

Hail Cesar — the janitor matador

I worked with Cesar Romero ... not the one who acted with Tyrone Power, Burl Ives or Rod Serling, and not the guy who played The Joker to Adam West's Batman on television.

The Cesar Romero with whom I worked was a janitor, a green card custodian two years out of Nicaragua.

We buffed floors, cleaned toilets, fixed faucets, painted, filled water coolers, emptied the trash and washed the windows together in Glide Memorial Church, a seven-story building situated in the heart of the Tenderloin, San Francisco.

The Tenderloin has always been a rasty part of Baghdad by the Bay. At the time Cesar and I performed our custodial magic, the district was becoming a landing spot for Vietnamese folks, ten city blocks in transition from a haven for street hookers, soup kitchens and sex toy shops to a home for Asian versions of the same.

Glide Church is still pastored by the Reverend Cecil Williams, a true community leader, whose down-in-the-trenches approach to racism, poverty and gender are influenced by Glide's proximity to the trenches. In those days, his service featured a gospel choir accompanied by a full rock and roll band, with a light show projected on the wall behind the pulpit where most sanctuaries feature a crucifix. He wasn't a hell and brimstone preacher, but it was definitely hot times on any Sunday morning.

The church occupied only half of the big old building. The remainder was leased

to various service agencies like the Gray Panthers, and the San Francisco Food Bank. The offices held about 300 folks who required occasional janitorial attention.

Janitors are invisible, like prep cooks. Nobody knows who chopped all the cilantro and ancho chiles, shredded the pork, built the sauce, or steamed the tortas in your designer sopitas at your favorite restaurant. So, too, a banking firm takes credit for the perfect paint job or tile work on its building, but the workers who daily polish the brass, wash the barf off the walls, and pumice the urinals remain un-named.

Cesar bucked the trend of invisibility by adopting a matador's approach to custodial work. He dressed in crisp forest green J.C. Penny's gabardine uniforms, short sleeves pressed and cuffed to match his pants, squeaky black shoes fit for a general, wavy hair moussed into place, with a matching mustache. Hanging from his right rear pocket was a red utility rag, folded into thirds lengthwise. Clipped to his belt were twice the number of keys required to operate the building. Cesar was walking wind chimes.

Half an hour before quitting time on one Thursday afternoon we got a panic call from the third floor. A mouse had been spotted. Cesar said something to himself in Spanish, reached into a gray toolbox, pulled out a foot-long bladed screwdriver, and motioned for me to accompany him on the safari. In the elevator he stood tapping his foot to a silent tune.

Room 319 was in a tizzy. Four women

and two men were huddled against the windowed side of the room, pointing toward a desk that sat out in the middle. Could we hurry and do something? They had deadlines. Nothing could be done with a filthy mouse scurrying around the place. The creature had been last seen in the lower right-hand side of the desk.

Cesar held the screwdriver in his left hand and carefully pulled the red rag from his hind pocket as we approached the infestation. Sure enough, inside the file cabinet portion there was a little gray city mouse kicked back on his haunches and nibbling on the corner of a Ritz Cracker it had mined from a month's worth of leftover lunches, including two undisturbed York's Peppermint Patties.

Cesar dropped to his knees and gently employed the tip of the screwdriver to flip the cracker from the mouse's paws. It eyed us for a moment like "Hey dudes, I'm on your side of this question," then nimbly leapt up into the catacombs behind the sliding drawers and hingeworks. Gone.

Cesar never missed a beat. He swapped ends with the screwdriver and proceeded to pound the handle on sandwich bags and paper cups and Kleenex boxes, drumming on the guts of the metal desk, setting up an unholy racket for half a minute before whipping out the red rag and diving almost entirely into the desk.

When he emerged, he held the rag tightly at shoulder level with the screwdriver poised above it like a sword. The office workers thanked us, almost applauded as — head thrown back — Cesar marched triumphantly from the room with the trophy.

In the elevator he opened the rag and produced two Peppermint Patties, handing one to me.

