

## GUEST COLUMN

### Slowing opioid crisis a focus for Tennessee

One thousand, six hundred and thirty-one. That is how many Tennesseans died from a drug overdose in 2016.

Of overdose deaths in 2016, 72.7 percent had an opioid present in their system when they died. These numbers make very clear the scourge that is the opioid epidemic in Tennessee.

In January 2017, I announced the formation of a task force on opioid and prescription drug abuse. I tasked the group with identifying the best strategies for tackling the opioid epidemic, and prioritizing what could be done by the legislature.

The task force had a series of meetings where they heard from Tennesseans who had been impacted by this crisis in numerous ways: addicts, family members of addicts, law enforcement, judges, district attorneys, doctors, and countless people who serve in a variety of roles in the medical community. The result was a deeper understanding the impact this epidemic is having on our state and the steps we could take to address it.

The exhaustive list of recommendations includes things that should certainly be a multi-year effort, but for the immediate future, I prioritized three things to tackle in the 2018 legislative session: 1) expanding access to treatment programs; 2) allowing patients to limit the number of pills prescribed to them; and 3) investing resources into law enforcement efforts to combat the problem.

First, treatment must be a part of the solution. Treatment programs have proven to be an effective tool in fighting the epidemic. Drug courts in Tennessee are nothing new and have been very successful, but we must commit more resources so that those addicts who want to get clean are able to do so. There are 10 treatment admissions for abuse for every one death, and there are approximately 12,500 Tennesseans who do not have access to treatment

today. We will be seeking additional funding in this year's budget that will be made available to the courts to offer treatment assistance to offenders needing it.

Second, we will be filing legislation that allows patients to limit the amount of pills in a prescription dispensed directly to them. Throughout the task force process, I heard from many Tennesseans who had minor surgery, and were prescribed opioids to relieve the temporary pain. However, while the recovery stage might only be 3 days, they were prescribed

30 days worth of opioids. This often led to either abuse by the patient, or abuse by a friend or family member who had access to the leftover pills. We will propose that patients can simply request a limited number of pills out of the prescription, to keep extra and unused pills off the street.

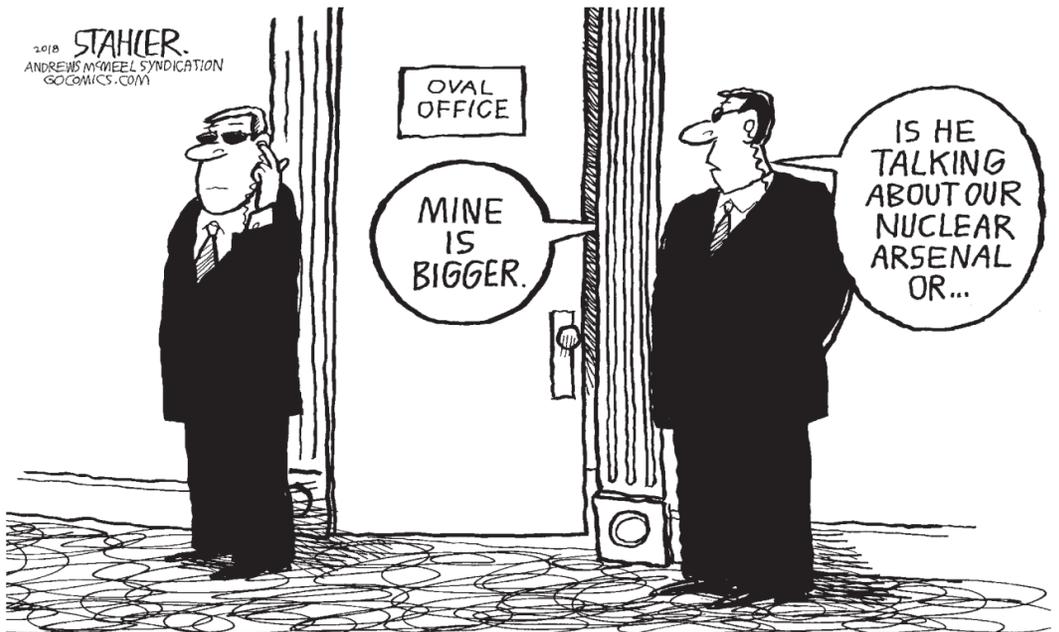
Finally, we need to invest more resources into law enforcement efforts to combat this problem. This means additional Tennessee Bureau of Investigation agents who can target drug dealers and distribution chains that keep these drugs on the street. The latest threat is fentanyl, which is a type of opioid. In Decatur County earlier this year, drug agents seized 10 kilos of Fentanyl during a traffic stop — the lethal dose for an adult is 2 milligrams.

