

FORUM

Where is the America I used to know?

James B. Ewers Jr.

Guest Columnist



The holiday season is upon us. Shopping carts are full with both purchase and layaway items. You remember layaway, don't you?

Thanksgiving gave us time to spend with family and friends. Some of us ate too much and watched way too much football. Little kids were treated to watching Charlie Brown and Snoopy on television.

College students are back in school now but the Christmas break is in sight. Elementary, middle and high school students are trying their best to sit still for an entire day. Their teachers are providing instruction each day despite the Yuletide spirit being in the air.

All of us are familiar with all or parts of the aforementioned scenarios because that is the America we know. Yet there is a disturbing part of America that has reared its ugly head and making an attempt to steal our joy.

A few weeks ago, a Planned Parenthood facility in Colorado Springs, Colorado, claimed the lives of three people, including a law enforcement officer. Presidential candidates on both sides weighed in with their thoughts.

Bernie Sanders, Independent senator from Vermont running as a Democrat, said, "I strongly support Planned

Parenthood and the work it's doing. I hope people realize that bitter rhetoric can have unintended consequences."

Ted Cruz, Republican senator from Texas said, "Praying for the loved ones of those killed, those injured and first responders who bravely got the situation under control in Colorado Springs."

Unfortunately, some of us have such strong, and, yes, unreasonable positions on issues that we resort to violence. The families of those killed and wounded did not have a Happy Thanksgiving. Instead they were traumatized and heartbroken by this senseless tragedy.

Some would opine that the gun issue and the abor-

tion issue triggered this shooting. I believe they did. For some years now gun control and abortion have become everyone's hot button issues. If you want a heated exchange, just start talking about either of these issues and you will surely get one.

At the heart of both issues is personal choice and rights. Proponents of guns say stricter gun laws take away individual rights. Those in favor of abortions say it is a woman's body and therefore her right to choose.

Whatever our opinion is about these issues should not result in guns being brandished and lives being lost.

Our sadness and mourning for the Colorado

Springs victims was brutally interrupted by a mass shooting in San Bernardino, California. This shooting occurred on Dec. 2, and 14 people lost their lives. More than a dozen people were injured in a shooting that took place during a holiday party at a social service center. At the social service center were adults with special needs having holiday fun.

The shooters have been identified as a husband and wife. They were radicalized terrorists.

Interestingly, this incident occurred just five days after the Colorado Springs shooting. In San Bernardino, Police Chief Jarrod Burguan said, "A man and a woman in the

SUV with assault rifles, handguns and assault-style clothing were killed." Upon inspection of their home an assortment of weapons was found.

One question that is being raised is how could the killers get their hands on so many guns? I believe it speaks to how easy it is to get guns in America today.

President Barack Obama in an address from the Oval Office on Sunday called upon Congress to make it harder to buy guns and to have stronger background checks. Opponents of the President say this is not the answer. Another point that gun lobbyists use is that guns kill people. But who pulls the trigger? These two incidents

serve as a sobering backdrop to what happened in France and Africa where lives were lost because of guns and terrorism.

So what is next? Have we as Americans become immune to mass killings in our own country? Do we simply watch and wait until it happens again and give out more heartfelt sympathies and anguish? As important is, have we given up hope? I hope not.

We can't celebrate being American and live in America if we see violence as an everyday occurrence. Recently, one college president, Jerry Falwell Jr. of Liberty University in Virginia, encouraged his students to carry guns. Many of us know that is not the answer.

Maybe hearts and minds must reach rock bottom in our hurt, anger and sadness before we will do something about it. I believe we have reached rock bottom.

For those of us who believe in the power of prayer, we must continue to pray for a world-wide deliverance and healing. We know God will do His part. The question is will we do our part?

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Five years of GOP rule cripples state, report shows

BY CASH MICHAELS FOR THE CHRONICLE

After five years of Republican governance in North Carolina, a new report from a nonpartisan government watchdog group says the state has been "altered and weakened," definitively reversing its prior progressive course, and has actually fallen behind in the areas of education, social programs and public policy investment.

In effect, North Carolina's rich have greatly benefited from numerous tax cuts at the expense of the state's poor who, statistics show, are slipping deeper and deeper into poverty, especially with the elimination of several social safety net programs like the Earned Income Tax Credit and cuts to unemployment benefits.

The multi-part report titled "Altered State," is produced by the editorial staff of NC Policy Watch, a progressive nonprofit project of the N.C. Justice Center in Raleigh. It consists of eight news stories and several commentaries that take an in-depth and concise analysis of the drastic changes in several public policy areas that have resulted in North Carolina becoming one of the most conservative states in the nation.

Indeed, in the report's introduction, NC Policy Watch Executive Director Chris Fitzsimon goes back to an October 2011 meeting that then state House Speaker Thom Tillis had at a Mars Hill restaurant that was videotaped where he promised "... that one of his goals was to 'divide and conquer' people on public assistance."

Tillis, now a U.S. senator, explained that he wanted to get people with disabilities to "look down" at others on public assistance, low-income families whom he deemed unworthy of public support. Fitzsimon continued, "It was a revealing moment for the new Republican majority in Raleigh, laying bare one of their goals, to unravel the social safety net in pursuit of their aim to shrink the government they disdain and slash taxes on corporations and the wealthy.

"It is part of an agenda they have pursued without pause in the last five years," Fitzsimon added, "and the damage to North Carolina has been remarkable and stunning to behold."

From the slashing of the social safety net to

fewer protections of the environment, drastic cuts to the public education budget to restrictions in voting rights, the report denotes all of the areas where conservative policies over the past five years, mostly targeting the poor, have had a devastating impact.

Rob Schofield, director of Research for N.C. Policy Watch, helped to edit the report and wrote the conclusion. He says anyone seeking an accurate picture of where North Carolina stands now versus five years ago needs to read "Altered State."

"The folks who are driving this train are determined to roll back the clock," Schofield says.

Though he says "Altered States" is "a lot of bad news," Schofield says he tried to ensure that there were areas of hope that were also highlighted. Still, when areas like median income being much lower for families than five years ago pop up, it's hard to encourage that those challenges can be overcome.

The result is that North Carolina has dramatically moved from the middle of the pack in terms of all 50 states in areas like per pupil spending and unemploy-

ment benefits, to literally near the bottom with less progressive states like Alabama and Mississippi.

With the numerous tax cuts employed since 2011 when the Republicans took over the N.C. General Assembly, the state is operating with less revenue, especially with the rich paying, on average, \$15,000 less in taxes.

If there is one thing Schofield says should stay with readers regarding the changes that have already taken place, it is that there is no sign that any changes are slowing down, meaning that more is on the way.

"The damage that has taken place over the past five years has been enormous," says Rick Glazier, executive director of the N.C. Justice Center and former Democratic state lawmaker. "But if we're going to turn things around in the years to come and put North Carolina back on the path to progress, it's imperative that people understand where things stand. This report does a great job of bringing home the nature of the challenges we face."

From now until the middle of December, a new article will be issued each morning online from the "Altered State" report. Go to <http://www.ncpolicywatch.com/category/altere-d-state/> for more.



Tillis