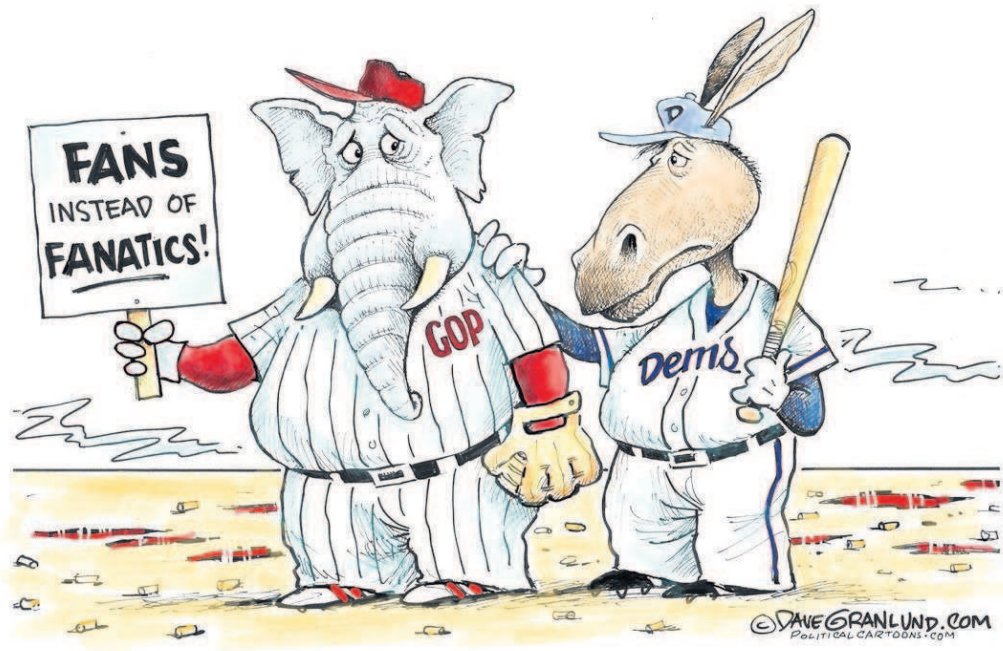
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J.D. SMITH
FROM THE HEADWATERS
OF DRY CREEK

Fifteen minutes later we got another call from 319, saying that they had discovered yet another mouse, but we needn't bother coming up because, following Cesar's example, they had squished it with the bottom of a metal wastebasket, wrapped the corpse in paper towels and flushed it down the toilet.

J.D. Smith is an accomplished writer and jack-of-all-trades. He lives in Athena.



The battle of Dak To

It's hard to get nostalgic about war, but reading *The New York Times* of May 26, I came across a front page article "David and Goliath in Vietnam" by Neil Sheehan, a former correspondent for *The Times* and writer about the Vietnam War.

Abruptly, old memories kicked in. Because about two-thirds of the way into the piece, this stopped me cold: "The 'hill fights,' as they were called, unfolded through 1967 as General Giap lured General Westmoreland into one battle after another. The most gruesome occurred in late November 1967 near the outpost of Dak To in northern Kon Tum Province in the Central Highlands."

My sudden interest arose from the fact that on the morning of December 7, 1967 on a U.S. Air Force DC-3 I landed at the airstrip at Dak To. At the time I was director of USO Saigon. A veteran of more than 18 months of service establishing USO Clubs on Marine Corps combat bases in the northern sectors of the country, I knew something of the trials and tribulations of war.

But, let me be clear, I never had to move under fire which is what a soldier or Marine must do. I was at Dak To because I had been following the terrible battle that had taken place the previous month and figured that at an isolated outpost like Dak To, the remaining troops would be feeding on old C rations and there was a little something USO could do to help.

But first, to secure the necessary permission and logistics, I met with my liaison at the headquarters of the U.S. Military Assistance Command at Tan Son Nhut Air Base outside of town. With approvals in hand, I asked staff at the snack bar (then the world's largest) to prepare a bunch of meals to put in individual plastic containers together with several crates of Coca-Cola and a few boxes of Christmas gifts that folks at home had sent to USOs in Vietnam.

When my flight schedule came through I drove out to the air base and loaded everything into the DC-3, an older but reliable transport plane, and soon I was on my way to Dak To. After a five-minute visit with Brigadier General John R. Deane of the 173rd Airborne Brigade who much appreciated our little shipment



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of morale builders, some soldiers and I loaded up a 3/4-ton 4x4 M37 Dodge truck.

With our load of food and Cokes and Christmas packages we headed out to some sandbag hoochs where GI patrols camped providing some security and intel on North Vietnamese movements. So, after a couple three hours chewing the fat with the guys while distributing our stuff I returned to the airstrip to catch my flight back to Saigon. Oops! Plane had left without me. However, another plane was leaving soon for Pleiku Air Base from where I could catch another flight into Saigon. The plane was a C-123 cargo aircraft, a smallish two engine freighter that could fly and land most anywhere.

With its rear cargo door down, I loaded in, cinched my seat belt and with a few GIs we took off enjoying the air-conditioned view because the pilot had left the ramp down. But climbing out of Dak To, all of a sudden, through the still-open ramp, we could see some tracer shells heading our way and figured we were about to catch some rounds. However, the pilot also saw the tracers and hauled back on his joystick and the plane tipped skyward flying as close to vertical as it could get. So, us passengers got this unusual view of Dak To framed in the open air ramp. After a few seconds the plane leveled out and headed for Pleiku, whew! And happily, at the Pleiku airstrip I caught a ride with a couple of guys in an unusual airplane. Introducing myself "Hi, I'm Tom Hebert and I sure appreciate your help. One man said, "Hi!, I'm Jim and this here is John." Jim and John, huh? Hmmm. Immediately I knew they and their plane were CIA. But another couple hours of good talk and some laughs and I was home with an amazing day behind me. Behind until May 26, 2017. Dak To and the war? *The Times*: "Two hundred and eighty-seven of these Airborne troopers and infantrymen from the Fourth Division died. More than 1,000 were wounded. And as always, when the fight was over, the Vietnamese disappeared to fight another day."

