

OPINION

Silencing the press

BY ART CULLEN

Leading legislators bent on hobbling Iowa's community newspapers so they can keep the public in the dark are lurching forward. A bill to eliminate public notices from newspapers cleared the Senate Local Government Committee last week. City councils and school boards would not have to publish their board minutes, claims paid and other public business except on their own websites.

The bill is presented as an attempt to save money. It won't. The government employs legions of public-relations flaks to spin the facts and tell you that your rising taxes must be somebody else's fault. They are doing fine. The facts get hidden instead under the guise of saving money.

This is actually a deliberate attempt to weaken journalism that confronts the American-style Taliban — government that shoots people in the streets, detains citizens without hearing and bans books. These legislators fully intend to silence us.

Eliminating legal notice revenue will kill a third to a half of the state's newspapers — nearly all in rural communities like ours. Legislators know it. That's why they're doing it. They call a free press "the enemy of the people."

They are suffocating libraries, gagging teachers and trying to hide their business from the public. They are operating secret police that puts legal residents in concentration camps and ships them to points unknown. It is Stalinist. Eliminating public notices is another nail in the coffin to an informed democracy. Step by step, it is our undoing. We lose a little more freedom every day with every chink in the armor of democracy.

Of course we depend on the revenue just like CBS News lives in fear of the Federal Communications Commission. Losing legal notices will mean a lot of pain for us. It means you will know less. You will have a hard time finding the list of salaries they used to publish. You won't know to check the state website when they are taking away land for a pipeline. You won't know how your money is spent. Pretty soon, you won't know what happened to your cousin who got arrested.

The newspaper won't be there to report on it. Not in Aurelia, where we had to shut

down The Star after Cherokee County cut off public notices. It will result in fewer reporters bringing you the facts. That is the whole point of the American Taliban. Their aim is to rule using the cloak of religion. They seek to gain and hold power by any means necessary. This is not about saving money. It is about power.

Secrecy and fear conspire in efforts to keep the public from interfering with the government. First, they eliminate the city council minutes and bills so you know a little less. We will report on the highlights, but you won't get the nitty gritty. Then, the newspaper erodes away until there is nobody left to report the news. That is how the Taliban likes it. If you protest, the government will gun you down. They know where to find you.

They have cowed the major broadcasting networks. They have raided newsrooms and arrested reporters. They control the social media channels. They are coming after us, community newspapers that are the last bastion of a free press. They threaten us for our news reporting and for our opinions. They are cutting off our revenue. Forgive our siege mentality, but those are the facts.

You should know what the American Taliban are really up to. They are trying to steal your liberty and destroy democracy. We know we sound self-serving — we plead guilty. The government was forced to account for its business and support a free press through publication. The cost is a pittance compared to what we waste on road salt and gravel. It is the cost of an informed electoral democracy. This goes back to Ben Franklin days, the idea that there should be postal franking and public notices that provide a foundation for a free press. Those ideas have been thrown into the dustbin of liberal democracy. We live in a Christian nationalist state. Propaganda substitutes for vetted facts. All of us are obliged to seek out the truth while the channels are shut down.

Somehow we will survive because we must. We will report and advocate. We will not forget. We will not give up. We will tell you the truth. The government won't. To survive in the absence of public notices, we need your support through subscriptions and donations. Without a free press, the authoritarians will have their stranglehold. They are well on their way. Freedom demands our vigilance. It slips away right before our eyes.

When "crazy" is the only answer

BY ALAN GUEBERT

House Ag Committee Chairman Glenn Thompson must not be a superstitious man. If he were, he would not have introduced the biggest bill of his congressional career, the "Farm, Food, and National Security Act of 2026," on Friday, Feb. 13.

But there he was Feb. 13 taking the lid off his "farm bill 2.0" for all to see. The bill, he explained, "provides modern policies for modern challenges..."

Not really. In fact, little in Thompson's proposed legislation even suggests the current century. Worse, three of "modern" agriculture's biggest problems—ethanol, resource pollution, and tariffs—are barely mentioned or left completely unaddressed.

Take tariffs. While never mentioning the word, Thompson suggests a tariff-fueled, 54 percent drop in recent U.S. soy sales to China can be cured through increased "port capacity" and "new and developing markets."

Clearly, today's biggest trade problem is tariffs. No matter, Thompson budgets \$533 million—more than twice today's "trade promotion" spending—to paper over it, not fix it.

It's another sign that the past, according to recent Farm Bill research, is where much of today's Farm Bill still gets its inspiration—especially the costliest aspects of it, according to Jonathan Coppess, associate professor and director of the Gardner Agricul-

tural Policy program at the University of Illinois.

In a recent, multi-part series on Farm Bill basics, Coppess explains the ages-old root of farm program payments, "base acres," and how they continue to drive farm policy.

