

# Opinion

## When hatred runs into big business, you can expect the worst

By DENNIS GRUBAUGH

This fall, Adidas gave the boot to shoe man Kanye West, and I say good riddance. The company sent a loud message regarding business people and words of hate.



**Grubaugh**

A few days later, advertisers similarly began bailing on Elon Musk after his buyout of Twitter. A lot of us think his professed penchant for free speech is going to go overboard, paving the way for more extremist elements on the worldwide messaging forum. Among those fleeing, at least temporarily, were General Motors, United Airlines and General Mills.

Given the eccentric nature of both men, you have to wonder how either of them became billionaires. But they did. West climbed to the top as a rapper-turned-entrepreneur; Musk did so via his launch of Tesla and SpaceX. Neither is known for a particularly deft touch.

Wealth, however, doesn't always stand up to recklessness, and now each is

learning a costly lesson. West went afoul, of course, after his series of antisemitic comments drew widespread condemnation. He lost his status as a billionaire by losing an Adidas partnership worth about \$1.5 billion. Adidas will continue to sell the sneaker and apparel line, but without the Yeezy name and branding.

Meanwhile, Musk's slapdash way of doing business shows all over his acquisition of Twitter, where he's attempted to fire half the workforce. The transition's been so riddled with holes that only hip-shooting can be blamed.

An avid user of Twitter for years, Musk never has learned when to keep his mouth shut. One particularly notable transgression occurred in 2018, when he purportedly "joked" about taking Tesla private. The Security and Exchange Commission didn't find it funny and issued separate fines of \$20 million on both Musk and his electric car company.

Importantly, the SEC penalty also warned about "those who make public pronouncements without regard for either the accuracy or impact of their words."

Now, Musk's success with Twitter will be dependent on how much he is willing to spend to right the social media ship — and how much he can

discover humility along the way.

Businesses exist because of the goodwill they maintain with their patrons, employees, etc. There are lines, however, that professionals do not cross. Saying what one thinks, without regard to consequences, is one of those lines.

I'm of the old-school belief that showing respect for others is the vanguard of all attributes. And most business people will tell you that they rely on hard work, their employees, the strength of their products and services, and a good set of ethics to succeed. Expressing personal opinions is way down on the list.

Musk and West used a bulldozer-like approach in their rise to the top. Small-business people must walk a fine line among the customers they rely upon.

The famous Colorado bakery case is a recent historical example. Owners refused to make a cake for a gay couple's wedding, citing Christian beliefs. The couple sued and the case dragged on for 10 years before the U.S. Supreme Court eventually issued a ruling that supported the business.

The case dealt with whether owners of public accommodations can refuse services based on First Amendment claims of free speech and free exercise of religion, and therefore be granted an exemption

from laws ensuring non-discrimination on the basis of an owner's religious beliefs.

The Colorado Civil Rights Commission found that the bakery had discriminated against the couple, so the bakery took the case to the top court. In a 7-2 decision, the high court ruled on narrow grounds that the commission did not employ religious neutrality, which violated the bakery owner's rights to free exercise.

Unfortunately, the court did not rule on the broader issue of anti-discrimination laws, free exercise of religion, and freedom of speech. That would have more clearly addressed whether any business has the right to refuse such services.

The baker's decision, of course, cost it a ton in lost business and attorney fees, so you wonder, was putting principle before service worth the price?

Musk and West can continue to talk smack and likely get away with it, but recent history is rife with the cases of notable figures, including corporate execs, who acted or talked inappropriately and were beaten down by cancel culture.

Businesses large and small can ill afford to exercise such poor judgment.

*Dennis Grubaugh is retired editor of the Illinois Business Journal.*

## Like Harry Truman, history will judge Biden much more positively

By ALAN J. ORTBALS

While I received numerous kudos for my September editorial regarding the Biden administration's accomplishments of the last two years, at least one reader begged to differ. In fact, he submitted a letter to the editor that was 8 pages long—single spaced no less. Because of its length and because it was anonymously submitted, the IBJ editor declined to print it. Regardless, I thought it was worthy of response.



**Ortbals**

I had expressed confusion over the email I received from local Cong. Mary Miller who claimed that "the American people are appalled by the radical leftwing agenda." What could be so appalling, I wondered, regarding the administration's remarkable response to the pandemic; the enactment of a long-awaited infrastructure program; the rebuilding of our international relations and strengthening of NATO; passing gun safety legislation; slaying the world's most wanted terrorist; jump-starting chip manufacturing in the US; investing in renewable energy; authorizing Medicare to negotiate drug prices; raising taxes on multi-billion dollar corporations and reducing the deficit?

