

from our viewpoint...

Defend everyone's right to speak freely

'I may not agree with what you say but I'll fight to the death to defend your right to say it' - Voltaire (a paraphrase of his remarks)

The U.S. Supreme Court, saying even hurtful speech is protected by the Constitution, ruled last week members of a Kansas church can't be punished for staging an anti-homosexual demonstration at a military funeral.

The justices, voting 8-1, said a lower court was right to throw out a \$5 million award to a man who said the demonstration marred his son's funeral. The protesters, from the Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, bore signs saying God was killing U.S. soldiers to punish the country for accepting homosexuality.

"As a nation we have chosen a different course - to protect even hurtful speech on public issues to ensure we do not stifle public debate," Chief Justice John Roberts wrote. "That choice requires we shield Westboro from tort liability for its picketing in this case."

The leader of the church, Fred Phelps, was one of seven protesters at the 2006 funeral of Matthew Snyder, a Marine lance corporal who died in Iraq's Anbar Province.

The demonstration was about three blocks away from the Westminster, Md., Catholic church where the funeral was held, and Snyder, nor his family actually saw the protesters.

Albert Snyder sued Phelps and two of his daughters for intentional infliction of emotional distress. A jury awarded Snyder \$10.9 million, later reduced by a trial judge. A federal appeals court threw out the entire award, and Snyder appealed to the nation's highest court.

Justice Roberts characterized the ruling as a narrow one resting in part on Westboro's compliance with police instructions about where the protest could be held.

"Simply put, the church members had the right to be where they were," the chief justice wrote. He added, "The protest was not unruly; there was no shouting, profanity or violence."

Maryland has since passed a law imposing restrictions on funeral picketing, and Roberts said 43 other states and the federal government have similar measures.

The Tea Party people make a point about upholding the U.S. Constitution and on some occasions may find themselves defending things they may not personally believe in.

Defending the Constitution is not a conservative versus liberal battle, and both sides feel their interpretation is correct when referring to the "intent" of the founding fathers.

The Supreme Court decision was the proper one in defense of the First Amendment, and to protect the rights of people to peacefully assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.

The actions of the Westboro church people in this case are not a shining example of what is considered the best of America, and the less than peaceful protests of the anti-abortion protesters would fit on the same level. However, in both cases the First Amendment in the strictest interpretation of the U.S. Supreme Court decision deserve the same protection to express their opinions.

That same amendment protects freedom of religion and freedom of the press. - Tom Betz



GOP straw poll results

The GOP straw poll has ended and the results are mixed, much like a salad bowl: a little bit of everything. At the outset I thought if I and my helpers could generate anywhere from 75 to 100 responses, that would be super. Well, we far surpassed that; a total of 254 people responded. I won't comment on anything at this point because I know you want to see how it turned out. I will give you the raw numbers, no percentages and I am hoping for some comments.

Here are the numbers:

Mitt Romney 23; Chris Christi 19; Newt Gingrich 18; Ron Paul 17; Michele Backmann 17; Tim Pawlenty 16. Mike Huckabee 14; Sarah Palin 12; Sam Brownback 12; Mitch McConnell 12; Rand Paul 11; John McCain 10; Mitch Daniels 10; Herman Cain 8; Scott Walker 7; Jeb Bush 6; Paul Ryan 6; Jerry Moran 6; Gary Johnson 5; Haley Barbour 5; Rush Limbaugh 4; Jon Kyle 2; Judd Gregg 2. Total 242

Responding to the poll but saying it was far too early to have made a decision for a Republican nominee, 12

Total responding 254

Thanks to you "voters." I'll be trying this a few more times before the showdown. And each poll will reflect fewer candidates as the ranks dwindle.

Comments from you the readers

I learn a lot from writing my columns for publication in newspapers, such as the one you are now reading. Readers are quick to advise, disagree, agree, complain - you know the litany. And I take stock of some of those comments.

I am going to pass along portions of several comments generated by the column in which I said I might possibly give up my independent status. I used to have a thing called "Snippets" which would run in my columns. Snippets consists of a sentence or two or three from reader responses and no name is attached. If a reader wants more of his/her comment to be used, they would have to offer it as a letter to the editor, which stipulates names will be used.



tom dreiling

• time out with td

So, here we go with a few snippets.

"You are sort of undecided like me, Tom. You try political parties like I try beer. And I can never quite settle on one."

"...We'd love to have you join the Republican Party. The right party for the smart crowd!"

"If you were born a Democrat, as you said, and changed, is your religious belief next? I think this is a fair question..."

"...Think not of Democrats or Republicans as parties, Mr. Dreiling, because parties are fun. Our two major political parties are far from that."

"...Independents need to be more vocal. Thanks for letting this independent voice become part of your mission. Please keep it an 'I', as in independent!"

"...When you pick your next political party, please research the issues and the party platforms. I am so tired of people 'picking sides' like it was some sporting event. Kind of like the K-State, KU rivalry. With that mentality, it's easy to 'hate' the other side, and think your side is always right..."

