The Roanoke Times

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1st Amendment Sanctuary, or up for Darwin Awards?

By Dan Casey

You may be familiar with the Darwin Awards and anecdotes illustrating that dubious honor’s charming concept. My fav is the one about the genius fisherman and his golden retriever. With the guy’s jeep, they drove far out onto a frozen lake one bitterly cold day in January.

The ice was so thick it would have taken hours to drill through. The angler had a bright idea, though — a stick of dynamite. He lighted that sucker and heaved it like a quarterback hurling a “hail Mary” pass.

Naturally, the dog thought they were playing fetch, and it made a beeline for the explosive. Fido grabbed it in his teeth and happily bounded back toward its owner as the fuse burned down. That’s when our hero realized his blunder.

“No! No!” the fisherman shrieked at the pooch, waving his arms frantically. The confused dog perceived its master as angry. So Fido dived under the Jeep, still gripping the dynamite in his jaw. The last glimpse anyone caught of them came a split second before a ground-shaking “BOOM!”

That’s not precisely what happened in Campbell County Tuesday night. But there was indeed an explosion of news. It occurred after the board of supervisors unanimously declared Lynchburg’s southern neighbor a “First Amendment Sanctuary.”

It’s the first locality in Virginia to adopt such a measure, but it may not be the last.

If you recall, governing boards across the commonwealth adopted “Second Amendment Sanctuary” resolutions in 2019. The movement began in Carroll County that June and moved across the commonwealth like a wave. Proponents characterized it as a warning to lawmakers in Richmond against enacting gun control laws.

This one’s a reaction to Gov. Ralph Northam’s pre-Thanksgiving executive order regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, said Campbell County Supervisor Matt Cline.

The governor limited public gatherings in the commonwealth to 25 people or fewer. He also expanded Virginia’s mask mandate to include children age 6 or older, and prohibited restaurants from selling alcohol after 10 p.m.

Cline said the media has unfairly “spun” the board’s vote as an anti-masking resolution.

It “is not anti-mask,” Cline added. “There’s been a lot of misreporting what this resolution is and what it isn’t.” He sent me a copy.

The resolution states Northam’s executive order violates the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, as well as and Articles 1 and 12 of the Virginia Constitution.

“It violates the business owner’s right to commerce,” Cline said. “He has a First Amendment right for people to assemble at his business.” No such numerical assembly limits or edicts on social distancing, masks or alcohol sales, are mentioned in either constitution. Cline cited a restaurant owner whose revenues have declined 70% during the pandemic.

One part of the resolution states the intent is that “no Campbell County funds will be used to restrict the First Amendment and other clearly established rights of the People of Campbell County, and that no County funds shall be expended to aid federal or state agencies in the restriction of said rights.”

Another part says, “No Campbell County employees, government funds, resources, agencies, contractors, buildings, detention centers, or offices may be used for the purpose of enforcing laws that unconstitutionally infringe on the Bill of Rights and other clearly established rights of the People.”

Cline told me he does not oppose people wearing masks. He believes good social distancing practices are a smart idea, especially for those who are in a high risk category. But the governor’s orders have not been enacted by the Virginia’s legislature. And those infringe on constitutional rights of the people, he said.

I’ve seen no signs — yet — that other area localities are considering “First Amendment Sanctuary” resolutions the way they did with the “Second Amendment Sanctuary” stuff.

“We hadn’t heard about [what happened in Campbell County] until reading of it in the newspaper,” said David Radford, chair of the Roanoke County Board of Supervisors. “We haven’t talked about it, or received any phone calls from any group.”

The resolution is interesting for a couple of reasons.

First, consider what happened shortly after scores of Virginia localities proclaimed themselves “Second Amendment Sanctuaries.” That kind of blew up in their faces — because the Virginia General Assembly shortly thereafter enacted gun control.

Second, compared to some other states, Virginia has been pretty successful at stanching COVID-19 infections.

