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Opinion

Free Press Viewpoint

Accountability keeps us all safe

The recent drug arrests in Colby are one more reminder to be happy of where we live and who our neighbors are.

When the police knock on you door in the middle of the night, waking you from a sound sleep, your first reaction may be fear, but it's probably not fear of the police.

Those officers may be bringing bad news. Let's face it, a knock on the door in the middle of the night is unlikely to be good news. But even if they are there to arrest you, you can be sure they won't hustle you into the back of an unmarked van, never to be heard from again.

When an officer walks through the halls of your six-yearold's grade school, he or she is not there to frighten little Joey into giving little Suzy's cookie back.

That police presence serves instead to do a couple of things - the school is checked to make sure there are no intruders who shouldn't get within a mile of little Joey and Suzy, while the children have a chance to get used to the fact that police may look big and scary in their uniforms but are really adults that kids can count on.

In a small town, we all have neighbors who are law enforcement professionals. We see them at the grocery store or the coffee shop. Their kids play with our kids. They may live around the corner or in the next block, but they know when something goes wrong in their neighborhoods and are there to set it right. They help a lost kid get home, they find missing dogs and bikes. And sometimes they have a big investigation and arrest a bunch of alleged drug dealers.

The police, though, live in the public eye, accountable to the public. As they watch to see everything is OK, we watch them to make sure they are OK. This is a right and necessary part of a free society. Checks and balances are needed to keep any one group from becoming all powerful; the checks on law enforcement are no different than any other area.

We at the Colby Free Press provide some of that accountability. That's why we print On the Beat and the Thomas County Jail bookings. It's not about pointing a finger at wrongdoers; it's about giving everyone one more reason to stay on this side of the line, both ordinary citizens and law enforcement.

There are laws in this country, to protect Joey and Suzy and all of us, including the law enforcement professional on your street. – Marian Ballard

🕀 Where to write, call

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U.S. Rep. Tim Huelskamp, 126 Cannon House Office



"AND THEN, AFTER THE TORNADO HIT THE BIBLE BELT, THERE WAS THIS BERIE SILENCE."

Lines will always divide country

This column is about lines that divide the country.

Not the Mason-Dixon line, which divides North from South back east. It's kinda irrelevant out here, except that in an accident of history, it also serves as (approximately) the border between Kansas and Nebraska. It runs just 13 miles from my house.

That's because Kansas was to have come into the Union as a slave state, part of a longtime compromise that kept an uneasy balance in the U.S. Senate for the first half of the 19th century.

Abolitionists from the North colonized and eventually controlled Kansas, however, leading to a decade of border warfare and eventually, 150 years ago, the Civil War. After Kansas was admitted as a free state, you see, the South could see the handwriting on the wall.

But that is dry, historical stuff. Today, we're going to talk about the Sweet Tea Line and the Green Chili Line. And if there's time, maybe the Firefly Line.

In Yankee states, even the more northern border states such as Missouri or Kentucky. you can go into a restaurant and order iced tea and it will come unsweetened, maybe with some of those little sacks of sugar or sugar substitute.

In the South, diabetics fear ordering tea with lunch. In the South, they just assume you want sugar. My son in law, who lives in Georgia,



likes "unsweet" tea, and he always orders it that way. He gets sweet tea half the time anyway.

The Sweet Tea Line, best I can figure out, is somewhere around the border between Tennessee and Kentucky, give or take a county or two. By the time you get to Texas and the Gulf States, best taste your tea first.

Then there is the green chili line. It's been blurred a little in recent years, but generally it runs north and south through the High Plains. In New Mexico, Colorado, southern Wyoming, Arizona and west, no self-respecting Mexican restaurant would think of not serving green chili, that wonderful concoction of fresh chopped chilis, onion, garlic and (usually) pork, with (sometimes) potatoes or tomatoes thrown in.

Drive east from Colorado, and you'll have a hard time finding anything but red chili, made papers. When he has the time, he'd rather be with ripe, dried chilis, beef or pork, with or without tomatoes, and (shudder) maybe even beans.

Out west, by the way, traditionally, in the Southwest, you get a choice. The server will ask, "red or green." Or you can order "Christmas," by which they mean one color on half the plate and the other on the other. Yum.

Growing up in Kansas, I was innocent of green chili until we moved to southern Colorado some 31 years ago. I grew to love the green, which can be mild or hot, with varied ingredients as noted. But nearly always good.

