Opinion

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EDITORIAL

Feds not needed to police school board meetings

The National School Boards Association's definition of what might constitute domestic terrorism and hate crimes is awfully broad.

Broad enough, potentially, to encompass actions clearly protected by the First Amendment.

The Association recently sent a letter to President Joe Biden asking for federal law enforcement to help "deal with the growing number of threats of violence and acts of intimidation occurring across the nation." The letter reads, in part: "the classification of these heinous actions could be the equivalent to a form of domestic terrorism and hate crimes."

In response, U.S. Attorney General Merrick Garland said the FBI would work with other federal, state and local agencies to "develop strategies against the threats," according to an Associated Press story.

Obviously it's not acceptable for people who are upset with school boards to escalate from verbal or written opposition to physical. But every state has criminal laws regarding assault. And most communities have police departments to deal with people who break those laws.

The School Boards Association offers no compelling evidence of a rash of violence against school boards that local officials aren't capable of handling, or that warrants federal involvement.

The letter to Biden cites an Illinois case in which a person was arrested for aggravated battery and disorderly conduct during a school board meeting. This, not surprisingly, was accomplished without the involvement of the FBI or any other federal agency.

Other examples listed in the letter include school boards "confronted by angry mobs," an Alabama resident who called school administrators while videoing himself on Facebook Live, and a person who yelled a Nazi salute during a school board meeting in Michigan.

Some of this behavior sounds obnoxious. Some, as with the Nazi salute, is abhorrent.

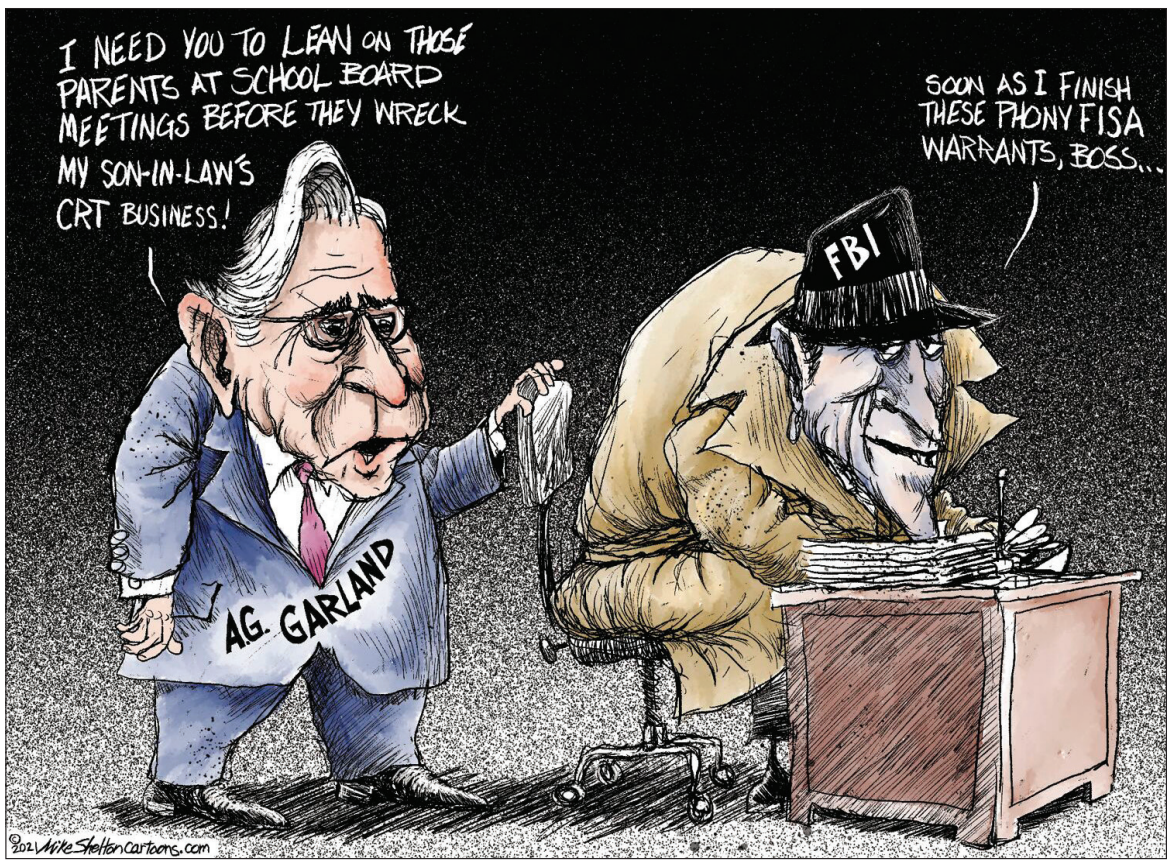
But being part of an angry mob, or making videos of phone calls with public officials, or even yelling Nazi salutes, not only is unlikely to be criminal, but it's probably constitutionally protected speech.