Ignoring all of that, the anonymous writer instead blamed Democrats for a laundry list of complaints: allowing rioters to run rampant in the summer of 2020; releasing violent criminals out on the streets; promoting abortion (which he considers murder); ignoring the cost of combating climate change; lousy

schools, Illinois' fiscal problems; high gas prices and illegal immigration.

All of this, he says, is because Democrats are soft on crime, cater to elites, don't care about ordinary citizens, scheme with teachers' unions to keep Illinois residents poorly educated so they'll vote for Democrats, don't care about women, and want to run up gas prices to coerce people into buying electric cars. He doesn't say why he thinks Democrats promote illegal immigration. Oh, and the nefarious George Soros is the puppet master behind it all.

I'm not going to try to speak for Democrats. One of the problems with political discourse today is we lump people together as a monolithic bloc and then subscribe a list of motives and beliefs that define "them" as "the other." But I would like to briefly respond to the writer's charges for myself.

I don't condone violence whether it's perpetrated by Black Lives Matter protesters, neo-Nazis in Portland OR, or white supremacists in Charlotte VA. And, while all lives matter, that response belittles the racism and oppression that has been African Americans' historical lot. Liberals didn't cause the BLM riots, the brutal and sadistic murder of George Floyd did. And when black men can end up dead because they went out to buy a package of Skittles or fell asleep in a fast-food drive-thru or jogged down the street in a white neigh-

borhood, it certainly seems that black lives don't matter and that needs to be rectified.

And, I would not criticize the response of the police departments during the BLM violence. Maybe he thinks they should have been more militaristic but that didn't work in Ferguson, MO a few years ago.

Illinois' SAFE-T Act regarding bail reform, which he disparages, doesn't apply to any violent offender or anyone considered a flight risk.

I think abortion comes under the heading of personal freedom and the government—whether federal, state, or local—should stay out of it. I do agree with the writer that contraception should be stressed. Oddly, that is one of the principal functions of Planned Parenthood which Republicans ceaselessly try to defund.

If he thinks the cost of combating climate change is expensive, he should calculate the cost of doing nothing.

He claims that Illinois schools are awful and lays that at the feet of Democrats but, according to Wallet Hub, Illinois public schools rank 9th of the 50 states in terms of quality as measured by high school graduation rates among low-income students, math and reading scores, and median SAT and ACT scores. Interestingly enough, the Republican-controlled Missouri schools ranked 35th on the same criteria.

Illinois certainly has had its fiscal issues but, according to the non-partisan

Illinois Center for Tax and Budget Accountability, the primary cause was the regressive flat income tax that Pritzker tried to change. For decades, under both Democrat and Republican leadership, the low state income tax generated insufficient revenue and resulted in multiple administrations robbing Peter to pay Paul and pushing costs off onto local governments.

The problem with immigration is it is way too hard to do it legally and way too easy to claim asylum. Democrats have tried repeatedly to reform this broken system but have not been able to get Republican support.

And, finally, Biden hasn't stopped oil and gas drilling on federal lands. In fact, his administration has approved 74 percent more permits than were done during the same period of the Trump administration. Gas production is at an all-time high and oil production is expected to hit an all-time high next year.

Reread the second paragraph above and consider that all of that was done on the heels of an unprecedented insurrection and during a debilitating pandemic. Biden receives a lot of criticism, and his approval rating is in the mid-forties. I think history will judge him much more positively.

*Alan J. Ortals, former publisher of the Illinois Business Journal, can be reached at [aortbals@ibjonline.com](mailto:aortbals@ibjonline.com).*



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is owned and operated by  
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P.O. Box C • Mascoutah, IL 62258  
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**President/Publisher:** Greg Hoskins  
[ghoskins@heraldpubs.com](mailto:ghoskins@heraldpubs.com) (618) 566-8282

**Editor:** Melissa Crockett Meske  
[macmeske@ibjonline.com](mailto:macmeske@ibjonline.com) (618) 616-1335

**Marketing Manager:** Charles Huelsmann  
[chuelsmann@better-newspapers.com](mailto:chuelsmann@better-newspapers.com)  
(618) 973-0414

**emailus**

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