

Standard online reader survey



Q: Do you think the father should be charged after giving four guns back to his mentally ill son, who is accused of killing four at a Nashville-area Waffle House?

YES or NO

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GUEST EDITORIAL

Laws too weak to keep mentally ill from guns

The vast majority of Americans, including ardent Second Amendment defenders, agree people with serious mental illness shouldn't have access to a firearm.

And yet it keeps happening with regularity and the most tragic consequences.

In a Waffle House outside Nashville, a deeply disturbed man with an assault-style rifle randomly killed four people, all in their 20s. The victims were a musician, a student in social work, a cook saving money to start a family, and a 20-year-old home appliance installer who had just texted his mother about how much he loved her.

The accused gunman, 29-year-old Travis Reinking, had a long and open history of aberrant behavior and even lost his legal right to own a firearm last August after an incident outside the White House.

In two years leading up to the shooting, Reinking had threatened suicide, menaced an employee of his father's crane company with his AR-15, complained to police about singer-songwriter Taylor Swift hacking his phone, and dove into a public pool wearing a pink woman's housecoat.

Flags don't get much redder than that. So what loophole allowed him to take up deadly force? After the White House incident, when Reinking had to surrender his gun owner's license to sheriff's deputies in Illinois, where he lived at

USA Today

the time, his four guns — including the AR-15 — simply went to his father, Jeffrey, who held the necessary license.

"We had no legal justification to seize the weapons," Tazewell County Sheriff's Chief Deputy Jeffrey Lower said. "We cannot seize property without a warrant or a crime being committed."

Instead, deputies warned the father to keep guns away from his son. That didn't happen.

Federal gun laws disqualify the mentally ill from owning firearms only if they have been involuntarily committed by a court — a high bar that fails to cover many of the deranged and dangerous. An Obama-era regulation, adding mental-health information for a relatively small number of people to the national gun background check system, was reversed in a bill signed by President Trump last year.

The good news is that "red flag" laws are cropping up across the country. Six states (California, Florida, Maryland, Oregon, Vermont and Washington) have them, and 20 more have them under consideration. These laws need to require that seized guns be kept by law enforcement or a federally licensed firearms dealer, not merely turned over to a relative who might give them back.

DO VOTERS
HAVE ANY IDEA
HOW DIFFICULT
IT IS TO CREATE
A BIGGER
DIVERSION THAN
YESTERDAY'S
DIVERSION?



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Stakes high for state control

On the ides of April, I opined on how the stakes are high this year for Democrats and Republicans alike in both houses of Congress, with implications for President Trump and our country.

The stakes are also high for both parties in the nationwide political struggles for state governors and state legislators.

Of the current 50 state governors, 32 are Republicans, 17 are Democrats, and 1 is an independent. That's good news for the GOP for now, but the potential bad news is 26 of them are theoretically up for re-election this year. Meanwhile, only 9 of the Democratic governors are, should they choose to run.

Republicans now control about 56 percent of all state legislative seats across the country. Democrats control nearly 43 percent. Republicans hold majority in 67 state chambers, Democrats do so in just 32 chambers. In the state senates, the GOP controls 36 chambers, the Democrats 14. In the state houses, the GOP controls 31 chambers, the Democrats 18.

As of this writing, there are 1,140 Republican state senators and 808 Democratic state senators, 2,999 GOP state representatives and 2,334 Democratic state representatives. That adds up to a total for both state chambers across the country of 4,139 Republicans versus 3,142 Democrats.

Why do all these numbers matter? Because control of the executive and legislative branches at the state level is tantamount to control of their respective agendas. The stakes are unusually high this year, and in 2020, when the next nationwide decennial census is required to be conducted.

Congress authorized the first decennial U.S. census on March 1, 1790. Data collection took 18 months. The official headcount was 3.9 million people, resulting in an increase from 65 to 105 seats in the U.S. House of Representatives. The primary purpose of the census, then and now, is to apportion seats in the House. However, as our nation grew, so did the scope of the census, but that's a tale for another time.

Census data is also used to "determine the boundaries of state legislative districts, and the distribution of federal funds to local, state and tribal governments."

Now that's where the plot thickens for political control of the executive and legislative branches of state government.

Guess who gets to define and redefine the aforementioned "boundaries?" If you answered, "the political party in control," you're right. Ideally, that process would flow logically, mathematically and smoothly to a bipartisan solution.

The problem is the political party in control is normally not all that interested in a bipartisan solution. Instead, its top priority is retaining and expanding its political power by redrawing districts to their benefit and to the detriment of the other party. By the way, both parties do this when they are in control, even though they whine about it when they aren't. More later on some extreme cases of "redistricting," including the infamous practice called "gerrymandering."

Retired Army Col. Thomas B. Vaughn can be reached at tbovwm1@blomand.net.

MY TURN

THOMAS B.
VAUGHN



All political hope is local

Our political system is in trouble. There. Finally, I've typed a sentence no one can dispute.

Here are the symptoms: Public despair. Political polarization. Congressional paralysis. Rampant incivility. Government by crisis. Rapid decline in respect abroad for America. Economic uncertainty even at a time of reasonable economic conditions.

But hold it. You're not hearing much complaining about state and local government. The problem, as Ronald Reagan might have said and as many of his successors would endorse, is Washington, D.C.

Could the problem be one of the heroic efforts of American history, one that helped lift the country out of the Great Depression, defined the relationship between the capital and the citizenry, and shaped our politics for three-quarters of a century?

Could we be suffering a New Deal hangover?

Republicans, who never liked the initiatives Franklin Delano Roosevelt wrapped in his New Deal blanket, are congenial to this idea. Some Democrats are open to the notion.