"Liked your column. I read it in the Aurora Sentinel when the mailman dropped it off in my mailbox over the weekend. May I suggest you go Democrat? We'll have to kick butt again to straighten out that unruly bunch now controlling the House of Representatives. I'll buy you lunch...if you do."

"Have you heard from House Speaker Boehner yet?..."

"When a baby dirties its diaper, it gets changed. Certainly you don't have such a problem?"

"I...just hope you hold no party as your identity. With too many people, their party seems to be who they are. Their identity."

These heavily edited snippets were just small parts of comments from readers of the Aurora

Sentinel, The Hays Daily News, northwest Kansas newspapers in Goodland, Colby, and Norton and from my contact list. Your comments are appreciated. Send to: milehitom@hotmail.com.

The decision made, but...

Okay, you are probably wondering what I am going to do politically. If you recall my last column, I ended it this way: "Give me an?" Well, after careful, very careful consideration and reviewing the goings-on of both political parties vs. the independency of an independent, I've reached a conclusion.

And while you are wondering what that decision might be, I must tell you won't find it in this column. Ever. I learned a lesson the hard way by revealing myself as an independent in my column a few years back. The reaction was not what I had expected. "Turncoat" was used often. The negative comments far outweighed the positive. And I would rather not go through that again, so I hold my decision close to the vest.

When sports take over the spotlight

There was this guy who managed to come onto a 50-yard seat at the recent Super Bowl game. He noticed there was a vacant seat between he and another man. He asked the other guy if he knew why that seat was empty. Yeah," he said with a solemn voice, "I bought two tickets and that seat was for my very best friend, but he died." "Oh, I'm sorry to hear that," said the first guy, "but surely you could have found some other friend to use that ticket."

"No," the guy responded, "they're all at the funeral."

Closing

Have you said something good about your town today? There's still time.

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Trade already



Insight this week

• john schlageck

Three stalled trade agreements are jeopardizing a vital cog of this country's economy. The inability of Congress and the Obama administration to compromise on Free Trade Agreements with Colombia, Korea and Panama is costing the United States \$3-billion in lost agricultural trade.

Here's the breakdown. If it is ever fully implemented, the Korean free trade agreement would result in approximately \$1.8-billion annually. Gains in exports through the Colombian agreement are expected at \$815-million. The Panama agreement would bolster U.S. ag exports to more than \$195-million.

These trade agreements are crucial for the economic well being of this nation's farmers and ranchers as well as the economic health of their rural communities and the whole of the U.S. economy.

Make no mistake about it, there is a direct correlation with the beginning of the supply chain on this nation's farms and ranches and the workers who package and move the livestock, grain, fuel and fiber to foreign consumers.

A decline in U.S. exports will result in a decline in work for those who are part of that food pipeline. Every billion dollars in agricultural exports creates work for approximately 9,000 workers, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

While the United States has dallied with these free trade agreements for years, other nations - our competitors - are pursuing and in some cases have secured their own trade

agreements. Case in point is Canada. They have completed negotiations with Colombia and their agreement awaits implementation.

This debate on free trade is no longer just about generating potential export gains but about the loss of existing U.S. exports. This nation and its farmer and rancher producers are losing billions of dollars to competitors with our stalled agreements.

Here's an example of what I'm talking about. During the 10-year period from 2000 to 2009, the Chilean wine market share in Korea rose from 2.4-percent to 21.5 percent. During this same time period, the U.S. share fell from 17.1-percent to 10.8-percent.

Here's another. The U.S. agriculture peak market share with Colombia totaled 46-percent in 2008. Last year it dropped to 21-percent as Argentina took our share of the ag export pie.

Just one more. A recently completed trade deal between Canada and Panama has given our neighbors to the north a competitive edge over us for products such as beef, pork, beans and various processed foods - if the Canadian trade deal goes into effect before the U.S. agreement.

This country's inability to take action on the

trade front has resulted in a loss of market share and economic growth during a period of time when we cannot afford it. The U.S. governments inability to move these free trade agreements forward will continue to benefit our competitors around the world while damaging U.S. agriculture producers and American food-supply workers.

It's past time for this continuing political posturing and lack of cooperation on both sides of the aisle. Our elected leaders were sent to Washington on behalf of this nation's people. It's time for them to lead. It's time for them to implement free-trade agreements.

John Schlageck of the Kansas Farm Bureau has been writing about farming and ranching in Kansas for more than 25 years. He is the managing editor of "Kansas Living," a quarterly magazine dedicated to agriculture and rural life in Kansas.

Letter Policy

The Goodland Star-News encourages and welcomes letters from readers. Letters should be typewritten, and must include a telephone number and a signature. Unsigned letters will not be published. Form letters and letters deemed to be of no public interest or considered offensive will be rejected. We reserve the right to edit letters for length and good taste. We encourage letters, with address and phone numbers, by e-mail to: <star.news@nwkansas.com>.