

## Free Press Viewpoint

### In the busy holiday don't miss holy day

With all the hustle and stress of what we call "the holiday season," it's easy to lose sight of why we do all this, even for those who accept and believe in the message in the coming of the Christ child.

We get busy. There's a lot to do, presents to buy, homes and trees to decorate, parties and programs to attend, events to notice, sales and shopping, the list goes on. No one even knows exactly why we celebrate his birth at this time of the year, since scholars say the Bible gives no actual date for the birth.

Many speculate that Dec. 25 was chosen by the Roman church because a Christmas celebration then would overshadow traditional pagan observances in Europe keyed to the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year.

It's easy to forget that the day originated with a church service, the Christ Mass, and while many of us were in church either Christmas Eve or Christmas Day, it seems like more and more people in what we once called Western Civilization either question these beliefs or no longer know what to believe.

Perhaps, as a noted writer once said, we live in a cynical age. The wonder and promise of the Christmas story is just too much for many to accept, the whole idea of a Savior sent to forgive us our sins and lead us to everlasting life.

It is a lot to swallow when you look at it that way.

Or maybe it's the commitment required to accept the offer and try to live as Christ teaches us to live, recognizing that we remain nothing more than, as Nelson Mandela put it, sinners who keep trying.

Perhaps the idea of a judgment day, a winnowing time when the wheat will be separated and the chaff swept into unquenchable flames, bothers a lot of people. Like death itself, no one wants to face that prospect.

They say a lot of people feel left out, stressed and depressed this time of year. That's too bad. Christmas should be a time of joy, of love and giving. It can be, if we take time to remember where all this started.

On this Christmas, we hope everyone does just that. Take a moment wherever you are to think about how fortunate we are to live where we live, in the era we live in, when the condition of men is probably, while not perfect, better than it's ever been. Be thankful for these gifts and recall the promise, in whatever tradition you prefer, of God's grace.

To each and every one of you out there, we wish you a joyous holiday and some relief from the demands of the season. Merry Christmas! — *Steve Haynes*

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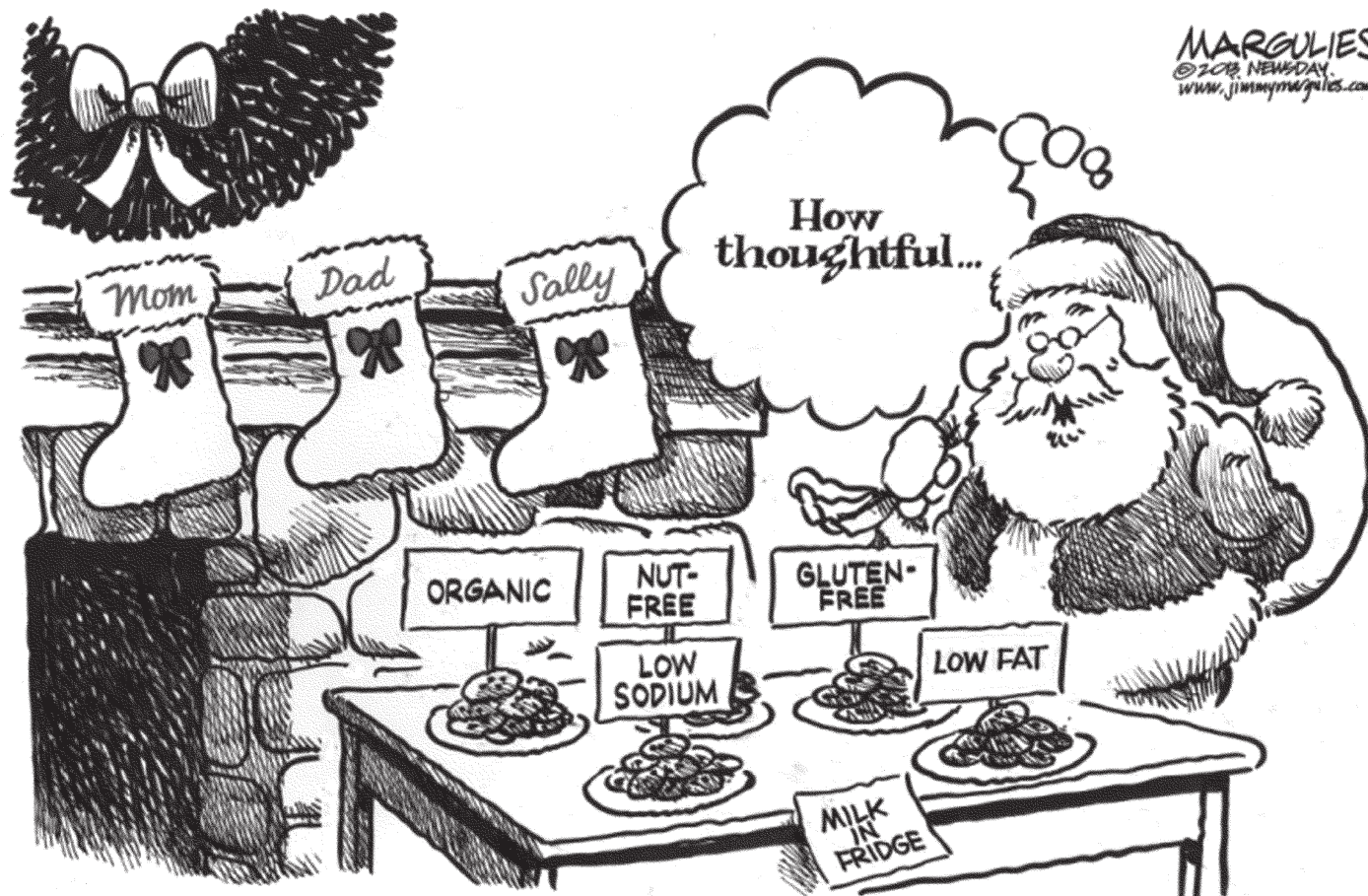
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### Green lights could land her in red

