

## Our founders knew the value of free speech

*Why should freedom of speech and of the press be allowed? Why should a government which is doing what it believes to be right allow itself to be criticized?*

*It should not allow opposition by lethal weapons. Ideas are much more fatal things than guns. Why should any man be allowed to buy a printing press and disseminate pernicious opinion calculated to embarrass the government?*

Practical reality, or antidemocratic thinking at its worst?

Government leaders sometimes think they know what is best for us. They think it would be easier to “get things done” if they could work behind closed doors.

To this way of thinking, allowing the public or its representatives, the press, to watch the government process is just a waste of time.

Behind closed doors, that’s how government used to operate in America, despite our two-century pretension to democratic ideals.

Political parties chose candidates nominated in smoke-filled rooms. Party bosses made the decisions, sometimes voting uncommitted slates, making deals for ambassadorships, cabinet seats and pork-barrel projects.

City councils and state legislatures often went behind closed doors. Ward healers delivered the vote in city precincts, and candidates did as they were told once elected.

A lot has changed in America since that day. We come a lot closer to living up to our ideals.

Presidential candidates are chosen in an open process, involving millions of voters and far fewer back-room deals.

States have laws requiring government meetings to be open and allowing citizens to inspect public documents.

Still, many officials might be tempted to agree with the words above. After all, they believe they are trying to do what is right. From hard experience and great devotion,

they know the city or county or school district needs.

They miss the point: It’s not just what government does that people need to know in a democracy, but why and how a decision was reached. Then, and only then, can voters make intelligent decisions on their leaders.

All that may sound high minded, theoretical. But people need to know what their officials are doing and why. They hire the press — newspapers, magazines, television stations, bloggers — to tell them what’s going on. And it’s hard to get a story right when decisions aren’t made in the open.

The author of those words above? V.I. Lenin, founder of the Soviet state.

Lenin did not start out to build a soulless government. He thought he was doing the right thing for “the people.” He’d allow no one to get in his way.

One of our founders, Thomas Jefferson, had a different view. He believed a free press provided the only way for a large population to know the truth.

“If I had to choose between a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I would choose newspapers without a government,” Jefferson wrote.

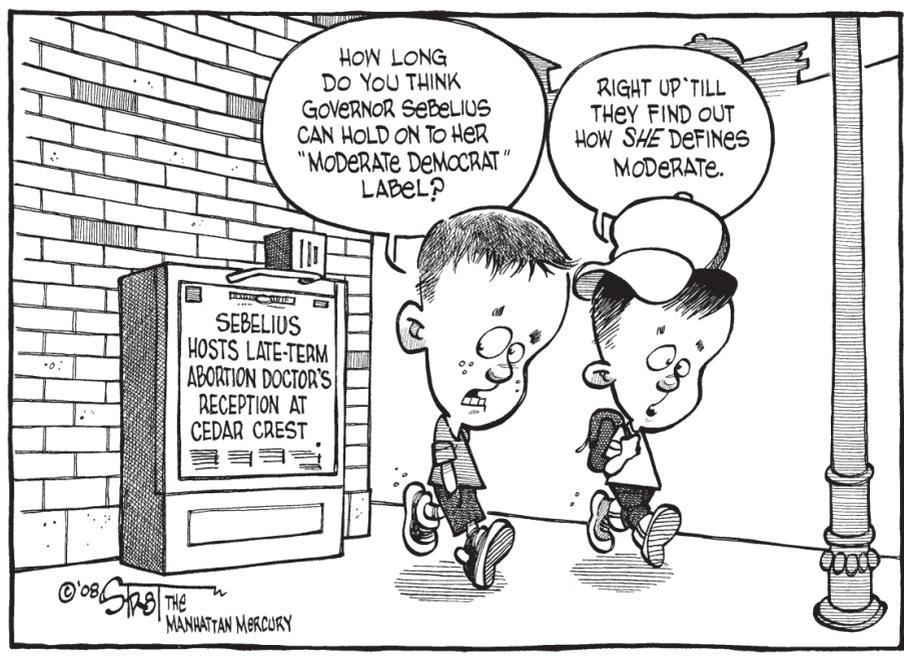
His pen helped shape the First Amendment, still the greatest statement of freedom in our history. It’s spare language says more than many books. Its influence is mighty.

*Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.*

Today, no doubt, it would take a couple dozen pages to say all that.

Lucky we are to live in the shadow of Jefferson, and not of Lenin.

— Steve Haynes



## More hail, storms, tornadoes

The weather service is predicting rain and hail, thunderstorms and tornadoes. Well, how is that different from almost every night since mid May?

Some years are just like this. Watch the clouds move in every night. Pray for rain. Hope it doesn’t hail and keep a flashlight in the tornado shelter.

Thursday was no different. The forecast was for rain, lightning, hail, and possibly, the wrath of God. We left anyway.

I know. I know. “What’s with this ‘we left’ stuff, You guys are never home, anyway,” you say.

It’s true. But, this time it was a short trip to Washington — Washington, Kansas, that is — for the annual U.S. Highway 36 Association meeting.

We left before the weather got nasty in Oberlin. Stopped in Norcatur to pick up Bob Strevey, who also was going to the meeting, and headed on down the highway listening to the police radio give out warnings of tornados, damaging winds, hail the size of baseballs, flash floods and other doom and gloom.

I’m not sure why we even listen to that good news. Police radios never have any good news. Some days, you think there’s no good news in the paper. Well, try listening for something, anything good on the police, fire and ambulance channels.

Anyway we watched the clouds swirl around us — dark to the south, east and west. The crew at the news-



## Open Season

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paper called and said they were closing down and heading home before the hail struck. Could they use our empty garage and basement?

Sure. The next report was that they didn’t make it to the garage and had to shelter under a big tree out front. With the number of leaves I found in my yard the next day, I’m not sure if that was a good move or not. Still any hailstone that hits a leaf or branch probably loses a lot of force before it has a chance to bounce off your windshield or hood.

We pulled into Washington and the town was real quiet and damp. People were coming out of their basements. We had made the whole 3 1/2-hour trip without getting so much as a drop on us.

At the motel, the owner said she had 15 people with her in the basement. Apparently, we just missed the thunderstorm and tornado alert. There seemed to be no damage around town, so I’m guessing the tornado missed them.

Back home, there was no tornado, but the hail mowed down my bean plants. Poor beans. The first planting got frozen. (Remember that freeze

we had on Mother’s Day?) Now the rest got creamed by hailstones.

I only lost a couple of corn plants and one tomato. I was short a green pepper plant also, but since the cat had done that one in before I left, I’m not blaming the weather.

Knowing that I’d lost some plants, I bought several at the Duckwalls in Washington. I’d already scoured Oberlin for pepper plants and had bought just about the last tomatoes in town the week before to replace earlier canine and feline damage.

Some people say that they had no hail. Others were busy replanting. I offered them some of my imported plants.

I figure we’re pretty luckily. The corn, peas, tomatoes, peppers, broccoli lettuce and spinach came through fine. The beans took a beating, but they’ll come back or they won’t. They’re not all gone. We’ll get a crop. Or, we may get more hail.

Guess, I’ll do that only thing I know to do about hard water from heaven.

“Hail Mary, full of grace....”

## Framing is his favorite thing

Jim headed out the door bright and early today. He’s building a new garage for some friends of ours and was anxious to get started. Framing is one of his favorite things, and he expected to have a big day.

It’s been awhile since he has taken on a project like this, and I wanted to send him off with a hearty lunch. He said he just wanted a light lunch but, by the time I packed a cooler with ice, soft drinks, iced tea, hard-boiled eggs, crackers and cottage cheese, he could barely lift it.

“Woman!” he said. “What are you trying to do? There’s enough food in here for me and two other guys.”

-ob-

We did something fun Sunday evening. These friends that Jim is building the garage for invited us out to their place for an impromptu supper. Nothing fancy, just good food and good conversation. Their grandchildren were there, so the house was jumping.