By definition, base acres are historical; they establish the "what" and "how much" government will subsidize "covered" crops like corn, soybeans, cotton, wheat, rice, barley, oats, sorghum, and peanuts under Farm Bills.

And here historical means old. "The base acre system is rooted in acreage allotments which were part of the parity policy design that developed out of the New Deal farm policies," he explained in his initial paper. (All are posted at farmdocdaily.illinois.edu)

As such, base acres "represent a snapshot in time, but a very different time." In fact, if landowners did not update their base acres when given the chance in either 2002 and 2014, their "base acres would be largely unchanged from the contract acres [laid out in] ...the 1996 Farm Bill."

And millions weren't; a 2005 USDA report shows that "over 60% (163 million) of the base acres..." were not updated.

Crazy, right? Why not update your base to better reflect current crop mix and, potentially, boost program payments? Coppess has a perfectly good answer but must take a tortured path to get to it.

"The 1996 contract acres were not calculated anew;

they were simply the base acres enrolled under the 1990 Farm Bill. Those base acres were established for the 1986 crop year by the 1985 Farm Bill, calculated using the acres [from] ... 1981-1985."

So, "It is not an exaggeration to note that most of today's base acres represent planting decisions and farming that are decades old—many of which... were... made in the first half of the farm economic crisis of the 1980s."

Why? Because the 1996 law famously "decoupled" base acre payments from what is actually grown on the land. Combined with other "updates" to payment schemes over subsequent years, this "flexible" design "encourages... a farmer to supplement the income from one crop with the payment of another."

Indeed, this "fundamental flaw becomes most problematic when farmers growing the same crops can earn different incomes based solely on policy and politics."

Neither changes under Thompson's "modern" bill. Policy and politics, after all, will deliver an additional \$27 billion in "bridge" and "ad hoc" payments this year. In any other business that would be a sure sign of failure; not in U.S. agriculture, though.

Crazy? Yeah, that's the right answer.

© 2026 ag comm
The Farm and Food File is published weekly throughout the U.S. and Canada. Past columns, recommended reading, and contact information are posted at farmandfoodfile.com.

The privilege of getting from Point A to Point B

But what if you don't—or can't—drive

BY JOAN ZWAGERMAN

I hang up the phone, and it hits me again. Even with certain limitations on my time and wallet, I enjoy a lot of privilege in life.

The person I spoke with is an alumnus of my workplace, Buena Vista University, and he was calling from two states east, where he lived both before and after attending BV.

When he came to school in the 1960s, he rode the Illinois Central right into town. (If you, like me, hear strains of "City of New Orleans" in your head—only because it mentions that railroad—you're welcome.)

I try to imagine a young man leaving everything and stepping off the train with a suitcase (or two) and starting college in a place where nobody knows him. What an adventure.

My own train dreams took me from Omaha to Seattle on Amtrak's California Zephyr and the Empire Builder from Seattle to Minneapolis on the way back. Not because I had to but because I wanted to.

Thanks to the power of advertising, train travel seemed romantic. Without a sleeper car, however, by the third day, the romance was gone. Still, that trip in the 1980s scratched the "see America by rail" itch and back then, it was affordable. I was just out of college and had no credit card.

For Mr. X from a Midwestern state, the train was the only way he could get to school. He didn't drive and he never has. There are people in the world who cannot or will not drive, a fact I often forget.

He would visit campus more often because he has a deep love for our school, but the train stopped running before he graduated. Greyhound was the next best thing, which if you've ever taken one, that might make you laugh.

You'll remember the racing dog painted on the side of the bus. Again, advertising at

its most disingenuous. There is a reason folk singer Harry Chapin called it a "dog of a way to get around."

Like a dog, it would trot here and there, stopping at little towns all along a route. For people with less means—or no car—it provided a way to get around. For Mr. X, the bus would get him to Storm Lake and within striding distance of campus, until that, too, stopped.

In college, I once boarded a Greyhound in Hospers, Iowa, on a summer Sunday morning and rode it to Minneapolis. It was a long hot bus ride, and it took all day, rather than the usual four hours by car.

None of my trips on public transportation were necessities, and that's what I mean about privilege. My life and livelihood did not depend on those modes of getting around.

For Mr. X, the closest he can get to Storm Lake now is a bus stop in Fort Dodge, and because he doesn't drive, that isn't close enough. The bus doesn't come anywhere near Hospers anymore, either.

People with heaps of privilege may wonder what the fuss is about. "Get a car, and get on with it!" As if it's so easy for someone with health challenges or little means.

We, the privileged, whizz by and don't give our mobility a second thought.

In her book, Paper Girl, author Beth Macy travels to her Ohio hometown to find the world she once knew long gone. Rampant social problems and NAFTA eroded the fabric of a once-vital manufacturing town. Its young people are beset with adult problems and few resources to assist them toward a better life.

