



COMMENTARY

'Don't tell me what you think. Tell me what you know.' Media bias, real and perceived, is a threat.

BOB LEWIS

FEBRUARY 1, 2021 12:01 AM



Pro-Trump rioters smash media equipment during a riot at the Capitol last week. (Alex Kent/ For the Tennessee Lookout)

The past few years have been a real crucible for this country, and no institution has faced more challenges (from within and from without) than the big, brawling, chaotic and cutthroat-competitive entity that we know by the overbroad shorthand “news media.”

I grew up a news junkie, enraptured by the sonorous, dispassionate delivery of the day’s events by Walter Cronkite at suppertime five days a week, with Mike Wallace each Sunday night, and with Chet Huntley and David Brinkley on the rare occasions our shaky outdoor antenna in the pre-cable years could capture enough signal from NBC’s Memphis affiliate 100 miles away.

They were the gatekeepers, and theirs was an unembellished, almost terse take on the news. They were the Sgt. Joe Fridays of journalism: “[Just the facts, ma’am.](#)” Cronkite, for instance, had vested feelings about the events of his day, but you rarely glimpsed them except perhaps for the afternoon of [Nov. 22, 1963](#), when he removed his black-rimmed glasses, looked away from the camera, swallowed hard, and somewhat haltingly read the wire service bulletin that President John Kennedy had died.

It informed my decision to study journalism in college and enter the brave world of newspapering that had just held a criminal president to account in the broad scheme of corruption known as Watergate. I learned from my first daily newspaper editor, when I was pitching a story about improper personal favors dispensed by local government to a prominent landowner, that my suspicions meant nothing until I could prove it. “Don’t tell me what you think, tell me what you know,” the late Joe Ellis, editor and publisher of the Clarksdale (Mississippi) Press-Register, admonished me.

And I remember my bureau chief’s directive on my first day with The Associated Press: “Get it first, but first get it right.” That advice from the late Jake Booher was my guiding star for 28 years at AP until, tragically one night in 2013, [it was not.](#)

My error was not in slanting a story to fit an ideological or cultural bias. It was succumbing to “confirmation bias.” I had the documentation right there in my hand, and the pressure was on to break a major story in that year’s gubernatorial race, a story I knew competitors were pursuing. I should have waited longer for definitive confirmation of what the document apparently alleged. I failed my journalistic duty to be sufficiently skeptical – to wait for one more call to be returned, one more email reply – all in my frenzied pursuit of the blockbuster byline. I would learn to my horror that the document omitted a crucial detail that I would have discovered had I been more patient. To my abiding shame, I falsely blamed a candidate – future Gov. Terry McAuliffe – for a wrong he did not commit.

I knew the moment we learned the story was fatally flawed and AP “killed” (or rescinded) it that my reporting career could be over. It was. The fault was all mine: I said so at the time, I say so now, and I will say it for as long as I live. I don’t begrudge AP for my dismissal. I consider the news cooperative, which turns 175 years old this year, a shining beacon of fair, unslanted, top-quality global reporting that’s increasingly rare these days. But AP was wrong to also fire two of my colleagues.

I spent several years after that pitching stories about Virginia-born McGuireWoods to journalists, particularly those who cover the world of Big Law. And after that, I had the good fortune to connect with *The Virginia Mercury* and, in retirement, return to what I love in writing this column.

But here is the crucial distinction: what I did for AP and for the newspapers I served for more than 35 years – reporting – is not what I do now. What you’re reading is commentary, and it is clearly marked as such. I have a point of view, an argument to make, and the *Mercury* allows me and other columnists the forum in which to do it, carefully and responsibly differentiating it from the unbiased news coverage by its talented reporting staff.

Much of today’s media, however, have allowed the wall between news and opinion to crumble. That has long been evident among the 24-hour cable news networks, and it has been catalyzed over the past decade or so by the Internet and a downright predatory social media environment. It has taken an immeasurable toll on the credibility of legacy (or “mainstream”) media and, consequently, on the functionality of American society.

It’s jarring for my contemporaries – those who grew up in the era of unadorned prose in their afternoon newspapers or network newscasts of the mid- to late 20th century – to now see what they presume are reporters telling them what they think, not what they know.

Chris Halsne, a longtime investigative journalist who is [American University](#)’s investigative broadcaster-in-residence, says much of it could be traced back to Ted Turner’s founding of CNN, the first live 24-hour news network beamed via satellite to cable systems worldwide.

