

## VIEWPOINTS

# Freedom: A complex, priceless commodity

One could easily argue that what I'm about to write about — the Westboro Baptist Church — has nothing to do with Veterans Day, which our nation will soon celebrate.

I think one could just as easily argue that this church and its band of protestors pretty much sums up the very essence of Veterans Day.

It is, indeed, a paradox.

By now, we're all familiar with this church and its activities, which have been in the news; it seems, for over a decade now.

Members of the Westboro Baptist Church, consisting almost entirely of the family members of its founder, the Rev. Fred W. Phelps of Kansas, have attended hundreds of military funerals toting signs that read, "God Hates the USA" or "Thank God for 9/11." They call the deaths punishment for Americans' immorality. No one is immune to it seems; a few members even showed up recently in Sioux Falls on the day of Sen. George McGovern's funeral.

One would hardly deem what Phelps and his followers are doing to be humane or upstanding or patriotic. But, the fact that he's able to do it at all is a teachable moment for all of us.

Phelps is, by the very simplest definition, being an American. Maybe not a decent American, but he's one of us, with the same rights of free expression we all enjoy.

Ironically, the U.S. Constitution, the document that has laid the groundwork for over two centuries now to guarantee that "Congress shall pass no law" that would short us of the basic freedoms we all enjoy, is a living, breathing document kept safe for all of us by the very soldiers who lay down their lives, year after year, decade after decade, to protect it.

For all of us. Even Phelps and his motley crew.

In early 2011, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that a grieving father's pain over mocking protests at his Marine son's funeral must yield to First Amendment protections for free speech. The 8-1 decision in favor of the Westboro Baptist Church of Topeka, Kan., was the latest in a line of court rulings that, as Chief Justice John Roberts said in his opinion for the court, protects "even hurtful speech on public issues to ensure that we do not stifle public debate."

There's likely a good chance that Phelps and his disruptive influence will be around for a long, long time.

So it was with a bit of delight that I uncovered an old news clipping in my files telling of

how citizens battled Phelps and his followers with their own weapon: a protest.

## BETWEEN THE LINES



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Bikers' groups such as the Patriot Guard have patrolled funerals to hide the sight of the Westboro Church members. At a funeral in Lamar, MO, hundreds of people lined the street waving American flags in front of the Westboro protesters.

A few days later, in a different Missouri town, the Westboro members never even made it to the protest. Nearly a quarter of the residents of Weston, MO, turned out with huge American flags and patriotic music. When Westboro church members saw the crowd, they left the funeral.

It is an instance that would delight both those who immerse themselves in the study of Constitutional law, and in the laws of physics.

When children, we all learned Newton's Third Law: To every action there is always an equal and opposite reaction. Perhaps we never realized how physics is also present in our day-to-day efforts to maintain civility.

I'm not saying this is a perfect solution, but so far, there just doesn't seem to be one.

We don't want funerals to become sideshows. We don't want Westboro people showing up outside a church filled with mourners, and frankly, while the counter-protesters hearts are in the right place, it would be, well, decent and humane if they didn't have to show up in the first place.

