

Mark Harmon: Opinion journalism needs ethical guidelines

By Mark Harmon

Saturday, June 22, 2013

The Pew Research Center's recent report, *The State of the News Media 2013*, documents what we all have observed — more news chattering and less news gathering. Across the three largest 24/7 cable news operations, coverage of live events fell by 30 percent between 2007 and 2012, while interview segments increased 31 percent.

Pew's tallies are that 46 percent of noncommercial time on CNN is spent on commentary, 55 percent on Fox News and 85 percent on MSNBC. One also should take note of the 4,000-plus U.S. radio stations using a talk format, and the plethora of commentary-oriented websites.

While we can and should lament and fight the shrinking commitment to news gathering, it seems to me another response also is necessary. We should draft and publicize a set of ethical principles uniquely geared to opinion journalism. I've crafted a list of a dozen suggestions to get the conversation started:

- * To the greatest extent possible I will seek out and use the primary source of any claim, quote, photo, video, audio or argument.
- * I will not use as valid arguments personal attacks, appeals to fear, appeals to popularity, appeals to force, appeals to pity or other logical fallacies.
- * I will not conflate or exaggerate an opponent's position into a "straw man" position easily refuted but also not truly representing the opposing position.
- * I will not adopt the tactic of guilt by association.
- * I will not assume cause and effect when two items may be linked only sequentially not causally, or when effects may have multiple causes.
- * I will recognize that not all supporting information for a claim is equally strong. Descriptive data, gathered and presented properly, for example, likely is stronger than a solitary example or anecdote. Well-done empirical research, in turn, may be superior to a singular descriptive statistic.
- * When presenting polling data and other public opinion research, I will present the

name of the polling organization, the actual wording of any question, sample and subsample sizes and the margin of error. I will endeavor to meet other standards of presentation from professional polling associations.

* I will not claim prescience when my actions help make my prediction come true.

* I will not assume or assert that truth lies in the middle of two conflicting claims. Under certain conditions either could be true, neither could be true, or the truth could be a position not even under consideration.

* I will recognize that science does not stop being valid even if a person or group chooses to ignore or disbelieve the findings of empirical research.

* I will regard with suspicion those who skip the peer-review process in academic research.

* I will make prompt and prominent corrections when valid claims of factual errors are brought to my attention, and I will not repeat those demonstrably false claims in later pronouncements.

This list betrays both my experiences and my biases. I've been in many roles associated with opinion journalism: newspaper columnist, radio talk show host, panelist on local news interview programs, and even an elected official advocating certain public policies (I was a Knox County commissioner, 2006-2010). Currently I'm teaching a special class for college freshmen called "How to Argue, Without Yelling or Punching." I've even drawn from days long ago competing in speech and debate activities.

Our current professional ethics codes (notably the Society of Professional Journalists and the Radio Television Digital News Association) are good starting points. Let's begin there and build a specific ethical list for opinion journalism. Done well, good commentary brings insight and enhances public debate. Done badly, it can be a spiteful gabfest that confuses and alienates. Let's encourage the better practices.

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Mark Harmon: Tennessee senators mislead constituents on student loan rates

By Mark Harmon

Sunday, August 18, 2013

Tennessee's U.S. Senators, Bob Corker and Lamar Alexander, successfully pushed for a change that will make college students and their parents pay more for education loans. It's a hard sell, of course, but their argument largely was: "Take this, because the crazy House Republicans wanted something even worse."

It's a bit like welcoming people to take a kick to the shin because the alternative was a kick to the groin. Parents and students, quite rightly, might be wondering if there weren't some alternatives that didn't involve being kicked at all. There were, but this Congress and its banker benefactors were having none of that.

Congress initially took no action, and thus on July 1 interest on a specific type of loan, subsidized Stafford loans, jumped from 3.4 percent to 6.8 percent. Belatedly recognizing the vast unpopularity of this, some in the Senate pressed for reversal. The simplest thing to do was to approve a plan on the table to extend the 3.4 percent rate.

Instead, the bankster buddies prevailed and an ugly plan emerged. Stafford subsidized loans would increase to 3.86 percent next year, and would increase with a market rate plus some nice profit cushion for banks. It would cap out at no more than 8.25 percent. Graduate students would pay more, 5.41 percent next year, with the same potential to rise and capping out at 9.25 percent. Parents' PLUS loans would slip a bit from current rates to 6.41 percent, but also could rise, capping out at a whopping 10.5 percent.

