

# OPINION

## COMMENTARY

# Elections don't have to be contentious



**Joseph Filko**

In my most recent column (Jan. 13), I lamented the domination of our primary system by the most extreme elements in our two major political parties. One result of that has been the reduction in the number of people who identify as either Democrats or Republicans. A December Gallup poll revealed 29% Democrats, 28% Republicans and 40% independents. When those independents who lean one way or the other are included, the numbers come out to 47% Republican and 48% Democrat. We truly are a divided country.

Republicans supporting Donald Trump appear to make up about half of the Republican's 27%. The same is probably true for the progressive wing of the Democratic Party, and it is those groups that provide most of the energy, do most of the leg work and that come out to vote in the primaries. In Iowa, for example, while there are about 3 million residents, only a few hundred thousand participate in the caucuses. Only about 20% of us participate in midterm primaries, but yet it is at the grassroots level that most politicians get their start.

As a result of our complacency, the most radical elements control the day, and far too many of our elections turn into slugfests. A classic example was the contest in Iowa between Ron DeSantis and Nikki Haley. When they were by themselves in town halls, answering questions from moderators and audience members, they were generally calm, informative, clear and responsive to questions. When they appeared on a stage together in a "debate," they brutalized each other mercilessly.

We probably aren't going to change the system, but an experience in my own life proved to me that individual candidates can choose a better path.

Back in 1982, four years after I left teaching in the State College (Pennsylvania) Area High School, an unexpected opening appeared midterm on the local nine-member school board. In order to preserve an odd number of board members, a special election was held.

Because there was no time for a primary, each political party was permitted to select one candidate. I made a spontaneous decision to appear before the local Republican committee and present my credentials. Of the several citizens who appeared, I was the one selected. The Democratic Party did the same, and they selected a highly respected professor of education at Penn State, Mary Dupuis. I had taught one of her chil-

dren in high school and thought she was a sincere and entirely qualified person.

Mary and I resisted the temptation to make our campaigns partisan or divisive. We would appear at school plays and sporting events to shake hands and distribute campaign literature, often extending friendly greetings. We each put a few ads in the local paper, but they were not attack ads. We focused on our experiences and our priorities for the school district, which encompass Penn State University, the Borough of State College and several surrounding townships, a total of about 150 square miles.

Even though I had served in 1976 as the chief contract negotiator for the local teacher's union and in 1978 had served as its president, I did not seek nor receive its endorsement.

In fact, during the evening that I was presenting my credentials to the local Republican committee, the strongest objection to my candidacy was my prior leadership positions in the teacher's union, i.e., the fox in the henhouse.

But in only four short years, having been away from it, I could tell them honestly that I was already beginning to perceive unionism and professionalism as strange bedfellows, and that belief persists to this day.

Right before the election, a candidates' night was held in the high school auditorium and was very well attended. There were plenty of issues to be discussed, but it wasn't set up as a debate. Instead, each of us made an opening statement, and then the rest of the evening was spent fielding questions from the audience. We didn't agree on everything, but not once did Mary or I say anything negative about each other.

To the contrary, each of us made the point that regardless of which one of us was elected, the school district would be well served.

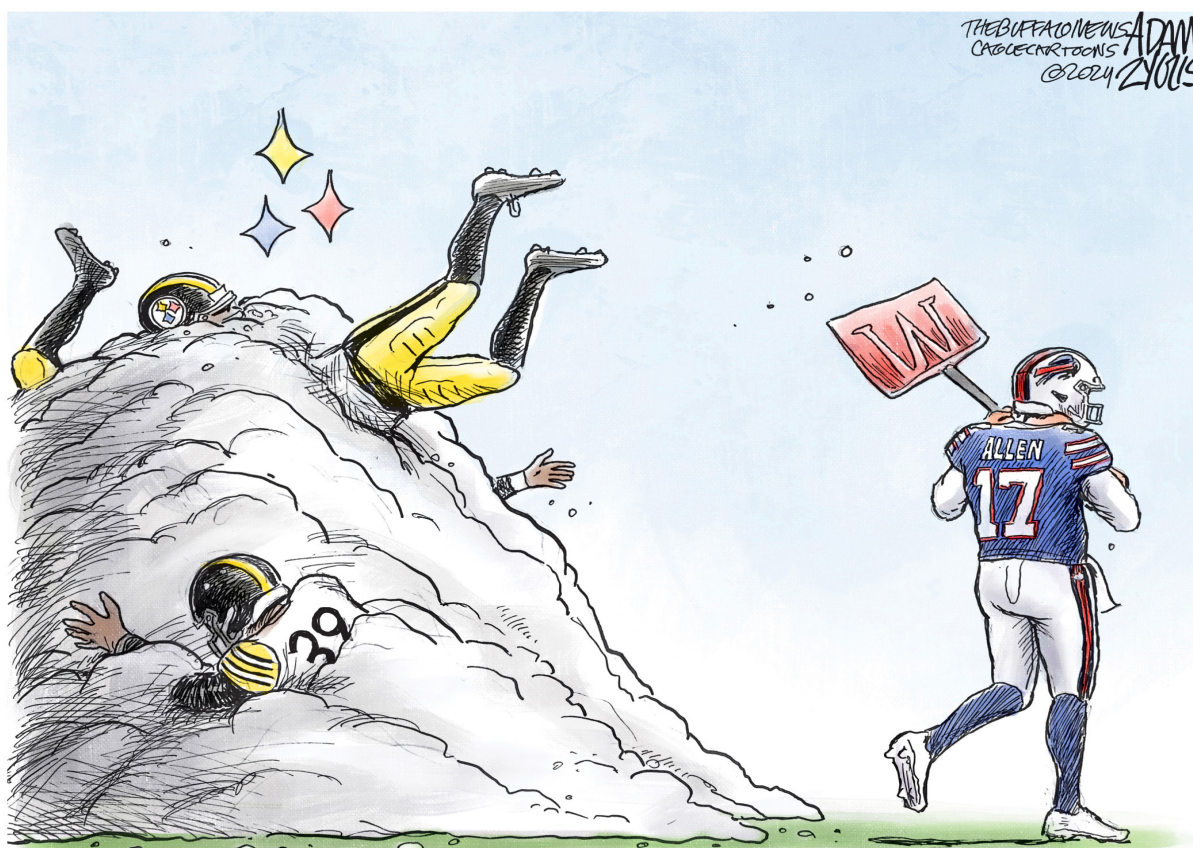
The local newspaper agreed. What a refreshing change from politics as usual.