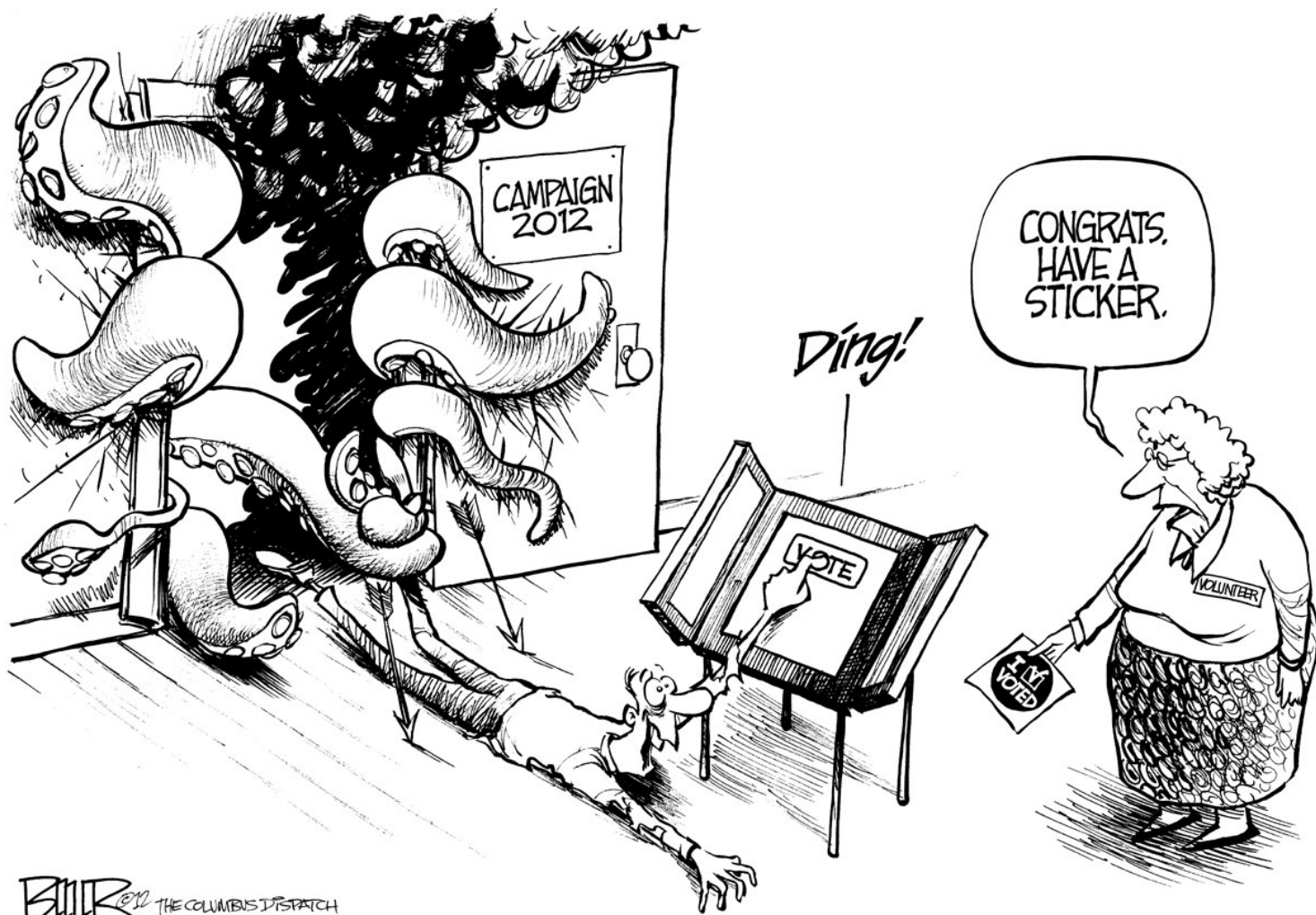
Freedom is a complex thing. There are no easy solutions to some of the challenges it brings.

It is what makes it a priceless commodity, doled out, without question, to you and me and every American.

And protected, without question, by hundreds of thousands of women and men in uniform who have made the ultimate sacrifice because they knew all along that freedom is more precious than life itself.

Every time I read about Phelps, I think about the freedom of expression that he enjoys, even though he practices it in a strange and abusive manner. And I think of the people in the military, both past and present, who make it possible for even the most extreme among us to enjoy our complicated yet wonderful freedom.

Honoring our soldiers in this way — taking time to personally recognize what they've done to allow us to remain free — is ultimately the best way to counter Phelps and his hate-filled crusade.



BILL R. THE COLUMBIAN DISPATCH  
ORIGINARTISTS.COM

## While we were sleeping – the '91 heist

So much of what I admire about the Crown of Thorns plant is the drama it imbues in the paradoxical nature of its gangly cactus-like vegetation.

With dense woody stalks that ooze a sticky latex substance when cut and shoots bearing super prickly thorns, the Crown could double as a lethal weapon. That is until producing dainty clusters of red blossoms, disguising itself in lush flora.

Legend has it that the actual crown of thorns placed on the head of Christ was made from the pliable stems of this plant, which easily can be shaped into a circle.

At one time, I had this variety, otherwise known as Christ Plant, Christ Thorn or Euphorbia splendens. My story began when a slip was ceremoniously bestowed upon me as a parting gift from a dear friend, who was a surrogate, vigilant mother to my husband and me and a doting grandmother to my then infant daughter.

The day my young family would depart on a 200-mile journey west across the Iowa, Joyce

trimmed a good-sized branch from her towering mother plant and ceremoniously wrapped it in layers of wet paper towel. Her fingers, thick from a lifetime of farm work, cautiously dodged each long thorn, and then carefully tucked it in a plastic bag for our move to Sioux City.

That was 1974. During the 17 years that followed, a single slip flourished into a beautifully towering conversation piece, reaching some four feet high.

Over time, I had fallen in love with my Crown of Thorns, keeping watch over it, nurturing it, relying on it as a vivid reminder of all that Joyce meant to us. It was a tangible symbol of the lifeline she had extended to us as newcomers in our former town.