That’s reflected in statistics from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control. One is the average daily number of cases in the past week. Among 50 states, Virginia ranks fourth lowest, with 28.4 COVID-19 cases per 100,000 population. The national average for states was 53.

According to the CDC, the state with the highest rate is South Dakota. It’s the average daily COVID-19 infection rate over the past week stand at 116.7 — more than four times Virginia’s.

South Dakota Gov. Krsiti Noem is among U.S. governors who have declined to mandate mask wearing, social distancing or limits on peaceable assembly — although she has advised and encouraged citizens to do so follow CDC guidelines. But that’s up to them.

If Campbell County’s “First Amendment Sanctuary” takes off like the “Second Amendment Sanctuary” resolution did in 2019, will Virginia wind up like South Dakota has with COVID? At the least, it seems like a possibility. And that would be the wrong direction.

Kind of like Fido, as he ran back toward his master, with that lighted stick of dynamite in his mouth — just before the bomb exploded and the lake swallowed all.

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Fake news makes Roanoke pit stop

By Dan Casey

In recent days, a number of this newspaper’s readers contacted us about an alarming incident. They read about it in an article headlined “Chaos is coming to Mayberry.” Purportedly, it happened at the City Market in Roanoke the evening of Aug. 28.

The story, by Georgia-based freelance writer Leo Hohmann, has been passed around on social media.

Tuesday night, conservative talk show host Mark Levin promoted it on his nationally syndicated radio show.

Hohmann called the event “an incident that did not get reported in any media until now.” His account depicts an appalling scene from a purported Black Lives Matters protest that purportedly turned ugly and violent.

There’s good reason you haven’t read about it in this paper, or seen the video on the TV news. That’s because I could find no evidence the events Hohmann describes ever happened at all.

Purportedly, the episode began about 6:30 p.m. outside 202 Social House, a restaurant along Market Square. It occurred as “about 100 diners” enjoyed “a summer evening of rare socialization during the ongoing COVID-19 restrictions imposed by Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam.”

“A group of at least half a dozen men, dressed all in black with black face masks, entered the outdoor dining area. As they moved toward the center they started talking to diners in an aggressive manner,” Hohmann’s article claims.

Purportedly, a couple of outdoor diners attempted to peacefully retreat by walking away, after they had ordered their food but before it arrived at their table. But four protesters purportedly followed the man and woman for about a block and a half.

At that point the purported couple separated. The man purportedly urged the woman to run. The article purports that he couldn’t himself flee “because I have a foot issue.”

Purportedly, the protestors demanded the man “either raise your fist in solidarity or you get on the ground and lay before us and beg for forgiveness.” When he purportedly refused, they purportedly attacked. One purportedly threatened, “I’m going to kill you right now!”

Purportedly, that protestor was armed “with a stick, which looked like a broom handle.”

The purported victim-hero, “Joe Mantle,” defended himself despite his purported bum foot. And he purportedly acted with the speed and agility of Kato, the karate-wielding chauffeur from the “The Green Hornet.” (That was a fictional TV show based on a fictional comic book.)

Joe’s spectacular defensive maneuvers purportedly rendered three of the purported Black Lives Matter protestors writhing on the sidewalk, unable to breathe, purportedly bloody and “crying” and “screaming in a lot of pain.”

Purportedly, “by the time a police officer arrived, all four were gone,” Hohmann wrote.

Pretty wild stuff, huh? There are only a few problems with Hohmann’s article. Namely, the salient facts he purports proved impossible to verify.

First, nowhere in the article does Hohmann (who’s apparently based in suburban Atlanta) claim to have personally witnessed any of those occurrences. Instead, the story’s based on a description by a single source, “Joe Mantle.”

The article describes Mantle as “an options trader and former radio talk show host in his 50s” who considers Blacks Lives Matter “a terrorist organization.”

Second (and oddly), “Joe Mantle” is a fictional name. Hohmann explicitly acknowledges that in the article, without citing any reason why he gave a fake name to his singular source. (Hohmann hasn’t responded to three emails I sent him about his article.)

