

A Penny for Your Thoughts
by Penny Gross
Exclusive to the Falls Church News-Press

A Minnesota legislator and her husband murdered in their home. Another legislator and his wife shot multiple times. A United States Senator wrestled to the floor and handcuffed in a Los Angeles federal building. Public service is an honorable profession; it also is an increasingly dangerous one, especially when some elected leaders, rather than condemning attacks, “egg on” confrontations with incendiary comments. Speaker of the House Mike Johnson, constitutionally third in line to the presidency, suggested publicly that California Governor Gavin Newsom should be “tarred and feathered” for opposing Donald Trump’s ordering of the California National Guard, in contravention of the authority of a governor in his/her home state Utah Senator Mike Lee made light of the murder of the Minnesota legislator on social media, blaming “Marxist” views simply because she was a Democrat. And few Senators have expressed concern about Senator Alex Padilla’s treatment by FBI and security personnel although Speaker Johnson suggested that Padilla should be censured.

Of course, the Speaker has no jurisdiction over Senate actions; he needs to mind his own chamber, but retribution seems to be popular in the House. Representative Nancy Mace (R-SC) filed a resolution to expel Representative LaMonica McIver (D-NJ) for involvement in a scuffle with ICE officers in Newark, and William Timmons (R-SC) followed up with a resolution to censure her and launch an ethics investigation. Representative Buddy Carter (R-GA) filed a resolution to strip McIver and two other New Jersey Democrats of their committee assignments.

Some of this can be attributed to political theatre, but lives, democracy, and the rule of law are at stake. Regardless of political persuasion, elected officials should be united in their abhorrence of violence against any other public servant. An election tenders specific authorities to the electee, but they still are human. I often had to remind my constituents that election didn’t endow me with any special talents or give me eyes in the back of my head. Election meant I had to work harder and smarter on behalf of more than 100,000 residents of Mason District, but I had to shop for groceries, do laundry, and take care of my family, just like anyone else. I rarely worried about my personal safety, but I did heed public safety tips when in a crowd or on stage.

When hearing about attacks against public officials, mass shootings at schools or worship, vehicles ramming street markets and festivals, we lament the violence, wonder why it wasn’t prevented, and look to place blame on mental health or lax security or immigrants or whatever, and how polarized America is. Too often, it’s the fault of all those other people, not us or me. And too many of our top elected officials -- President, Vice President, Speaker, many Members of Congress – by their comments or lack of same, augment the polarization, appealing to their base, I guess, rather than the American people as a whole. They need to be reminded that they are elected to serve all of the people, not just those who voted for them. The pendulum can swing back toward the center, but it will take work, time, respect, and stepping up, by everyone.

June 19, 2025

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Are there any adults in the Trump White House? Media photos show adult humans coming and going, but the missives issued by Trump, his Cabinet members, and the White House press operation appear to belie any adult thought processes. It's no secret that Trump's personal values focus on himself and ostentation, the gaudier the better. What he and his vice president call the "cherished" Oval Office has become a gilded stage set for televised gatherings, the flashier the shiny gewgaws, the better. Add to the mix the many sycophantic Cabinet members vying to one-up each other in lauding Trump's latest "achievements." There are more than a dozen Cabinet members; will any of them be a responsible adult and holler "STOP!"

Has any Cabinet member questioned Trump's contention that he "doesn't know" if he is supposed to uphold the Constitution? It won't be the Attorney General who sweetly grins from ear to ear when talking about the federal death penalty. It won't be the reckless and unqualified Secretary of Defense. It won't be the Secretary of Health and Human Services who doesn't appear to remember anything. And it won't be the Secretary of State/USAID director/Acting Archivist/national security advisor. He's too busy balancing four jobs! They all took a similar oath to "preserve, protect, and defend" the Constitution just weeks or months ago, but apparently have forgotten their pledge or committed fraud when they uttered those words.

Mr. Trump is all about marketing and entertainment, not governing. Following the death of Pope Francis, he mused that he might like to be Pope, notwithstanding that he is neither Catholic nor a priest. Nevertheless, the White House posted an obviously altered photo of a scowling Trump in papal robes trimmed in gold, of course. The same White House also issued a "May the Force Be With You" photo of Trump as an overly-muscular Star Wars character. Should we expect an Academy Award statuette of Trump next? It surely would fit with his golden persona, but let's not give the White House any ideas!

Trump's recent comments about the economy demonstrate how out of touch he is with the American public – the 99 percent who do not claim to be wealthy. In an interview with NBC's Kristen Welker, Trump insisted that gas prices are down to \$1.98 a gallon in a few states, but there is no data to support his contention. Gas in the Metro area this week is about \$3.09 a gallon, although I did see one station where it was \$2.93. Most states' gas prices range from about \$2.69 to \$2.98. Trump's gas math is as bad as his tariff math.