That was until the waning hours before dawn one summer day in 1991, when someone stole

my "friend" from our front porch.

Distraught and completely mystified over why anyone would want this awkward beauty, I later learned such an item could bring upwards of \$50 or more.

In some ways it was comforting to hear we weren't the only ones whose property was ravaged by menacing marauders while we slept. After morning light illuminated our neatly situated dew-kissed yards, neighbors up and down the street reported a trail of stolen pink flamingos and pinwheels, chase lounges and charcoal grills, wind chimes and whirlygigs, bird feeders and birdbaths. You name it — if it was bolted down, it was gone. According to the rumors, Gypsies were the culprits.

I imagined my Christ Plant on a cold street corner somewhere in Sioux Falls, Fargo — who knows, maybe even Minneapolis — only to be greedily sold to an unas-

suming stranger.

You may think I'm a bit over the top. Try to understand that sometimes people are really attached to plants. Under our watchful eyes and not-so-green thumbs, they become loyal friends, constant, unshakable companions.

Yes, I suffered loneliness over missing my Crown, and I fretted over who would care for it as dutifully as I had for so many years. Who would water it and pick up after it? Who would nurture it and keep it alive?

I sometimes wonder if it's alive after all these years. Still longing for it, I probably wouldn't recognize it. That was one beautiful houseplant! I wonder if other slips were cut and passed on.

Who knows, maybe there's an entire extended family out there...somewhere.

### MY STORY YOUR STORY



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my "friend" from our front porch.

### Guest Commentary:

## Honoring defenders of liberty

By Senator John Thune

Battles fought in wars around the world, both past and present, have been depicted for many Americans through the lens of a camera. Behind the triumphs and the sadness of the photographs, are the men and women who have so valiantly honored the call to duty in defense of freedom. These men and women, some of whom made the ultimate sacrifice, have protected our nation from foreign and domestic threats, and fought in the name of liberty all over the world.

This September, I had the great opportunity to help welcome home the 842nd Engineer

Company of the South Dakota National Guard. The 160 men and women of the Spearfish, Belle Fourche, and Sturgis-based unit represent some of the best that both South Dakota and our nation have to offer. These servicemen and women, like so many before them, honored the call to duty and selflessly put the welfare of our nation before their own personal needs.

This Veterans Day we pause to thank and pay tribute to the veterans and active members of the military who have risked life and limb protecting our freedoms. South Dakota veterans, young and old, connect us to the past and present struggles for

freedom and peace. Their honor, duty, and patriotism make us proud to call them family, friends, and neighbors, and we honor the memory of those who have fallen, keeping all who serve in our prayers.

While we honor our veterans sacrifice, we are also aware of the continued struggles for many of the men and women in the military who have returned home from tours of duty. As the son of a World War II veteran, I believe we have an important responsibility to care for our veterans who have sacrificed so much for our freedom. I am a strong supporter of programs that benefit our veterans and believe more can be

done in terms of enacting pro-growth policies to address the needs that veterans have during this exceptionally difficult period of slow economic growth. I will continue to work across the aisle to come up with viable solutions to stimulate growth, boost job creation in the private sector, and assist those who have given so much to their country.

I invite all South Dakotans to join me in honoring the sacrifice of our veterans and to keep the brave members of our military and their families in our thoughts and prayers as they continue to serve on our behalf.

### Guest Commentary:

## Thanking our military families

By Rep. Kristi Noem

Like all Americans, South Dakotans hold the members of our military in high esteem. From the airmen at Ellsworth Air Force Base to the men and women with our National Guard, these patriots have earned our unwavering gratitude. So too, have the families that support them. The month of November is Military Family Month, where we give special recognition to the men and women behind the uniform.

While America's service men and women are deployed around the world, their wives, husbands, parents and siblings are back on the home front; praying for their safety, caring for children and going the extra mile. Military families demonstrate sacrifice in so many ways. They move from base to base and town to town. Husbands and wives give up precious time with their spouses and children. And they all do it because they love our country and find the sacrifice a small

price to pay in exchange for the freedoms we enjoy as Americans.

One of the most special things for a military family is when they get to be reunited. I was honored to help welcome home South Dakota Army National Guard's 842nd Engineer Company recently. Seeing husbands and wives rush to one another and children overjoyed to see their mother or father was incredibly heartwarming. It was a reminder of how resilient these military families are, and what a significant role

they play in our nation's fabric.

America remains the greatest nation in the world because of the men and women that wake up every day committed to defend it. While we honor our courageous service members, let us also take special care to honor the families that support them. This month, I hope all South Dakotans will take a moment to thank a military family member for the sacrifices they make for our country.

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