinson's administration finally stepped up and suggested Ecclesia College ought to be relieved of the ill-gotten gains it received through the scamming politicians.

That sounds awfully serious. Death for a six-pack? At risk of interpreting the Good Book, it might be talking in spiritual terms, along the lines of the wages of sin and such.

The college's attorney, Travis Story, says testimony shows the college, other than Paris, didn't know about any kickbacks and used the funding as promised.

Arkansans have witnessed a more-than-fair share of lying tongues lately among those who sought and accepted the public trust, state lawmakers willing to commit crimes for their economic benefit.

But just as public officials ought to have a higher standard of accountability than the average man on the street, shouldn't a Bible college operate beyond a letter-of-the-law interpretation? Does it truly not matter that the money was obtained through fraudulent means?

Woods has been sentenced to 18 years in prison and ordered to pay restitution. Neal, who cooperated with prosecutors, got a year of house arrest.

We'd argue state lawmakers, the crooked ones and the others who directed money to Ecclesia, should have never been devoting taxpayer dollars to a private religious school to begin with.

What about the college itself? Its now-former president, Oren Paris III, admitted his involvement in the scheme and received a three-year prison term.

So far, it doesn't appear that Ecclesia is leaning toward doing what's right.

What about the college itself? Its now-former president, Oren Paris III, admitted his involvement in the scheme and received a three-year prison term.

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Madness, madness

When the truth doesn't really matter

NORTHWEST ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE
In 1987, Raymond J. Donovan, a former secretary of Labor, walked out of a courtroom where he'd just been tried for grand larceny and fraud.

help himself no longer. Then he began tweeting, questioning the woman involved. Then, in what will be this week's bizarre tweet from Donald Trump, wrote: "Facts don't matter. I go through this with them every single day in D.C."

Mr. Donovan was acquitted. Along with all the other defendants. He left the courtroom, then asked the press: "Which office do I go to to get my reputation back?"

The accuser's attorneys have said they'll allow their client to testify, maybe. But the accused would have to go first.

We've been watching the madness in Washington, D.C., play out for about a week now, and we wonder—no matter how this judicial nomination turns out—if the reputations of two people will ever be the same.

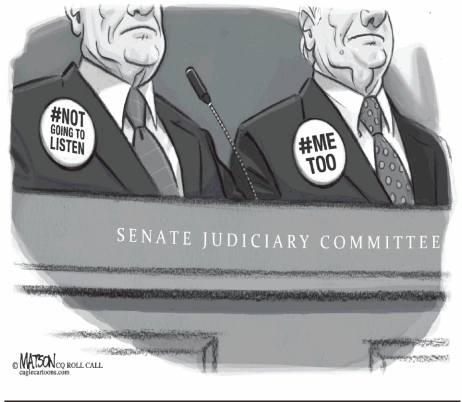
Columnists are treating this process as a horse race (see Jennifer Rubin nearby). The Washington Post published a guest column from a rape victim this week—as if her nightmare was an aggravating factor in Kavanaugh case.

A news commentator/judicial strategist/Twitter user—apparently for we've never heard of him before—made news by suggesting that the victim in this case was mistaken, and perhaps confused Brett Kavanaugh with another boy at the high school who looked like him.

We're not sure what's more remarkable, the hypocrisy and negligence of the political class, or the hypocrisy and negligence of the media class. On all sides.

The president strangely stayed out of the fray for several days until he could

Americans.



COLUMNIST Walking in Memphis

David Cohn, the well-known writer from the Mississippi Delta, said that the Delta Hotel in Memphis and ends on Catfish Row in Vicksburg.



riverfront restaurant that will be operated by well-known chefs Andy Ticer and Michael Hudman. "My dad had a saying that people and cities define themselves by their buildings, and as a native Memphian, I could not be prouder of what One Beale says about our city's culturally rich past and our promising future," said Carlisle Corp. chief executive officer Clarence Carlisle.

There's a special place in my heart for old hotels, which is probably why I've written so much about the Arlington Hotel at Hot Springs while hoping that this Arkansas jewel will be on my birthday. During the four years I spent with the Delta Regional Authority, meetings at the Peabody were a regular occurrence.