“There’s only so much news in a day. So, over the course of a day, in order to fill these commercial news operations, they have been infiltrated with commentary. It’s really no different from the editorial page in a newspaper. It’s opinion. They talk about news but in a certain way. The institutions that have done that, they don’t clearly mark it,” Halsne said. “There’s a blurring of lines between news and editorial and entertainment these days.”



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The truth is out there, Halsne said, but viewers and readers must be savvier, to work harder, to take in a wider array of credible sources to find to it.

It’s no longer just a matter of intermingling opinion with real news or tinting facts red or blue. Now, news organizations nakedly accuse one another of lying, and they’re fighting it out live and on-air as happened Thursday night on left-leaning MSNBC where host Chris Hayes [confronted fired Fox News political editor Chris Stirewalt](#), claiming that Fox repeated and lent credence to former President Donald Trump’s falsehoods. Imagine a WWE smackdown but with geeks behind desks instead of muscled toughs in a ring.

And that says much about why commercial news has become what it is. The business of news is making money, and the WWE's style of over-the-top confrontation rakes it in. So if confrontation – even involving contorted takes on facts – is what the market wants, many in the news/entertainment business are willing to do it to chase those clicks, to hold those viewers, to keep those subscribers and to sell those ads. That creates a dangerous societal dissonance and exacerbates cultural and political divisions. It doesn't help when outlets that are supposed to be the guardians of journalistic integrity, like [The New York Times](#) and [The Washington Post](#), get caught doing “[stealth edits](#)” to past published work, including the Times' much-lauded and [much-criticized 1619 Project](#).

In a journalism education career now in its fifth decade, Will Norton has imparted inviolable basics of journalism to thousands of college students in Nebraska and Mississippi, including numerous Pulitzer honorees. No rule was clearer or more sternly enforced than the sanctity of verified facts in all our reporting. I feared Will and learned from him then, when he was my professor and adviser at the [University of Mississippi](#). He is a beloved friend and mentor now.

Will approaches retirement from Ole Miss at the end of this semester somewhat disheartened that a confluence of economic, technological and societal factors bodes ill for the continued vitality of honest reporting that he spent a lifetime evangelizing. He notes that more than 300 million Americans have devices that are today's equivalent of a printing press and video and audio production and distribution suites but lack experience, training or even the concern over whether what they publish is fair, factual or false.

“Americans are so accustomed to opinion (that) they can't tell when it's a factual story or not,” he lamented in a phone call last week.

“CNN, when it started, covered facts, but then they found out that what people want is more opinion and thinking, more ‘this is what I think.’ How can you come out of those sessions knowing what are the facts? You don't,” he said.

The era when a handful of networks and major papers were gatekeepers of the limited channels news dissemination died decades ago. The online news landscape has brought a welcomed diversity of opportunity and perspectives unimaginable a generation ago. But it has also created an ungovernable and dark realm where points of view need no longer be challenged by reality, where malignant lies and propaganda from the fringes of the left and the right enjoy parity with – even primacy over – verifiable, empirical fact.

In short, it erodes the common basis of acknowledged truths necessary as a shared basis for an informed citizenry to debate policy and chart its best path forward. And that should scare everyone.