While these are the initiatives I will be prioritizing and spearheading, other members are bringing forth proposals to address this epidemic that I will be supporting and working with our colleagues to pass. We must all work together and be united in our opposition to this public health crisis if we are to make any progress. The health, safety, and well-being of Tennessee depends on it.

*Beth Harwell serves as Tennessee Speaker of the House, a position to which she was first unanimously elected in 2011.*



HARWELL



### Trying to understand Russia

Now for one of my major resolutions for 2018 — putting Russia in necessary perspective. How many Americans really know this people or this country?

First, step back into the 13th century, when hordes of Mongol horsemen, wild tribal men without the simplest learning, swept out of their home deep in Central Asia, destroying everything in their path.

Later, the all-powerful Russian autocracy, in which the tsar, the "little father," owned all the land, easily morphed into the all-powerful Communist Party, which took over in 1917 and assumed ownership of all the land.

Since the 19th century, Russia's inner conflict has been between the individual and the collective — called the "Westernizers" and the "Slavophiles" — and that metaphysical conflict came to a head most recently in the 1950s, with Khrushchev and his now-famous 1956 speech to the 20th Party Congress dethroning Stalin. "The thaw!" the hopeful exulted.

"Many things changed after the fall of the Soviet Union," David Satter, a Russian specialist and graceful writer, comments knowingly in his recent book, "The Less You Know, The Better You Sleep." "But as society was rapidly transformed, it became obvious that there had been no moral revolution in Russia."

He continues: "The new society that emerged had three outstanding characteristics: an economy dominated by a criminal oligarchy, an authoritarian

political system and, perhaps most important, a moral degradation that subverted all legal and ethical standards and made real civil society impossible."

So, here we are: a Russia locked within its own cruel, autocratic foundations and an America with values and virtues of democratic formation inculcably different from it. For our foreign policy, and especially for our attitudes toward Russia, that means:

1. There is no sense whatsoever in treating Russia as a "normal" state that will respond either to our emotional

good will or to our diplomatic and military bad will. What we can do instead is simply "manage" a fraught relationship, and live with it.

2. A wise American diplomacy would always see

Russia in the real terms of its complicated history and not in terms of what we hope it could be. As for Vladimir Putin, he is simply a new tsar, and tsars are friends to nobody.

3. We should never overestimate Russia's power, as we are doing today. Despite everything, Russia remains a poor, miserable country, its GNP about equal to California's, whose "power" is illustrated for a gullible world only in showy aggressions on its borders.

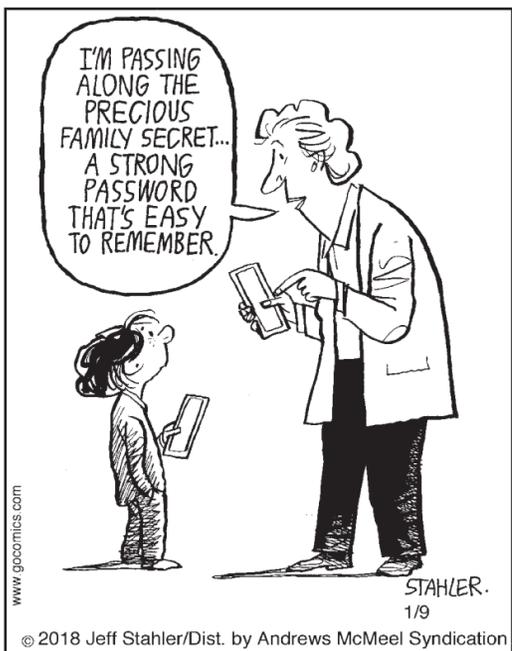
In short, were we to face Russia in this manner — understanding its history and acting upon reality instead of either hope or hate — then we would have nothing to fear.

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GEORGIE ANNE GEYER

#### COLUMNIST



### There's hope amid 24-hour anger

"I walked down this path lonely, sad and hopeless," the self-described "chalk warrior" and independent filmmaker known as T explains in words on pavement off the East River in Harlem. T knows we so often look down when we walk. So, she literally meets people where they are by writing messages on the sidewalk. She's been doing it for years; she celebrated her 24th birthday and marked the passing of her grandmother all with chalk messages.

I encountered T, as it happens, when I asked on social media for some thoughts on this time of transition between one year and the next.

