

EDITORIAL

Brown's misplaced compassion

Whatever good things Kyle Hedquist did before, and whatever good things he will do in the future, are eclipsed by the absolute finality of the instant he pulled a trigger and fired a bullet into the back of Nikki Thrasher's head.

It happened in 1994 on a backroad in Douglas County, Oregon.

Hedquist was 17. He was convicted in 1995 of murdering Thrasher, 19, and sentenced to life in prison without parole. Hedquist admitted that he killed Thrasher because he feared she could testify against him in a series of burglaries he also committed.

Hedquist is no longer in prison. And he has Oregon Gov. Kate Brown to thank for his freedom. Brown granted clemency to Hedquist last month. He was released April 15.

Brown's decision prompted predictable outrage from some law enforcement officials, including Douglas County Sheriff John Hanlin, and District Attorney Paige Clarkson and Sheriff Joe Kast in Marion County, where Hedquist was released to live in the Salem home of a former prison chaplain.

But not all of the criticism comes from expected sources.

Brown's fellow Democrat, U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden, described Brown's decision as "wrong on every level, starting with its callousness toward the crime victim's family and extending to all Oregonians counting on public officials to make decisions with public safety in mind." Wyden also described Brown's commutation of Hedquist's sentence as a "grossly irresponsible use of the clemency powers."

Wyden's comments are harsh — and rightfully so.

Brown's defense of her decision, meanwhile, is the typical mealy-mouthed claptrap of those who seem incapable of accepting that some people do things so heinous that no subsequent acts, however admirable, offset the harm they have caused or justify a reduction in their punishment.

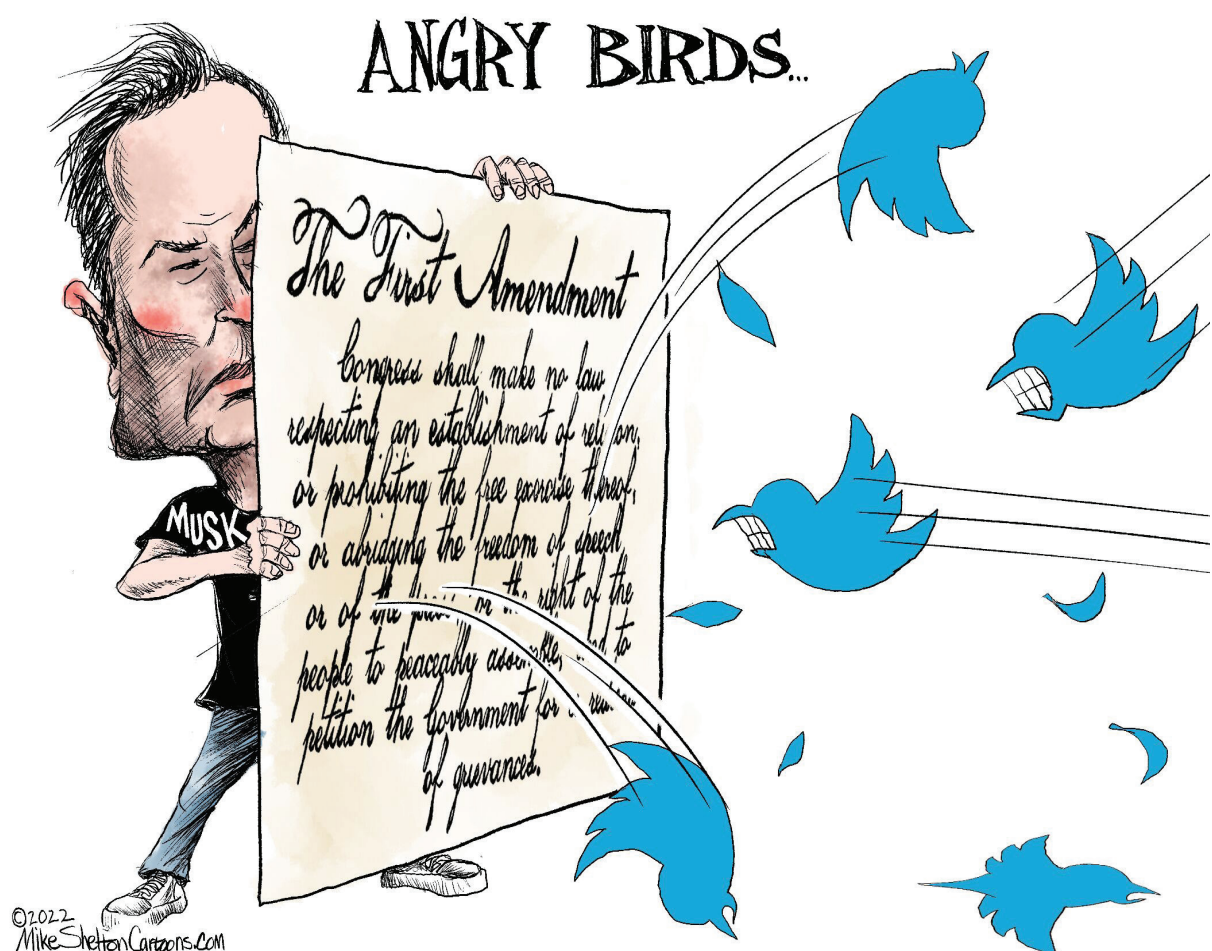
"Teenagers, even those who have committed terrible crimes, have a unique capacity for growth and change," Brown said in a social media post in which she also applauded President Biden's granting of clemency to 78 people, all of whom, unlike Hedquist, were guilty of nonviolent crimes.