Folks don’t do enough of that sort of thing anymore, “neighbor-ing” back and forth. My folks used to have company in for supper and cards or we would go to a neighbor’s



## Out Back

By Carolyn Sue Kelley-Plotts  
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house all the time.

I think we’re all too busy or too concerned about how the house looks. I know there are times I would die if anyone saw the state of our house, but I still shouldn’t let that stop me from being hospitable. I know I don’t give anyone else’s home the white-glove test, so I should assume they don’t do that to mine.

There’s nothing we enjoy more than visiting with friends or making new ones.

-ob-

My daughter Kara and I are trying to coordinate a time when her daughter, Taylor, can come for her annual visit from Dallas. In the past, Kara and I would rendezvous in Wichita (about half way for both

of us), stay the night in a motel with a pool and then each return to our homes the next day, me with Taylor for two or three weeks and she to some private time with her husband Adam.

Kara and I have been discussing the possibility of Taylor flying to Denver, where I would be waiting for her when she gets off the plane. I even promised to go out the night before so I could be waiting in the airport terminal before Taylor got on the plane in Dallas.

Kara said Taylor had been listening to her end of one of our conversations and said, “But Mom, if I fly to Grandma’s, we won’t get to spend a night in the motel.” And here all we were thinking about was gas and time.

## Is it fair to back new motel?

Should Oberlin back a promoter who wants to build a new motel or protect the business of those who own the town’s one remaining motel?

It’s a tough question. It’s been more than 40 years since anyone built a motel here. Highway development pretty much stopped along two-lane roads after the development of the Interstate system, which concentrated traffic on those major routes.

Any town needs new development, Oberlin more than most, so it’s tempting to jump right on the bandwagon. This is something we’ve wanted for a long time.

But no one offered the owners of the old Frontier Motel a tax break when they bought the property or fixed it up, and no one’s offering to safeguard their business now or next year if a new competitor comes to town.

This is not a clear-cut case, like when a firm wants to build a manufacturing business in town. There is competition. These people have their savings invested in the old motel.

What should the city do? The developer, Dave Winfield of Kearney, Neb., is asking for a property tax abatement and a sales tax exemption to get the new motel built. That means he’d avoid paying all or part of the property tax on the increased valuation of the property, plus state sales taxes.

The city wouldn’t lose any revenue, but it wouldn’t gain any for the life of the tax breaks, usually



## Along the Sappa

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10 years.

Then, according to reports from Thursday’s council meeting, the developer is asking that the community provide the land, \$16,000 in paving, dirt work, water, sewer and electrical lines and then issue tax-exempt bonds, which would be sold on the open market.

All that — the land, paving and grading, and utility lines — could cost the city quite a bit. The bonds themselves would be repaid by the motel, with no obligation to the city. The benefit to the developer is that interest on the bonds would be tax-exempt, making them easier to sell.

One solution would be to decide what the city and the development group are willing to do to get the new motel, then offer the same deal to owners of any existing hotel. It seems only fair to cut them in on the public money if we’re going to give any to an outsider.

But there’s no guarantee the owners of existing hotels, either the Frontier or the downtown Land-Mark Inn, could or would want to remodel. The LandMark is a historic building and its size is limited by location. Conceivably, it could

expand by buying vacant buildings nearby. Whether that would pay for itself is another question.

It could cost a bundle to renovate the Frontier to bring it up to current standards, with larger rooms and new furnishings. Again, it’s a question not just of desire, but of return. Would remodeling pay for itself? Or might it be cheaper to start over.

The motel business here has been tough. Two operations have closed in the last few years, and one now is used to house construction workers. The town could use a new facility, competitive with the national chains, but at what price?

The questions the City Council has to answer are two, really:

Can Oberlin afford to back a new motel? Can it afford not to?

And, knowing a new motel might damage the business of investors in existing facilities, is it fair to back a new one?

If the answer is to offer help to everyone, how much can we afford?

As I said, it’s not that easy of a decision. The offer is tempting. The cost, to the city and to the owners of the Frontier, could be significant.

What do you think?

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