Unsurprisingly, many of the commenters wanted either enthusiastic applause or a definitive condemnation of Donald Trump. Why are we so focused on the executive, the national, the celebrity? Our

national politics is important, but it's not everything. We make it more powerful than it should be when we obsess about it and let it control our lives, emotions and behavior toward each other. It's a big country out there and every one of us has a role to play. One Facebook commenter, himself an experienced journalist and commentator, said: "We ... need to dial back on the 24/7 notions of being angry, hurt, or ... mad all the time."

Another suggested, via Twitter: "How about a sustained argument for optimism (realistic optimism) as a human virtue, and pessimism as pride?"

And yet another said: "Out w/hysteria, in w/reflection. Out w/vilification, in w/identification. Out w/fear, in w/love. Out w/despair, in w/hope."

T the chalk warrior talks about how a man, who wasn't always supportive

of her chalk ministry, came up to her as she was on her last mission, gave her a hug and told her how he had been praying about her and the love she had poured out onto the pavement over the years. She reflected in a video on YouTube about the mysterious, even hidden, grace that might be at work when we simply show a little love, even to people we don't know.

T reminded me of a message from Pope Francis on the first of the year last year. He talked about Mary and the need our culture has for celebrating and embracing motherhood.

"Mothers are the strongest antidote to our individualistic and egotistic tendencies, to our lack of openness and our indifference. A society without mothers would not only be a cold society, but a society that has lost its heart, lost the 'feel

of home.' A society without mothers would be a merciless society ... Where there is a mother, there is unity, there is belonging, belonging as children."

He said, "It is the sense of being orphaned that the soul experiences when it feels motherless and lacking the tenderness of God, when the sense of belonging to a family, a people, a land, to our God, grows dim."

T will soon be a mother herself, but long before she became pregnant, she was trying to draw people out of their spiritual orphanhood with her chalked messages of hope. May she and mothers of all kinds be embraced, celebrated and listened to and supported in the new year. Only then will we move beyond our rancorous politics and begin to achieve something better.

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KATHRYN LOPEZ

#### COLUMNIST



JAMES CLARK

#### THE SCOOP

### We're throwing too many people in jail

When Apple announced several months ago its latest iPhone would come with \$999 pricetag, it was a definite OMG moment.

But anyone who knows much about cellphones will tell you the \$999 price is just a smidgen of the overall cost when it comes to owning a cellphone. Monthly service plans can really make a dent in a family budget, especially if you exceed your data allotment.

The end result is your \$999 phone will likely end up costing you at least \$2,500 in service fees to operate over a five-year period.

I mention this not to get you to re-evaluate your cellphone plan. Rather, my point is to make a comparison to upcoming expansion plans at Warren County Jail.

County government has said it intends to borrow \$6.5 million to expand our overcrowded jail. It's a figure that has drawn a little outrage because, like a \$999 phone, it seems like an awful lot of money.

In actuality, that \$6.5 million will end up being just a tiny fraction of the overall expense when it comes to operating our jail expansion over its lifetime. It's the reason our county desperately needs to consider other forms of sentencing for some of our offenders.

Our current jail has a capacity of 251 inmates. Over the past six months, Sheriff Jackie Matheny says the jail has averaged 317 inmates a day. The all-time high has been 370 inmates.

"It really creates a lot of friction and leads to violence when you have that many people crammed in here," said Matheny. "When you have more inmates, you have more stuff happening."

The budget to operate the jail for this fiscal year is \$3.53 million. That includes everything — jail uniforms, guards, medical personnel, food, clerical supplies, and utilities.

While jail expansion plans are not finalized, Matheny said projections show the county adding between 130 and 160 beds. Even at the low estimate of 130 beds, that's increasing jail capacity by more than 50 percent. It's doubtful costs would increase by a full 50 percent, but it's not difficult to see the annual jail budget approaching \$5 million once jail expansion is complete. That's a big, recurring OMG.

Do we really want to pay so much to operate a jail? And, at that capacity, do we really want about 1 percent of the Warren County population behind bars on any given day? To both questions I say absolutely not.

When I asked Sheriff Matheny about the makeup of our jail population he said, "A lot of our crime does revolve around drug abuse and addiction. A lot of people are in here for probation violations, not being able to follow the rules of their probation, failing a drug test, or not paying what they're supposed to."

The sheriff said common reasons people serve jail time include drugs, theft, assault, domestic assault, driving on a revoked license, and failure to pay child support.

My opinion is we need to find ways to punish some of these offenders that don't involve sitting all day long in a jail cell.

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