Central stands two blocks from King's assassination site at the Lorraine Motel... The Lorraine's redevelopment in 1991 into the National Civil Rights Museum brought in tourists and paved the way for new restaurants and nightlife.

The original Peabody opened at the corner of Main and Monroe streets in downtown Memphis in 1869. Col. Robert C. Brinkley named his hotel in honor of financier George Peabody, who was a friend. Brinkley received word of Peabody's death just before the hotel opened and decided to honor Peabody rather than using the name Brinkley Hotel.

There also are lessons for Arkansas' largest city. In discussions about why Little Rock has been stagnant in recent years, people point to problems with crime and the public schools. Memphis suffers those same problems, and it hasn't stopped developers from betting big on downtown.

The lobby hosted everybody from Arkansas and Mississippi plantation owners to professional gamblers. One of the live radio broadcasts on CBS originated from there. Big bands played the Plantation Roof and the adjoining Skyway Room.

Last month, New York developers announced plans for a 26-story, 590-room Loews Hotel downtown. Just down the street, the long-vacant building at 100 North Main will be renovated for condos and offices.

Each project would energize a wider swath than the block the building stands on.

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NWA LETTERS

Young people should serve in U.S. military

On Sept. 10, Ivan Daubenberger wrote a letter about the young today not being able to do for themselves because their parents do everything for them. I have a solution to this problem.

authority (civil law and military), responsibility for themselves and others, manners, how to dress appropriately, how to keep themselves clean and healthy, and many other qualities their parents neglected.

Can you imagine how nice that would be instead of seeing them slouching, dirty-faced, sucking on cigarettes, drugging, and stealing to obtain drugs. And, no, I've never been in the military, but I have a deep respect for those who are currently serving or have served.

Northwest Arkansas Democrat Gazette logo and contact information for staff members including Todd Nelson, Rusty Turner, Greg Harton, Brent Powers, George Loftus, Lisa Thompson, Eric Gilreath, and Sandy Thompson.

Letters section header and content, including a letter about young people serving in the military and contact information for Rex Nelson.

EDITORIAL

# Slave to the lender

Lawmakers' cozy loans should be prohibited

**I**t's easy enough in reading our old state Constitution to grasp that its authors had some concerns about the integrity of the men (at the time) representing the people in the Arkansas General Assembly.

That dusty document, from 1874, devotes considerable language to the setting of boundaries for state lawmakers. For example, no person responsible for collecting or holding public money shall be eligible to hold a seat in either house of the General Assembly nor any office of trust or profit, the Constitution says, until such time as the money is accounted for and paid back.

In other words, nobody in charge of public money can run off with a bunch of it, then get himself elected to the state's Legislature.

The Constitution goes on, saying nobody convicted of embezzlement of public money, bribery, forgery or other "infamous crimes" shall be eligible to serve in the General Assembly or office of trust or profit in the state. The body's members are empowered to expel one of their own by a two-thirds vote, and if the matter at hand involves corruption, the member's eligibility to serve in the House or Senate shall be ended.

Any member who receives or consents to receive any direct or indirect offer or promise of money "or thing of value, testimonial, privilege and personal advantage" to influence his performance of his public or official duty shall be guilty of a felony, according to the state Constitution.

It's not hard at all to get the idea that the people of Arkansas were wary. Money can be a corrupting influence. Arkansans have seen ample evidence of that in the recent cases against state Sen. Jon Woods and state Rep. Micah Neal, both of Springdale, and other lawmakers in the state who have been exposed as guilty of accepting bribes or kickbacks. Arkansas has a political corruption problem. As the framers of that 1874 Constitution clearly believed, governance demands a high standard for ethical behavior. Lawmakers would do well to behave so far beyond any question of disreputable actions that their honor would remain not only intact, but unquestioned.

Here's another thought about the men and women of the General Assembly: We voters don't send them there to become part of a fraternity. There are only 135 members of the two houses, so it's certainly to be expected that they get to know each other. But too often we see evidence that lawmakers get real chummy with their colleagues, to the point that they seem to be a class unto themselves within the state's population of 3 million.

