

Opinion

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Our freedom We would do well to heed Jefferson's words today

THOMAS JEFFERSON, author of the Declaration of Independence and founder of the University of Virginia, was proud of a third great, original, contribution to the United States of America.

As a state legislator, Jefferson in 1779 drafted and won passage of the Statute for Religious Freedom. Amended, it was adopted in 1786.

As our nation today wrestles with governmental nativity scenes and the notion of "voluntary" prayer in public schools; as right-wing religious groups seek the teaching of "creationism" in public schools; and as left-wing religious groups equate their brands of pacifism with God's word, we need to look back to Jefferson.

THE IDEA of religious freedom was controversial even in Jefferson's day. In his "Notes on Virginia," he observed heretics, under common law, could be burned. He recalled that public law provided for punishing a person who denied the being of a God, the Trinity, the Christian religion or the divine authority of the scriptures.

For his beliefs, a person could be ineligible for civil or military office. "By the time of the Revolution," Jefferson wrote, "a majority of the inhabitants had become dissenters from the established church but were still obliged to pay contributions to support the pastors of the minority."

And so, in observance of Independence Day 1985, we reprint, not the Declaration with which most of us are already familiar, but Jefferson's own draft of what he considered to be his equally noteworthy contribution to American thought.

THE STATUTE OF VIRGINIA FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM
"Well aware that the opinions and belief of men depend not on their own will, but follow involuntarily the evidence proposed to their minds;
"That Almighty God hath created the

mind free, and manifested His supreme will that free it shall remain by making it altogether insusceptible of restraint;

"That all attempts to influence it by temporal punishments, or burdens, or by civil incapacitations, tend only to beget habits of hypocrisy and meanness, and are a departure from the plan of the holy author of our religion. . . .

"THAT TO compel a man to furnish contributions of money for the propagation of opinions which he disbelieves and abhors is sinful and tyrannical. . . .

"That our civil rights have no dependence on our religious opinions, any more than our opinions in physics or geometry

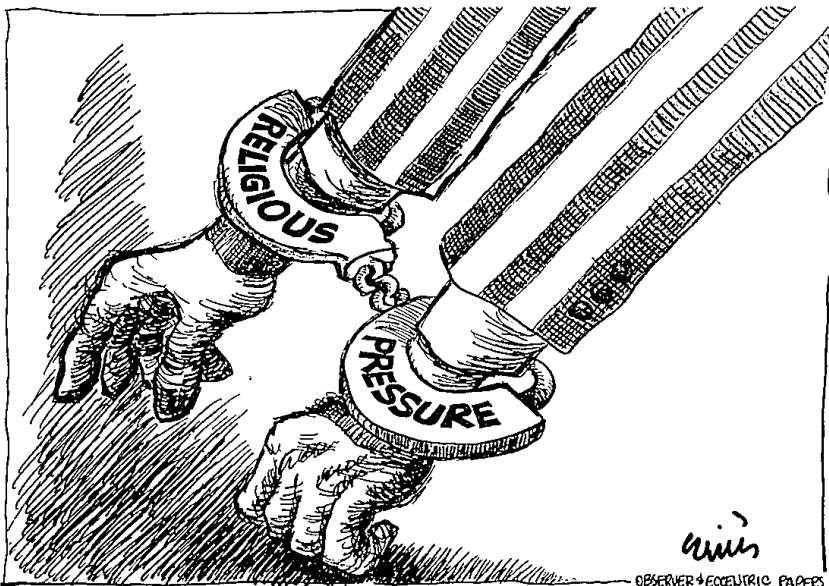
"That the opinions of men are not the object of civil government, nor under its jurisdiction. . . .

"That it is time enough for the rightful purposes of civil government for its officers to interfere when principles break out into overt acts against peace and good order;

"And finally, that truth is great and will prevail if left to herself; that she is the proper and sufficient antagonist to error, and has nothing to fear from the conflict unless by human interposition disarmed of her natural weapons, free argument and debate, errors ceasing to be dangerous when it is permitted freely to contradict them.

"WE THE GENERAL Assembly of Virginia do enact that no man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place, or ministry whatsoever, nor shall be enforced, restrained, molested, or burdened in his body or goods, or shall otherwise suffer, on account of his religious opinions or belief;

"But that all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinions in matters of religion, and that the same shall in no wise diminish, enlarge, or affect their civil capacities."



