

from our viewpoint...

Murder is foul deed, thankfully rare here

The events a few miles south of Brewster have focused attention on the darker side of human actions, and we feel sympathy for the family of the one who was taken in such a harsh manner.

Looking back over the 116 year history of Sherman County it is good to see that cases involving murder have been rare, and there have been times there were years between such tragic occurrences.

It was remarkable to see there was a 23 year period without a single case and it had been 17 years ago that the last murder took place. To some people we talked to having 17 murders was higher than they expected.

At the same time we were talking to County Attorney Bonnie Selby about the number of drug related cases filed in the county last year. To us having 35 people arrested seems a high number.

The most alarming part is the number arrested for their involvement in meth labs. Selby was pleased she was able to get pleas and convictions on many of those arrested, and believes she has a good cases against more of the pending cases.

The statistics from Selby brings home the fact the war on drugs is on our doorstep. We are sure the law enforcement people will continue to emphasize catching those who are manufacturing the drugs, and want them to know we appreciate their work.

Whether we can win the war on drugs is a larger philosophical question, and one with no quick or definite answer. It is easier to argue about the need for troops to stay in Iraq and Afghanistan than to find answers to how we stem the tide of drug use in our country.

Nearly 100 years ago a similar war was being fought against the demons of alcohol. There were national and local chapters of the Women's Christian Temperance Union in most cities, and people were lining up to take the pledge not to drink.

That effort spawned the 18th Amendment which prohibited the manufacture of alcohol on a national scale, and gave rise to the "roaring 20s" and the heyday of the bootlegger and speakeasy. It did not really stop the manufacture of alcohol nor the thirst of the country, and after a number of years the failed attempt was repealed by the 21st Amendment.

It was better to regulate and tax the vice of drinking rather than continue trying to ban it from existence, and it is a big part of the national income today.

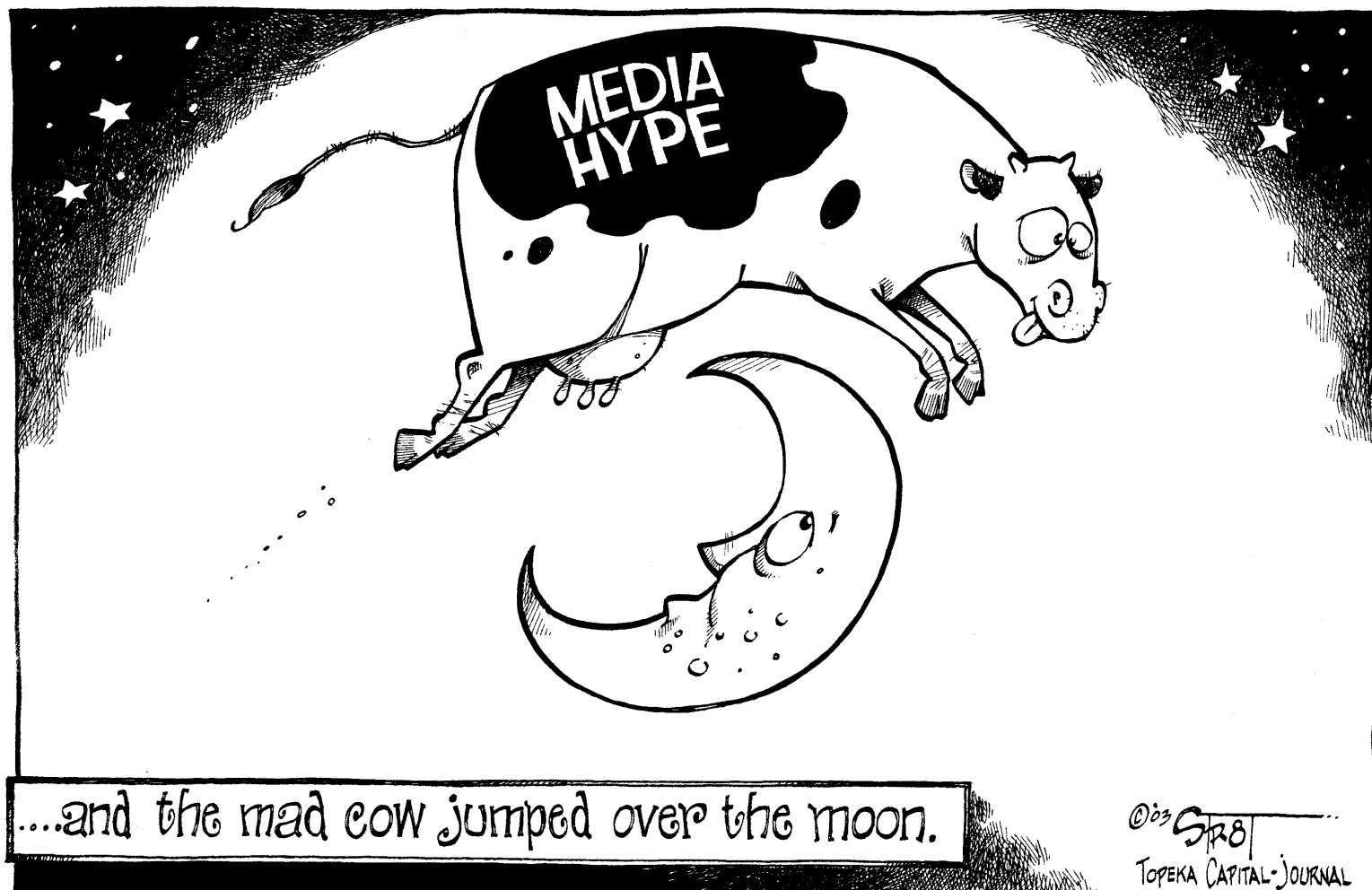
That tactic has been employed on the evils of tobacco and the costs of smoking is at least 20 times higher today than it was when we were teenagers.