It's not that they behave like monarchs or take on dynastic airs. It's more like they take on each other as family, a bunch of brothers, sisters and cousins willing to overlook each other's flaws and circle the wagons when one is threatened. Outcry over recent public corruption scandals have hardly arisen from the Legislature. Indeed, much of what one hears from lawmakers seems tinged with a certain sympathy for those convicted of stealing from the public. It's like having a family member who broke bad: Yeah, maybe he did it, but we still love him.

The thing is, Arkansans deserve lawmakers who are completely dedicated to representing them, not spending their time ensuring the bond of fraternal brotherhood

among members is preserved. That's why the recent news about some lawmakers loaning each other money was astonishing.

On last Sunday's front page, readers learned that House Revenue and Taxation Committee Chairman Joe R. Success, said he made a \$16,000 loan to then-House Speaker Jeremy Gillam, R-Judsonia, in the fall of 2016. Gillam has since resigned to become director of governmental affairs and external relations for the University of Central Arkansas, a state-supported college. Gillam didn't report the loan on his

required statements of financial interest for 2016 or 2017 until a reporter contacted him recently. Gillam, when he was speaker, did appoint

him to his committee chairmanship, but Gillam denied the loan had any influence on that.

State Rep. Charlie Collins, R-Fayetteville, reported on a financial report in 2016 that he had loaned more than \$12,500 to state Rep. Nate Bell of Mena and Bell's wife, Phyllis, who is an aide to Gov. Asa Hutchinson. By 2017, that loan had apparently dropped below \$12,500 and Collins had collected more than \$1,000 in interest income.

State Sen. Jim Hendren, R-Sulphur Springs, has said he would look at possible changes on the legality of such loans, but acknowledged himself having loaned about \$4,000 in 2015 to then-state Sen. Jake Files, R-Fort Smith. Files recently pleaded guilty to federal wire fraud, bank fraud and money laundering charges and received 18 months in prison. His criminal problems were linked to his struggling businesses and personal finances.

The you-rub-my-back-I'll-rub-yours atmosphere of Arkansas' state government is already strong. Lawmakers should end these kinds of financial exchanges.

Both candidates for the office of attorney general have called for a prohibition on lending between state lawmakers, although incumbent Leslie Rutledge said she would not offer her own legislative proposal to accomplish that. It seems the state's attorney general ought to be at the forefront of pursuing barriers to public corruption.

What these loans communicate is that our state lawmakers go down to the state Capitol to become pals, which then affects their primary duty of being representatives of the people.

Arkansas lawmakers in many cases seem to look for ways to ethically compromise themselves. These scenarios are not as bad as an invitation to corruption as when new lawmaker Micah Neal, financially strapped in his personal life, approached Jon Woods with a simple question: How do you make money? That led to criminal offenses against the public trust.

Loans aren't criminal offenses. They should, however, certainly be prohibited now that they've come to light. The only thing that should influence votes in the Legislature are strong arguments and constituent viewpoints.

Conservative financial guru and radio broadcaster Dave Ramsey often quotes the book of Proverbs' admonition that the "borrower is the slave to the lender." We think that warning applies to the men and women who are elected to the Arkansas General Assembly. If a lawmaker has a master, it ought to be the people of his or her district, not a chamber mate in the Legislature who can afford to loan him money.

**WHAT'S THE POINT?**

Loans between state lawmakers invite improper influences and should be barred.



COLUMNIST

## Buffalo ribs with Cam



Rex Nelson

**I**t tells me a lot about Dr. Cam Patterson, the new chancellor at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences, that he wants to meet for lunch at Little Rock's Lassis Inn. It tells me that he's getting a feel for Arkansas. And it tells me that he has good taste in food.

We sit at one of the tiny booths on East 27th Street and eat fried buffalo ribs (the kind that come from a bottom-dwelling carp, not the four-legged King of the Great Plains). The Lassis Inn's famous juke box is silent, but thoroughbred horse races are playing on television. As usual, owner Ethel Washington Jr. has cooked the fish perfectly.

Patterson is a nationally renowned cardiologist. If my wife complains about me having fried fish for lunch, I can tell her with a straight face that I was under close medical supervision.

