

from our viewpoint...

Justice apologizes for seizing tapes

Chalk one up for freedom. A small victory, perhaps, but important. Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia has apologized to an Associated Press reporter whose voice recorder was seized and erased by a U.S. marshal on Scalia's protection detail during a public appearance. The justice says he's sorry, and it won't happen again. He said he will permit print reporters to record his remarks in the future, understanding that many of them depend on their recordings for accuracy.

Wow. Decency and common sense prevail. The spectacle of a marshal grabbing reporters' recorders in front of God and the entire audience, even as the justice spoke to a high school crowd in Mississippi, is unreal. This is America, after all. Land of the free. Home of free speech. A place where everyone is presumed innocent until proven guilty. A country, in fact, where federal law forbids agents from seizing reporters' notes, film and gear on a whim. What happened, apparently, was that the justice had announced at an earlier speech that it was his policy not to allow recordings of his talks. He also bans television cameras and video recorders. None of that is unusual. Any speaker has the right to set conditions before he opens his mouth. People don't have to stay. Reporters don't have to cover the speech.

But at the high school, no one mentioned the rule. The two reporters recording the speech had no idea they might offend the justice. They were, in fact, sitting right in front of him, in plain view of the speaker and the entire audience.

That's when the deputy marshal moved in and started grabbing their gear. A newspaper reporter gave up her tape and got it back only after it was erased. The AP reporter refused to give her digital recorder up, so the marshal grabbed it, demanding "the tape."

The deputy apparently didn't understand that digital recorders don't have tape, but the wire service reporter eventually showed her how to erase the memory.

The justice, ironically, was talking about the U.S. Constitution and the rights we enjoy under it.

One of those is supposed to be due process under law. Police and federal agents are not supposed to take the law into their own hands.

Usually, a high official caught in this kind of trap just bulls his or her way through. It's unheard of for someone to apologize for this kind of mistake.

Maybe the justice realized that bad publicity might harm his changes of being promoted to chief justice. Maybe he realized that he had made a mistake.

Maybe he just thought an apology — and a change of heart — was the right thing to do.

That would be sort of novel in Washington, but it could happen.

Whatever the case, Justice Scalia did the right thing and we all are better off for it.

It shows that if you believe in justice and the Constitution, things might just work out.

Hooray for common sense! — Steve Haynes



I took a trip I never expected to take

I don't know about you, but I've just returned from a trip that I never, ever expected to take.

I went to Korea. My youngest son is stationed there, and he invited me to come see that country.

My impressions of the Orient were never very good.

I suppose my impressions began during World War II when the Japanese were our enemies. Even though a child, I heard a lot about "Japs." Movies didn't help. The Japanese were portrayed poorly, and I thought they were sneaky, heartless, untrustworthy, etc.

As I matured, my head told me all these impressions were unfair and probably part of wartime propaganda, but my heart still was suspicious.

I never had any desire to go to any Oriental country.

Boy, have I been incorrect.

My trip to Korea was wonderful. Having time with my son was great, and I rejoice to say that my ideas about that country were all wrong. The people were friendly, and they like Americans.



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• commentary

The country was clean — even Seoul's subways. No dirt, no roving gangs, no graffiti. They were efficient and easy to maneuver.

Never before have I felt like a tourist attraction, but I did in Seoul.

There were a lot of springtime field trips from schools taking place. My son and I were stared at, pointed to, and many little kids said hello to us in English.

We could almost guess the extent of their English training in school: "Hello. Hi! What is your name? My name is _____. How are you?"

We were approached by all ages. When my son would sometimes reply with a phrase in their language, they were delighted. I was even tapped on the shoulder by a Korean grand-

mother who said hello to me. I don't suppose they see many American grandmothers there.

When I smiled and replied, she was delighted and bowed. They are great "bowers." Even though I couldn't speak their language, I did smile and bow, and that courtesy transcended our differences.

I am so glad I went to Korea. I wish I could have stayed longer.

The only trial of the whole trip was the long plane ride to get there. But when you figure it is only 12 1/2 hours to go halfway around the world, it isn't bad.

