

Mean people's rights are as important as any

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.

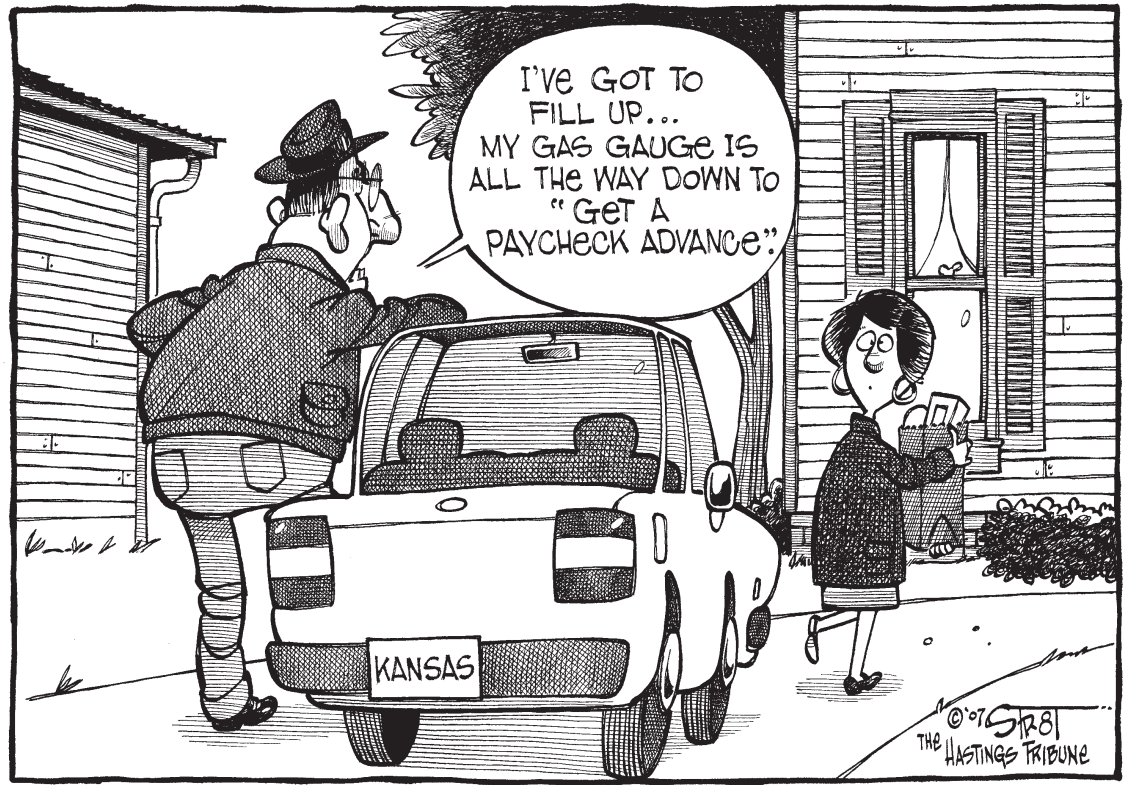
That's the danger — and the genius — of our strong system of human rights. It includes the freedom to be obnoxious, the freedom to be wrong.

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*



Why won't they let me shop?

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-sponsored art market and gave us 30 minutes to shop its three



Open Season

By Cynthia Haynes
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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 through 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.

Sing out for former prisoner

Hallelujah! Amen! Preach on, brother!

Sunday, we had the thrill of a lifetime when we, along with good friends Bob and Ila, Dwayne and Aurelia and Destry and Marisa, got to worship with a congregation in Wichita.

A young man, Andrew, who had attended our chapel services while he was at the Norton Correctional Facility, called to let us know he was off parole.

His first question to us was, "Could you come and sing with me at my church?"

With a little juggling of our weekend schedule the answer was, "Yes."

A couple of phone calls later, Bob and Ila were on board and so were Dwayne and Aurelia. Both couples have children in the area and didn't need much of an excuse to go visiting.

Andrew has one of the most amazing voices I have ever heard. His range is beyond tenor and his voice is crystal clear. I don't know much about music, but I can tell he has perfect pitch and an incredible talent.

His friendly nature and humble demeanor made him someone we wanted to know better. And the



Out Back

By Carolyn Sue Kelley-Plotts
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chance to sing with him "on the outside" was irresistible.

The predominantly black congregation he is part of was established as an outreach to people who have been in prison.

It is a perfect tie-in with our outreach to the families of men in prison.