Tom Hebert is a writer and public policy consultant living on the Umatilla Indian Reservation.

Hanging out with a concealed weapon

The pistol arrives at my house in a padded tote, the size you'd pack a picnic lunch in. It's a 9mm Glock 26, a "sub-compact" concealable semi-automatic. Diminutive, hammerless and made of polymer, to my eye, it's a true exotic. It's accompanied by two clips and a box of 115 grain ammo, missing one round. I think, How about that? I zip the tote back up, squirrel it away in my desk.

This Glock belongs to a friend. After suffering a major depressive "episode," as he called it, he's made me the weapon's custodian in perpetuity. Beyond keeping it out of his hands, I'm not sure of my responsibilities: Is there registration protocol to observe? What happens if he abruptly changes his mind? Is it OK for me to shoot this gun?

For all its Western bravado, or maybe because of it, Montana's suicide rate is twice the national average: 24 per 100,000, compared to 12 per 100,000 nationwide. Meanwhile, Missoula County, where I live, has the highest suicide rate in the state, up an incredible 70 percent from last year. Two-thirds of these deaths were "gun assisted." Few gun owners want to hear these stats, but the 2012 FBI Supplemental Homicide Report states that the ratio nationwide of gun deaths by suicide compared to self-defense gun deaths is almost 40 to one.

As a hunter, I own two rifles and a shotgun. I've not kept a handgun for 20 years. It was just coincidence that I had one at all: A tradesman friend had offered me a pistol in exchange for felling a large tree for him. The gun was a Ruger "Security Six." I agreed to the trade on a whim: With my 12 gauge, aught-six and 30-30, a big-bore revolver made a classic Western ensemble.

The Ruger came in handy just once, when my wife and I attended the Miles City bucking horse sale. We stayed at an especially nasty motel. As we unlocked our door, our shirtless neighbor popped out, chugging an IceHouse beer.

"Lucky you!" he giggled. You get the room next to me!" I walked to my pickup, brought the Ruger inside and slept peacefully. Maybe our neighbor was harmless, maybe not. I certainly felt safer, let's leave it at that.

But a few years later, after a troubled night of my own, I understood clearly that the Ruger had



FRED HAEFELE
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to go. So the next day, I traded it for an antelope rifle. It wasn't a big deal. There was no "episode." I just thought I'd feel safer with the Ruger gone, and I was right.

The presidential election, for some reason, renewed my interest in self-defense, and I grew curious about my friend's concealable.

The 9mm Glock is the world's most popular handgun, and I wondered what all the fuss was all about. I headed out to the gun range to find out.

With its ultra-light weight, shortened barrel and bobbed grip, the Glock felt both flighty and hyper. In fact, the pistol felt downright goosey and emphatically void of any character at all, Western or otherwise. In the right hands, it's probably a terrific gun, but the pistol flat-out gave me the yips. While I've fired more powerful guns with considerable accuracy, with the Glock I barely hit the paper.

A week later, I told my friend, Scott, about my experience shooting the Glock.

"Get rid of it," he said without hesitation.

"Really? Why's that?"

"It's a bad horse and you two got crossways. Don't screw around."

"I shouldn't just learn to shoot it?"

"Get rid of it," he repeated.

It was sound enough advice, but of course it's not my pistol. For the sake of confidentiality, I didn't tell Scott the gun's history. I certainly haven't told him about the rifles I garage-stashed for another friend, three years ago. Scott might get the idea that most of the people I know are disturbed.

I'm starting to think that might be right. While it's flattering that my friends have this much faith in me, it presumes I have discretionary sense that I simply don't possess. For example: How do I decide that it's OK for the owner to take back his guns? More pressing, by what standard do I tell him he's not OK? And what if I ever have an "episode" myself and need to get rid of my own guns? What kind of guy takes custodianship of what's clearly an arsenal of despair?

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Quick takes

Rainbows meet in EO

No! They gathered near Woodland, Washington a few weeks back and left a horrible disgusting mess. We can't afford to clean up the mess after they leave.

— Shannon Clark Ternes

Please do not just infringe on these people's rights to use public land because you don't understand why they do it. It's actually a very positive experience. I live in Eastern Oregon and hopefully I will get to attend this year's gathering.

— Kristy McPherson

They also harm irreplaceable archaeological and cultural resources. They should pay to have their event at a fairgrounds or somewhere privately owned. It's not fair to the taxpayers for them to come in and trash out national forests.

— Holly Shea Barrick

One of the great lessons of the Twitter age is that much can be summed up in just a few words. Here are some of this week's takes. Tweet yours @Tim_Trainor or email editor@eastoregonian.com. Keep them to 140 characters.