The Lassis Inn started in the early 1900s when Joe and Molassis Watson began selling sandwiches out of the back of their home. Sales increased when fried fish was added to the menu. The current building was constructed in 1931. It was moved a short distance in the 1960s to make way for Interstate 30.

"They had intended to call the establishment the Watson Inn but decided on the derivative of Molassis Watson's name because they thought it sounded better," Revis Edmonds writes in the Encyclopedia of Arkansas History & Culture. "Through the years, Lassis Inn has been known for more than its fish. In the years leading up to the desegregation of Little Rock Central High School in 1957, Daisy Bates and other civil rights leaders held frequent meetings at the restaurant. It became known that Lassis Inn was one of the few safe places where people could gather to discuss the problems associated with segregation."

"This was the only place," says Washington, who bought the restaurant in 1989. "People couldn't go anywhere else."

We're having lunch on the exact date—Sept. 25—that the Little Rock Nine entered Central High for the first time for a full day of school. That was the day they came through the front door, escorted by the 101st Airborne Division. Patterson mentions that his oldest child is a student at Central High and is enchanted by the beauty of the building and the history that surrounds it. He says the course offerings are no more varied than the school she attended in New York.

In a story titled "Ode to a Catfish House," Katherine Whitworth described the place this way: "The Lassis Inn hunkers alongside the interstate in a small, royal blue building. It is the architectural equivalent of minding your own business, and it's hard to notice unless you're looking for it."

Patterson took the reins at UAMS on June 1 after four years at the Weill-Cornell Medical Center and Komansky Children's Hospital, New York Presbyterian Hospital, where he was the chief operating officer. Don't let those years in New York fool you, and don't be fooled by the fact that Patterson was a research fellow in Boston for the Cardiovascular Biology Laboratory at the Harvard School of Public Health. He's a Southern boy, meaning that he knows how to relate to Arkansans.

Patterson was raised in Mobile, which is about the most Southern city there is: the kind of place where lawyers still wear seersucker in the summer and take long Friday lunches. He received his bachelor's degree from Vanderbilt University, which often is called the Harvard of the South, and went on to earn a medical degree

from the Emory University School of Medicine in Atlanta and an MBA from the University of North Carolina.

Folks as smart as Patterson do their homework. He was well aware of the financial difficulties UAMS has experienced in recent years. He said he applied for the job because he was ready to return to the South and because he considers UAMS to be "an enterprise that has everything. We're the academic medical center for the entire state, and we have a responsibility for people across the state. There aren't many jobs like this one."

Patterson's wife Kristine is an infectious-disease specialist. The couple has three children; the oldest is 16. Patterson says they've fallen in love with the state. He has fished for trout on the Little Rock and White rivers. He has floated the lower Buffalo River.

"We have eight regional campuses, and I'm in the process of visiting them," Patterson says. "I've been all over the state, seeing it from a work perspective and a recreational perspective. This is a place filled with people who do the very best they can with what they have. It's a good place to raise our kids."

Patterson isn't going to mention it, but UAMS has been financially starved in recent years by the Legislature. Legislators fail to understand that UAMS has a mission in all parts of a state that rates low in most health-care statistics. With almost 10,000 employees, it's also one of the state's leading economic engines. If Arkansas is going to come close to reaching its potential, far more state funding for UAMS will be required.

**I** was heartened recently while reading a profile of Baker Kurrus, one of five candidates for mayor of Little Rock. He said leaders in the capital city must lobby the Legislature on behalf of UAMS and the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, which also is being starved. The other candidates should follow his lead.

In Patterson, UAMS appears to have found a leader who can relate to legislators when making the case for additional funding. "This isn't the first time I've been to a place with financial challenges," he says. "I'm not scared of challenges. We must get back to being creative and innovative. We need to find ways to collaborate with other institutions across the state. At most other academic medical centers, you don't serve an entire state. You don't have the opportunities we have."

Patterson comes to Arkansas at a time when about two-thirds of the state is losing population. That means fewer doctors and fewer rural hospitals. It makes the telemedicine efforts at UAMS more important than ever. He tells the story of a woman in the rural Ozarks with whom he visited this summer. She travels 45 minutes for primary care.