The congregation was kind enough to give me a few minutes to tell them about the Haven, the house in Norton we operate to accommodate families of inmates who come to visit for the weekend.

We were made to feel welcome and given time to sing three songs. Andrew joined us, hitting the high notes like I knew he could. A lady from the congregation jumped in with us, and her strong harmony added to what, in my humble opinion, was a pretty awesome sound.

All in all, it was a great weekend. Adding to the fun was my friend

Jody's company. Her daughter lives in Wichita and Jody went along for the ride.

You know how good conversation makes the time go faster? Well, Jody and I talked about 90 miles an hour and the road just flew by.

We're tired, but it's a "good" tired.

Now, the trick is to get Andrew up here so everyone else can hear him. The invitation has been extended and he has agreed.

How about I let you know when he's coming? You have to hear him sing.

From the Bible

Then shall the earth yield her increase; and God, even our own God, shall bless us.
Psalm 67:6

Vietnamese see it differently

Surreal.

We looked at each other, the salesman from Tennessee and myself, as we walked through the jungle outside Saigon.

We had just toured the tourist attraction built around the old Cu Chi tunnels, a Viet Cong stronghold north of Saigon. Today, it's been rebuilt with representative bunkers showing how the sturdy communist soldiers lived underground while the Americans ravaged the surface.

At one point, a guide shows you how a "liberation fighter" could just disappear under a camouflaged trapdoor. Several of us, including South Dakota publisher Charley Najacht, a retired National Guard colonel who was a platoon leader in the war, tried the spider hole.

Then there's a tour where you can crawl through what's left of a real tunnel. Just going down there and looking creeped me out.

Americans and the French before them had a different name for this area. They called it the Iron Triangle, an area so difficult and so fortified that it denied all attempts to subdue it.

The Americans tried, mounting three major offensives through the zone in 1966 and 1967. One division-level sweep involved more than 16,000 troops. B-52s tried to carpet bomb the tunnels. American troops known as tunnel rats crawled in to demolish them.

But eventually, the Americans moved on and the communists rebuilt the tunnels. The Americans even built a division firebase on the south end of the complex to block attacks on Saigon.

Today, guides point out that it was located partly over one tunnel. The Vietnamese brag that the Americans never figured out how the guerrillas could pop up right in their midst.

For a generation that lived through what is known here as the American War, it's more than a little strange to be here — in the midst of a green, relatively prosperous and booming country — and hear all this from the "other" side.

The departure of the Americans



Along the Sappa

By Steve Haynes
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in 1975 marked the end of nearly a century of war and occupation for Vietnam, including domination by the French and the even more cruel Japanese.

If anyone today questions why the U.S. didn't "win" this war on the battlefield, they need only to know one statistic: While American battle losses are listed at 58,000 killed in action, the Vietnamese count theirs at 3 million, including 1 million combat troops.

An enemy willing to take that kind of losses and continue fighting will wear any power down.

So the U.S., under the old conservative Richard Nixon, just pulled out. Support for the war was gone. Peggy Hutchinson, who was with us on the trip, was a pioneering woman journalist in the '60s and '70s, one of the first women combat reporters. She recalled being on the roof of the Caravelle Hotel downtown watching as the communists rolled in to take Saigon.

"They were shooting people and

throwing the bodies in trucks," she said.

Chaotic film of the last helicopter leaving the U.S. embassy burns in our minds.

But today, our guide points out, more than 60 percent of the population in Vietnam was born after the war.

They have no memory of the conflict with the Americans and the "reactionary elements." They care only about the growing economy and feeding their families.

The same might be said of this country.

And if you want to know who won the war, look around at Cu Chi or the airport shops, anywhere in Vietnam. Cynthia marveled at the fact that everything is priced, not in dong or francs or euros, but in dollars.

"Maybe we did win," she said. Or looking at the bustling suburbs of this city of 7 million, with their new wide roads and LED traffic signals and herds of motor scooters, maybe in the end, everybody won.

Alumnus likes name

To the Editor:

I would like to thank you for your editorial on a potential name change for Fort Hays State University.

I attended Fort Hays for three years prior to transferring to the University of Kansas for my senior year. I was not aware that President Ed Hammond had suggested a name change and appreciate knowing this is going on, since I live out of state.

As an alumnae of the university, I receive regular calls for donations. I will be sure to add my voice to those who are NOT in favor of any name

Letter to the Editor

change when I receive the next call! I will also write to express my displeasure at any name change due to the very reasons listed in your editorial.

Kay Harold
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