I don't know what gifts Ivanka Trump received on birthdays and holidays, but I'll bet it wasn't 30 dolls. Mr. Trump asserted that two dolls would suffice, but they might cost a couple of dollars more because of his tariffs. As the parent of two adult daughters, it's been years since I priced dolls, but some quick research reveals that American Girl dolls cost more than \$100 each, regular Barbie dolls \$20 and up. Both brands are manufactured in China, so the Trump tariffs, which would be paid by parents and grandparents, not China, will more than double the purchase price. Mr. Trump followed up with a comment about pencils, that no one needs 250 pencils when five would be enough. Huh?

The non sequiturs keep coming. His response to almost any question circles back to a condemnation of his predecessor, immigrant criminals, or the 2020 election, which he still contends was rigged. These are not rational discussions about policy, but the rantings of a man whose mental stability and penchant for vengeance are antithetical to the functioning of our democracy. Who will step up and be the adult in the White House?

May 8, 2025

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Nearly 50 years ago, my husband and I purchased property on the Outer Banks of North Carolina and had a small cottage built at Avon, a village on Hatteras Island about six miles north of the iconic Cape Hatteras Lighthouse (which currently is surrounded by massive scaffolding for restoration in time for the nation's 250th anniversary). At Eastertime, we would make the 600-mile round trip to open the house for summer tenants. If Easter was early, the weather often was cold and rainy; late Easters would be sunny and warmer.

Sunny and warm was the order of the week for our beach trip last week. Sunsets were gorgeous, bright corals and soft pinks against cloudless skies, and the constant yammering of news outlets was refreshingly absent. It seemed almost sacrilegious to activate electronic devices in such a bucolic beach atmosphere. The whole idea was to leave the political and commercial turmoils behind. And it worked, for the most part.

The Outer Banks are fairly isolated. No commercial airports serve the islands; no trains and few buses are scheduled there. The North Carolina Ferry system serves some islands, but the primary mode of transportation is private vehicle. As we navigated the various sites along the narrow beach roads, the diversity of visitors was expansive. Dozens, perhaps hundreds, of Canadian windsurfers rented houses on the "sound" side of the island to take advantage of good winds on Pamlico Sound. Most of the vehicles bore Quebec license plates. Apparently, the Trump-manufactured rift between the U.S. and Canada didn't affect windsurfers. That was good news for Dare County tourist revenues. Several multi-generational Indian families were aboard the Ocracoke ferry. I heard Spanish spoken by visitors to the Bodie Island lighthouse, and an Eastern European language by four fellows at the Wright Brothers Memorial in Kitty Hawk. At that same site, I observed what appeared to be an interesting religious/cultural exchange by a man dressed in traditional Hasidic fur hat (called a Shtreimel) and long coat who approached a small group of men and women who appeared to be Mennonite. Photos were taken, but a long conversation, maybe 20 minutes, followed. I was too far away to hear what was discussed, faith or sightseeing? Hundreds of miles from home, on remote islands, it essentially was the world in a teacup!

And that's to be celebrated, again and again. Diversity adds to our strength. It is not something to be feared, erased, or demonized. As I write this column, the death of Pope Francis has just been announced. His passing removes a global advocate of compassion and support for migrants at a time when such advocacy is sorely needed to counteract the odious policies of many world leaders, including Donald Trump. One of the Pope's last audiences was a brief meeting with Vice President JD Vance, who has clashed with the Pope, especially about immigration. One can only hope that one of the last papal blessings might instill more compassion and introspection in Mr. Vance. Pope Francis was known as a voice for the "poorest people on earth." He knew, and accepted, that vast numbers of people fit that category, and that they deserve the same measures of compassion and humanity enjoyed by those more fortunate.

April 24, 2025

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Discussion and debate have been the hallmarks of American college and university campuses for more than a couple of centuries, until now. Where different philosophies and points of view could be examined and expounded, usually safely despite raised voices in sometimes tense surroundings, today's public and private institutions of higher learning are under attack by the Trump Administration. Threats include loss of federal funding grants for schools that uphold diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) as core principles, as well as questioning the endowments that alumni and supporters contributed to establish financial stability for future generations. Independence of thought, and respect for that independence, can be challenging to all sides; without it, education fails.