We remember when the anti-smoking groups decided it was a good tactic to "educate" the young kids about the danger of smoking and they went home and tried to tell mommy and daddy or grandma and grandpa they shouldn't be smoking.

Today the anti-drug effort is aimed at the young people with the hope they will learn about the dangers, and will be strong enough to stay out of that trap.

It was good to hear Selby say the number of juvenile drug cases were down in the past few years, and we hope that trend continues. We have seen the trouble and pain drugs like meth and cocaine can cause. We may not be able to win the war on drugs, but the evidence is strong we must continue the fight.

We believe it is a good bet that keeping the drug level in check is part of what keeps murder at a low number, and feel a few of the more recent murders have a connection to the demons of drugs and alcohol. — Tom Betz



Disease threats are overrated

Let's hear it for the overrated disease.

Every time you pick up the morning paper, there's some new threat to human health.

It's hard to say which is the most overrated, but if any disease actually killed or even sickened as many people as the hype would have you believe, we'd be in real trouble.

Where should we start? Anthrax?

There's no doubt that the purified anthrax some wacko sent through the mail two years ago was deadly. Trace amounts left in postal equipment apparently killed at least two or three people who never saw one of the original letters. Congress was locked out of its offices for weeks. Mail facilities were in an uproar.

But the anthrax powder is more of a poison than a disease. The bacterium is deadly enough at "weapons grade," but the disease itself is hard to spread and fairly easy to treat.

So much for the anthrax scare.

West Nile virus?

For all the hysteria the last couple of summers, the number of serious cases has numbered in the dozens in this area. It's not a nice thing to get, but it's no epidemic.

The disease is deadly enough for birds, but



steve haynes

• along the sappa

most larger animals — horses and humans seem to be the most susceptible — recover quickly. Any virus has its risks, but West Nile is not going to depopulate the United States.

SARS, or Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome?

Virus caused, sort of a heavy-duty cold, SARS is a nasty infection, but it's been successfully contained the last couple of years.

Again, it's not something you'd volunteer to have, like getting the mumps while you're young. But SARS is not the Black Death, or bubonic plague.

Neither is plague these days, come to think of it.

Endemic in many areas, plague seldom bothers humans today. Better sanitation and limited contact with rodents has stopped its spread.

Just don't play with prairie dogs.

We have seen the mad cow, and it is us

A friend of mine was uncharacteristically cheery during the holidays, an anomaly he finally explained: "I made a bunch of money shorting Wendy's."

He's a day trader. Translated, his explanation means he cashed in by betting the panic from mad cow disease would turn fast-food company stocks into downer animals. The message here is that our culture has become so predictably frenzied people can make money betting on stampedes.

Orange alerts, airport barricades and frothing at the mouth about a vanishingly obscure disease of cattle — these are the trappings of what some label a "culture of fear." I wish we were, but I think there is a subtle and important line to be drawn here between fear and panic. The latter implies bug-eyed, bovine, bellowing hysteria, and mad cow disease illustrates the point. We are not a culture of fear. We are a culture of panic.

The short selling of fast-food stocks, killing of calves and regulatory umbrage are all panic reactions. No American has contracted mad cow disease in this country, let alone died. By comparison, three common food-borne bacteria — salmonella, listeria and toxoplasma — kill 1,500 Americans a year, yet food poisoning is background noise not worthy of a headline.

Panic is a short-term, irrational response, and there simply is nothing to panic about in our beef supply. There is, however, something to fear, something to identify as a real and long-term threat that requires a rational response. The madness is not in our cattle, but in our method of raising them.