This is not to suggest that people who are aggrieved by school board actions, or inactions, should seek to derail public meetings, even by nonviolent means such as shouting. This accomplishes nothing.

But the ultimate test of the First Amendment is not that it protects the soft-spoken and the reasonable. That's easy and uncontroversial. If the term "free speech" is to be anything other than an empty platitude, it must offer equal protection for the loud, the boorish and the purveyors of conspiracy theories, even if they cause school board meetings to last longer than they otherwise would, or expose members to uncomfortable diatribes.

In any case, the reality that disgruntled citizens attend public meetings is no cause for asking the most powerful law enforcement agency in the land to get involved.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



OTHER VIEWS

Editorial from The Dallas Morning News:

If you mailed a letter across town on Friday, it might not have reached its destination until Wednesday. That's because, as of Oct. 1, the U.S. Postal Service has implemented changes that will slow down the mail. While we're not thrilled about delays, we welcome this news as evidence of reform at an agency that badly needs to adjust to the current economy.

Under Postmaster General Louis DeJoy's strategic restructuring plan, first-class mail will take as much as a day longer to reach its destination, though the added time won't be uniform across the country. According to an analysis by The Washington Post, the longest delays will be west of the Rocky Mountains and in some parts of Florida and South Texas. In Dallas-Fort Worth, customers can expect service about a half-day slower than in the past.

The plan is part of DeJoy's efforts to keep the Postal Service solvent, which is no easy lift. The agency faces a projected $160 billion deficit over the next decade. For fiscal year 2020, its net operating loss was $3.6 billion, which was $409 million more than the previous year, according to an April report from the Postal Regulatory Commission.

Some of the financial pressures faced by USPS are out of its hands. It doesn't receive taxpayer funding and it's not allowed to set its own prices. Plus, the 2006 Postal Accountability and Enhancement Act required it to pre-fund 75 years' worth of retiree health benefits in 10 years.

Any corporation that faced that level of financial shortfall would have long since gone the way of the Pony Express. So it's only reasonable for DeJoy to make use of the management levers still available to him. Delivery times are a big one.

DeJoy is getting pushback on Capitol Hill from lawmakers who say the changes will drive away customers and erode the agency's credibility. They are joined by a group of 21 attorneys general, led by Pennsylvania and New York. In our view, it's a little late for those concerns. The USPS has taken its place alongside the department of motor vehicles as a poster child for bureaucratic complexity and poor customer service. And, to be honest, the Postal Service's monopoly on cheap letter delivery is a big driver of its customer base.

If DeJoy's plan works, the service will increase reliability. The agency hasn't hit its internal standard of 96% on-time delivery for almost a decade. Currently, only 86% of two-day mail and 58% of three-plus-day mail is arriving on time, according to The Post's reporting. DeJoy is trading speed for dependability here, which could earn back some customer trust in the long run.

This is an industry that has experienced foundational disruption in recent decades. Restrictions from Congress and competition from companies like FedEx, UPS and Amazon have eroded its business model.

Americans will have to adjust, especially older Americans and those who rely on the mail for critical things like medication.

DeJoy isn't exactly an inspiring figure. He's currently under investigation related to campaign financing. But the USPS is long overdue for an overhaul, and he's taking action. If we have to mail those Christmas cards a day earlier, that's an adjustment we're willing to make.

Letters to the editor

- We welcome letters on any issue of public interest. Customer complaints about specific businesses will not be printed.
- The Baker City Herald will not knowingly print false or misleading claims. However, we cannot verify the accuracy of all statements in letters to the editor.
- Writers are limited to one letter every 15 days.
- The writer must sign the letter and include an address and phone number (for verification only). Letters that do not include this information cannot be published.
- Letters will be edited for brevity, grammar, taste and legal reasons.