As I finish my last rib, I think to myself that Cam Patterson just might be the most important person in Arkansas right now. Let's hope he gets the help he needs.

Rex Nelson is a senior editor at the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette.

## NWA LETTERS

letters@nwadg.com

### Take time to secure debris in vehicles

In the past 10 years or so traveling the highways of Northwest Arkansas, debris coming from unsecured loads from the back of various commercial vehicles have cost me one windshield from stones/rocks, numerous tire punctures from various bolts, screws and scrap wood, and one hose from a flying piece of aluminum siding. And, Wednesday morning, I had the privilege of spending an hour using a heavy

de-greaser to clean a red industrial lubricant off the side of my vehicle because someone couldn't be bothered to take five minutes to ensure everything remained in their truck. In addition to damage, it is common to see chairs, mattresses and all manner of lost items along side the highway.

Are people in such a hurry to and from their job sites or destinations that they can't take a couple minutes to make sure whatever is in the back of their trucks is secured?

CARL HEFFNER  
Springdale

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EDITORIAL

Can trust be restored?

Lawmakers urged to embrace higher ethical behaviors

NWA DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE They're just words. Important words, to be sure.

Senate President Pro Tem Jim Hendren, a senator from Sulphur Springs near Gravette, opened the Arkansas General Assembly's regular legislative session Monday with a call to lawmakers and others influencing state government to behave themselves.

It might be galling to the straight arrows among lawmakers that their institutional higher-ups feel a need to lecture them about legal or ethical lines and admonishing them to resist crossing them. But as an institution, the General Assembly clearly needs leaders who will set a higher standard, an expectation of conduct conducive to transparency in government and respectful of the responsibility given over by the voters back home.

Let no one underestimate what those voters have done. By electing these 135 members of the House and Senate, they have laid their trust upon them along with their hopes that legislators will use their time in the state's hallowed institutions wisely, effectively and, above all, with integrity.

Men and women in those chambers needed to hear, and take to heart, what Hendren had to say. And, he said, his words needed to echo beyond the Senate and House chambers where opening festivities were taking place.

"Lobbyists, business interests, organizations and others that have a vital role to play in our process, you all know they can be held accountable for unethical behavior as well," Hendren said after Supreme Court Justice Dan Kemp swore him in.

Hendren, as one would expect, stood up for his colleagues, calling the notion that the "Legislature is a wholly corrupt institution run by corrupt, evil people" a lie. But he clearly recognized a need to address Arkansas' latest period of political corruption as reflected by two years of federal investigations, indictments and convictions of lawmakers, lobbyists and business people engaged in bilking taxpayers.

So much of it, sadly, started right here in Northwest Arkansas. It has been two years since revelations that a former Springdale lawmaker, Micah Neal, entered a guilty plea related to accepting a kickback for funneling state tax dollars to Springdale's private Christian school, Ecclesia College. There was also the trail and conviction of state Sen. Jon Woods, also of Springdale. He got 18 years in federal prison for his role in arranging or accepting kickbacks.

Jake Files, former senator of Fort Smith, reported last year to a federal prison to serve 18 months on wire fraud, bank fraud and money laundering charges related to his misuse of taxpayer dollars in his private business.

Hank Wilkins of Pine Bluff and Eddie Cooper of Melbourne, former lawmakers, entered guilty pleas on public corruption charges as well.

Just last week, former state Sen. Gilbert Baker of Conway was indicted by a federal grand jury on corruption charges.

Hendren urged his colleagues to begin the session with a determination that "the culture of greed and corruption is over."

"We will not participate in it. We will not ignore it, and we will not tolerate those who do," he said. Hendren no doubt recalls his own brush with Woods. In court documents and an interview last

fall, Hendren said Woods in a 2011 meeting sought a bribe of \$10,000 or more to stay out of the way of Hendren's 2012 state Senate bid in the event redistricting placed the two men in the same district. Hendren's decision was to tell a local prosecutor about it after telling Woods "he did not do business that way," the court documents said.

Woods has denied the approach, his attorney said last year.

Hendren demonstrated integrity with his refusal, but said he decided to "run my race" and not pursue the matter further when authorities asked if he was willing to wear a recording device to document Wood's alleged offer.