The disease is a concern because almost 80 percent of the nation's beef comes through



prairie writers circle

• richard manning

feedlots, which collectively form a remarkably inefficient protein factory. Mostly, this system's raw material is grain and soybeans. But it gets amped up with protein supplements, which these days could mean anything from rendered household pets to sardines, blood or slaughterhouse waste.

Legally, rendered cattle parts aren't supposed to be fed to cattle. That's the practice that can indeed infect cattle with mad cow disease. But as is the case with any large, elaborate and diffuse system with an end goal of profit, regulations slip. Even the federal government admits the ban is too frequently breached.

This feedlot system developed as part of our Rube Goldbergian industrial farm economy that has everything to do with disposing of surplus grain and almost nothing to do with the health of consumers, the well-being of farmers and the health of the land.

We could finish our beef on grass, as some niche marketers are doing in this country. (Given the current panic about mad cow, that would be a pretty niche to occupy. Even my short-selling friend could be bullish on this business.) Grass can't spread mad cow disease.

But mad cow is not the point; it's a symptom of a deeper ill. The feedlot system is cruel, wasteful and dangerous. It entails a litany of abuses, but its inefficiencies can be summed in energy use. It takes about 10 calories of fossil-fuel energy to make a calorie of feedlot beef.

Hantavirus scares me. Like the African infection ebola, it's often fatal. The infection is painful. No one wants to be that sick.

But unless you play in deer mouse droppings, it's hard to get hantavirus. It doesn't seem to be spreading to the human population with any great speed. Nor has ebola left its African homeland.

And then there's mad cow disease, more properly known as bovine spongiform encephalopathy. It's a nasty little infection, caused by a particle known as a "prion" that defies definition. Sheep, deer, elk and people all get some form of this disease, and it seems to spread in most species by eating brain tissue.

Or maybe not. No one knows.

But the number of humans infected is infinitesimally small compared to the number of people who eat beef, venison, elk and mutton.

It's been a good guess that the next big flu epidemic will take more people than all the others combined, but influenza is more of a common-type disease, hardly worthy of scare headlines and 5 o'clock treatment.

That should put the trendy diseases in perspective. Ah, but where's the fun in that?

Grass-fed cattle require less than a third as much.

This theme plays throughout our food system. Cornell University's David Pimentel estimates that if the world's known oil reserves were used only for agriculture and the whole world produced food in the high-energy way we do in the United States, those reserves would be gone in about seven years.

Anyone who does not see the peril to human life in that number hasn't considered how far we will go to secure oil. I fear our adventure in Iraq is only the beginning.

Richard Manning's most recent book, "Against the Grain: How Agriculture Has Hijacked Civilization," will be published in February. Manning lives in Missoula, Mont. He is a member of the Land Institute's Prairie Writers Circle, Salina, Kan.

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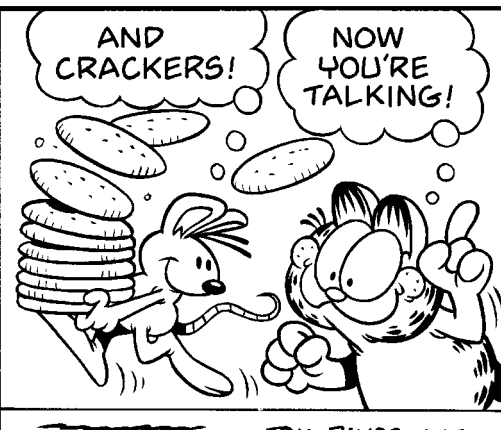
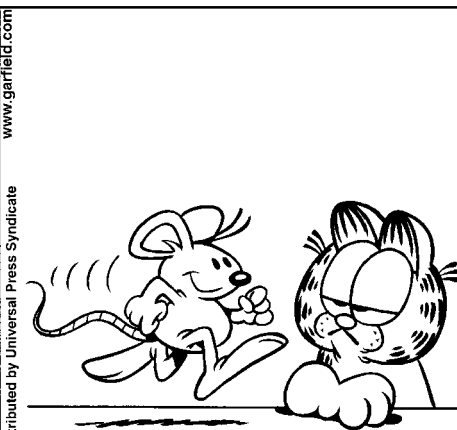
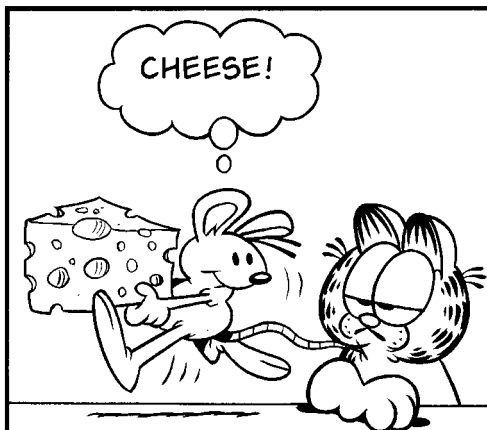
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