This is ludicrous.

Teenagers may well be more likely than adults to recognize their mistakes and become better people. But there's nothing unique about Hedquist. Would Brown have been as lenient if he had been, say, 21 when he murdered Thrasher? What is the age threshold? The very concept, of course, is inane.

The only unique aspect of this situation — the only one that is irretrievable — is Thrasher's life. Hedquist took it. And Brown can never justify giving him, at age 45, freedom for the rest of his own life.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



YOUR VIEWS

Voting for McQuisten will help protect our rights

Are you awake yet?
Our freedoms are extremely fragile, Oregon is in a state of disaster!
Are you fed up with your gun rights being threatened? Are you tired of living in fear?
Do you worry that your timber will needlessly burn? Does it concern you that our kids are being indoctrinated with evil in public schools? Are you disturbed by the possibility of more

lockdowns and mandates? Do you believe in medical freedom? Are you irritated by the rise in crime in our state? Do you go to bed anxious that your property will be the next one burglarized? Are you outraged that you live in a state that does NOT "back the blue," but instead enables lawlessness? Are you as disgusted as I am, that we live in a state that promotes the death of unborn children? Are you happy with the state's gross mismanagement and the effects on your business?
Did you ever believe that you would

live in a state that would shut down places of worship, but would still allow for liquor stores and big box stores to remain open?

If you answered YES to any of these questions, then a vote for Kerry McQuisten is the only solution and the only hope. I undoubtedly believe that she has what it takes to save Oregon! As for me and my family, locally and across the state, it is a big YES for Kerry McQuisten!!!

Thomas Hughes
Baker City

OTHER VIEWS

Learning from a fading pandemic

Editorial from the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

The pandemic is almost over — we think. Not as a medical fact. COVID-19 will be around forever, just like the cold and the flu, but it no longer dominates our daily lives and politics. The Democrats' mild reaction to last week's court decision against mask mandates are among the many signs the American people are moving on.

On April 18, a judge in a federal district court ruled the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) lacked the authority to impose its travel mask mandate, which covers planes, trains and mass transit. Most airlines dropped their requirements immediately. So did some government agencies, including Amtrak. In Pittsburgh, the Port Authority announced the end of masking only a few hours after the decision.

Some commentators squawked, but significantly, the Biden administration wavered. Even after announcing,

after a multiday delay, that the Justice Department would appeal the ruling, the administration has thus far declined to seek a stay of the district court decision, which would bring back the mandate immediately. It's clear Biden's team does not want to resurrect it.

Some of that is politics. Democratic candidates don't want to run against Republicans who can exploit voters' mask-fatigue. That would not only rouse the Republican base, but also appeal to many centrist voters who feel enough is enough. These are voters Democrats need.

The development of vaccines and other medical treatments, and the ability of people to calculate risks to protect themselves and others, also have undermined COVID-19's dominance in our public life.

So does the American people's craving for normality. An Axios/Ipsos poll released this month showed only 1 in 11 Americans still believes COVID-19 is a "serious crisis." Al-

most twice as many don't think it's a problem. Three of four Americans believe COVID-19 remains a problem, but one the nation can manage. More and more Americans are starting to live as they did before COVID-19.

Barring a new and very dangerous variant, the pandemic is no longer an overriding crisis. This gives us time to think about the ways we can protect the public against disease without weakening or even destroying crucial aspects of American life. Americans have experienced the destructive cost and the inequity of lockdowns, for example. They have witnessed small businesses lost forever because the state forced them to close, while allowing big chains to stay open.

They have also witnessed the dangerous limitations of the creed of go-it-alone individualism.

The government — and the people themselves — made many mistakes that need to be acknowledged, and not repeated, when the next pandemic hits.

COLUMN

Twitter, Musk and the real version of free speech

I find it depressing that many Americans seem to gauge our country's commitment to free speech based on whether a billionaire buys a social media platform that treats its users as if they're incapable of processing more than 280 characters all at once.

Most three-year-olds can spit out sentences with more heft.

Although based on my occasional excursions into Twitter it seems that the three-year-olds have been let loose there already, with similar results as when toddlers have the run of the kitchen.

I have nothing against brevity, to be sure.