My credit card may be compromised now, and all because I was looking for green Christmas lights.

This saga actually started last year when, at the end of January, Steve told me I had to take the Christmas lights off the bushes and trees and put the inside tree in storage.

I was devastated. I love Christmas lights. I get up early each morning and go downstairs to a bright rainbow outside my door, on the mantle, on the tree and outside the kitchen window. It's glorious.

The end of January is still deep in winter. It's dark out there, and when I come downstairs in the morning, it's dark inside and out without those pretty little lights.

Steve finally agreed that we could put red and white lights on the bushes by the front door until the end of February in honor of St. Valentine.

I immediately found just the right ones at a local hardware store. I was delighted then, but not so happy when the end of February came, and it was still dark outside.

Steve agreed to green and white lights for St. Patrick's Day through the rest of March. But the hardware had no green lights. Their supplier had no green lights.

It was a dark March.

This year, I was going to get an early start on



**Cynthia Haynes**

• Open Season

looking for those green lights. I would prefer some that matched the red-and-white ones, but I wasn't going to be too picky.

But again, the hardware store had only white, red and blue in single-color lights. The dollar store and the grocery didn't have any, either.

Even the large chain store not to be mentioned didn't have any.

Maybe in Augusta when I visited the girls, I thought. It's a mid-sized city with big box stores. Surely one of those places would have my green lights.

So I checked at Lowe's, their grocery stores and Target. I even tried that other chain.

No one had any green lights, although everywhere I went, it seemed that someone had up a display with nothing but green lights. I was beginning to think it was a conspiracy to keep me in the dark come March.

While I was in Target looking for the lights,

though, I picked up a book for my granddaughter's pre-school gift exchange. ("Please bring a book for a boy. Spend no more than \$5, please.") and three packages of some little trinkets for the party. Each package was \$4, so that was another \$12.

I checked out using my credit card.

A week later, the great Target credit card scandal comes to light. Millions of credit cards have been compromised including mine — the woman who spent less than \$20 and never shops there.

