

# Brickbats have replaced bright ideas

Those of us of sound mind found last week's shooting at a gathering of politicians at a ball field outside Washington, D.C., unacceptable.

No matter what your political party or persuasion, killing people over it is inexcusable and not the act of a sane individual.

Occasionally, the political rhetoric in Wallowa County becomes heated, and folks don't use their manners. Certain people have buttons that are easily pushed, and the result is gasoline thrown on smoldering embers.

It's sometimes difficult to determine what passes as expressing strongly-held beliefs and what is purely provocative. And are even the most crude utterances protected speech?

Clearly there has to be a common commitment from all sides of any issues to make an effort to understand what others are saying. There is not — and should not be — an insistence that one side is always correct and another side is always wrong.

Society has been mourning the death of dialogue for decades. Actual time of death came shortly after 7 a.m. on June 14 at a baseball field in Alexandria, Va.

Situations such as these should grab supporters of all sides by the lapels, but they should not stifle honest debate. The tendency after this type of episode is to suggest that everyone should simply keep his or her opinion bottled up, and that way no one is offended. See no evil. Speak no evil. Hear no evil.

Those who truly believe in freedom of speech have a right and responsibility to keep speaking truth to power. The problem is the manner of the speech and not necessarily the content.

There isn't an easy solution. Is "hate speech" protected speech under the U.S. Constitution? Is repeated loud and malicious harangue to be discouraged? Does society as a whole need "safe spaces," such as those popular on certain college campuses where students can shield themselves from uncomfortable or dissenting viewpoints?

Who should shut up and listen and who should speak out? And who should decide?

The discussion didn't begin when Donald Trump was elected either. You can go as far back as The Sedition Act of 1798, which broadly made it a crime to criticize the government.

One ingredient we find in far too short a supply in 2017 is respect. With social media particularly, it's easy to slice someone to ribbons and not think anything about it. It's harder to do that to someone sitting across from you at the coffee shop.

The prevailing thought seems to be that some opinions are simply not worthy of respect. That line of thought questions the worthiness of the individual, which can lead to far more serious societal consequences.

Another ingredient is a willingness to hear all sides. Your mother probably told you that you should have two ears and one mouth, which means you should listen twice as much as you talk. She was right.

Finally, there is a complete and total lack of a sense of humor in public discourse. We have become a society of hypersensitive inwardly focused mental midgets and have lost the ability to see that life is sometimes a comedy, not always a tragedy.

Sometime you aren't even the most important person in the room.

Can we find the road back to balance? We must if we are to continue to survive and prosper as a democracy.

## EDITORIAL

Voice of the Chieftain



# Finding, and somehow remembering, 'comfort'

Several years ago, Stephanie Koontz, history professor at Evergreen State University, was at Fishtrap with her then-new book, "The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap." It describes a world we thought we had — but one that never really existed.

At the time, the idea of the "nuclear family" was the rage; Koontz argued that the notion was a mixture of altered memories of the Victorian Age and "Leave it to Beaver" television of the '50s, that the "extended" multigenerational family and not the "nuclear" family had been the traditional glue that held people together. Nuclear families in the '80s became lost in angst, guilt and faulty memories.

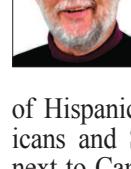
I've been thinking about that book and title a lot these days, trying to understand political angst and anger on both sides and an election that brought a political outsider like Donald Trump to office.

Most of the people I know who voted for Donald Trump are not struggling because of lost coal mines or Obama policies that promoted clean energy, not struggling to make ends meet, to put fine food on the table, or to put a boat, travel trailer or RV in the driveway. They're living relatively comfortable lives.

It might be because they fear losing this comfortable life and remember the past with a nostalgia that highlights all the warm and fuzzies and forgets the troubles and traumas.

"Leave it to Beaver" was a TV show. Mom the homemaker and dad the breadwinner and two kids living on a nice suburban street was an ideal. On my '50s street, mom worked, and among my friends' parents were alcoholics and single moms, one a woman widowed by Korea trying to hold things together without relatives or extended family living nearby.

My California high school had plenty



## MAIN STREET

Rich Wandschneider

of Hispanics and a few African-Americans and Samoans, because we were next to Camp Pendleton. But my street was all-white; not Marine Corps housing, which really was integrated because President Truman had recently integrated the formerly all-segregated military; or Posole Town, the unpaved streets on which most of the Mexican community lived.

Some of the Mexican families had been there longer than California statehood, long before my own German and Norwegian grandparents and great-grandparents made it to Ellis Island. It did not count for much in a '50s California that was largely in white hands.