I was a freshman at the University of Oregon in 1962 when controversy hit the campus during winter term, testing the First Amendment and tolerance of other opinions. In the first instance, preacher Homer Tomlinson invited himself to college campuses as the self-styled "King of the World," and planned to crown himself "King of the University of Oregon." His platform opposed war and sin and lauded the "rain (sic) of righteousness." He set up a lawn chair on the steps of the Student Union and used a bullhorn to speak to students who jeered, threw tomatoes, and sprayed him with shaving cream. It was not the university's finest hour, but shortly after, the student body created a free speech platform in front of the Student Union which invited speakers to share their opinions or beliefs with anyone who wanted to listen. The wooden structure later was replaced by a sturdier brick lectern still in use.

That February, Gus Hall, former general secretary of the Communist Party in the United States, was invited to speak at the university. Who invited him is unclear, but Arthur Flemming, Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare in the Eisenhower Administration, was in his "freshman" year as president of the university and made the final decision to allow Hall to speak. Flemming bore the brunt of outside opposition, but the faculty and University community, including those who had opposed Hall's coming, stood behind his decision. Hall's appearance was slated for Mac Court, the basketball arena, but the venue was switched to Hayward Field, the football stadium, after a bomb threat. Rain didn't dampen the turnout; between 7000 and 10,000 people showed up for what might be called today a "nothing burger." His speech wasn't violent, wasn't stimulating, and wasn't long, but was disappointing in its lack of any food for thought. An item in the 1962 yearbook noted that "whatever else is said about Gus Hall, he caused a sense of unity in the University which was a wonderful thing to behold in the time of such intense emotion. Gus Hall left the University of Oregon better than he found it."

More than 60 years later, the principles that undergirded the University community's response and adherence to free speech can be both a support and a warning in today's educational atmosphere. The same 1962 yearbook pointed out that "the willingness to listen to differences of opinion serves as a stimulus to creative and intelligent thinking. In the educational process, this stimulus is vital to development of the individual...controversy is often the seed of great achievement." Isn't that what higher education should teach us?

April 10, 2025

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Today marks two months since Donald Trump took an oath to “preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States” as president of the United States. Was he listening to the words of the hallowed oath as he repeated them? Or did he have his fingers crossed behind his back? We know he didn’t put his hand on either of the Bibles held in the Capitol Rotunda by his third wife. His press secretary, repeatedly, has said that this administration believes that portions of the Constitution are unconstitutional. What?

Most high school students would be able to tell you that freedom of the press is not unconstitutional. Birthright citizenship is not unconstitutional. Defendants, regardless of the charge, are entitled to legal representation. State Bar Associations, following due process, can ban attorneys for ethical breaches; presidents can’t. It seems that nearly every action taken by the Musk/Trump cabal has been subject to legal challenge and, fortunately so far, the federal courts have provided guardrails to limit the administration’s broadaxe approach to dismantle government. Whether the Supreme Court will uphold the lower courts’ decisions is unknown at this point, but it is time for the Court to recognize its role as a co-equal branch of government enshrined in the Constitution and show some spine when Trump’s appeals, using curious legal arguments, come before them.

As more chaos and destruction emanates from the Trump White House, friends and family from around the country have asked me what they can, or should, do. My advice, some of which has appeared in my previous columns, is to contact their Members of Congress, write letters to the editor, have conversations in whatever circles they inhabit – the workplace, the classroom, the worship service, the dinner table. Sometimes, though, the best advice is to “turn it off,” if only temporarily. In today’s 24-hour information cycle, everything seems to be “breaking news,” whether a court decision, a plane accident, or Trump “winning” a tournament at one of his many golf resorts. I’ve enjoyed watching the news ever since the 15-minute Huntley-Brinkley report appeared on our old black-and-white television when I was a child. A snapshot of national and world events, it was just enough, along with the daily newspaper, to learn more about community, government, and world affairs, and then go about our daily activities. Today we are bombarded at every turn, on every device, by a firestorm of information – and disinformation – so I say, turn it off. The calm that brings can be amazing!

One of my favorite columnists is Dana Milbank, who writes for the *Washington Post*. Mr. Milbank writes damning critiques of the Administration (he critiqued Joe Biden, too), interspersed with the occasional introspective column about his recently-purchased farm in rural Virginia. His stories about buying a tractor, and learning how to drive it, and a recent column about the spotted salamander, had me chuckling at his descriptive word pictures of the natural world. A vernal pool may be distant from Potomac intrigue, but that little pool holds millennial mysteries of nature that have survived political strategies from the right and left since before the founding of our Republic. As Spring approaches, taking a closer look at the beauties of nature’s rebirth, in the yard, the local park, or a nearby stream, can provide a terrific mood adjustment, better than alcohol or chocolate!