I'll have to wait for the statement to know if I have any odd charges. One man reportedly had \$12,000 charged to California casinos, and he'd never been there. California, I mean.

In the meantime, I stopped by my hardware store to leave off some items for a food drive, and there they were — three packages of green lights that just matched my white ones.

It's going to be a bright and happy March around my place — and I may have a new credit card by then.

*Cynthia Haynes, co-owner and chief financial officer of NorWest Newspapers, writes this column weekly. Her pets include cats, toads and a praying mantis. Contact her at c.haynes@nwkans.com*

### Congress still isn't being responsible

Congress is winding down a historically unproductive session with a small flurry of activity. It's a welcome change, but so long overdue that it can't possibly make up for what should have been accomplished on Capitol Hill this year.

The problem is that for too long, members of Congress have been working hard at everything except the one thing they should have been working hard at: legislating. They've been so unproductive that they've actually threatened our world standing and our domestic well-being.

To be sure, they are moving incrementally. Gridlock is breached, but not broken. The likelihood is that Congress will pass a defense bill. It reached a small-scale budget agreement that undoes a bit of the damage caused by the sequester. It is finally starting to work through a list as long as your arm of judicial and executive-branch confirmations, but only because Senate Democrats decided they had to change the rules if they wanted to fill long-vacant government positions.

Still, the list of what Congress hasn't done is sobering. There's no food-stamp reauthorization or waterways construction bill. It did pass a one-month extension to the Farm Bill, but that falls far short of the certainty this crucial economic sector needs.

There's no lasting solution to the debt-ceiling problem. Almost nothing has been done about the fundamental gap between taxes and spending. It has left unemployment benefits unresolved, immigration reform unresolved, tax reform unresolved, action on climate change unresolved. This lack of productivity makes me wonder if Congress can address challenges without a crisis.

Mind you, some members take pride in how unproductive Congress has been. They argue that the less the government does, the better. But given Congress's pathetically low standing in the polls, it's clear that most Americans

### Other Opinions

• Lee Hamilton Center on Congress

don't agree. They don't like incompetence, as their response to the botched rollout of the Affordable Care Act suggests, and they really don't like people who dodge their responsibilities, which is what Congress's ineffectiveness amounts to.

Unlike many members of Congress, Americans seem to understand that things that ought to be done are not getting done, and that there are real costs to inaction. We're in a race with China for world leadership, and whether we like it or not, others around the globe are comparing our two governments.

The attractiveness of the American model is under challenge, and our political dysfunction is a serious handicap. As the *Wall Street Journal* put it recently, a superpower that isn't sure it can fund its government or pay its bills is not in a position to lead.

And because problems aren't getting addressed, others are stepping into the breach at home, too — but with less transparency, less accountability, and less flexibility. The Federal Reserve board is doing the heavy lifting on the economy. The Supreme Court is essentially legislating. Executive-branch agencies are trying to handle massively difficult challenges through executive orders. State and local governments have decided that even on issues they can't address effectively, like immigration, they're on their own.

When asked about all this, congressional leaders tend to blame the other house, arguing that they've done their best but the other side

has bottled up their efforts. All I can say is, finger-pointing is not an excuse, it's an admission of failure. A leader's responsibility is to enact legislation, not just get a bill through the house he or she controls.

Legislating is tough, demanding work. It requires many hours of conversation about differences, commonalities and possible solutions. It demands patience, mutual respect, persistence, collegiality, compromise, artful negotiation and creative leadership. Especially when Congress is so divided.

Yet when Congress meets only episodically throughout the year, when it often works just three days a week and plans an even more relaxed schedule in 2014, when the House and Senate give themselves just one overlapping week this month to resolve huge questions of public policy, you can only come to one conclusion: They're not really willing to work hard at legislating.

A last-minute flurry of bills offers hope, but it's going to take a lot more work to convince the country that Congress knows how to live up to its responsibilities.

*Lee Hamilton is director of the Center on Congress at Indiana University. He was a member of the U.S. House of Representatives for 34 years.*

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### Mallard Fillmore

• Bruce Tinsley