The better alternative would have been the Bank on Student Loans Fairness Act, sponsored by Sen. Elizabeth Warren, D-Mass., and Rep. John Tierney, D-Mass. They recently wrote, "Some people say that we can't afford low interest rates for students. But the federal government offers lower rates on loans every single day — they just don't do it for everyone. Right now, a bank can get a loan through the Federal Reserve discount window at a rate of less than one percent. The same big banks that destroyed millions of jobs and broke our economy can borrow at about 0.75 percent, while our students will be paying nine times as much as of July 1."

The Congressional Budget Office consistently reports the federal government makes money on student loans, a net of \$37 billion this year alone.

Politicians of all stripes talk a good game about education as a good investment in our

people and our country. Pegging student loans to the bank discount rate would have been true to these words. Expanding student grants would have been true to these words. That \$37 billion could have paid for a lot of student grants. Instead, Alexander tried to get a publicity benefit from misleading claims about what happened.

If you look at the front page of the July 20 News Sentinel, you'll see a smiling photo of Alexander and the headline "Deal cuts college loan rates." I like to think Alexander is smiling because the headline writer was having a bad day or relied too much on the news release. If something was 3.4 percent in June but is now 3.86 percent, most people would call that an increase, not a cut. In clever Alexander math, however, Congress gets a benefit from its own ineptitude, comparing the proposed figure to the threatened 6.8 percent rate with congressional inaction.

OpenSecrets.org lists Alexander's career campaign contribution haul from commercial banks at \$622,643; the figure for Corker is \$752,215. No, parents and students, they haven't been bought, but one should ask if they are being rented.

Gov. Bill Haslam has set for our state the ambitious goal of increasing the percentage of Tennesseans with post-secondary education from 32 percent to 55 percent by 2025. The "Drive to 55" requires that many more people complete four-year college degrees, two-year associate degrees and technology/career certificate programs.

Grants, much more than loans, are key to achieving those goals. Grants do not add to the crushing debt U. S. students now face, now estimated between \$900 billion and \$1 trillion.

So, as members of Congress on break crow about their actions on student loans, take a moment to ask them, "Where is your bill for more grants?" and "Why didn't you support the lower rates of the Warren/Tierney bill?"

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Mark Harmon: Medicaid/TennCare should be expanded if Haslam's plan is rejected

By Mark Harmon

Saturday, September 14, 2013

Starting Oct. 1, Americans will be able to get health insurance via online comparison shopping under the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act. All plans will meet certain required standards of coverage.

Those of us who already have health care coverage need not do anything but can peek at alternate offerings. While people can shop on their own, many helpers, often volunteers, will assist them in making choices, securing coverage and getting any eligible subsidies.

You'd think this plan — private, insurance-based and competitive — would be applauded by conservatives. It is similar to plans by Bob Dole, Mitt Romney and even the Heritage Foundation. Instead, the public is getting bombarded with outrageously false claims.

Tennessee, sadly, is smack in the middle of the posturing and shrieking. Meanwhile, our people suffer.

Tennessee's first mistake was not creating an exchange or marketplace of its own. Those in our state who screamed loudest for state-specific plans let the opportunity pass. Fortunately, the Affordable Care Act has a backstop for states ignoring the health coverage needs of their people. The federal marketplace will be available to residents of those states.

Our state's second, and much more serious, mistake was refusing federal dollars for an expansion of Medicaid. The group most in need of better health coverage is the working poor — those who work hard in one or more jobs with low pay and no benefits. Expanding Medicaid to 138 percent of the poverty level is an effective way to reach them.

The Affordable Care Act offered a reasonable plan. The federal government would pick up the entire cost of expansion through 2016, then very slowly a small state cost-sharing comes into play. States and the federal government for years have shared Medicaid costs. That state expansion share, however, caps out at only 10 percent and not until 2020. Then the ratio fixes at nine federal dollars for every state dollar.

We don't have to look very far to see more reasonable choices. Kentucky created a

health coverage marketplace called Kynect. Kentucky also agreed to expand Medicaid, effectively extending coverage to an estimated 308,000 of its residents.