The federal tax code, among much else that the government expects, could benefit greatly if it were subjected to a Twitter-style diet.

But the dramatic distillation that Twitter requires encourages people, or so it seems to me, not to sharpen their minds and hone their messages but rather to spew the first thought that comes to mind. This is rarely a thought of which we're later proud. Spontaneity has its place — deciding where to have dinner in a city with a wealth of restaurants, for instance. But engaging in a respectful discussion requires a certain amount of contemplation. There's a reason the conversations we enjoy most tend to be punctuated with extended moments of silence. Twitter is more akin to someone standing on the porch and screaming at the dog that just took a dump on his freshly mowed grass.

Even a model of rhetorical re-

straint such as Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg address would have had to be broken into a gaggle of tweets.

(And speaking of that era, let's not even ponder Facebook groups pitting the rebels against the Yanks.)

But it's not the nature of Twitter, with its near insistence that sober consideration of complex topics be squeezed into a bumper sticker slogan, that bothers me about the recent hysteria surrounding Elon Musk's purchase of the platform.

What chafes me is what seems to be a widespread belief that on Twitter rests the sanctity of the First Amendment, one of the fundamental, and foundational, principles that are integral to the enduring greatness of America.

This strikes me as not just a great exaggeration, but also as downright daft.

The concept of "free speech" is, naturally, closely associated with the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. But the First Amendment, which uses the term "freedom of speech," doesn't deal with citizens' right to express themselves in any privately owned forum they choose. Rather, the amendment prefaces all the things it protects in addition to freedom of speech — free exercise of religion, freedom of the press, the right to peaceably assemble and to redress the government for grievances — by stating that Congress shall make no law restricting any of those rights.

And although the crafters of that wondrous document could not have



Jayson Jacoby

foreseen Twitter (or, perhaps, Elon Musk) they were quite explicit in confining their concerns about repression to ensuring Congress wasn't the outfit doing the muzzling. They weren't worried about some colonial version of social media.

The point is that although the debate over Twitter, and the nature of its censorship, involves free speech in a general sense, it has nothing to do with the First Amendment.

I've read and listened to Musk's ideas on the matter and, if he is sincere, then I can't help but agree with him. He is advocating for the tolerance of all viewpoints as against the suppression of those which some people deem offensive. This, it seems to me, is the proper way to think about free expression, on Twitter or anywhere else, simply because the notion that we ought to defer to any person's, or group's, definition of what's offensive is antithetical to the very concept of free speech. The previous owners of Twitter were on solid enough legal ground in making such determinations — they're not Congress, after all. But morally speaking they waded into quicksand — and Musk says he wants to yank Twitter loose from the morass.

For all that, I can't muster any great amount of angst about how Twitter, or any other social media platform, stifles its users.

The reason is simple: volume.

I'm talking about terabytes, not decibels.

Twitter and Facebook can fairly be called 21st century versions of the public square, I suppose, solely due to their popularity.

But I think it's ludicrous to contend, as some people have, that the censorship which certainly exists on those platforms, no matter how ubiquitous they are, poses any significant threat to our ability to express ourselves, or for other people to find our viewpoints and embrace or impugn them at their leisure.

Twitter, massive though it is, still represents, in one sense, a drop in the vast online sea. The notion that a person can't make available his every harebrained idea to everybody with a cellphone (which IS everybody, essentially) is laughable.

When somebody claims that Big Tech is severely suppressing free expression, ponder this question — is it easier today than it has ever been to avail yourself of the dizzyingly vast array of crackpot theories of which the human mind is capable?

The answer, as any sensible person must agree, is yes.

And nothing — including whether or not Elon Musk owns Twitter — can possibly change that reality.

Having earned a paycheck for three decades thanks to the perpetual gift that is the First Amendment, I instinctively abhor censorship.

And it troubles me that so many Americans, under the guise of pro-

tecting people from the terrible experience of reading something that they find reprehensible, would so readily conclude that such opinions ought to be excluded from public discourse.

But I also trust the free market. Plenty of people have complained about censorship on social media. But perhaps only Musk has the financial clout to do something about it in a prominent way.

His takeover of Twitter quickly prompted a parade of stories about how many people have vowed to quit Twitter — those, it seems to me, whose dedication to free expression seems to falter when they encounter opinions that might make them, or others, feel bad.

No doubt that will happen. And it might well be that more people drop Twitter than flock to it, the latter group attracted by Musk's apparent commitment to the sort of rhetorical smorgasbord that the internet made possible.

But at least all those people will be choosing for themselves.

And as obnoxious as people can be — and frequently are, on Twitter and other social media platforms — I still subscribe to the notion that freedom, and I mean the genuine article and not the ersatz version determined by the easily offended, requires that we sometimes trudge through the sludge as we wade about, searching for inspiration and wisdom.

■ Jayson Jacoby is editor of the Baker City Herald.