How to comply with the law

IT HAPPENED in Redford Township, but it should be happening statewide.

A local unit of government held a conference for all its boards and commissions on how to comply with the state Open Meetings Act.

The attorney conducting it was former state Rep. Robert Law, crown prince of a political family whose members hold office in Plymouth Township and West Bloomfield Township.

Law's attitude was one of openness. Honest. He took the position that the public's business ought to be done in public. He encouraged compliance with the Open Meetings Act.

IT WAS the first time this newsman, a keen follower of the Open Meetings Act, can recall a governmental group holding a seminar on compliance.

The Michigan Townships Association last year had a convention in Dearborn in which he concurred and supported all sorts of ways to gut the law. Speakers there wanted to hold closed-door meetings at the mere threat of a lawsuit. That would mean they could hold secret meetings on anything because, in this lawsuit-happy society, someone is always threatening a suit.

The Michigan Association of School Administrators is another group which has problems with open meetings. Profes-



Tim Richard

al school administrators, as you would know if you ever dealt with them, take the paternalistic attitude that they'll do what is best for the children, and let you know about it afterwards. Their working definition of "child" seems to include everyone without a doctorate or specialist degree in education.

THE CHIEF purpose in holding a seminar on the Open Meetings Act is to make members of governmental councils, boards, commissions, committees and subcommittees aware the law exists.

You don't need to memorize the contents. Just absorb the proper attitude that Bob Law exudes.

You don't even need to consult a lawyer 98 percent of the time. Unlike most state laws, the Open Meetings Act was written by laymen. It's in everyday English. Any literate person can understand it. There are no hidden meanings.

In fact, you should become suspicious when you hear someone ask for an attorney's opinion. Chances are that person hopes to find some esoteric definition in an effort to beat the law and hold a closed meeting.

PROVISIONS of the Open Meetings Act are fairly easy to grasp. All decisions must be made in the open. Period. No exceptions.

All deliberations must be in public, with certain limited exceptions. Some closed meetings may be held by taking a two-thirds vote of the board — such as real estate transactions or consultation with an attorney over pending litigation. Others may be held at the option of a second party — such as an employee or student in a discipline case.

There have been quite a number of court cases. Most were unnecessary. Most resulted from officials' having a bad attitude about doing the public's business and spending the public's money in front of the public.

Redford Township did a forward-looking thing in holding a seminar on compliance with the Open Meetings Act. The Michigan Townships Association should do the same thing. So should the Michigan Association of School Boards. So should the Michigan Municipal League. So should the Michigan Association of Counties. So should the Michigan Community Colleges Association.

Shared high schools don't seem very likely

IT'S BEEN suggested in some quarters that school districts consider sharing high schools to meet the soaring costs of education.

In an era of declining enrollments and school closings, it might seem like a natural for neighboring school districts to share schools.

Schools in Oakland County are already sharing high schools through their south-end and north-end vocational high schools. And shared programs for the handicapped and special programs have been in operation for years.

But shared high schools?

Bill Keane, superintendent of the Oakland Intermediate School Board, sees little possibility of it, although he is optimistic about the use of shared programs and classes.

KEANE RECALLS what he terms the "essential prototype" of such a proposal. Involved were two small school districts on the west side of the state, one with a new high school, the other with a new middle school.

The two superintendents came up with a merger plan in which middle school students in the two districts would attend the middle school and high school students would attend the high school.

Elementary school pupils would continue to attend school in their home districts. "It didn't happen," said Keane. "You know why?"

"The older community didn't want to give up its football team. The same went for the band and other special programs. "The only one I ever saw close in Oakland was a high school in Waterford. And it took about four years of trauma."

KEANE NOTES that sharing facilities is not a new concept. He points out that Plymouth in Wayne County already buys warehousing space from Livonia, and that Oak Park, Ferndale and Berkley run a joint program for the gifted and talented at the Clinton Community Center in Oak Park.

Mary Ann Kreinbring, Troy School board president, said her district is look-



Jim Ritz

ing into what she calls "edu-trends" — futuristic changes that schools may need to make down the road.

