

# Time flies while we walk

Last week's column marked two years of "You Can't Beat a System You Can't Understand" in the Jamestown Press. The time flew by while we walked, or so it seems. Last year, we covered a variety of subjects ranging from the high profits of crime to the perils of Blackberry thumbs, as well as a story about Santa Claus, and another that explored the cutting edge of toilet technology.

This year appears to be shaping up with an abundance of column fodder that we can flesh out, misshape, dissect and distort at will. We shall continue our quest for off-the-beaten-path subject matter that is begging to be addressed but has not yet been published because of fear. Yes, fear. Columnists of every description must beware of causing publishers, advertisers, and the politically correct, serious pause, lest they lose favor with the authoritarian set that believes title and entitlement are synonymous.

When we are errant in our written ways, if our readership remains high, the business savvy publishers will continue to print our material. However, we will be stricken from invitation lists and social registers (as if we were ever on any) with the deft stroke of an aristocratic pen for even the slightest faux pas. The offended objects of our acerbic quills have gone so far as to program their telephone systems to redirect our calls to automated voices that say things like, "If you know your party's extension, you



**You can't beat a system you can't understand**

By Sam Bari

may dial it now. If you are not one of the privileged few — get lost."

That is the fate of many journalists, particularly those who write for major publications. Those brave icons of the writing world are limited to addressing subjects that will not cause embarrassment to their newspaper, their country, or worse — their advertisers. Anything that will cause diplomatic hardship, international incidents, altercations or affront to possible and real adversaries and advertisers, both foreign and domestic, must be handled gingerly, or not at all.

Columnists who write for local and regional publications, on the other hand, have more latitude. Even if we are syndicated in a number of local publications, we can take liberties that the big newspapers cannot, simply because little is at risk. For instance, if we make disparaging comments about General Motors or Toyota, the General or Mr. Toyota are not going to pull their advertising accounts. They cannot because they do not place ads in local newspapers.

Last week, USA Today reported that Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez told U.S. officials to "Go to hell, gringos!" and called Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice "missy" on his weekly radio and TV show. On Friday, U.S. State Department deputy spokesman Tom Casey said Chavez's plans under the law "have caused us some concern." Because of political and diplomatic considerations, the reporter and Tom Casey were limited in what they were permitted to say.

Hugo was arrogant and insulting. He often offends me, as I am sure he offends many. However, unlike the USA Today reporter and Tom Casey, I can say with impunity, "You're right Hugo. We've been to Venezuela, so we know

what it's like to go to hell. It's a miserable place, mostly because you're running it. We're glad we don't live there." I can say that and more, and nothing bad will happen as a result. It is one of the perks of grassroots journalism. Not that I make a practice of disrespecting public officials or embarrassing any publication that prints my material, knowing that I can write the truth and occasionally have a little fun without fear of retribution so comforting.

That is not to say that grassroots journalism is without responsibility. Often, irresponsible media on a local level does irreparable harm. Writing for friends and neighbors requires more of a familial discipline.

Writers like Samuel Clemens, through his pen name Mark Twain, made grassroots journalism what it is today. He forged new territory in local newspapers by telling tales, spinning yarns, and commenting on everything from total abstinence to zeal.

"Total abstinence is so excellent a thing that it cannot be carried to too great an extent. In my passion for it I even carry it so far as to totally abstain from total abstinence itself." — Mark Twain, the Washington Post when it was a weekly.

"Zeal and sincerity can carry a new religion further than any other missionary except fire and sword." — Mark Twain, Christian Science Monitor in its infancy.

Because of Clemens and others of similar intent, I can write about my misspent youth, the Googlamaniacs in our research department, a different perspective on Santa Claus, and worry about what the guys from outer space must think if they are watching us.

Thank you, Jamestown, for being receptive and supportive of my experiments in sometimes quirky, occasionally funny, and often absurd brand of journalism. You have been a wonderful audience. The experience has been fun. I believe that enough subject matter is still out there to possibly write another year's worth of columns about living in that system we just can't seem to understand.

## Applications

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agreed to a change in arrangements, even though the dual appointment was not due for review until the next council election in November.

Councilors decided to seek proposals from any interested lawyer or law firm. They are working toward holding the town's annual legal budget to \$90,000. Town legal spending is in line with budgeting this fiscal year. Last year, the legal account was \$20,000 over budget.

Parks and Harsch are two of the 11 applicants. Parks (and associate) offered to do all the town's work for \$86,400 or \$95 per hour. Harsch proposed to continue responsibility for all town legal work, except criminal prosecutions, for an annual fee of \$65,000 or \$100 per hour. Harsch also submitted a second proposal that he, with other lawyers, share the sole solicitor appointment for all work.

Two lawyers — Carolyn Mannis and Merlyn O'Keefe — offered to do only criminal work for the town for \$30,000 and \$33,000 respectively. Mannis has been the town prosecutor as part of the current Harsch collaborative.

The councilors comments at Friday's meeting did not seem to indicate a preference for any of the applicants as solicitors, but they were very clear that being able to keep Mannis as prosecutor would be given priority. They spoke about her reputation as aggressive. Councilwoman Barbara Szepatowski said the town needs Mannis' "total commitment to the town," and noted that Police Chief Thomas Tighe and other local police officials have cited Mannis' "commitment to win." Szepatowski said some who represented the town in previous years did not act as if they had to win for the town.

The councilors agreed by consensus that all applicants need to be advised that the council was prepared to "reserve prosecutions" for Mannis. Six of the 11 applicants said that as sole solicitor, they would be prepared to do the prosecutions, as well as the other work listed as general municipal, planning and zoning, and labor.

Those six firms or collaboratives and their proposals for annual fee/or hourly, are:

- Kelly, Kelleher, Reilly, Simpson and Donnelly, which took over the North Kingstown legal account, \$120,000/\$115.
- Blish & Cavanagh, \$110,000/\$125
- Harsch, Silva, Thomas et al, \$90,000/\$100.
- Parks and Zangari, \$86,400/\$95.
- Ruggerio, Orton, Brochu, Sternick, \$80,400/\$135.
- McKenney, Quigley, Izzo, Clarkin, (no annual fee), all work for \$150 an hour.

Two lawyers bid on part of the town work: Karen Ellsworth said she would do all planning and zoning for \$40,000 a year or \$100 an hour, and James O'Neil bid on general municipal work only, with no annual fee, all work for \$125 an hour.

State law provides that all proposals for professional contracts, such as for lawyers, are subject to negotiations and the town is not required to accept lowest qualified bidder, town officials emphasized.

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