Macy follows a few teenagers who yearn for more education following high school, but getting to the nearby community college is itself a big hurdle. One girl has no car but determines to ride her bike 20 miles (one way) every day—even in winter—until a teacher points out the im-

probability of that.

One young man starts his classes, but immediately his car dies, and he has no money to replace his wheels. Coupled with a family emergency, he drops out in the first weeks of the term.

How much harder do these kids have to have it, I wonder. How much longer are legislators and fat cats going to haul out the old saw about boot-strap pulling when cruelty and lack of understanding have cut those frayed ends long ago.

For her part, author Macy also came from a hardscrabble existence and knew firsthand "how much a crap car limited a rural kid's ability to improve their lot."

She had to work her tail off for everything she had, but she had one advantage that the current crop of kids in her hometown don't. She received a Pell grant that paid for her schooling, her room and board, and her books.

It was the difference that gave her a chance in life, a chance she would never have had otherwise. Without such chances, Macy "recognized the unprecedented forces that were actively turning the community [she] loved into a poorer, sicker, angrier, and less educated place."

Today's Pell grant doesn't come close to filling the bill. The maximum award for the current academic year is \$7395. That's less than \$3700 per semester.

Base tuition at Iowa's regent universities is \$9,852 at University of Iowa, \$9,816 at Iowa State University, and \$9,054 at University of Northern Iowa.

There are loans, you say? Sure, but what if, like the kids Macy met, you can't get from Point A to Point B to begin with? What if you can't afford a car loan? What if, for whatever reason, you don't (or are unable to) have a driver's license?

Most of us take getting a car, getting an education, building a life, so for granted, but poverty makes the slightest movements toward a better life seem insurmountable.

The way towns and cities are planned (I would argue NOT planned), you are screwed if you don't have access to public transportation.

Once upon a time, you could get to Storm Lake from two states away without a car, but that was long ago in a world far, far away and gone.

In her perfect world, Joan Zwagerman would be able to fulfill all her needs on foot or by bike. The world is so imperfect.



LEVINE/SUN 2026
MIKE SMITH — DIST. BY KING FEATURES SYNDICATE/MS

Enough already

BY RICK MORAIN

To public officials and political candidates of all stripes: enough already with the foul language.

Government leaders since the founding of the United States have used off-color words.

According to one associate professor of presidential studies, "President and Vice Presidents who don't swear are the exception."

But there's a difference today—and it's huge. Until very recently, officials and candidates limited their strong talk to private conversations, with their friends, staffs, and colleagues. If one was caught uttering those hot words, it was usually because they had forgotten that the microphone was turned on, or because recordings of their private conversations had gone public for whatever reason.

A few Presidents developed reputations for foul language, nearly always said in private.

The chief executives best known for potty-mouth are probably Andrew Jackson, Lyndon Johnson, and Rich-

ard Nixon. Nixon was careful to restrain himself in front of the voters, but the Watergate tapes found him out. The other two were likewise pretty circumspect in public venues.

President Jackson had a pet parrot named Polly on whom he doted. Polly was his constant companion, and consequently had every opportunity to pick up his words and phrases.

Jackson's 1845 funeral, eight years after he left office, was held at his home, with Polly present. The large crowd upset the parrot, and she began swearing loudly and colorfully, to the point that she had to be removed from the service, according to a reverend who was present, recounting the episode years later. A truly fowl-mouthed bird. Back in Jackson's time, the most shocking swear words had to do with the Almighty.

That has changed. Today those involving human anatomy have moved to the top—or the bottom—of the no-nos. They describe bodily functions and body parts located at the base of the abdomen.

And it isn't just Presidents, of course. Many people appear to link swearing with authenticity, so any official or candidate who swears in public gains stature with some voters. It didn't used to be that way.

And political protestors both left and right show no reluctance to wear shocking T-shirts or carry scurrilous signs, or to chant smut in unison.

Lots of folks think that's cool.

It's ironic that at a time when legislatures like Iowa's shrink classroom discussion of sex and gender topics, they have no trouble giving a pass to public officials whose language would send a kid to the principal's office if he or she used it in class.

I'd love to hear a voter immediately call out an official during a political speech for using what President Trump calls "locker room talk." Confronting foulness directly may be the only way to raise the level of political discourse.

The most admired American leaders used more acceptable, and more creative, words to make their point.

If you want to submit a Letter to the Editor for publication, here are the guidelines:

• Your name, address, phone number, and/or email **must** be on the submission. We have to be able to verify who signed the letter.

• **UNSIGNED** letters are destroyed without consideration.

• Letters need about 750 words.

• Letters may be edited for content and clarity.

• Letters are published as space is available and in the order in which they are received.

Send your letter to
Cherokee Chronicle Times
111 S. 2nd, Cherokee, IA 51012
or email: editor@ctimes.biz

