

from our viewpoint...

Some people are hard to take, love

It's hard to love the Rev. Fred Phelps and his offspring. They're all nuts, and not in an amusing or entertaining kind of way.

The Phelps family and a few followers hang out at the Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, where they foment hatred, especially hatred of homosexuals.

God hates homosexuals, the Phelps say. They claim he's punishing America for harboring them by killing our soldiers in Iraq.

The family and the church have a long history of spreading this venom. They've staged rallies, marches, parades and demonstrations. They used to show up every day outside the home of the publisher of the *Topeka Capital-Journal* and once picketed a Kansas Press Association convention.

The press, they claim, pushes the homosexual agenda. And since God hates "fags," He must hate the press, too.

The attacks get personal. It's hard to take. No one likes dealing with Fred Phelps, but half his family seems to be lawyers (Fred himself is a disbarred lawyer, and at least two of his daughters have law licenses) and they sue over any attempt to block them.

Then a couple of years ago, this kooky clan got the idea that God was punishing the U.S. by killing our soldiers. They began picketing at the funerals of men and women killed in combat.

That's nice, isn't it?

Your son or daughter is killed in action in some God-forsaken foreign land, and a bunch of nutty demonstrators show up outside the funeral. It's hard to take. Disgusting.

And despite some attempts to curb the practice, it's perfectly legal. The church has a religious and political voice, both protected by the First Amendment to our Constitution.

Many would gladly take the Phelps' rights away, especially since they have been attacking war-battered families in their time of grief.

Maybe the most effective response, though, has come from an American Legion offshoot, the Patriot Guards, a group of motorcycle riders who station themselves between Phelps' rabble and the mourners at a funeral. The wackos get their say but the family is spared most of the indignity.

Is there something wrong with Americans that we allow this kind of behavior? Or something right? How can we let a small group of hatemongers spread venom at the funeral of a fallen soldier?

But if our troops fight to defend our freedoms, as we often say, doesn't that include the freedom of people like Fred Phelps to be nuts?

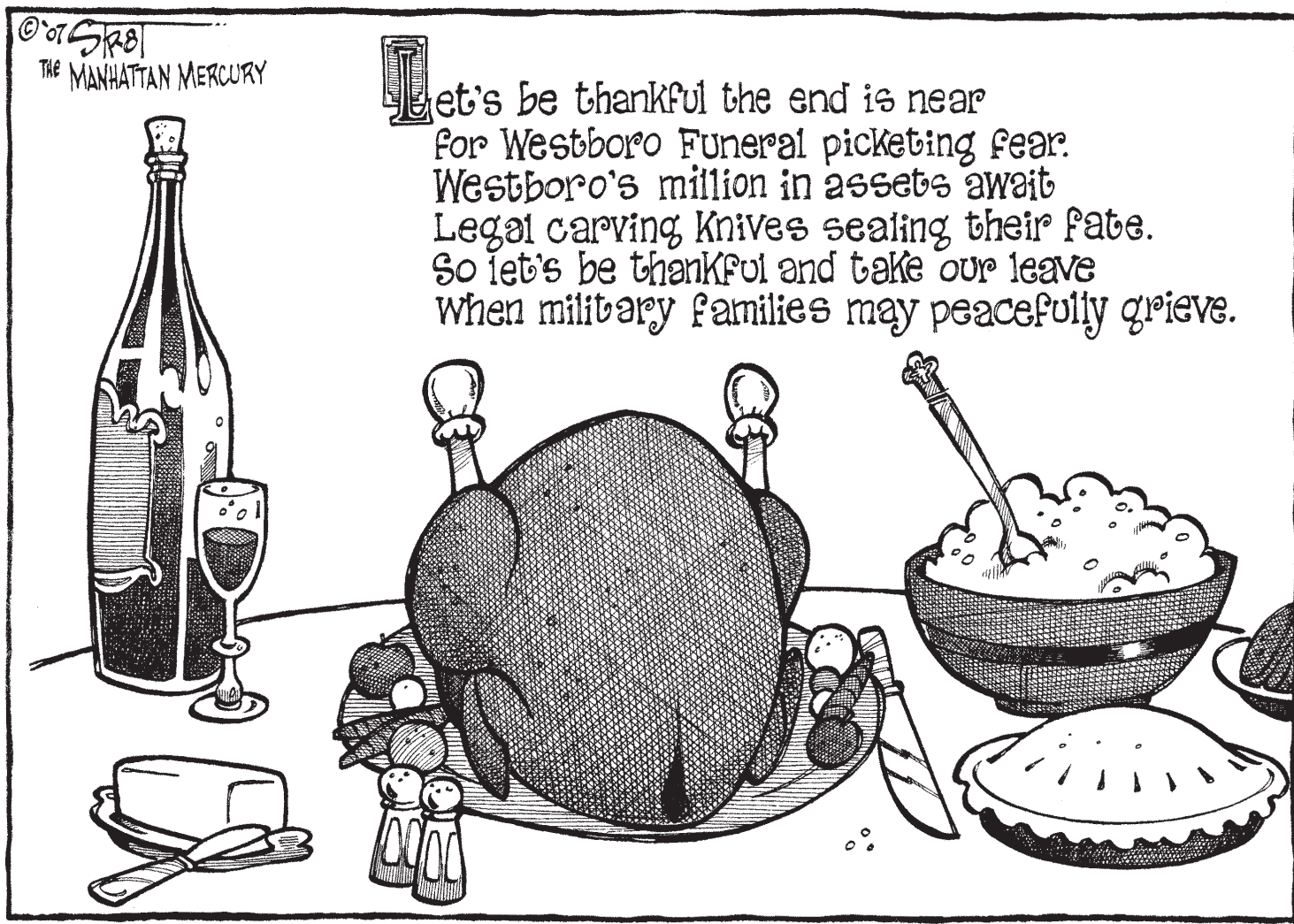
Even the American Civil Liberties Union, often criticized for backing whatever liberal cause comes down the pike, has defended Mr. Phelps and his decidedly unliberal behavior in the name of free speech.

