

# Opinions

## The First Amendment

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.

### LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

#### Prioritize prudence over profit

The Mission Health - HCA Healthcare deal is a defining moment in Western North Carolina's health-care future. Before the deal is done, there must be comprehensive analyses of the details ranging from how the \$1.5 billion in proceeds will be spent to who will be the money handlers — the members of the Dogwood Health Trust. Much has been hidden from public view.

That the Asheville Citizen Times editorial board endorses the need for rigorous review and oversight is reassuring. The editorial spotlighted public misgivings about who serves on the Dogwood Trust board.

There is much concern that the board members neither sufficiently represent the demographics of the region nor have the best interests of public foremost in their plans. Board member decisions will have far-reaching and long-term impacts on the health and health care of the thousands of Western North Carolinians in rural and urban areas. Currently, the board is weighted with former Mission Health executives and metropolitan Asheville's well-to-do and well connected.

This is not just another business deal that will serve corporate shareholders. It must also serve the public interest and necessity. Clearly it's a case for prioritizing prudence over profits.

Peter Kent, Asheville

#### There are ways over – and under – walls

I just found a December 18 US Customs and Border Protection web posting headlined "Incomplete Illicit Cross-Border Tunnel Discovered in Nogales, AZ." This particular tunnel was being built to bring drugs into the United States. The criminals that are building these tunnels would likely branch out to smuggling people to circumvent President Trump's proposed wall. This happened with the East German Berlin Wall.

Douglas Baird, Asheville

#### Will our generation be great again?

Our WWII parents were known as the greatest generation. How about us? Based on the just-released Senate investigations, the Russians are trying their best to turn us into the hate-ist generation — turning Americans against Americans and tearing our country and democracy apart with their divisive social media attacks. Trump, with his tweets, is complicit in adding fuel to the fire, as are those of us who gullibly re-tweet this Russian sabotage.

We each must recognize that we are as much at war today as was the greatest generation, with an enemy whose goal is to not just to undermine our American democracy, but to de-legitimize America as a model for aspiring developing countries.

The question is: Is our generation capable of meeting this new threat? Can we become the collaborative American democracy we once were? Does each of us have the will? The courage? Or, will Russia triumph at last, without firing a single shot? America's fate is in our generation's hands.

Stuart Smolkin, Asheville

#### HCA deal will set us up for success

The healthcare landscape in our country has changed considerably in recent decades, so it is understandable that residents of rural Western North Carolina want to ensure they continue to have access to high-quality healthcare services at local hospitals.

I believe the proposed transaction of the Mission Health System with HCA Healthcare would go a long way toward alleviating concerns about the future of our rural hospitals.

As part of the agreement, HCA Healthcare has committed to keeping all Mission Health hospitals, including the rural facilities, open for at least 10 years after the closing of the deal, with additional protections extending beyond that timeframe. The Mission hospitals will continue to be managed locally, but with HCA Healthcare joining our communities, rural residents will have access to top-notch care with best practices in cardiology, oncology, behavioral health, women's and children's health.

Additionally, the proceeds from this approximately \$1.5 billion transaction will be used to fund the Dogwood Health Trust, a foundation independent of HCA Healthcare that will focus exclusively on supporting the well-being of Western North Carolina communities.

This foundation, combined with HCA Healthcare's resources will bring the best care to our communities both now and well into the future.

Andrew Riddle, Flat Rock



## Trump has been walking a tightrope of lies, and now he is teetering



Eugene Robinson  
Columnist

WASHINGTON — There was plenty of awful legal news for President Trump this week, but the worst may have come from an official who hasn't yet been sworn in.

Letitia James, who will become the New York state attorney general next month, told NBC she plans to "use every area of the law to investigate President Trump and his business transactions and that of his family as well." James also said she hopes to pursue state charges against Trump associates whom the president might pardon for federal crimes.

No wonder Trump was so untethered when Chuck and Nancy dropped by.

Trump has been walking a tightrope of lies all his adult life, and now he is teetering. He has inflated his wealth. He has aggrandized his business acumen. He has managed to convince supporters that he is a respected businessman who brilliantly commanded a vast real estate empire. In a fanciful 2015 statement of his net worth, he claimed that his brand alone — just the name Trump — was worth \$3 billion.

I wonder what it's worth now.

In reality, Trump has never come anywhere near the top rank of New York real estate developers. He ran not a huge, sprawling enterprise but a small family firm in which he and his children had direct control. He was seen as so unreliable that genuine moguls refused to have anything to do with him. When he tried to go big — risking everything on casino development in Atlantic City — he failed miserably, despite his father's efforts to bail him out. His bankers were left holding the bag, and now most major financial institutions won't lend the Trump Organization a dime. It was Trump's undeniable skill as a television performer on "The Apprentice" that saved him from total ruin.

Now the law is beginning to squeeze him from all directions. His former consigliere, Michael Cohen, was sentenced Wednesday to three years in prison. One of the crimes Cohen confessed to committing was violating federal campaign-finance laws by orchestrating six-figure payments to a Playboy model and a porn star, in the weeks before the 2016 election, to ensure their silence about sexual encounters they say they had with Trump. Cohen says he did this at Trump's direction.

Trump's see-no-evil allies dismiss Cohen as a proven liar about other matters. But also Wednesday, the company that owns the National Enquirer — American Media Inc. (AMI), which is run by Trump's close friend, David Pecker — admitted playing a major role in that same hush-money scheme. The aim, according to the company, was to help Trump win the election.

Trump responded by tweeting that "I never directed Michael Cohen to break the law." But in the past, the president has also said that there weren't any hush-money payments; that if such payments were

made, he didn't know about them; and that the payments, which totaled \$280,000, were a "simple private transaction."

The bottom line is that two witnesses, Cohen and AMI, independently now implicate the president of the United States in the commission of two felonies.

The campaign-finance case is being brought by federal prosecutors in the Southern District of New York. Back in Washington, meanwhile, special counsel Robert Mueller has been busy as well.

We learned this week that Michael Flynn, Trump's short-lived national security adviser, has met with Mueller's team 19 times to tell them what he knows. We also learned that Cohen has been eagerly cooperating with the Mueller probe. This means that at least two people in a position to know whether collusion with the Russians took place are singing like songbirds.

Potentially more serious for Trump and his family in the long run, however, is what the New York state probe might discover.

How much of the Trump Organization's revenue has come from the sale of luxury real estate to oligarchs from Russia and other kleptocracies? Where did these buyers' money come from? Why was Deutsche Bank — recently raided by German authorities and under investigation for money laundering — the only major financial institution willing to lend money to Trump in recent years? Where did Trump's company get the large amounts of cash used in several transactions that Washington Post reporters uncovered? How much commingling of funds was there between Trump's company and his eponymous foundation?

Trump's longtime accountant, Allen Weisselberg, has turned state's evidence. He may be the Virgil who guides federal, state and local prosecutors through a Trumpian inferno of shell companies and opaque transactions. The outlines of Trump's fate begin to emerge.

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**For information:** Call Casey Blake at 828-232-5841 or email cblake@citizen-times.com.

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