In the end, I was elected and then reelected to a second term, but I know that Mary would have made a great board member.

Later, in 1988, there occurred the one and only teacher strike in the history of the school district, and that was the most traumatic thing that I experienced as a board member because the singular reason I had left teaching was 2%-3% pay raises during the high inflation of the Ford and Carter years.

I decided not to run for a third term, but overall, it was richly rewarding experience.

*Joseph Filko has taught economics and American government and lives in Williamsburg. He can be reached at jfilko1944@gmail.com.*



## BUILDING A BIGGER TABLE

# Dispelling false historical narratives

By **Laura D. Hill**

Recently, GOP presidential nominee Nikki Haley has been making comments about race that promote false narratives about America's racial history. According to Haley, "America has never been a racist country." However, when you live at the "birthplace of America," where seeds of racial division were sown more than 400 years ago, you know better.

You have likely visited Jamestown Settlement's Powhatan Indian Village and learned about the history and culture of the native Powhatan tribes — pre-English contact, at contact and post contact.

You have likely toured Colonial Williamsburg's Peyton Randolph House and viewed interpretation by Janice Canaday or other African American costumed interpreters, who share the harrowing stories of life at this property, which was home to 27 enslaved people and the Randolph family.

I could write a book to dispute Haley's comments, which are widely viewed as political pandering because they are at odds with her experience. Haley is the American-born daughter of Indian immigrants who settled in South Carolina — where the Civil War began — after Confederate forces fired the first shots on Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor on April 12, 1861.

Haley has acknowledged that she faced racism while growing up. Moreover, in 2015, while South Carolina's governor, she signed into law a bill that removed the Confederate flag from the state capitol building after Dylann Roof, a self-avowed racist, walked into a Black South Carolina church and murdered eight people attending a Bible study.

In December, Haley came under fire for failing to mention slavery as the cause of the Civil War. Haley backtracked. During a town hall meeting in January, she confirmed that she knew slavery was the root cause of the war that claimed more than 600,000 American lives. She stated, "You grow up and you have, you know, I had Black friends growing up. It (slavery) is a very talked about thing."



Miss Juneteenth USA Sunshine Huggins speaks Tuesday during the Greater Williamsburg National Day of Racial Healing. **HARRY WASHINGTON**

Haley's self-contradictory comments demonstrate that like millions of people, she is still grappling with racist experiences that her family encountered, which included the police being called on her Sikh father for wearing a turban while shopping at a grocery store. Imagine how traumatic this incident must have been for her as a child.

Yet today, as a candidate for the highest political office in the nation, Haley does not acknowledge racist behavior as an adverse effect of living in a nation that is rooted in racism.

It's past time to be clear about the fact that there is one race — the human race. Racism is a man-made social construct to assign value to humans based upon skin color for the purpose of exploitation.

The 17th century English colonists devalued the Powhatans to facili-

tate displacing them from their land to grow tobacco, which was the colonists' cash crop. Meanwhile, Africans and their descendants were devalued to exploit their labor, which generated wealth for their enslavers for more than two centuries.

I am still pondering Haley's "Black friends growing up" comment. It is not uncommon for kids to have a diverse group of friends while growing up. In his autobiography, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. shared that as a preschool-aged boy, he had white playmates. But at 6 years old, he was told by his two white friends that they were not allowed to play with him anymore.

The \$64,000-question I want answered is: How many authentic Black friendships does Nikki Haley have today? If she is elected as the next U.S. president, how will her policies impact her Black friends? Will they promote racial equity or expand

racial divides?

Attending the 5th annual Greater Williamsburg National Day of Racial Healing that was held this week gives me hope! Seeing a diverse group of people come out on a bitterly cold winter night to listen and learn to foster racial healing and relationship building was priceless. Seventeen-year-old Sunshine Huggins, Miss Juneteenth USA, gave a dynamic address that encouraged truth-telling about America's history. I wish Nikki Haley had been there.

When we come together to build a more truthful and just community, we all win!

*Laura D. Hill is the executive director of the Virginia Racial Healing Institute, which manages Coming to the Table-Historic Triangle. Learn more about her work at varacialhealinginstitute.org.*

THE VIRGINIA GAZETTE

**KIM O'BRIEN ROOT**

Editor  
kimberly.root@virginiamedia.com  
(757) 603-3671

DAILY PRESS MEDIA GROUP

**SUBMIT A LETTER TO THE EDITOR**

Send your letter to the editor to [letters@vagazette.com](mailto:letters@vagazette.com). Letters must include your full name, place of residence and phone number (although we only publish name and locality). Keep letters short, ideally 250 words. All letters are subject to editing.