The Department of Health and Human Services has tallied some of the other benefits of the Affordable Care Act specifically to Tennessee:

- n Health insurance companies must spend four out of every five premium dollars on actual health care — or give you a refund. This year that translates to 131,826 Tennessee residents getting more than \$5.6 million in refunds, an average of \$69 for each covered family.

- n Fifty-nine thousand more young Tennesseans stay on a parental policy and can stay on that policy until they turn 26.

- n No deductibles or co-pays for seniors to get preventive care. In 2012 alone, more than 608,000 Tennessee seniors receiving traditional Medicare used one or more free preventive services.

- n As of 2014, no more insurance companies cutting off people for annual limits or pre-existing conditions.

Expanded preventive care reduces many Affordable Care Act costs, but more cost savings comes from less reimbursement for indigent care in emergency rooms. The reasoning behind this is that more working poor covered by Medicaid means less need for that inefficient clogging of our emergency rooms with the uninsured. All hospitals suffer from our governor's bad decision, but rural hospitals suffer most.

In effect, we are turning down a good deal, harming our people and our hospitals, just to appease some state legislators who have a visceral reaction to the president who offered the deal.

Six Republican governors back Medicaid expansion. Gov. Bill Haslam has cobbled together something close to a plan, but it covers fewer people at higher costs to those people and with more money-skimming intermediaries. Once it gets rejected, he should accept the Medicaid/TennCare expansion, thus covering an additional 180,000 Tennesseans.

The success of the Affordable Care Act will come through the lived experiences of people.



Mark Harmon: 'Morally rudderless' Gonzales outrageous pick by Haslam on judicial panel

By Mark Harmon

Friday, November 15, 2013

You may have missed it, unless you stumbled across The Associated Press' report late last month. Gov. Bill Haslam appointed Alberto Gonzales to a panel charged with nominating candidates for the Tennessee Supreme Court and our appeals courts.

Yes, that Alberto Gonzales, the former attorney general whose record under the George W. Bush administration left many, even prominent Republicans, shaking their heads in dismay.

Gonzales is with a Nashville law firm and teaches law at Belmont University. Barely a week after Gonzales arrived on campus, 45 Belmont faculty and staff signed an open letter opposing torture and expressing support for the Constitution, a not-so-subtle reference to Gonzales' legacy.

Early in his career Gonzales hitched his star to George W. Bush. As governor of Texas, Bush appointed Gonzales to a vacancy on the state Supreme Court. To keep the seat, Gonzales would have to run for it — taking thousands of dollars in campaign contributions from companies with business before the court, and not recusing himself from those cases. His excuse was that the practice was legal under Texas law, failing to see the important distinction between what is permissible and what is proper.

As White House counsel, Gonzales advanced memos that, using euphemisms and contorted arguments, tried to justify techniques historically regarded as torture. He argued against our detainees being covered by the Geneva Convention. He was rewarded for telling his benefactors what they wanted to hear, surviving a nomination fight to become attorney general.

Gonzales then took aim at habeas corpus — your right to know the charges against you and to be able to challenge your detention. It dates to the Magna Carta and is in Article 1, Section 9, of the U.S. Constitution: "The Privilege of the Writ of Habeas Corpus shall not be suspended, unless when in Cases of Rebellion or Invasion the public Safety may require it." Gonzales tied himself in knots arguing it really wasn't enumerated as a right because it was spoken only in terms of when it can be taken away. Sen. Arlen Specter suggested that Gonzales was "violating common sense."

The sophistry crashed in congressional testimony about the abrupt firings of nine

federal prosecutors. Congress sought answers to whether those prosecutors were dumped because they wouldn't pursue stagnant politically tinged cases. Gonzales said, "I don't recall," or variations like "I have no memory" and "I have no recollection," 64 times.

The committee Republicans had enough. Chuck Grassley said the story kept changing. Lindsey Graham called it "a stretch." Texas' John Cornyn used the phrase "really deplorable." Specter, then the ranking Republican, characterized it as "significantly, if not totally, at variance with the facts." Oklahoma's Tom Coburn called for Gonzales to resign.

