

Editorials are the institutional voice of The Free Press and independent of the newsroom reporting staff

OUR VIEW: SEXUAL ASSAULT

Take sexual assault more seriously

The Legislature, local law enforcement and prosecutors must address critical flaws in Minnesota's system of investigating, prosecuting and evaluating sexual assault cases where victims have for too long been ignored.

Why it matters:

A Star Tribune in-depth report showed serious flaws in the prosecution of sexual assault cases in Minnesota.

An in-depth Star Tribune report last year showed egregious errors in the prosecution of sexual assault cases throughout the state. Victims weren't believed and in some cases were ignored. Investigators wrote off cases when it seemed alcohol was involved. Some suspects were never questioned. Attitudes were not much better. One law enforcement officer described managing the sexual assault unit as a "dead-end assignment."

The hundreds of cases reviewed by the Star Tribune showed a systemic problem with investigation and prosecution of cases and pointed to attitudes of police, poor and inappropriate investigative techniques, little training for officers and little support for victims going through the trauma of a sexual assault.

The good news is that the law enforcement, the legal community and lawmakers responded to the report with serious efforts to study the issue and make recommendations for changes.

Minnesota Attorney General Lori Swanson convened a task force that recently made recommendations to the Legislature. The Peace Officers Standards and Training board also convened a committee to study the issue and recommended changes for protocols and practice in the investigation of sexual assault.

Both groups will recommend more training for police officers. Another recommendation calls for setting up a statewide accountability board to review and critique investigations.

Other recommendations include modifying how alcohol and consent are used as factors in decisions to prosecute. There is a call for making sure victim advocates are readily available and mandated in cases to help victims navigate the system.

A set of recommendations calls for changes to law enforcement training protocols and educational pieces to help combat dismissive attitudes by prosecutors and law enforcement in sexual assault cases.

But the larger problem of societal attitudes toward sexual assault will continue to cast a shadow on the entire process. Reporting sexual assault remains the most difficult part of prosecuting cases.

Inver Grove Police Chief Paul Schnell told the Star Tribune that building trust among sexual assault survivors will be one of the most important changes.

"I think it's important that they understand that there is a system and network in our state that is here to address these issues to investigate them thoroughly and hopefully to find some sense of justice — whatever that ultimately looks like," Schnell said.

The recommendation from the task force and changes proposed by the POST board should be approved and implemented as soon as possible. One more sexual assault case that goes unprosecuted is one too many.

OTHER VIEW

A great early target for gun legislation

New York Daily News

We badly want Democrats to use their new House majority not to posture, but to pass concrete legislation that improves the lives of ordinary people.

So it's heartening to hear that incoming House Speaker Nancy Pelosi is eager to lead her chamber to intelligently tighten gun laws in a manner supported by nine out of 10 Americans.

Politico reports that Democrats are poised to move a bill to require federal background checks on all gun sales, with small exemptions

for transfers between family members and temporary use of a gun for hunting.

Roughly a fifth of all gun sales now escape such checks; sales over the internet, a growing share of all firearm purchases, are a Texas-sized loophole.

Making sure felons and mentally unstable people can't snap their fingers and get their hands on killing machines is as obvious as it gets. Studies show background checks could sharply reduce gun deaths; in the first year of the Trump administration, they hit a 40-year high.

FOUNDED IN 1887

The Free Press

1st 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.

STEVE JAMESON, Publisher

EDITORIAL MANAGEMENT

JOSEPH SPEAR, Managing Editor
KATHY VOS, News Editor
TIM KROHN, Business Editor
ROBB MURRAY, Features Editor
PAT CHRISTMAN, Photo Editor
JIM RUEDA, Sports Editor

BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

JUSTIN NILES, Audience Development Director
GLEN ASLESON, Facilities & Technology Manager
TODD BROUWER, Press/Post Press Manager
DEB PETERSON, General Manager - The Land

LETTERS POLICY

The Free Press welcomes letters on any issue of general community interest. Please limit your letters to no more than 275 words, typewritten or clearly printed. Letters or emails citing facts that are not commonly known should include the source. Letters must contain the author's name, address and phone number for verification. All letters will be edited for clarity, grammar, spelling and space. You may email letters to the editor to editor@mankatofreepress.com.