In New Mexico, it's pretty much the state food.

And the Firefly Line?

In most of Kansas, kids wait for warm summer nights when they can chase and capture those fascinating little glowing creatures. Not in Denver, or most of the mountain West.

The Firefly Line runs somewhere between Atwood and St. Francis, it seems. West of there, they are rare or wholly absent. Oberlin and Hoxie seem to have plenty, while Colby and Atwood have a few.

'Tis a pity children of the West are deprived of this simple pleasure, but they seem to find other things to do.

Like eat green chili and drink unsweet tea.

Steve Haynes is president of Nor' West Newsreading a good book or casting a fly.

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Ignorance has a long half life

Dental X-rays constitute most Americans' experience with radiation. With every report from the Japan nuclear power plant, we remember the dental technician draping us with a lead apron and then leaving the room while their machine mysteriously zaps our jaws.

It is all the more scary because we don't hear or see the "radiation" - just the resulting photo of our teeth.

Meanwhile, those who do understand radioactive materials - science teachers, corporate and military safety officers, etc. - fortunately have spouses who are shielding the television from our wrath. My science colleagues correctly describe most media reports as "clueless," "sensationalized," " ignorant" or "non-sense."

Most Japanese citizens remain calm, but Westerners line up at airports to leave in a panic. The Media attributes this to a Japanese attitude of accepting fate. But some of it is their deeper knowledge from better science education. What do many Japanese understand about radiation that most Americans do not?

"Radioactive particle" is not the same as "radiation." The press is using these interchangeably but the difference is very important.

Radiation is energy in particle or wave form.

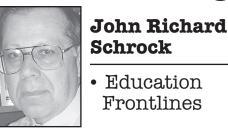
"Non-ionizing radiation" includes everyday visible light, radiant heat, radio waves, untraviolet light, and the like.

"Ionizing radiation" has enough energy to remove electrons from atoms, forming ions. Large amounts of ionizing radiation can alter DNA and kill cells.

Nuclear power plants produce unstable atoms (radioisotopes) with extra neutrons. Unstable isotopes of uranium, radium, radon and thorium are found in nature. Other radioisotopes are made in nature and in nuclear reac-

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tors. As these radioisotopes decay to stable elements, they emit ionizing radiation.

There are three forms of ionizing radiation. Understanding them is important.

"Alpha particles" are the largest emitted from the nucleus of an atom. They collide immediately with surrounding atoms and lose their energy. A sheet of paper easily stops them. In air, they only travel a few centimeters. Only if we eat, drink, or breathe in radioactive material that emits alpha particles - and then concentrate them in the body - do they pose a health hazard.

"Beta particles" are smaller. They are less likely to collide with atoms, so they can travel farther. But a thin sheet of metal or a few centimeters of wood or plastic stops them. Beta particles can be a health hazard if highly concentrated on skin, or when ingested or inhaled if they are concentrated in tissues. Iodine-131 is a beta emitter and we can concentrate it in our thyroid.

Alpha and beta emitters give off their radiation over time. An alpha or beta source is not going to be harmful to living tissue at a distance because neither travels with high energy over long distances. When we see images of Japanese health workers scanning people's coats and telling them to wash the dust off, this washing carries the alpha and beta emitters into the soil and water where the radiation they will give off is shielded.

Gamma radiation is the radiation in the minds of most people due to our experience with medical and dental x-rays. It is pure energy with no mass or charge, and requires shielding by lead or concrete. So far, this is mainly a concern to the nuclear workers inside the power plant and storage areas.

A final factor is "half-life," the time it takes a radioisotope to decay half way toward its stable form. Of the three main radioisotopes produced, Iodine-131 is the most common and has a half life of just over 8 days. That means half of the radiation will be emitted in 8-days, half of what remains (or one-fourth of the original) in 16, and so on. Strontium-90 and Caesium-137 are produced in much smaller amounts and have half-lives of under 29 years and over 30 years. Strontium is a beta emitter. Caesium emits both beta and gamma radiation.

So alert your spouse to protect the television! You now know enough to throw objects at your set set as the ignorant continue to misreport the news.

John Richard Schrock, a professor of biology and department chair at a leading teacher's college, lives in Emporia. He emphasizes that his opinions are strictly his own.

Write us

The Colby Free Press encourages Letters to the Editor on any topic of general interest. Letters should be brief, clear and to the point. They must be signed and carry the address and phone number of the author.

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