David Iglesias, one of those fired prosecutors, wrote, "I once said that I found Gonzales to be a personal inspiration. No one can deny him his life's story, which is the American Dream writ large. It began in Humble, Texas, born of impoverished Mexican-American parents. He, like me, is a veteran of the U.S. military. He went to some of the best schools in America, including Harvard Law. Yet, somewhere along the line, he drank the loyalty Kool-Aid. Watching him testify before the Senate and the House was painful for me. He ... became just another morally rudderless political operative."

Haslam's panel may be short term. Our Legislature let the Judicial Nominations Committee expire. Next year we vote on a constitutional amendment creating a process of the governor appointing judges directly, but with legislative approval. Until then, Haslam should be peppered with questions like "Is someone associated with torture memos/doubting Habeas Corpus/denying application of the Geneva Convention a good choice for selecting Tennessee judges?"

These questions should rain down like a water torture, a torture Haslam invited by his outrageous choice.



Mark Harmon: Some farm subsidies and military projects should be on the table

By Mark Harmon

Sunday, October 20, 2013

Stephen Fincher is a Republican congressman and farmer from Frog Jump, Tenn. Fincher's actions on the recent farm bill are both instructive and disturbing. He supported up to \$20 billion in cuts to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, more commonly known as food stamps, but was adamant in retaining most of the subsidies geared toward corporate agribusiness.

Farmer Fincher gets a lot of farm subsidies. The Environmental Working Group crunched the Agriculture Department data and discovered that from 1999 to 2012 he collected more than \$3.5 million. In 2012 alone he received direct payments of \$70,000. He was not alone; 13 other current congressmen received farm subsidies (and all but one voted to slash food stamps but save subsidies).

The Agriculture Department has calculated that roughly three out of every four dollars in farm subsidies go the largest, most profitable farms. Large commercial farms in 2009, for example, reported average annual household income of more than \$160,000 but netted more than \$30,000 in subsidies. Federal records also show the nation's corporate agribusiness, from 1995 to present, getting a total of \$265 billion in total from direct payments and farm insurance subsidies.

Crop insurance presents a challenge but also an opportunity to bridge political boundaries. Political players as different as the Heritage Foundation, American Enterprise Institute, Environmental Working Group and President Barack Obama all oppose crop insurance subsidies. They all note, quite properly, that these subsidies no longer serve the goal of protection from drought and other natural disasters, and that goal could be served better through other means.

If the current crop of congressmen who march under the banner of "slash government spending" dropped sloganeering for specifics, they might find unusual alliances and surprising success in cutting corporate agribusiness subsidies. Another area for such cooperation could be in programs that the Pentagon doesn't need or want, and has been imploring Congress to stop funding.

Our top military brass wants to terminate: the C-130 Avionics Modernization, C-27 Joint Cargo Aircraft, Global Hawk Block, Precision Tracking Space System, W78/88 Life Extension Program and the Cruiser Modernization Program. Our same military officials

want to delay the Army Apache helicopter, reduce procurement of the Army Light Utility Helicopter and reduce the requirements for the Army Mid-Tier Networking Vehicular Radio.

The Project on Government Oversight has additional suggestions, as does a bipartisan group of 15 former senior government officials who have served eight different administrations, Democratic and Republican. They call themselves the Coalition for Fiscal and National Security.

One already sees some modest movement in this regard. In April a bipartisan group of 12 members of the U.S. House of Representatives pledged their support to Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel in his promise to “reshape the Department of Defense to reflect 21st century threats and fiscal realities.”

Pork-barrel politics, however, has blocked such recent efforts by our own military to retire seven Aegis cruisers and two amphibious ships by the end of fiscal 2014, or to end the service of more than 70 National Guard and Reserve aircraft no longer needed for national security.

Self-styled conservatives wouldn't have to look too far for political cover in demanding less profligate military spending. The conservative groups R Street Institute and the National Taxpayers Union in June of this year released a report called “Defending America, Defending Taxpayers.” It makes a case for \$1.8 trillion overall in military cuts, making our defense budget leaner while still keeping us safe.

“Audit the Pentagon” proposals have been floated by politicians as diverse as Democratic House member Barbara Lee and Republican Sen. Tom Coburn. East Tennessee's own U.S. Rep. John J. Duncan Jr. sometimes even quotes favorably former president Eisenhower's warning about the military-industrial complex, but sadly Duncan has introduced precious little legislation to curb that complex.

In the post-shutdown era, serious budget negotiations should start with corporate agribusiness subsidies and needless military projects.