The meaning of Mattis

James Mattis' resignation letter laid bare the frightening future of national security under President Donald Trump.

The defense secretary made it clear that he could no longer serve a president who betrays our friends and bows to our adversaries. The last straw was Trump's green light to Turkey to massacre our Syrian Kurdish allies.

But what finally drove Mattis out was not just Trump's callous indifference toward America's friends. It was also the way Trump has turned foreign policy-making into a one-man show based on personal whim — or self-aggrandizement.

The last significant foreign policy brake on the self-styled "genius" in the White House will now be gone. Americans better hunker down for 2019 — because Trump's stunning decision on Syria highlights every dangerous component of his policy-making approach.

Consider them one by one: Trump's foreign policy process has become so chaotic it is almost nonexistent. Trump suddenly tweeted the news that 2,000 U.S. forces would leave Syria within weeks without prior consultation with any of his team — not the Pentagon, not his secretary of state, not his national security adviser, not his commanders, not Congress, not NATO allies fighting alongside us in Syria, not the Kurds.

In the preceding weeks, almost every top Trump adviser on Syria — both military and civilian — had been stating publicly that those troops would stay for some time to prevent an Islamic State revival or further advances by Iran. Syrian Kurds had also been recently reassured. Just this month, the U.S. special

envoy to the anti-Islamic State coalition, Brett McGurk, told reporters: "Americans will remain on the ground after the physical defeat of the (Islamic State) caliphate, until we have the pieces in place to ensure that that defeat is enduring. Nobody is declaring a mission accomplished."

From Mattis on down, all of these U.S. officials were blindsided by Trump's tweet. As were the Kurds.

Trump's foreign policy decisions appear driven more by personal issues than security concerns. In a video defending his Syria decision, Trump declared, "We have won against ISIS." Not true.

There are an estimated 20,000 to 30,000 Islamic State fighters believed to be in Syria and Iraq, who could re-emerge if U.S. troops leave prematurely. U.S. special forces — while small in numbers — give Kurds and Sunni tribesmen the confidence to keep fighting, while training them to take over after a future U.S. exit. They also gather intelligence on the growing Iranian presence in Syria.

Those U.S. troops provide Washington with its main leverage in ongoing international negotiations over Syria's political future, preparing the ground for U.S. troops to ultimately leave. Trump's move has cut the legs out from under U.S. negotiators.

So why did Trump tweet now? No sign security interests were considered.

It's possible that the unusual criticism he took last week from far-right Fox News commentators about the border wall convinced Trump he needed to fulfill a different campaign promise and bring the troops home. Or — since Trump shows little interest in long-term strategic thinking, and views every foreign policy issue

in terms of making the best monetary deal — his phone conversation last week with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan may hold the key. The two leaders discussed new arms deals — a quid pro quo for letting Turkey crush the Kurds?

Which brings us to the third component: Trump emboldens autocrats while betraying allies. The president kowtowed to the despotic Erdogan, despite Turkey's pledge to bury the Kurds. The Turks have already bombed the Kurdish Afrin region of Syria.

Moreover, those who will gain most from the U.S. withdrawal, besides Erdogan, are Russia's Vladimir Putin and Iran's ayatollahs, whose hold on Syria will be solidified after a total U.S. exit. Putin swiftly praised Trump's decision to quit Syria. (Mattis has long been disturbed by Trump's attraction to the Russian leader).

And, of course, the Kurds, who face Turkish slaughter from the sky, are stunned. It was Trump's indifference to their fate that reportedly propelled Mattis to quit. He also knows that Trump's betrayal will discourage any putative allies from working with the United States in the future.