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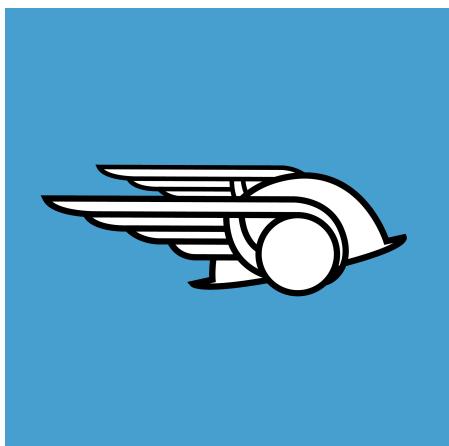
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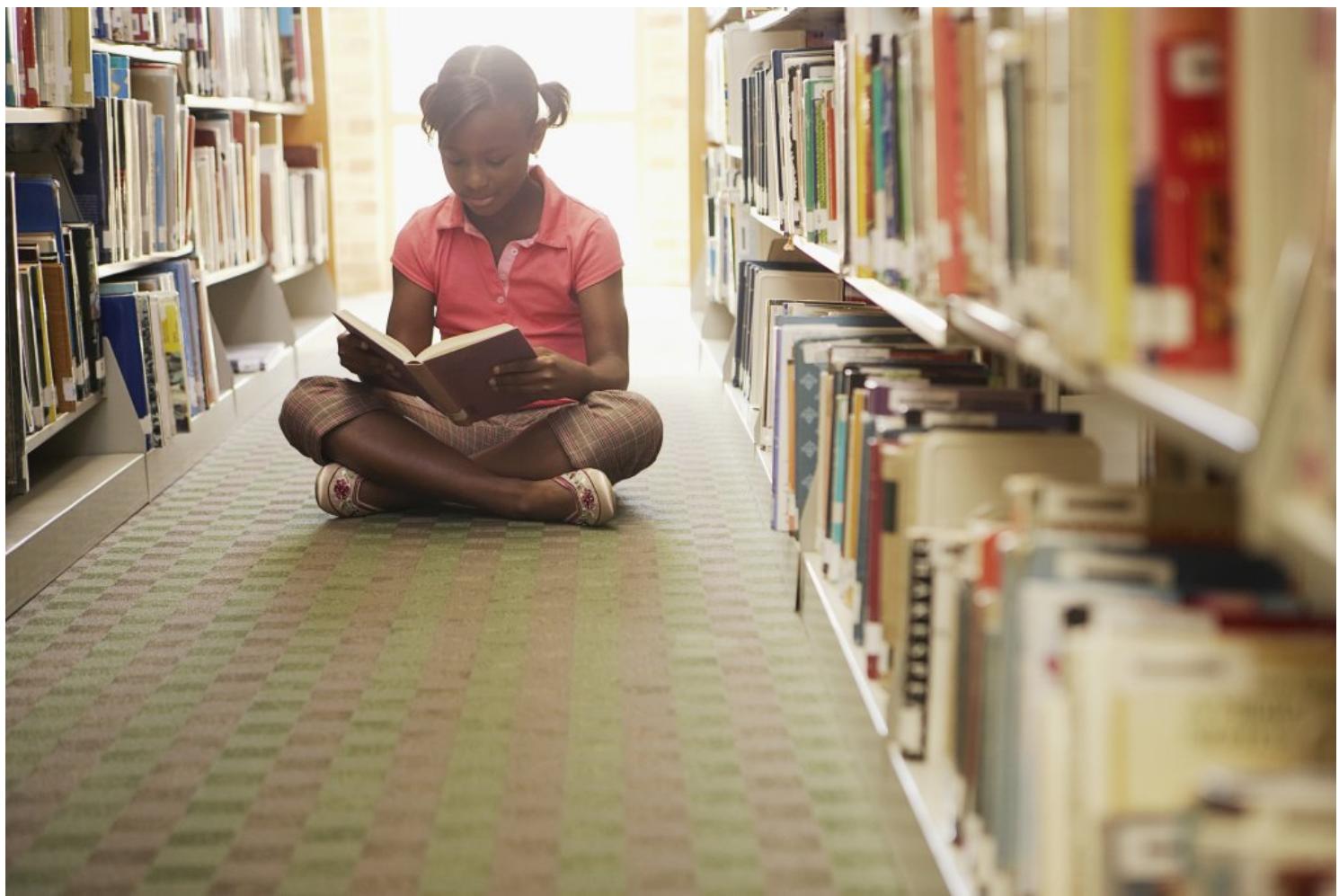
EDUCATION

COMMENTARY

Emily's Tale: Where government programs fail, humanity must step up

BOB LEWIS

FEBRUARY 22, 2021 12:02 AM



(Getty Images)

"Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country."

- President John F. Kennedy, Jan. 20, 1961.

Pardon me while I irritate some progressives.

Government spending and programs are not the only answer to some of the nation's most persistent needs.

That's not to say we shouldn't enact more federal relief for people who've been financially wrecked by no fault of their own during the coronavirus pandemic. We should, and soon! But target the spending to those whose livelihoods and economic security have been crushed, their families left homeless and queued in long lines outside food pantries. Put the cash where it's needed, not with those who've fared well.

That's not to say that we shouldn't spend – and mightily – on our crumbling national infrastructure, on America's vulnerable electrical grid and information technology networks. The past month's headlines prove the dire urgency of it and there is ready bipartisan concurrence on those needs, yet somehow nothing gets done.

And that is not to say that there is no role for local, state and, yes, federal governments to spend what is necessary to ensure that every child has an equal educational chance regardless of whether his or her school is in an affluent suburb, the gritty inner city or dirt-poor farm towns.