"The thing that stuck this indelibly in my mind was when [Woods] said, 'this is the way it's done,' that this sort of thing happens in politics all the time. That is the culture we have to change."

Hendren recalled last September. Changing culture very well might require going the extra mile to ferret out and prosecute those who would enrich themselves through the power of elective office. "No tolerance" is a very high bar, one we believe all lawmakers should embrace. Hendren's words Monday reflected that even if his follow-through in 2011 fell short.

Are there more indictments, guilty pleas or convictions to come? It would not be a surprise. Hendren, and Speaker of the House Matthew Shepherd of El Dorado, devoted themselves on Day One of the legislative session to calling for integrity in public service.

"Unfortunately, the work the Legislature is charged with doing has been overshadowed for several years by mistakes, misdeeds, corruption and even illegal actions by a small ... group of our former colleagues," Hendren said. "These activities were actions of greed, dishonesty and selfishness. The behavior was a betrayal of their duty to their constituents, a betrayal to their oath of office, and a betrayal to their colleagues and the institution of the Arkansas Senate."

"While we cannot change the events that occurred, we can learn from them and we can certainly control the events that happen during the year forward," he said.

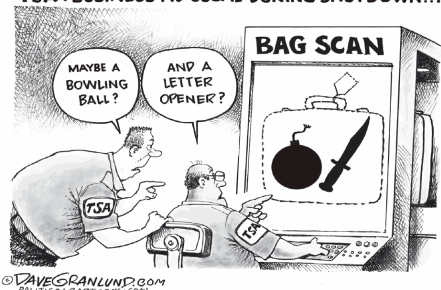
Yes, these are important words. But they are just words, appropriate for inaugurating a new legislative session. What matters now is how those involved in state government apply them in small decisions as well as major ones. The call for integrity applies not just to criminal acts, but transparency in the political process — a lack of secrecy about who is pushing certain legislation and why or a resistance to creating more exemptions in open government laws. It is, after all, in secrecy that the seeds of political corruption can be planted and nurtured.

Lawmakers can tighten down the ethical rules by which they and other influencers working to affect public policy should operate.

Speeches are a great start, giving voice to the urgency to act and to change attitudes at the state Capitol and throughout government. What will matter a great deal more are the changes lawmakers can and should make to ensure ethical and legal violations are met with serious repercussions.

The culture won't change because Hendren or anyone else says it should. For that to happen requires ethical behavior day in and day out, in big and small matters, in the service to the people of Arkansas.

TSA : BUSINESS AS USUAL DURING SHUTDOWN...



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COLUMNISTS

Scandals hurt lawmakers' work

Corruption stains institutions' service to voters

As Arkansas lawmakers get to work this week, they face an ambitious agenda from second-term Gov. Asa Hutchinson and more than a few challenges, including some that come courtesy of former colleagues.

This legislative session commenced in the wake of scandal that has seen indictment of several lawmakers and lobbyists.

For a long two years, they have dominated the headlines. They are barely more than a handful of the 135 state lawmakers who hold these positions of trust at any one time. But they've made the job harder for those who serve now.

For all the lawmakers — newly seated and returning — who weren't party to such schemes or any of the other misconduct that got their colleagues in trouble, the challenge is to restore public confidence in this Legislature.

To their credit, the current legislative leadership has taken steps toward more transparency in day-to-day operations.

Hendren underscored the message on Monday when he began the session. "We will not tolerate those who do."

On the other end of the Capitol, House Speaker Matthew Shepherd said state representatives focusing on their constituents. He, too, has made the point that lawmakers must rebuild public trust in the institution.

Lawmakers do need to pass some new ethics legislation to back up their leaders' pledges. Their success in rehabilitating the legislative image will depend as much, however, on how they go about their work.

Brenda Blagg



Their plates will be full as Hutchinson sets out his second-term agenda. It includes cutting the state's top income tax rate and raising minimum teacher salaries at the same time the state is searching for funding for highways and other needs.

The governor is also calling for reorganization of state government to reduce the number of departments answering directly to him to just 15, compared to the 42 that do so now. He expects no resulting job losses but anticipates better efficiency in operations.

