

# VIEWPOINTS

## Conversation takes the cake

Over the years I have been engaged in some strange conversations, none more so than one I had recently.

A retired farmer came by to talk to me about peach trees.

Most of the folks I talk to want to talk about peach trees.

He had 60 and put in 40 more and felt this was all he could handle.

After telling him he had to work at it, I realized in our conversation that he wasn't too interested in doing so. He had expressed that he had two heart attacks and was going to try and keep busy with the peach trees. However after I told him all the work involved and especially how he needed to protect himself by wearing a pesticide suit — including a mask and goggles — he said, "I have never worried about protecting myself against pesticides in all my years of farming, and I don't intend to wear a suit."

Then his wife added, "He has even sprayed chemicals on me."

I didn't dare ask if that was done on purpose, because she was a charming lady and I would guess easy to live with.

He was a nice fellow and I enjoyed talking to him.

Having said the above, it was apparent he was not going to take all of my advice.

Therefore I decided to change the subject.

It wasn't hard to pick a subject,

### A View from the Country

Raz Autry



because everyone has an idea on Iraq — that is except the President. He has a one-track mind. "stay the course."

The gentleman asked, "Have you ever been in a war?"

I replied, "World War Two." His next statement was, "You weren't in World War Two."

I said, "It must have been an illusion. I could have sworn I was in that war."

His answer, "All World War Two veterans are dead."

I said, "I am not."

He continued, "I am 77 years old and you say you are 80. You can't be 80 because you look younger than I do."

I told you I get in some strange conversations.

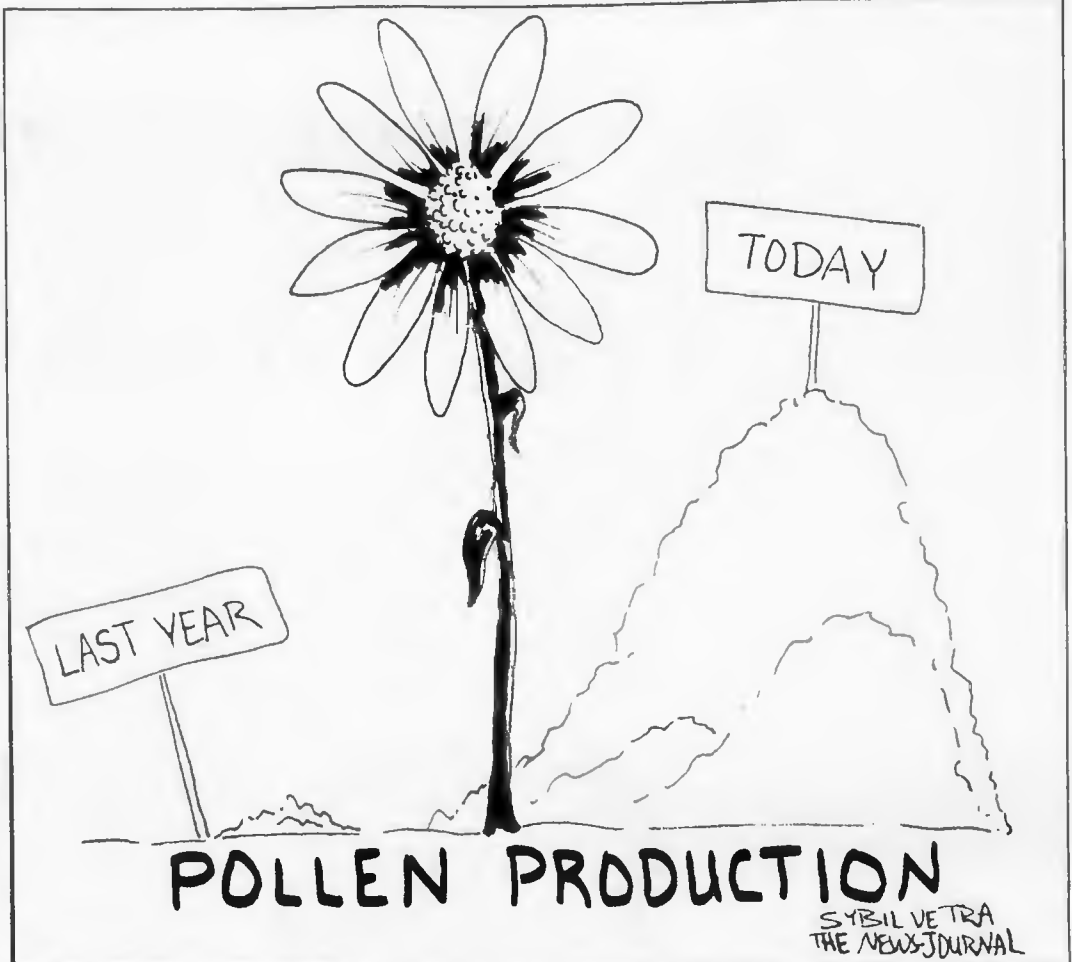
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The Friendly Undertaker informed me with a great deal of delight that he was in Montgomery County and spoke to my former secretary, who worked with me when I was the principal at East Montgomery High School. Her husband was an agriculture teacher at the school. Both were good friends. He was telling her how tight I was. He told her I

squeeze a nickel until it hollers. Can any of you who know the Friendly Undertaker even remotely believe that he would have the nerve to talk to anyone about being tight? However that is not the only untrue thing that has been said about me.