Government can do a lot to position its people to better their circumstances, but real change isn't authored in legislative salons and spelled out in mind-numbing study commissions. It isn't executed by auditors, consultants and mid-level administrators in corporate cubicles.

If government action were a panacea, the Post Office would be a model of punctuality and efficiency, the nation's COVID-19 vaccination effort would be going swimmingly and Virginians who lost jobs by the thousands would not wait helplessly for months on end for backlogged unemployment benefits.

The most effective way to improve the lives of others is when individuals see a need and have the skills, initiative and the passion to embark on a simple, single-minded quest to make things better than they found them.

Take childhood literacy for example.

Consider that [43 million American adults](#) can't read, write or do basic math beyond the level of a third-grade student. That's about one in five American adults who can't achieve economic security and meaningfully contribute to the gross national product, according to a [2019 report](#) from the National Center for Educational Statistics. [The Annie E. Casey Foundation](#) says that's an important threshold because up to and through third grade, children are learning to read, but from fourth grade on, they're reading to learn.

Illiteracy exists across the country, but it's worse in areas of high poverty and joblessness, areas where the poor are often burdened additionally by a poor command of English. It's also worse – as are so many societal problems – among minority populations. Minnesota and New Hampshire are routinely among the states with the best literacy rates. Immigrant-rich cities of California and Texas and fly-over country, particularly the neglected farm towns of the Deep South, suffer the most.

Aside from the crushing familial hopelessness of those trapped in generational illiteracy and poverty, note the costs we share as a country. Indigent health care in the United States resulting from low adult literacy levels costs as much as \$238 billion a year, according to [ProLiteracy](#), a nonprofit that is the nation's largest adult literacy and education organization. The toll was even greater over the past year as the coronavirus afflicted the poor and uneducated hardest. Elevating the lower end of literacy for the U.S. adult population to just a sixth-grade reading level would produce an additional \$2.2 trillion in wages earned annually, ProLiteracy estimates.

The key is early interdiction by third grade for children most at risk. It's a heart-rending task requiring the patience of a saint, a Quixotic level of persistence, a lifelong love of reading, a keen and perceptive intellect and a caring heart.

Across the country, volunteers – many in their retirement years – step up and give of their time to teach strangers to read. Because they're volunteers, it's impossible to find a reliable headcount. ProLiteracy, which has been at it for more than 60 years, supports more than 1,000 programs in the United States and 35 nations worldwide, but many others contribute unpaid and informally, as Emily did.

In 2004, she was looking for a way to give back after her husband of 52 years died. So she volunteered to help the elementary school in her small town with what was needed most and what she knew best: letters that make words, words that make sentences, sentences that make paragraphs, stories and books.

She was the salutatorian of her tiny high school class in 1946 in an America flush with confidence after winning World War II and overcoming the Great Depression. College wasn't in the cards, however, coming as she did from a family that treasured learning but was of limited financial means.

In her youth, Emily Peacock had indulged her muse as a columnist for the town's [weekly newspaper](#). She had previewed her literacy education acumen in the 1960s and '70s as a substitute teacher, filling a variety of roles from first grade to high school. Reading – particularly in the early grades – was her sweet spot. She knew intuitively what reams of government data and university white papers would later distill to a statistical certainty: that reading proficiency by third grade, far more than any other factor, determined a student's academic success or failure and, with it, his or her economic station in life.

And hers is a community with pressing needs.

In Lake County, Tennessee, literacy rates are among the lowest in the state and the rate of people living at or below the poverty level are among the highest, according to [U.S. Census Bureau figures](#). A state penitentiary is the dominant employer.

Teachers and administrators at the elementary school entrusted Emily with children in whom they saw great promise but who needed personal instruction to keep pace with classmates.

“Some of these children [come from houses](#) where nobody ever read to them. The only book in the house might be a phone book,” she once said. “But they’re so smart and they’re so sweet and all they need is a chance.”

She gave them that chance. One-by-one, she taught them to sound out vowels and consonants to form words, to string those words together into a clear thought – a sentence. One sentence after another after another until speed and comprehension increased and she got the only reward she sought – that moment when the light comes on in the eyes of a child who knows he or she can read and that dreams once off-limits are now reachable. Emily tracked them as they continued their studies, earned their high school diplomas and as some went off to college.

Word got around. Tennessee’s school boards association recognized her as the top volunteer educator in her region of rural western Tennessee. The [Lake County Schools Alumni Association](#) celebrated her achievements in childhood literacy at a community-wide dinner one night in October 2014.