That's the danger — and the genius — of our strong system of human rights. It includes the freedom to be obnoxious, the freedom to be wrong. But without the First Amendment guarantees of free speech and religion, our country would be far less than it is.

It's because our founding fathers had the foresight to protect our rights that we have the liberty we so cherish — that our troops defend — today.

The freedom to say unpopular things is part of that.

If liberty means putting up with Fred Phelps and his tribe, so be it. The Republic will survive, as it always has, and we're a better country because we allow everyone — even the nuts — to speak their piece. — *Steve Haynes*



Shopping big event when traveling

What does almost every woman and most men want to do when they're in a foreign country?

Shop, of course.

Yeah I know, you said visit the historic sites, go to museums and sample the local cuisine.

Well, that's all true, but you'd better get some shopping in so that you'll have something to take back to your husband, wife, parents, children, grandchildren, brothers, sisters, boss, employees, neighbors and nonsignificant others. A bauble or two for yourself is also a good idea.

So why did I find it so difficult to do any fun shopping on our recent excursion to Taiwan and Vietnam?

The answer is simple — tour guides. I actually had one shout, "No shopping, no shopping," at us in Hanoi. I think he was working on commission and we were buying from street vendors, and there's no kickbacks there.

We started off in Taiwan and the government-sponsored guide kept us so busy we didn't have a chance to buy anything that wasn't in an approved shop.

Well, I did get a \$3 pair of designer sunglasses from a vendor as I boarded the bus the first day in Saigon. After that, the guide kept an eye on me. I was obviously a troublemaker.

We finally got our chance to buy some trinkets the last day of the trip.

Our guide took us to a government-spon-



cynthia haynes

• open season

sored art market and gave us 30 minutes to shop its three floors.

I flew through that place, grabbing chopsticks, refrigerator magnets, small bags, letter openers, tea and a dozen other small items for gifts for the staff. I spent about \$100 in 30 minutes. In the same amount of time, Steve was able to buy a nice bracelet for our youngest daughter.

In Saigon, our guide was more understanding. In fact, he was the best guide we had the whole trip. He had the bus driver stop at a rubber plantation where a gang of children selling \$1 rubber-tree-seed necklaces hit us up. We all got back on the bus with at least one.

He also took us to a square near the old cathedral and post office. There, we had about an hour to walk around and enjoy the buildings and buy all the junk we wanted from the peddlers. I stocked up on post cards and postage stamp books.

He hurried us though the Cu Chi tunnels, an infamous Viet Cong stronghold outside town, but I was able to pick up a few gems. There aren't a lot of people in town with Viet Cong

headgear, including a Communist officer's hat. I bought two of each.

Steve got the officer's hat and I got the Viet Cong slouch hat. I gave my sister the other slouch hat and her husband, a Vietnam vet, the other officer's hat. He planned to wear it to work. I just hope he isn't wearing it to the American Legion next week.

In Hanoi, the guide was the worst about allowing us any time to shop.

He was shouting, "No shopping, no shopping," while I bought a conical straw hat like the peasants wear. It cost me a whopping 10,000 dong — about 60 cents. I doubt if there's much kickback on that purchase.

We did score about 20 beaded handbags off a little girl on a motorbike. She was persistent and followed us all over town.

Depending on when we bought them, the fancy bag with long beaded handles sold three or four for \$20. I'm not the world's best bargainer, so I ended up with three, which was about three more than I needed.