When I had been in Hoke County only a few weeks, a principal whom I had known for years came through Raeford, stopped at a local store and asked a man near by, "Do you know Raz Autry?" The man said, "I have just met him and like him." The next statement out of my ex-friend's mouth was, "He evidently has got his act together and stopped drinking. I was afraid Raz was going to get too heavy in the booze." After making this statement he got in his car and left, probably laughing his head off. A few days later the man called me and asked if he could come by my office. Once seated he said, "I need to talk to you about something a friend of your said." He repeated the conversation. I tried my best to explain that it was a joke, I am not sure I was convincing, probably because I had a great desire to shoot my ex-friend. Later I got hold of him and used all the foul language I had acquired in the war, that according to the farmer, I wasn't in. Needless to say he didn't listen because he was laughing too hard.

My parting thought — Have a real happy day. Enjoy it, because you got up this morning.



## Republicans need to change perception on public education

Why, somebody asked me last week, don't Republicans get more support from the public on education issues? Democrats, he continued, have been running public education, and they have ruined it by selling out to the education bureaucracy.

I was attending a luncheon program sponsored by the Civitas Institute, "a research and public policy organization dedicated to providing conservative solutions for North Carolina's pressing issues."

Each month at a luncheon (open to all, but attended mostly by political conservatives), Civitas President Jack Hawke, former chair of the North Carolina Republican Party, reviews results of a new poll that has surveyed North Carolina voters on important issues.

The March poll, like Civitas's prior polls, shows "improving public education" to be one of the top concerns of North Carolina voters. Twenty-two percent say it is the challenge that "needs the most attention from state government." It is topped only by "lower health care costs," which is the main state government concern of 25 percent of poll respondents.

Responses to other questions, Jack Hawk said, gave further indications of North Carolinians' concern for public education. For instance, 91 percent of respondents said that they supported "expanding vocational education programs in public high

schools to make it more attractive to students thinking of dropping out of school." Respondents also favored raising the mandatory attendance age. Seventy-two percent registered support to the following question: "In light of the 32 percent dropout rate, do you support or oppose increasing the mandatory school attendance age from 16 to 18 years of age?"

The large majority of respondents favor bonds to fund public school construction needs over proposed bonds for other important state infrastructure needs. Notwithstanding this strong support for improving public education, Hawke reported 49 percent of the respondents answered "yes" to this question: "If money were not an issue, would you choose to send your child to a private or parochial school instead of a public school?"

These responses were the basis for that question I got about the politics of public education. If the public has so little confidence in public schools that most (49 percent?) would choose private education for their own children, why don't they give the Republicans a chance to fix the public schools?

It is an important political question. Here is why. As long as the public believes that Democrats are better for public education than Republicans, Democrats stand a good chance of retaining control of state government even against the trend of growing Republican strength in the region. But, should Republicans persuade the public that their party

### One on One

D. G. Martin



would really be better for public education, then Democrats can pack their bags and go home.

Now, back to the opening question: Why does the public continue to support the Democratic Party over the Republican Party on public education concerns?

Here is what I think. The public doesn't really believe Republicans want to give the public schools more resources. They hear (and like) the Republican anti-tax messages. But when they hear Republicans call for public school "reform," they suspect that reform means less money — much less money — for the schools.

I answered the question bluntly, saying, "The public worries that Republicans don't really believe in public schools. It may not be fair. Republicans might really strongly want to help the schools. But their overall message of cutting government to save money and lower taxes comes across as a plan to cut resources to our schools rather than to strengthen them."

Several people in the audience sprang up to challenge me. "It is not fair to say that Republicans don't believe in public schools. We just don't like the results of Democratic mismanagement. And we can do a better job. We support the schools even more than the Democrats."

"Hold on," I responded. "You asked me a political question and I told you what I thought was the public's perception about Republicans and public schools. Their perception may be unfair, but if you want to win elections you need to find out a way to change it."

Then, I thought to myself, "I am in over my head and I need to change the subject quick."

So, I asked, "Who is going to win the governor's race in 2008?"