The success these students achieved was no surprise, really. Emily knew her stuff. She had done the same for my brother and me around our kitchen table before putting us to bed nearly 60 years earlier.



✉ Emily Peacock Lewis, a volunteer reading tutor and the author's mother.

At a private memorial service for Emily Peacock Lewis two weeks ago, the pastor of the [church](#) in which we were raised read words written by my brother, Steve. He knew he could never finish reading his tribute to mom himself, so he entrusted his handwritten script to the pastor, and [in her voice his words](#) took wing.

They were raw but tender. They were genuine and filled with love for and pride in this determined woman who gave the best she had, asked little, and left countless lives in her corner of the world immeasurably better.

Such was her power with words. And if there’s a more fitting epitaph to a life well lived, I have yet to read it.

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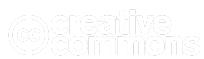
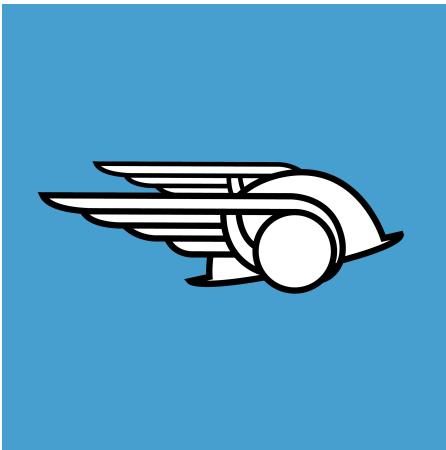
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COMMENTARY

In Virginia, why can corporations treat animals in ways that would land individuals in jail?

| BOB LEWIS

NOVEMBER 22, 2021 12:01 AM



Both PETA and federal inspectors found that lactating beagles were deprived of food in an effort to stop milk production and wean puppies. (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals)

"Heaven goes by favor; if it went by merit, you would stay out and your dog would go in." - Mark Twain

Who doesn't see red reading the [solid reporting](#) that Kate Masters presented in the *Mercury* last week about allegedly inhumane treatment of beagles at a corporate dog-breeding facility in Cumberland?

I certainly did. As a matter of full disclosure, I love dogs. Deep down. They're my weakness. I associate myself fully with the wisdom of Mark Twain in the prologue to this commentary.

As my wife astutely observes, babies reach out to her, but the dogs come to me. True. I own that.

So I seethed when I read that problems, which I reported on in a news story about the facility nearly two years ago, had persisted and there is still no effective state mechanism for regulating the Cumberland canine gulag.

Then I wondered how this is even possible.

Virginia law regulates [commercial dog breeders](#). But a loophole in the law gives a complete pass to businesses that breed animals for medical research, leaving the state powerless to look into conditions at the Cumberland facility.

In the 2020 legislative session, a bill that would have closed the loophole died after it was discovered that it would have inadvertently shut the facility down. Another bill that would have largely banned the breeding of dogs and cats for research in Virginia also failed in that session.

The conditions at the facility owned by the multinational biotech company [Envigo](#) first [came to light](#) because of sleuthing by the Norfolk-based animal rights group People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals.

The federal government does have regulatory authority over the facility. The Animal Welfare Act vests that authority in the U.S. Department of Agriculture. But the law has few teeth, according to [an overview](#) by the Animal Legal and Historical Center at Michigan State University that says the vast majority of animals used in research are excluded from the protections provided for in the AWA.

The USDA investigated the Envigo Cumberland facility after PETA posted its findings. An inspection this year found that more than 300 puppies died in the first six months and 22 days of 2021 from causes and circumstances that will never be known thanks to inadequate or non-existent recordkeeping. It's all contained in a 14-page official [USDA report](#) and a [follow-up report](#) if you have the heart to read them.

But what is the USDA doing about it? Damn little other than writing reports and responding to emails from reporters, it seems, making it indistinguishable from the rest of today's federal bureaucracy.

"I can only confirm that we're aware of the situation," an agency flack told Kate in an email earlier this month when she inquired whether further regulatory action would be forthcoming.

Before you start tweeting and penning letters to the editor labeling me an anti-business bleeding heart, hear me out. I realize the need for some medical research involving animals. I

don't like it and, given leaps in supercomputing simulation and microbiological analysis, I question how much of it is absolutely necessary.

It's beyond debate, however, that animal testing by corporations and research universities has yielded treatments and medicines that save and prolong human life and improve veterinary outcomes. Virginia Tech is among the research universities that take in beagles from the Cumberland Envigo compound. The whole issue is – and should be – subject to a robust and continuing bioethics debate.