And so, the retired Marine general reached his limit. (He also opposed another sudden Trump order for half the 14,000 U.S. troops in Afghanistan to return home, undercutting new U.S. efforts to negotiate a deal between Afghan leaders and the Taliban.)

But Mattis' stand won't curb Trump unless the retired Marine general speaks out publicly. And unless a critical mass of Republican senators finally recognizes the danger of an unrestrained Trump and confront him.

Email Trudy Rubin at trubin@phillynews.com.

Why we need Fox News

Some of you readers almost surely hate Fox News. But you know something? It isn't really so bad. It counterbalances the anti-Trump, leftist, overreaching, sometimes hysterical bias afflicting too much of what too many of its TV competitors offer. And, even without Charles Krauthammer, much of it is pretty darned intelligent and insightful.

Minus Fox, conservative commentary on TV wouldn't be gone entirely, but it would be vastly diminished, thereby delighting people like Bernie Sanders and Barack Obama. The former president could hardly stand it that Fox didn't think he was just about always right.

Krauthammer didn't for sure. I bring up his name because he was widely recognized in varied political camps as an extraordinary newspaper and Fox News commentator. He was one of the best news analysts in the country, someone meticulously well-informed and thoughtful, a man whose mansion of a mind I myself have missed so much since his illness and recent death. Few could do what he could do.

When the critics ponder Fox News, however, they have mostly liked to gaze at a different sort of regular, such as Sean Hannity. While he has his virtues, he was practically a Trump campaign manager during the elections and serves as something of an extra press secretary in the here

and now. Unlike a wisely detached Krauthammer, a conservative who did not hesitate to go after Trump when as much was called for, Hannity is buddy-buddy with the Oval Office and no better at enlightened perspectives than his Trump-despising opposites on other cable channels.

But then there's Alan Dershowitz, an omnipresent Fox guest, a deservedly famous retired Harvard law professor, a self-identified liberal who is principled enough to make many of his fellow liberals suddenly condemn him. He sees the whole special counsel investigation as pretty much a fraud that is flying circles around the law and degrading the Constitution. Proceed with an impeachment movement, this civil libertarian says, and you may endanger the republic.

Another champ of intellect as well as a first-rate impartial newsmen is Chris Wallace, host of "Fox News Sunday" and someone whose questions neither shout nor antagonize but seek and get incisive give-and-take from lively panels. Wallace does still more on Fox, but wait, I now want to point to another show of heft, one of the best hours of calm, cool, instructive discussion you'll get on TV.

It's the "Journal Editorial Report" hosted by Paul Gigot, editor of surely one of the best editorial pages in America, that of the Wall Street Journal. He is a Pulitzer Prize winner,

surrounds himself with other Journal whizzes and calls as well on outsiders whose expertise pops balloons of bombast both left and right.

You also might want to catch Mark Levin, a solid believer in what America stands for, an advisor to Cabinet members in the Reagan administration, a radio host with other megaphones, an author of fine books and someone who interviews other smart people on Fox. Listen, watch and learn.

I can't delve into everyone, such as the satirical wits on "The Five" or such well-known names as Dana Perino, Laura Ingraham and Tucker Carlson, for instance, although I will say this: Carlson is charming and great at correcting politically correct goofiness, although his populism is not my thing. I also respect Juan Williams as a regular representing the progressive point of view, which I think he does pretty well even if it's hard not to get deked occasionally with so many swinging back.

While I've mostly been commenting on commentary, the straight news is by and large reasonably good for TV. The deal, the big deal, is that truth is not so easy to get at, that no ideology has forever escaped fallacy and that just as our democracy needs liberal and conservative politicians to fight off the worst of each other, we need TV commentators who do the same.

Email Jay Ambrose at speaktojay@aol.com.



JAY AMBROSE
Tribune News Service