## Trash state property commission

BY SCOTT MOONEYHAM, CAPITOL PRESS ASSOCIATION

Former House Speaker Jim Black apparently didn't care that the buying and selling of state property is clearly an executive branch function.

Of course, these days, no one should care much what Black thought.

That being the case, legislators hopefully will decide to do away with a State Surplus Property Commission that he created, rather than try to recreate a better version of a bad idea.

Four years ago, Black came up with the idea of identifying and selling off state property to fatten state coffers. When the idea ran into predictable resistance from the State Property Office, Black went further, creating an independent commission. From the start, the plan included a provision to give brokers a commission if they could identify surplus property.

The commission — like a lot of Black's ideas that were passed into law using special provisions tucked into the state budget — was greeted with suspicion.

Keith Williams, a former Repub-

lican legislator, was named director of the 16-member board. Williams had backed Black's co-speakership with Republican Richard Morgan, then lost his seat two years later.

The job raised eyebrows. And some in state government circles privately questioned whether other unseen motives might be involved.

A few publications dutifully reported the facts known at the time.

The News & Observer of Raleigh recently revisited the issue, finding that in three years the commission hadn't sold a single piece of property.

Reporter Andrew Curless detailed continuing conflicts between the state agencies that control property and the commission that wanted to sell it. His article also disclosed how Williams was replaced as director by Patrick Bell. Bell's father was a key political supporter of Black, after Williams accused then-commission member Bell of a potential conflict of interest.

With Black gone from the House, members of the chamber have now decided that the property commission was a bad idea. Well, sort of.

Several House members have sponsored a bill that would abolish

the commission in its current form and replace it with new 9-member commission. Unlike the old commission, which legislative leaders completely controlled, the governor would appoint one-third of the members.

The changes may be an improvement, but still ignore the basic problem created by the commission.

Legislators make laws and appropriate money. Their job isn't to dispose of state property. How state property is disposed of, or if it is disposed of, is distinctly an executive branch function.

The governor oversees the State Property Office within the Department of Administration. If he (or someday, she) decides that office or its director isn't doing the job, then it's within the governor's power to act.

If the legislature believes the office needs more resources to do the job, then provide them. If its members believe an administrative agency needs reorganizing, then pass a law.

If that's still not good enough for a particular legislator, there's one thing left to do: Run for governor.

## Proposal to treat kids as adults at age 18 would help youth who make mistakes

BY CHRIS FITZSIMON, N.C. POLICY WATCH

Calls for fiscal accountability, wise investments of taxpayer money and helping North Carolina's children are almost always part of every lawmaker's campaign brochure when they are running for office and prominent in their speeches after they are elected.

That ought to mean broad support for legislation by Rep. Alice Bordsen that would address all three talking points. Bordsen wants to change the state law that requires that 16 and 17 year olds who commit any crime be treated

as adults and punished in the adult criminal justice system instead of the juvenile system.

North Carolina is one of only three states that automatically try 16 and 17 year olds as adults. Bordsen wants to raise the age to 18 and her proposal comes from the North Carolina Sentencing Commission that studied the issue for a year after Bordsen asked them to look into it.

The Sentencing Commission is made up of judges, law enforcement officials, victim advocates and criminal justice experts and has never been accused of being a soft on crime group.

But the case for this change is

overwhelming. The vast majority of crimes committed by 16 and 17 year olds are non violent and in 2005 only four percent of them were felonies against other people, yet the youth who commit them end up with a permanent adult criminal record that makes it much harder to get jobs or serve in the military. In most states, the offenses are handled in juvenile court and the offender's record is sealed.

Data from the Sentencing Commission show that youth who end up in the adult system are twice as likely to commit another crime as are the offenders who receive the support that the juvenile

system provides. And those new crimes committed by youth after leaving the adult system are often far more serious and violent.

That means that investing in treatment and support of youthful offenders now saves adult prison costs in the long run, not to mention that it prevents more crime, protects more potential crime victims, and makes it more likely that the offender can have a successful and productive life.

It does not mean that teenagers who commit violent crimes or are repeat offenders can never end up in adult court. A judge could still make that determination, but the presumption would be that anyone under 18 who commits a crime would enter the juvenile system unless a judge rules otherwise after a hearing.

Reportedly, some prosecutors want sole discretion over which youthful offenders go to adult court, but that's seems much more appropriate for a judge to decide after hearing from both sides.

There is a likely to be a group of legislators who oppose the proposal because they oppose anything that appears to inject a little common sense into the criminal justice system.

But Bordsen's bill would save taxpayers money in the long run, wisely invests in support services for troubled teens and their families, and clearly helps thousands of children by not only punishing them for their mistakes, but also giving them a second chance.

I sure sounds like what most legislative candidates said they wanted to accomplish in Raleigh. Now they have a chance to live up to those promises.



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