It's also beyond question that the developers of those treatments often charge kings' ransoms for access to those life-saving drugs and treatments in an American healthcare system that toes a fine line between free market capitalism and extortion. Each passing quarter, pharmaceutical giants continue to post lusty earnings, seemingly little of which goes into humane care for animals in places like the Cumberland facility. The PETA findings and USDA reports depict a world into which dogs are born to suffer and most will never know what it's like to snuggle in a human's lap, chase a tennis ball or have a name beyond a serial number.

Not that a corporate breeding mill can make all the dogs' lives the stuff of heartwarming Hallmark Channel movies. But is it asking too much that so monied an entity as Envigo at least ensure that nursing mother dogs are regularly fed, that kennels are kept clean, that puppies are not left to die by the truckload and that dogs aren't jammed together cheek-to-jowl in cages?

I was not alone in seeing red over the disclosures in Kate's reporting. So did state Sen. Bill Stanley. He's a conservative country trial lawyer whose practice is based in a log homestead near Smith Mountain Lake.

So last Tuesday, he drove up to Cumberland where he joined Senate colleague David Marsden, D-Fairfax, in meeting with Envigo's brass and its [lobbyists](#) to, as he put it, "read them the riot act."

Stanley succinctly frames the double standard in Virginia public policy that exempts research breeders from state animal protection laws that apply to the broader public. What the USDA reported at Envigo's Cumberland facility could result in a felony animal cruelty charge if done by a private person or commercial breeders, he noted.

In 2020, Stanley, a Republican who represents a Southside district, and Sen. Jennifer Boysko, D-Fairfax, authored an unsuccessful bill that would have severely curtailed cat and dog breeding for research. He favors holding research breeders to the same standards as organizations that take in rescue animals and offer them for adoption. He said he is drafting legislation for the upcoming session that also would make research breeders more accountable to the state, require better treatment for the animals and set up ways to find "forever homes" for animals past their usefulness to science.

"In the balance of the equities here, I don't see the utility compared to what these dogs go through, especially in the 21st century. We're still using these arcane methods to find medical

breakthroughs and solutions?" Stanley said.

Stanley said Envigo seemed receptive to some of his ideas, particularly turning over beagles to "releasing agencies" such as the Humane Society for private adoption rather than euthanizing them. In addition to legislation, Stanley said he is also drafting those terms into a memorandum of understanding that would compel both parties to work out an agreement.

"I said, 'Look, we're going to adopt out all these dogs, we're going to find forever homes for these dogs. Of course, it helps ease the capacity problem, it helps ease the caring problem – the unintentional neglect – and, ultimately, it's good PR for you, too,'" Stanley said.

For Stanley, humane treatment for the beagles of Cumberland and the prospect that they can someday love (and be loved by) people is no abstract concept. His dog Daisy – "the best dog I've ever had," he calls her – was once interned at Cumberland.

Out in the part of Virginia where Stanley is from, old-timers have a saying that rivals Twain's wisdom, and it carries a good measure of truth: "You can tell a lot about a fellow from how he treats a dog."



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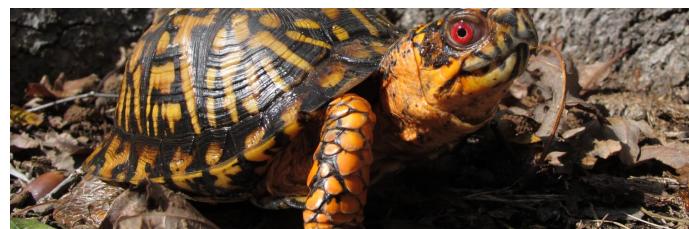
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BY KATE MASTERS

November 15, 2021

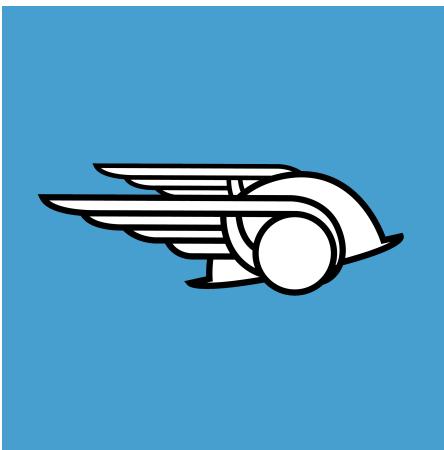
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May 7, 2021

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