

Your views. Our views. Opinion from across the world.

# THE OPINION PAGE

In the Mail: letters@gfherald.com; Box 6008, Grand Forks, N.D. 58206

## OUR VIEW

### Why is it so wrong to ask about shots?

**Herald editorial board**  
When the Herald sent a questionnaire asking local elected officials if they have been vaccinated against COVID-19, it seemed like a boilerplate, yet relevant, survey.

After all, the Herald asked federal delegates and high officeholders that question in a survey earlier this year. Of the 13 we asked, 10 answered.

Sen. Kevin Cramer, R-N.D., politely responded: "Out of respect for the North Dakotans who value their liberty and privacy, I will not be detailing the specifics of my vaccination status."

So it's surprising to see local backlash. One state lawmaker called the Herald and incorrectly told us our survey is a violation of HIPAA, a surprisingly uninformed take on the law by one who makes laws. Some took to social media, claiming we are creating a database or that it's "a trap." One of the commenters (not the elected officials themselves) noted our use of the word "deadline" in the survey, as if it's some trick, rather than a term used every day in the newspaper industry as we plan our content. An invitation recently sent by the Herald to a handful of local leaders to help us tout some good news happening in the community, or the deadline attached to it, didn't similarly make it onto social media.

Another wondered if the Herald's employees are vaccinated (answer: the Herald is a private entity, but for the sake of this conversation, the publisher confirms he has received the vaccine).

So why do we ask?  
As lawmakers discuss coronavirus mitigation forms, we wonder where they stand on vaccines. We believe it's our duty to inquire about the health of leaders who answer only to the people and not to a particular boss. These leaders are in charge of public health departments whose staff have urged residents to get vaccinated. Also, people take their cues from elected leaders and local influencers.

When then-Grand Forks Mayor Mike Brown had triple-bypass surgery in 2015 but didn't reveal it for nearly two weeks, we wrote that his secrecy was "a betrayal of the trust that Grand Forks residents vest in their mayor."

In 2017, when state Rep. Lois Delmore, D-Grand Forks, missed a series of votes in the Legislature, the Herald reported she had been in the hospital. In 2020, we reported Sen. Ray Holmberg, R-Grand Forks, had contracted COVID.

Back to vaccines: Federal government workers are required to have the shot. Locally, Altru Health System - a massive employer - has mandated vaccines for its employees. To enter Canada requires proof of vaccination.

So why is it morally wrong to simply ask local elected officials, who answer to the people, if they are vaccinated?  
And regarding HIPAA, the federal law that guarantees health privacy, one critical point about it is that entities - hospitals, businesses, etc. - cannot disclose personal health information. However, people can disclose their own information; further, people can ask other people about their information. If a person declines to answer, that's legally OK, too.

This has become a much bigger hullabaloo than it needs to be, aided by social media's outrage and the confirmation that some crave from it.

The elected leaders who received the survey could easily answer one of three ways: A) yes. B) no. C) I prefer not to say.

We can ask politicians their stance on abortion or same-sex marriage, but not whether they have the vaccine? This is the question that blows up the internet?

Either way, we reserve the right to ask.

## ND overlooks engaging storyteller

This year's Pulitzer Prize for Fiction went to Louise Erdrich for "The Night Watchman," her 17th novel. The award got scant attention in North Dakota, which is too bad, because Erdrich is the state's most prolific and engaging storyteller.

In addition to novels, she has published a collection of short stories, two books of non-fiction, three of poetry and seven books for children. The focus of her attention is what might be called "West Chippewa Country," which extends from Lake of the Woods to the Montana border with enclaves elsewhere, including the Twin Cities, Wood Mountain in Saskatchewan, Trenton, N.D., near the mouth of the Yellowstone River, and Lewistown, in central Montana.

Chippewa is still widely used, but many prefer Ojibwe or Anishinaabe. The last includes a much larger group of Indigenous peoples, whose territory extends from Michigan and Ontario through Wisconsin and Minnesota. Ojibwe is more specific.

The center of Erdrich's Ojibwe country and the locale for her book is Turtle Mountain, which sits astride the international border about halfway across North Dakota and close to smack dab in the middle of North America. Turtle Mountain is the home of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians.

The watchman of the title is based on Erdrich's grandfather, Aunishenaubay, known also as Patrick Gourneau, who was tribal chairman at Turtle Mountain in the 1950s, when Congress



MIKE JACOBS

moved to "terminate" several tribes of American Indians, the Turtle Mountain band among them.

The political figure behind "termination" was Sen. Arthur Vivian Watkins, a Utah Republican. He described termination as "the removal of restrictions over Indian property and person" in the title of an article in "The Annals of the American Society of Political and Social Science" published in 1957.

Erdrich, an enrolled member of the band, now lives in the Cities. She was raised in Wahpeton, N.D., where her father taught at a residential school for native youth. He encouraged his children to write, and three of his daughters are published poets.

Grandfather Gourneau was a writer, too. His output included letters to political figures, especially Milton R. Young, who represented North Dakota in the U.S. Senate for 34 years.

