

Standard online reader survey



Q: Do you like the idea of a celebrity like Oprah Winfrey running for President of the United States?

YES or NO

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EDITORIAL

We can't allow free speech to be punished

The confrontation may have occurred during a school board meeting in faraway Louisiana.

The people involved may not be known by most residents of Warren County and it's doubtful we will ever meet.

But the teacher who was removed from a Louisiana school board meeting, handcuffed, and arrested should be an issue that concerns all Americans. It's an issue that attacks the fabric of our society and our most fundamental freedom — free speech.

A video of the school board meeting and confrontation in the hallway has made its way across the internet. It shows a very disturbing situation.

A middle school teacher was politely addressing the school board during a time of the meeting open to public comments. The teacher was asking why the school superintendent was in line to get a raise of some \$30,000 a year while classroom teachers had not received a raise in 10 years.

It's a fair question and school board members should hear it. The open comment time of a school board meeting seems like the perfect place to formally address the problem in front of the entire board.

But instead of thanking the teacher for her feedback, she was asked to

leave the meeting before she was done talking. To ensure she complied, a school resource officer approached her to expedite her departure.

This lands a dropkick to the backbone of both democracy and free speech. The essence of our system is that we elect people to represent our views and serve our needs in government.

In return, we should always have the ability to reach our elected officials to voice our concerns. They may not agree with what we have to say, but it's their job to listen.

To have someone removed from a meeting because they present an opposing viewpoint is not acceptable. It makes it even more appalling when that person is arrested.

We don't live in Iran where citizens are punished by imprisonment and lashes for insulting political leaders. We live in America where a bedrock principle is the right to express our views.

There should be outrage in Louisiana and beyond. If we don't speak up about this wrongdoing in Vermilion Parish, the next incident may take place in Warren County.

The right for citizens to express an opinion about decisions of our government should be protected at all costs.



Trump turbocharges Dems

The 2018 elections are almost 10 months away — a lifetime in politics. But this is shaping up as a very good year for the Democrats. If they don't blow it.

Remember, on Election Day 2016, Team Clinton thought they were cruising to victory until the actual returns slammed them in the face. But recent Democratic victories in Virginia and Alabama provide a roadmap for success next November: Assemble a coalition of minorities, young people and educated suburbanites, especially women. That same coalition was uninspired by Hillary Clinton and, in some cases, intrigued by Donald Trump, but the president's appalling performance in office has produced the excitement and energy that was lacking in 2016.

"He is absolutely turbocharging the opposition," David Axelrod, Barack Obama's chief strategist, said of Trump in the *Washington Post*. "He is the greatest organizing tool the Democrats could have."

Rep. Charlie Dent, a moderate Republican, agreed on ABC's "This Week": "Clearly the Republican Party, my party, is going to experience losses ... It's going to be a very tough year."

Democrats need a net gain of 24 seats to retake the House (and two in the Senate). On average, in the first off-year election after a president takes office, his party loses 32 Congressional seats. That jumps to 36 if the president's popularity falls below 50 percent, and Trump's favorable rating is sitting at 39.8 percent (according to

Real Clear Politics).

In a generic ballot, when voters are asked which party's candidate they'll support for Congress, the Democrats lead by an average of 11.4 points.

The governor's race in Virginia and the Senate contest in Alabama assume outsized importance because of their psychological impact. Democrats are not only "turbocharged" by Trump, they now believe they can actually beat him.

Intensity matters. Right now Democrats are deciding to run for office, giving more money, volunteering their time. As former Democratic Congressman Steve Israel told the *Washington Post*: "Democrats have all the energy. They are on offense."

Demography matters as well. The electorate in 2016 was 71 percent white, down from 88 percent when Ronald Reagan won in 1980, and the shift toward a more diverse America that feels rejected by Republicans is inexorable.

GOP struggles are far from a done deal. The demise of Steve Bannon, after his contributions to the incendiary book "Fire and Fury," could mean Republicans nominate fewer hard-right — and eminently beatable — Senate candidates. Democrats could get over-confident, as they did in 2016. They could run completely against Trump and forget to give voters a reason to vote FOR them.

So Democrats everywhere should be making the same New Year's resolution: Don't mess this up.

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COLUMNISTS

STEVE & COKIE ROBERTS

A disturbance in the Force

Debates about Star Wars theology have come a long way since kids in the first "Star Wars generation" asked: "Is the Force the same thing as God?"

Later, kids viewing the second George Lucas trilogy faced the puzzling Nativity story of Anakin Skywalker. The future Darth Vader was conceived by bloodstream midi-chlorians — the essence of life — acting in union with the Force? His mother explained: "There is no father."

Now the middle film in the new trilogy — "Star Wars: The Last Jedi" — has believers debating whether the mythology created by Lucas has evolved into something more polemical, political and commercial, all at the same time. The big question: Can those who loved the early films trust Disney to protect the true faith?

From the beginning, it was clear Lucas was blending the comparative religion scholarship of Joseph "The Hero with a Thousand Faces" Campbell with dashes of Arthurian legend, samurai epics and Flash Gordon. At the heart of it all was the "monomyth" of Luke Skywalker and his epic spiritual quest, noted Bishop Robert Barron of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles.

"A young man (typically) is summoned out of the comfort of his domestic life and compelled to go on a dangerous adventure," argued Barron at his "Word on Fire" website. "In the process, he comes to realize and conquer his weakness, to face down enemies, and finally to commune with the deep spiritual powers that are at play in the cosmos. ... Usually, as a preparation for his mission, he is trained by a spiritual master."

Some of these themes remain in "The Last Jedi," noted Barron, and it's

obvious that Rey is a young heroine on her own quest. The problem, argued the bishop, is what has happened to Luke Skywalker and the rest of the ensemble. The old myths and archetypes have been buried in "an aggressively feminist ideology."

"Every male character ... is either bumbling, incompetent, arrogant, or morally compromised; and every female character is wise, good, prudent and courageous. Even Luke has become embittered and afraid," wrote Barron.

The Disney team may be changing some of the vague, but potent, Buddhist and Christian themes woven into the original films. For example, mastering "the Force" once required discipline, humility and careful training. There was good and there was evil, and heroes knew the difference.

Now, *Rolling Stone* exults the new film leads viewers "through so many trap doors and blind alleys that we can't tell the dark side from the light."

Disney insiders may be deconstructing the whole idea of what it means to be a hero or a villain, or to act in a heroic manner, said Alex Wainer of Palm Beach Atlantic University. He is the author of "Soul of the Dark Knight," a study of mythic themes in Batman fiction, and has studied Star Wars films for decades.

"Maybe the Force worked for a movie or two and you didn't have to explain it. Then you added the midi-chlorians and things started falling apart," said Wainer. "But this saga has enormous meaning for millions of people. It's become a ritual for our culture. This is personal and people want it to make sense."

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