Third, the Roanoke Police Department is unaware of any of the events the article describes.

“We do not have any written reports or dispatched calls that are similar to anything that this article is referencing,” said Caitlyn Cline, the Roanoke police spokeswoman.

“Also, we do not have a record of any protests or demonstrations downtown that day. That’s not to say they didn’t happen, we just weren’t notified of anything,” Cline added.

Fourth, the management of 202 Social House is similarly befuddled. General Manager Emily Ford told me she worked the night of Aug. 28. Since then, she’s also reviewed the restaurant’s security video, she said.

“We are not aware of, nor can we find any evidence supporting, anything claimed in the story taking place at 202 Social House,” Ford told me Wednesday.

Ford added that 202 didn’t even offer outdoor dining that night, although “a handful” of patrons did consume drinks outdoors that evening on the restaurant’s patio.

“I was actually surprised to see [202] thrown into it, having been here and knowing 100% that it did not happen,” Ford told me in a phone interview. The article has prompted a bunch of calls to 202 Social House, she said.

Fifth, Hohmann originally illustrated his article with three photos from The Roanoke Times. Those were snapped not late in August, but early in June. They’re of locals in Roanoke peacefully protesting racial injustice, following George Floyd’s May 25 killing by police in Minneapolis.

Also, those photos are copyrighted by this newspaper. And The Roanoke Times never granted Hohmann permission to republish them. Wednesday afternoon, Hohmann took them down, after Lee Enterprises, the newspaper’s owner, brought that to his attention.

Sixth, Hohmann embedded a video with his story that depicts a protest amid outdoor diners. But that’s from last week in Rochester, New York, which is 545 miles distant.

Seventh, as any reputable journalist can tell you, the devil’s always in the details. And Hohmann got a few of those wrong.

For example, Hohmann wrote: “The mayor of Roanoke, Sherman Lea, allowed BLM to paint its anti-police graffiti on a portion of the highway leading up to the center square.”

Actually, the “END RACISM NOW” street mural was a public arts project, conceived by locals, and deliberated on, approved and coordinated by the Roanoke Arts Commission. In that respect, “graffiti” is kind of a stretch. So is the reference to Campbell Avenue downtown as “a highway.”

There are other factual problems with Hohmann’s account which I won’t delve into because it would take up too much space.

Finally, there’s the issue of Hohmann himself and his freelance work. From what I can tell from his self-written biographical information, his articles have mostly appeared on WND.com. That’s problematic and calls much into question.

Going back nearly a decade, WND.com was a primary purveyor of the “birther” smear that claimed Barack Obama was ineligible to serve as president because he wasn’t a natural-born citizen.

The website is still around. But its glory days have faded somewhat from the time when WND.com was known as one of the biggest fake-news sites on the internet. What self-respecting journalist would ever brag he worked for them?

Anyway, because we’re getting calls and emails about it — and because 202 Social House is, too — all of the above may be worth a few minutes of your attention.

Which account should you trust? This one, with real names of real people? Or the other, which cites a single source whose fake name was made up by the author?

“If you’re able to contact anyone who was involved in this incident, please have them reach out to the Roanoke Police Department so we can speak with them about this situation,” said Cline, the police spokeswoman.

Emily Ford of 202 Social House isn’t going to hold her breath waiting for substantiation.

“I think we all know there’s a lot of fake stuff on the internet,” she said.

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CASEY: An ode to a dirty word

By Dan Casey

Once upon a time in American cities, a homeowner who wanted some kind of fire protection bought insurance. The insurance company would nail a small but distinctive metal symbol, known as a firemen’s mark, on the home’s exterior. You can buy those relics in antique stores today.

Insurers would pay private firefighting brigades to extinguish blazes at marked homes. If you didn’t have a mark, tough luck. The brigades might not fight your fire.

Then in the mid-19th century, some do-gooders in Cincinnati came up with a bright idea.

They suggested firefighting should be a public service that covered all homes, rather than only marked ones.