However, since I bought them out of the window of a moving bus, I think that counts as a "shopping experience."

That little girl was good.

After all that, about the only thing I had money for in Hong Kong was a new suitcase — a big one.

Care for veterans hasn't changed much

"Appeal for Wounded Men," proclaimed the New York Times headline. "An appeal to citizens to open their homes on Thanksgiving Day to the 15,000 wounded soldiers in the city was sent out yesterday.... 'Many of the disabled men feel the people have forgotten them.'"

That article appeared on Nov. 14, 1920. Four score and seven years later, our veterans are faring no better. In fact, except for the fleeting ripple of awareness among the news media and the American public around Veterans Day, the men and women who put their lives on the line to preserve our freedoms are all but forgotten.

Yet while we are called on daily to make certain sacrifices for the sake of winning the war on terror and bear with encroachments on our rights, economic hardships and an increasing number of casualties on the battlefield, our government leaders are doing little to care for those who were willing to make the ultimate sacrifice. Our military veterans return home suffering from traumatic brain injuries, the loss of limbs, posttraumatic stress syndrome and mental illness, only to find themselves jobless, with limited access to health care and other necessary support services.

We're not talking about a small group of people, either. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, there are 24.5 million veterans in the United States. More than a third of those living served during the Vietnam War. Unfortunately, many of these very same individuals who survived harrowing experiences on the battlefield are having a difficult time just getting by today. For instance, a recent report from the National Alliance to End Homelessness (NAEH) indicates that veterans make up 25 percent of America's homeless population.

"Combat veterans are especially at risk," says Steven Berg, the NAEH's vice president for policy and programs. "When people serve in battle, particularly, they come back and they're injured. They're injured with physical disabilities, they are injured with mental disabilities, and that all makes it hard for people to get jobs and pay rent and stay housed." As one newspaper observed, "there is simply no reason to tolerate the notion that a man



john whitehead

• rutherford institute

or woman who was prepared to die for this country ought instead to find him or herself homeless in it."

Others are struggling to just make ends meet. As a recent New York Times editorial pointed out, "Tens of thousands of reservists and National Guard troops, whose jobs were supposedly protected while they were at war, were denied prompt re-employment upon their return or else lost seniority, pay and other benefits."

Still others are being treated to bureaucratic run-arounds and are being forced to foot the bill for injuries sustained in battle. As the Times reported, "Some 1.8 million veterans were unable to get care in veterans' facilities in 2004 and lacked health insurance to pay for care elsewhere."

Even without physical disabilities to contend with, the transition from the battlefield to civilian life is not easy for many vets. Orlando Castaneda, an Army combat veteran from Texas who served in Iraq, put it this way: "When we come back, we are fragments of human beings, mentally and physically. We've been in the thick of it."

Sadly, some of these fragmented human beings are resorting to suicide. According to a recent CBS News special investigation, data from 45 states shows that 6,256 veterans took their own lives in 2005. That averages out to 120 deaths per week, which is more than double the suicide rate of non-veterans. Veterans aged 20 through 24, the age group currently serving in the war on terror, had the highest suicide rate among all veterans—between two and four times higher than civilians the same age.

It's a sad state of affairs. We ship these men and women off to fight for us, offer brief tributes to the ones who die and leave those who return home—many of them wounded in body and spirit—to fend for themselves. And with nearly 200,000 American soldiers cur-

rently fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq, it is little wonder that "aid groups are bracing themselves for a sunamilike upsurge in the coming years."

If compassion alone doesn't compel us to do something about the plight of America's veterans, then shame should, because it is disgraceful and dishonorable the way we continue to treat these men and women who have given so much for our country. And I say "we" because, ultimately, we the taxpayers, we the voters, we the people are responsible for how our country is run. Clearly, our elected officials need to do more than play political games with legislation intended to improve veterans benefits, but they won't act unless we pressure them to do so.

So this Thanksgiving, by all means remember to give thanks for the men and women who have made it possible, but don't just leave it at words. Put some action behind your words by doing your part to pay back the debt we owe these courageous men and women.

Take five minutes right now to write or call your local and state representatives to urge them to provide better care, facilities and job opportunities for our veterans. Assist disabled military veterans to acquire the financial and medical help they need. Find out what veterans live in your community and work with your church, synagogue or other institution to reach out to them. Many are in need of food, shelter and transportation, but others simply need a friendly face. Some communities are arranging free meals for homeless vets, as well as providing food and hygiene bags. If yours is not already doing something, arrange something.

A society is measured by how it cares for its poor, including its veterans. Now is the time to demonstrate that we are a country that values those who sacrifice so much in order for us to live free.

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