Mail: To the Editor, Baker City Herald,
P.O. Box 807, Baker City, OR 97814

Email: news@bakercityherald.com

Robocall overload; and Viola's touch with cows

JAYSON JACOBY

I've been unusually distracted recently.

Apparently there's an issue with my car's extended warranty. This dilemma, about which I am reminded regularly via thoughtful calls to my cellphone, has been nagging at me, like a fragment of a song lyric you can't quite remember.

Worse still, it's not clear which of my two vehicles is the problem.

I have two, and neither, so far as I can tell after sifting through the wads of receipts wedged into their respective glove boxes, actually has an extended warranty.

So now, in addition to worrying about the status of the warranty, I fear I might have acquired this additional, and no doubt valuable, protection by fraudulent means.

This wasn't intentional, of course.

But I know better than to argue ignorance of the law.

And based on the frequency of the phone calls, the people in charge of the extended warranty are quite eager to speak with me.

This sort of eagerness, in my experience, is proportional to the amount of money involved.

Lest I carry this charade beyond a reasonable number of paragraphs, I recognize, of course, that these calls are not legitimate.

I don't have an extended warranty on either of my vehicles.

And if I did, the company that sold me the warranty wouldn't sic the automated call machine on me to address any trouble.

Among the distressingly long roster of scams that pollute our world of saturated communications, these extended warranty calls strike me as especially transparent.

The much more insidious versions prey on, for instance, our emotional response to the possibility that a loved one is in danger.

If you get a call from someone claiming to be a relative whose car has broke down in a distant city, even a modestly talented impersonator might be convincing enough to prompt you to divulge personal information, the modern digital equivalent to handing over your wallet or opening your purse.

The warranty calls, by contrast, seem to me both impersonal in their approach and implausible in their content, a combination that makes them more amusing than annoying.

But of course they must work, or else my phone wouldn't keep ringing.

Along with millions of other phones, no doubt.

Volume, I'm sure, compensates for the low success rate of these sleazy ventures.

Just as a gill net dragged through the ocean or a great river will bring in a lot more fish than a single hook dangling below a bobber in a farm pond, automation allows scammers to peddle their criminal wares to a mass audience.

Probably I would be depressed to have this question answered, but I am curious about precisely how many of these calls are placed in the U.S. in a given day.

I doubt that I'm considered a ripe target — I presume the tech-savvy people behind these operations have at least a general idea of my net worth, which is decidedly modest.

And yet scarcely a day passes when my phone stays quiet (not that I much mind the interruption; my ringtone is the University of Oregon's fight song, and if I don't recognize the caller's number I usually tap my fingers on my desk for a couple of bars).

I suspect that these calls, which are easy to ignore and even easier to lampoon, have affected me in at least one way.

I haven't bought a new car in going on eight years, and I don't expect to be dickering with a sales manager for many more years. But I'm pretty sure that whenever that occasion arises — presuming such transactions will still be conducted from chairs upholstered in unconvincingly fake leather arrayed around a cheap table — I'll give a slight start, as from a minor fright, when the phrase "extended warranty" reaches my ears.

I have read many hundreds of obituaries in nearly three decades at the Herald, and although these documents naturally have many similarities, each is, like the people whose lives are memorialized, unique.

I have yet to tire of reading these odes.

I find it eternally fascinating to ponder the ways in which a life extending for many decades, and occasionally for the whole of a century or a bit more, can be distilled into some hundreds of words.

But only occasionally do I come across an anecdote, or even a single sentence, that strikes me as particularly piquant, something perhaps suitable as an epitaph.

I read one such recently in the obituary for Viola Perkins, who lived most of her life in Baker Valley and was involved in a host of good works.

Toward the end of her obituary was this sentence.

"And by golly, she could get cows — anybody's cows — to gather and come running to the gate when it was time to move them, with a hearty 'suuuuboss.'"

I also learned that Viola baked scrumptious chocolate chip and peanut butter cookies.

A fine skill, certainly. And one worth including in an obituary.

But I believe there are far more people who can bake a tasty cookie than there are people who can get cows — anybody's cows — to go through a gate.

Viola was one. I wish I could have seen her working cattle. I'm sure those who did see that spectacle will always remember.

Jayson Jacoby is editor of the Baker City Herald.