"The danger and problem we face is that as people think about our government only in terms of the federal government, people begin to lose faith in the very idea of democracy," said Morley Winograd, who served as the senior policy adviser for Vice President Al Gore.

He and a duo of well-regarded activists have written a brisk new book rooted in that conviction. Here's what Mike Hais, a survey research expert, Doug Ross, who operated

charter schools in Detroit, and Winograd have to say in "Healing American Democracy":

"The New Deal is a villain here mostly because it sought national solutions to a national crisis, but we have a national crisis of a different sort today. People are strong. The (local) community is resilient. But it makes you mad that people elsewhere, especially in Washington, don't see it that way. They don't seem to behave responsibly like you do. They're devoid of common sense. They talk and talk but don't get anything constructive done."

A lot of constructive work — a lot of constructive thinking — is being done at the local level, perhaps a cause of, or perhaps a reflection of, the decline in civic respect for

Washington. Three-quarters of Americans in 1958 thought the national government could be counted upon to do the right thing. Today only 1-in-5 feels that way, according to a December 2017 Pew survey.

"Serious as the era's problems are," James Fallows wrote in this month's edition of *The Atlantic* magazine, "more people, in more places, told us they felt hopeful about their ability to move circumstances the right way."

Whatever the cause, 70 percent of Americans, according to a September 2016 Gallup Poll, have confidence in their local governments to do the right thing. "I have seen the future," Fallows wrote, "and it is the United States."

Just not in Washington. Shribman is executive editor of the *Post-Gazette* (dshribman@post-gazette.com).

JUST A THOUGHT

LISA
HOBBS



Maybe alcohol not so healthy

I was sent this information by Dr. Wally Bigbee. If there was ever a doctor to be trusted, he would be it. When he sends me something, I read it in its entirety.

The information stated that a major new study found that having even just one drink each day could shorten your life. A team of 120 scientists analyzed data from multiple studies, involving nearly 600,000 people from 19 different countries, and found the more people drink, the shorter their lifespan.

I wasn't too shocked by that newsflash. To me, it's common sense: the more alcohol you drink, the shorter your lifespan. Your body isn't designed to process tons of alcohol. It's evident by the way your body reacts to it. No scientist needed for that evaluation.

My father was a raging alcoholic. I think characterizing him as "raging" is fair in more than one aspect. He died when I was about 6 or 7 years old. My mother said he gave up drinking for one year because a doctor warned him and he went right back at it. One of the very few pictures I have depicts him with a jug of moonshine slung over his shoulder as he downs it. I have two vivid memories of him. Both involve alcohol and neither one is really fit for publication.

There's a glimpse into my childhood, as sad as it was. My childhood is why I have a hard time allowing people to blame their upbringing for their current situation. Stop blaming them and take responsibility for yourself. I understand it's easier to play the victim, but you won't solve any problems by blaming others for your current situation. Take responsibility.

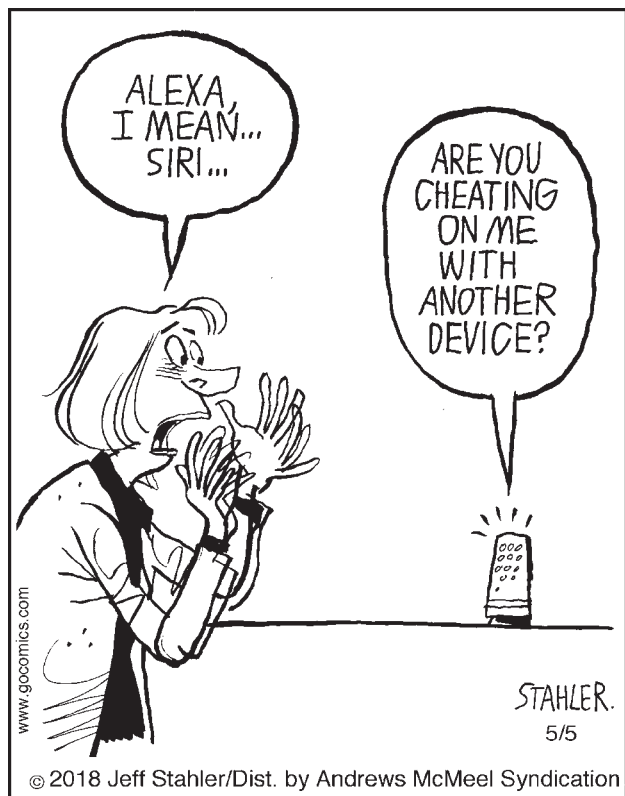
Back to the information. The write-up went on to say that people who have an average of seven to 14 alcoholic drinks each week can expect to die about six months sooner, while those who have two to three drinks per day could be shaving up to two years off their lives.

That's the part where my jaw dropped. Who in the world drinks two to three alcoholic beverages a day? Who would think that's healthy? Sounds like excess to me. Anything to excess is probably not healthy. I thought we were talking about social drinking (the occasional drink), but maybe not. Moving on.

Then, we get the shot of reality. It goes on to say "that drinking alcohol is associated with stroke, aortic aneurysm, severe high blood pressure, heart failure, and an increased risk for breast cancer and cancers of the digestive system. These findings contradict federal guidelines, which assert that men can safely drink up to two alcoholic drinks per day and women can have up to one drink daily."

Are these the same federal guidelines that gave us that ridiculous food pyramid that told us to eat 6-11 servings of bread, cereal, rice and pasta a day? Probably was. People need to question everything, including federal guidelines on what we eat and drink.

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