Lawmakers also must address again funding for the state's Medicaid expansion program. The good news is that Gov. Hutchinson and the legislative leaders don't expect a fight this time around, even though continued funding will again require a three-fourths vote in both chambers.

The program purchases private insurance for low-income residents with state and federal funds.

With federal approval, the state instituted a controversial work requirement that has been challenged in court.

Nearly 17,000 Arkansans lost coverage due to non-compliance. That's a troubling development the lawsuit is intended to address.

Even if a federal judge should stop enforcement of the provision, the governor and the Senate and House leaders don't anticipate renewed efforts to defund Medicaid expansion.

If they are right, that alone will help move this session along. Those federal dollars figure heavily in the Hutchinson overall budget plans for the state.

And those are but a few of the challenges awaiting this year's lawmakers.

None of it is ever particularly easy. This year, with that stain of corruption left by a relative few former lawmakers and lobbyists, the job is just that much harder.

Brenda Blagg is a freelance columnist and long-time journalist in Northwest Arkansas. Email her at [brendablagg@gmail.com](mailto:brendablagg@gmail.com).

NWA LETTERS

letters@nwaag.com

Reopen government, but forget money for the wall

The Senate needs to reopen the government by passing the clean funding bill that passed the House on Jan. 3.

Given that Senate leader Mitch McConnell refuses to bring that bill to the floor for a vote, any other legislation should be opposed until government is reopened.

I oppose any tax dollars going to this racist, xenophobic border wall. We all know this is the same bill that unanimously passed less than a month ago, and it's the president who has thrown a wrench in the works to pander to his base. It is an outrage that 800,000 federal workers are being held hostage, national parks are filling with trash and human waste, not to mention the untold ripple effects outside of federal employment.

Our senators voted for this bill in December, as was right. They need to insist that government be reopened before considering any further legislation.

DORIS HEADLEY Springdale

In national leadership, how low can we go?

There is a segment of our society that contends the current administration is an embarrassment in the international community. I submit that the ability to embarrass America is not exclusive to one side of the aisle or the other.

In the spring of 1999 my wife and I were traveling in Israel. While in Jerusalem, we were taking a taxi to the Old City. The taxi driver asks us "Where are you from?" We answered "The United States." He burst out laughing and said "Monica Lewinsky."

It should also be very interesting to observe how the incoming congressmen and women conduct themselves. Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez defends Rep. Rashida Tlaib's inappropriate and offensive language directed at the president. Apparently she believes one's poor behavior can

be justified by others' poor behavior. Perhaps they have decided to forgo the maxim Michelle Obama adopted as a principle of behavior, "When they go low, we go high" and replaced it with "When they go low, we go lower."

RICHARD SUTTON Garfield

Fort Smith must support tax for marshals museum

The United States Marshall Service was appointed by President George Washington in 1789. It was the first national law enforcement agency in America.

Reflecting upon how the museum landed in Fort Smith, I remember when many, many towns and cities wanted this national treasure. Fort Smith citizens, with all of their enthusiasm, telephoned, wrote letters, used social media and personal visits to several locations to express their sincere desire to locate a national museum in Fort Smith on the banks of the river facing the outflow territory.

Fort Smith again showed the pride our citizens displayed on many other occasions. It seems that the powers-to-be recognized it was the very foundation of Fort Smith area heritage. They recognized that the museum will be 1. An educational tool for all school children and all ages.

2. Another example of our nationally recognized heritage as a key western town.

3. A way to jump-start the riverfront development, which will aid every single person and entity in the region.

The vote March 12 for the marshals museum is not for a normal, sleepy museum. It is a museum chock full of heroes from the past, heroes today who pursue danger throughout the world to bring bad, bad people to justice. And in the future might chase bad guys into outer space, like "Star Wars."

Please just do it! Vote yes for one cent investment and let's move forward.

RICHARD J. UDOUJ Fort Smith

Northwest Arkansas Democrat Gazette contact information including names of staff like Todd Nelson, Rusty Turner, Greg Harton, Brent Powers, George Loftus, Lisa Thompson, Matthew Barker, Sandy Thompson.