In populous areas all over, people fell for the argument, and government took over urban firefighting.

One result today is the socialist Roanoke Fire-EMS Department. Its costs are spread among all city taxpayers. Although most of their homes never catch fire, they pay the firefighting costs of the ones that do.

The crafty socialists didn’t stop there, however. And as a result, all manner of other things became socialized, too.

Both the Roanoke County Police and the Franklin County Sheriff’s Office are socialist enterprises. They’re funded almost entirely with tax dollars, and they render service regardless of anyone’s ability to pay.

In Roanoke, socialist garbage collectors prowl the streets each weekday. Yes, the city collects a fee for that — but it’s a flat charge per house. A retired couple in south Roanoke who puts out one bag of trash weekly pays the same as a family of eight in southeast who puts out 10. That’s socialism!

Over in Roanoke County’s tony Hunting Hills neighborhood, every toilet flush is a socialist deed, because those homes are hooked up to public sewers.

Every book in the nearby South County Library is a paid-for-by-socialists volume. Interstate 81 is a socialist highway. And the bread of every doctor in Roanoke is buttered with socialism in the form of income they derive from Medicare.

The wily socialists chalked up their biggest victory ever in the realm of education. In 1870 they persuaded Virginia lawmakers and voters to enshrine no-charge public schooling in the commonwealth’s constitution.

Many other states followed suit. Today, some of those — such as Idaho and Utah — are bastions of conservatism. Just goes to show how conniving those socialists can be.

Which brings us to the 2020 Democratic presidential primaries. Sen. Bernie Sanders, a proud socialist, spent the first two months of the primary season as frontrunner. With the prospect of him as a presidential nominee, right-wing propagandists dug deep into their bags of tricks and began turning “socialism” into one of the dirtiest words in America.

After last week’s Super Tuesday’s results, Sanders’ candidacy looks more and more like a longshot. But that hardly matters. Some of his causes, such as no-charge public university tuition, are going to live beyond his candidacy.

Whoever wins the Democratic nomination this summer is going to be tattooed “a socialist” by the conservative hype machine.

Don’t underestimate them. They’re same folks who branded Sen. John Kerry, the recipient of three Purple Hearts, a Bronze Star and a Silver Star, a Vietnam coward when he challenged draft avoider George W. Bush in 2004.

Their playbook says “Democrat” means liberal and liberal means socialist. But they won’t stop there.

The mantra will go something like “Socialism equals communism! And communism leads to anarchism! And anarchists are fascists!” The same flawed logic equates hawks to hummingbirds, hummingbirds to bumblebees, and bumblebees to houseflies.

Right-wing provocateurs don’t care that hawks aren’t houseflies, or that anarchism is the polar opposite of fascism.

But they know repetition is far more important than fact when it comes to foisting really big lies.

All of which is to say that it might be a good time to get ready for family members and friends raving that Democrats will lead the United States down a socialist road that dead ends in Venezuela and Cuba. Don’t feel shy about calling out that horse excrement.

Ask them who douses their house fires, or teaches their children, or collects their garbage. Who took a report the last time they got in a car crash?

And when the subject of tuition-free public college comes up, ask whether that’s anything new.

Tuition was nearly free when I attended the University of Maryland in-state full-time. It was $399 per semester. Adjusted for inflation, that translates to under $1,000 today.

If you’re older than 60 and attended Virginia Tech in-state, tuition was nearly free for you, too.

That’s because public universities used to be far more heavily subsidized — thanks to socialism. At Virginia Western Community College, tuition is free or greatly reduced for students who qualify for its Community College Access Program.

So the next time you hear someone braying with outrage against socialism, ask those questions. And ask how could it be that Norway, whose social welfare system is far more comprehensive than ours, also has a much higher per-capita gross domestic product.

Finally, you might want to ask about President Donald Trump’s trade war.

You and I are paying tariffs on goods imported from China. And Trump is sending that money to farmers in the Midwest who can’t sell their crops since he started the war.

He’s redistributing our wealth.

How is that not socialist?