March 20, 2025

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Watching Mr. Trump address the Congress and the nation last week was like watching a train wreck. You don't want to stare at the carnage, but you can't look away either. Carnage may be too strong a word; no one died – yet – because of the 99-minute-long speech, but one could make a case that the truth died as a result of his comments. So, too, did any sense of bipartisanship, grace, or statesmanship. Rather than offer ideas to resolve challenges, Mr. Trump used the House chamber to litigate old grievances, attack elected Democratic officials and demonstrate the same boorishness we've seen on the campaign trail, and, recently, in his Oval Office meetings. In every way and every day, Mr. Trump reflects and reiterates his "I am your retribution" campaign promise.

The speech to Congress was less a focus on the future and more a blast from the past. The House of Representatives can be a bit raucous at times, although nothing like the British House of Commons, but Trump's lengthy diatribe contained so many lies and misinformation that his speechwriters probably need to go to confession. Millions of Social Security recipients are not living to extraordinary ages. The blame lies squarely on outdated computer systems that failed to record recipient deaths for some people born in 1920 or earlier. In fact, there are fewer than 90,000 Americans over the age of 100, or 0.027 percent of the entire population. That statistic easily can be verified, even by the President of the United States and his henchmen but wouldn't make the kind of headlines they crave.

"Tariffs" may be Mr. Trump's favorite word, but it is clear, perhaps to everyone but him, that the importer pays the tariff and passes the cost along to the customer. Congressman Don Beyer (VA-08) revealed that the Congressional Joint Economic Committee estimates that tariffs threatened by the Trump Administration will cost the average American family \$1600 to \$2000 annually. Even more curious is that Trump-threatened tariffs are targeted against our closest allies, Canada and Mexico. Pushback from those North American leaders was eloquent but pointed, and Canada's newly-elected Prime Minister Mark Carney said that Canada's tariffs in response to Trump's actions will remain until the Americans "show us respect." Following market plunges and outcries from industries, Trump deferred implementing his tariff scheme to April 2 rather than the more apt April Fools' Day.

As chief disruptor and chaos commander, Trump's damage to democracy, less than two months into his second term, is dangerous and extraordinary. In his zeal to be the center of attention, he threatens, bullies, and denigrates friends and foes alike – our allies, the press, women, LGBTQ+, federal employees, veterans, the legal profession. He picks fights where there are no fights to be picked, and doubles down when questioned. There appear to be no guardrails, and no rational adults to counsel a pullback from the precipice. Where is the moral backbone? The courage, integrity, duty, and devotion to the Constitution that were the high principles we traditionally expected from our elected leaders on both sides of the aisle? The train wreck is happening, and we must not look away, or fail to act.

March 13, 2025

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The majority of my elementary and secondary education was in Catholic school, where most of the teachers were nuns in black habits who ran their classrooms with steely conviction and little room for error. On average, the class size was 35 boys and girls in each "A" and "B" classroom; in high school, genders were separated only for physical education and health classes. Overall, our school was smaller than the public schools, with fewer amenities, but the education we received was excellent. A Catholic education focused on the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity, as well as the cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance. There was no "I" or "me" in Catholic school; the focus always was on service to others, and how we could make the world a better place.

I was blessed to learn those virtues as a youngster and have tried to live them throughout my life. That can be challenging, especially in today's world, but if you have the basic framework, you won't have to apologize for what you say and do, or walk back anything. In Catholic school, we learned, as in the other great Abrahamic faiths of Judaism and Islam, that God is the judge, not us. Today, that can be a slippery slope.

One's religion or faith usually is very personal so, whether immigrant or vice president, in this country you are free to practice your faith without government interference. That's why it was stunning to learn that the Trump Administration removed the "sanctuary" status of worship locations in its zeal to hunt down and deport persons whose legal documentation to be in this county is questionable, to use more charitable language. As I listened to public comments by Vice President JD Vance as he lectured Pope Francis, assailed European leaders in Munich, and noted that he "didn't care about Ukraine one way or the other," I couldn't help but think he might have benefitted from a Catholic school education, and learning more about theological and cardinal virtues before converting to Catholicism in 2019. Attending Mass on Sunday fulfills a Catholic duty but living Catholic virtues every day broadens one's perspectives and reconciles one's soul. An observation, not a judgment.

My late husband was a civil rights attorney, committed to the rule of law and to the ethical standards that most lawyers understand and practice. He would have been disgusted that Yale-trained lawyer Vance has encouraged the president to defy any Supreme Court decision that would prevent him from firing executive branch officials. Similarly, Hal would have applauded the valor of the Justice Department lawyers who resigned rather than support quashing the DOJ's corruption case against New York Mayor Eric Adams for what appears to be political reasons. More government attorneys may be faced with a similar challenge when the orders of Trump's Justice Department intersect negatively with their oath to "support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic...". Forcing ethical people out of government opens the door to potential self-interest, corruption, and disdain for the very people government is supposed to serve. Sound familiar?

February 20, 2025