A clue to the voter angst that helped bring on the current political drama came with a recent radio interview from Coeur d'Alene, where a woman said that she had moved there after retiring in California because things "felt like" California in the '70s.

I immediately thought about the Vietnam War that dominated young lives and politics in the '70s. What California street did she remember! And then I remembered my California streets of the '50s and Stephanie Koontz's book.

There were some great things about California and the '50s: Be-bop, the Drifters, Penguins and "American Bandstand" on TV; high school sports and after-game dances — the sports part was totally integrated; cool cars — my own '52 Ford not holding a candle to the '55 and '56 Chevies, which ruled the roads; and male teachers — my first men in the classroom happened in high school, and they were all WW II vets who had gone

to school on the G.I. Bill.

That bill was truly one of the great things about the '50s — a stroke of legislation that gave millions doors to education and home ownership, a bill that many believe created the middle class in the country.

My guess is that WW II and the G.I. Bill are also what made white Americans comfortable with each other. The East Coast especially was made up of ethnic neighborhoods, and some parts of the country were predictably German or Scandinavian or Irish. The War put Italian-Americans next to German, Polish, Irish and Scottish Americans, and the G.I. Bill put them in the same schools and suburbs.

White suburbs, builders and educators prospered in the '50s. And while ethnic divisions among European-Americans declined and white power broadened — we were comfortable enough to elect German-American Ike Eisenhower President in 1952 — inner cities declined.

The '60s and '70s brought Irish-American Catholic JFK to the White House, and Civil Rights acts, the Indian Freedom of Religion Act, environmental legislation, urban riots, Medicare, Medicaid, Vietnam, and Nixon. The '50s started looking comfortable.

And for many, another Irish-American President, Ronald Reagan — reaching back to a TV and movie-screen past — seemed to make things comfortable again.

But then it was Clinton and Bushes 1 and 2, the Internet, 9/11 and Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and an African-American President.

And once again the '50s — and making America Great Again — sounds like comfort food.

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George Burns recorded a song some years back called "I Wish I Was 18 Again." Ray Price released it in 2015 as well.

Never mind to be grammatically correct is needs to be "were" instead of "was."

It's a lament, of sorts, about growing old. All of us who reach a certain age can identify with the lyrics.

*Now time turns the pages and, oh, life goes so fast;*

*The years turn the black hair all gray.*

There are two basic responses to the inevitable experience of growing old. Roll over and give up or stand up straight and spit in Father Time's eye.

Sixty is the new 50, which is the new 40, which is the new 30. You get the idea.

One discussion regarding age is going on across Wallowa County and much of the country. How do you engage young people in clubs, groups, churches and organizations? If you attend almost any public gathering, the amount of gray hair is overwhelming. If gray hair is a sign of wisdom, we're in high cotton.

But where will we find leaders once the current generation shuffles off this mortal coil along with good old Hamlet himself?

What is being done to develop the next Rotary Club presidents, the next county commissioners, the next cemetery district volunteers?



## WAHL TO WALL

Paul Wahl

If you spend time around today's younger folks, you discover quickly they are intelligent, bright and enjoy serving their community. Unfortunately, most of them are not "joiners," unless it involves clicking on an icon.

That's not a criticism. The upcoming generation chooses to do things differently.

This phenomenon was addressed in Robert D. Putnam's book "Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community," published in 2000.

His premise was that while bowling remains popular, bowling leagues are nearly extinct. Television, social media, two-career families and generational changes in values results in fewer younger members of Rotary or Lions, fewer city council candidates and others.

In Putnam's view, that social capital deficit threatens educational performance, safe neighborhoods, equitable tax collection, democratic responsiveness, everyday honesty and even our health and happiness.

People were meant to live in community. The younger generation as a whole believes this, but they find community in social media networks and online, rather than at a weekly face-to-face gathering.

If you want to test that hypothesis, put out a plea for help with a community project on Facebook and watch the volunteers pour in.

Honestly, I believe today's younger generation is more interested in community than we were at the same phase in our lives, they simply go about it in a different way. Technology has changed the interactive process forever.

Perhaps we need to stream Rotary Club meetings using Facebook live video.

Without young people, the future of community institutions in Wallowa County to a great extent depends on an ever-increasing supply of old folks. Fortunately, we must have built it, because they continue to come.

That doesn't mean we can stop attempting to drag young folks out from behind their smart phones.

Who knows how many of them might find having a conversation across a cup of coffee interesting and even adventuresome.

*Paul Wahl is editor of The Chieftain and has one of those birthday's ending with a zero coming up soon.*