In addition to the letters, Gourneau prepared exhaustive testimony about conditions on the Turtle Mountain reservation, headed a delegation of Turtle Mountain citizens to travel first to Fargo for a field hearing and then to Washington, D.C. He recruited Martin Cross, a leader of the MHA nation of the affiliated Mandan,

Arikara and Hidatsa people. While Watkins was busy attempting termination, Cross and his people were moving out of the Missouri River bottomlands as water rose behind Garrison Dam.

Gourneau also wrote the first history of the Turtle Mountain band, a fact-laden pamphlet that went through nearly a dozen editions as he remembered more and learned still more about his people's struggles with the U.S. government.

Erdrich herself concentrates on the termination fight. She creates a cast of characters and develops several subplots, including the search for "Vera," a young woman lost and exploited in Minneapolis, amateur boxers named Wobbly and Wood Mountain, who faced off in the ring to raise funds to send tribal representatives to Washington, and the novel's hero, whom she calls Thomas Wazhask, who takes on the character of Patrick Gourneau.

But the protagonist of the novel is a young woman named Patrice but called "Pixie." Pixie works at the Turtle Mountain Ordnance Plant, later known as the "William Langer Jewel Bearing Factory," an irony given the senator's position on termination as reported by Erdrich.

Pixie is naïve in some ways, and her awkward approach to sexuality gets her into trouble more than once. She has a deep and intuitive understanding of the natural world, however, and the book provides many insights into Ojibwe lifeways and patterns of thought. Erdrich sometimes has

her characters think and converse in Ojibwe.

Like Erdrich's earlier books, "The Night Watchmen" is rooted in place but moves effortlessly through time, lending background and depth to the story. Erdrich has won many awards for her fiction, including the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award. "The Plague of Doves" was a Pulitzer finalist in 2009.

Erdrich's grandfather defeated termination.

The jewel bearing plant is still in operation, although it has been privatized as Microlap Technologies, which remains an important employer in north-central North Dakota. The plant in Rolla produces most of the country's jewel bearings. Historically most of these went into watches, but the bearings are used in other gadgets ranging from gyroscopes to skateboards. The company's website describes its products as "high-precision custom components from ultra-hard materials."

"The Night Watchman" runs to 450 pages. I found the first pages heavy going, but I stuck to it, mostly because I have enjoyed and admired Erdrich's previous novels. By the end of "The Night Watchman" I felt richly rewarded yet again.

Thanks to Leslie Peltier of Turtle Mountain Community College for pointing my way to Patrick Gourneau's history of the Turtle Mountain people.

**Wrong again**

South Dakota does have single-member districts, but most districts elect two members to the state House of Representatives.

## IN THE MAIL

### Democrats seek to control election

To the editor,  
The United States now has a population of over 352 million individuals including at least 20 million undocumented individuals living among us. At present we have 6,291,232 individuals infected with the coronavirus; which means just over 98 percent are not infected with the virus. Grand Forks County has a population of 69,451 with 52 individuals currently infected with the virus, which means 99.9% of county residents are not infected with the virus.

Going on eight months into 2021, North Dakota has had 142 actual deaths from COVID-19. Heart disease and cancer on average kill approximately 1,300 annually. Followed by Alzheimer's, chronic lower other respiratory diseases, accidents and strokes that each average around 350 deaths annually. So I have to ask why so much attention paid to a virus that could have been already licked had not the Biden administration opened the flood gates allowing undocumented, untested, infected individuals to disperse throughout American states and cities without any preparation or permission from those locations.

North Dakota Health Department statistics for Grand Forks County recorded a peak infection of 1,222 individuals during November 2020, which coincidentally was also the month Joe Biden became the most popularly elected president in American history, who when he did leave



his basement to campaign couldn't fill a small venue during his highly staged events. The WHO, CDC and NIH have regularly misrepresented science, covered up evidence and given conflicting information regarding the virus and its origin. And as fast as big pharma was in developing their vaccines, the virus has been just as busy creating new variants to the virus which is again causing officials to threaten lockdowns, mask and vaccination mandates and ultimately to punish those that refuse the vaccination. But given masks are ineffective in stopping the virus and that both vaccinated and

non-vaccinated can both catch and transmit the virus, why the angst regarding only those who refuse to take the jab? Answer: Democrats, their agent provocateurs, BLM and Antifa, enablers FB and Twitter, media giants, woke corporations, want to control the 2022 election as they did in 2020.

**Dwight Messner**  
Grand Forks

**Editor's note:** Numerous medical sources, including the Centers for Disease Control and the Mayo Clinic, say mask wearing slows the spread of coronavirus.

### Letters policy

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### Business office hours

8 a.m. to 5 p.m.  
Monday through Friday

### General number

(701) 780-1100 or (800) 477-6572

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- GEORGE WINSHIP, Herald founder

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Mail Delivery + Digital All Access  
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**Postmaster**  
Send address changes to Grand Forks Herald Box 6008, Grand Forks, ND 58206-6008

Periodicals postage paid at Grand Forks and additional mailing offices

The Grand Forks Herald (ISSN 0745-9661; USPS 225580) is published digitally daily and printed Wednesdays and Saturdays.

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