In fact, it's almost a miracle. The world indeed is getting smaller every day.

And, once again, I am reminded that people are much the same everywhere.

I have compiled some of my columns into a hardcover book. It is \$22 if I don't have to mail; \$24 for a mailed copy; that is just my cost, no profit. Contact me through star-news@nwkanas.com or at PO Box 12, Conway Springs KS 67031 if you would like to purchase one.

Exporting cheap corn and ruin

Americans have been talking a lot about trade this campaign season, about globalism's winners and losers, and especially about the export of American jobs. Yet even when globalism is working the way it's supposed to — when Americans are exporting things like crops rather than jobs — there can be a steep social and environmental cost.

One of the ballyhooed successes of the North American Free Trade Agreement has been the opening of Mexico to American farmers, who are now selling millions of bushels of corn south of the border. But why would Mexico, whose people still subsist on maize (mostly in tortillas), whose farmers still grow more maize than any other crop, ever buy corn from an American farmer? Because he can produce it more cheaply than any Mexican farmer can. Actually that's not quite right — it's because he can sell it much more cheaply.

This is largely because of U.S. agricultural policies. While one part of the U.S. government speaks of the need to alleviate Third World poverty, another is writing subsidy checks to American farmers, which encourages them to overproduce and undersell Third World farmers.

The river of cheap American corn began flooding into Mexico after NAFTA took effect in 1994. Since then, the price of corn in Mexico has fallen by half. A 2003 report by the Carnegie Endowment says this flood has washed away 1.3 million small farmers. Unable to compete, they have left their land to join the swelling pools of Mexico's urban unemployed. Others migrate to the U.S. to pick our crops — former farmers become day laborers.

The cheap U.S. corn has also wreaked havoc on Mexico's land, according to the Carnegie report. The small farmers forced off their land often sell out to larger farmers who grow for export, farmers who must adopt far more in-



**prairie
writers circle**

• michael pollan

dustrial (and especially chemical- and water-intensive) practices to compete in the international marketplace. Fertilizer runoff into the Sea of Cortez starves its marine life of oxygen, and Mexico's scarce water resources are leaching north, one tomato at a time.

Mexico's industrial farmers now produce fruits and vegetables for American tables year-round. It's absurd for a country like Mexico — whose people are often hungry — to use its best land to grow produce for a country where food is so abundant that its people are obese — but under free trade, it makes economic sense.

Meanwhile, the small farmers struggling to hold on in Mexico are forced to grow their corn on increasingly marginal lands, contributing to deforestation and soil erosion.

Compounding these environmental pressures is the advent of something new to Mexico: factory farming. The practice of feeding corn to livestock was actively discouraged by the Mexican government until quite recently — an expression of the culture's quasi-religious reverence for maize. But those policies were reversed in 1994, and, just as it has done in the United States, cheap corn has driven the growth of animal feedlots, which contribute to water and air pollution.

Cheap American corn in Mexico threatens Zea mays itself — and by extension all of us who have come to depend on this plant. The small Mexican farmers who grow corn in southern Mexico are responsible for maintaining the genetic diversity of the species. While American farmers raise a small handful of ge-

netically nearly identical hybrids, Mexico's small farmers still grow hundreds of different, open-pollinated varieties, commonly called landraces.

This genetic diversity, the product of 10,000 years of human-maize co-evolution, represents some of the most precious and irreplaceable information on Earth, as we were reminded in 1970 when a fungus decimated the American corn crop and genes for resistance were found in a landrace under cultivation in southern Mexico. These landraces will survive only as long as the farmers who cultivate them do. The cheap U.S. corn that is driving these farmers off their land threatens to dry up the pool of genetic diversity on which the future of the species depends.

Perhaps from a strictly economic point of view, free trade in a commodity like corn appears eminently rational. But look at the same phenomenon from a biological point of view and it begins to look woefully shortsighted, if not mad.

Michael Pollan, a professor at the University of California-Berkeley's Graduate School of Journalism, is the author of three books, including "The Botany of Desire." A contributing writer for the New York Times Magazine, he wrote this essay for the Land Institute's Prairie Writers Circle, Salina.

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