She suggests looking at the sharing of individual duties school boards are saddled with and foresees the possibility of shared high schools or at least shared facilities.

She says that will take some "gutsy" boards. "People tend to protect their own territory and sometimes that gets in the way of what's best for education."

KREINBRING INSISTS that consolidation and shared programs is something neighboring school districts are going to be forced to explore in coming years.

"It would make me an unpopular individual to say that we have neighboring districts that are too small to be in the education business. But maybe the answer is to consolidate."

School boards must look down the road, she says. "Some people call it futuristic; I call it realistic," she adds. "People have tended to just do what's convenient, but that's not going to work anymore."

Keane said he's not certain where a move to share high schools' would come from.

"I do see some possibility of sharing vocational offerings and the possibility of shared programming," he said. "With enrollments declining, it may be wise to offer a joint class in physics, or a shared program as the cycles move through the grades," said Keane. "But I don't see any great demand for shared high schools."

"I think you'll see all sorts of cooperative programs rather than the merger of high schools. If you're going to merge high schools, you might as well merge the districts."

GOP: reaching for the stars

A YOUNG MAN approached political expert Joe Schwartz recently and told him that he wanted to go into a career in politics. He said he envisioned himself sitting in the U.S. Senate some day. He also confessed that he was a Republican at heart.

What course of study should a fledgling politician take in school, he asked. Law? Political science? Business Administration?

Forget these, Schwartz said. He advised there are only three fields worthy of the young man's attention — the military, athletics or entertainment.

SCHWARTZ EXPLAINED that of late the state GOP has had trouble finding candidates for such lofty offices as U.S. Senator and had been looking around the country hoping to find someone who could run in Michigan.

"The way it is going," Schwartz said, "the party bigwigs cast a critical eye at their own members and conclude that none of them are well-known or charismatic enough to out any of the Big 3 (Democratic office-holders Gov. James Blanchard and U.S. senators Donald Riegle and Carl Levin). So they start looking around for someone with a big name."

"A few years ago they got the ex-president of the Michigan Jaycees who had made a name for himself as a tax cutter to run for governor against a Congressman. Only he didn't quite make it and so the party started looking for people with more glamorous backgrounds.



Bob Wisler

"They must have figured that even this guy Headlee was limited. After all, he was only the head of an insurance company.

"SO TWO years ago when they were faced with putting up a candidate against Carl Levin they went on a talent search and found an ex-astronaut from Michigan in Texas. Well, this Jack Loumsa never went to the moon, but they figured he had the right kind of background and TV appearance to attract voters. He was blond and blue-eyed and tall and all that and Carl Levin was balding and sort of rumpiled looking."

"But, that didn't work out either. Now the party is looking at running a candidate against Don Riegle and they are thinking maybe Loumsa can beat Riegle, even though he couldn't beat Levin. After all, he is still an ex-astronaut and he could take acting lessons so he can read the lines better on TV."

"But there is also the possibility that Pete Dawkins might be a good candidate. Someone figured out that he was raised in Michigan before he went to West Point and became a football star and Rhodes scholar at Oxford and he even came back

to Michigan for a visit a few times in the last 25 years.

"HE'S A retired general now and he could be the one, figuring that the only thing better than an ex-astronaut is an ex-general, ex-football player, ex-Rhodes scholar.

"You see this is the trend. People who get their names in athletics or entertainment, something like that. Look at Ronald Reagan — ex-actor who's great in front of a camera. Reagan got his start because of George Murphy, ex-actor who became a California senator. How about Bill Bradley, the ex-Nick star who is now a U.S. Senator, or Jack Kemp, ex-quarterback who could be president?"

"OF COURSE, sometimes political people make good candidates, but it's not as likely. The Republican big-wigs see a chance to make some gains with Bill Lucas, the Wayne County executive. His case is somewhat different, though, in that he was chosen because he might help the party draw all the black votes they've been missing. He's also good on TV, even though he wasn't an actor.

"If you really want to be successful in state politics, think about being a big-time athlete, an entertainer, like a movie or TV star, or a minority who makes good, maybe in the military.

"And, one other thing. Try to visit Michigan, once in a while while you're making a name for yourself."