

# viewpoint

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# Budget is smooth but city finances are still tight



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Today I'm writing what probably will be a boring column on a subject many people consider boring.

Yes, August brings us the City Council's Finance Committee budget hearings. Let's just say those hearings are not as exciting as a WWE Cage Match although on occasion in past years they have resembled one.

Except for a few blips, this year's hearings could be described as easy-peasy. Such things as a \$4 million oversight by the Mayor's Office when the recommended budget was put together would have caused gnashing of teeth by City Council members had it been done by former Mayor Alvin Brown's finance team.

But Mayor Lenny Curry's team, led by his chief administrative officer, Sam Mousa, and his finance director, Mike Weinstein, have a good relationship with council members. Brown didn't.

You could attribute that to the fact that most council members are Republicans as is Curry while Brown is a Democrat.

But while there may be a little partisan-

ship in play, both Mousa and Weinstein have solid track records with previous administrations that give them — OK, I'll go ahead and use that word — gravitas.

They also are quick to answer questions with reasonable explanations, which wasn't a strong point with Brown's team.

That and solid leadership by the Finance Committee's chair, Anna Lopez Brosche, have resulted in budget hearings that have proceeded smoothly.

I usually try to attend most of the annual budget hearings, but I've only been able to attend a few and watch a few others on video.

One thing that always stands out is the contradiction to the chorus of complaints that council members are overpaid and underworked.

Council members who serve on Finance and others who sit in on the hearings put in long days, often beginning at 9 a.m. and ending at 5 p.m., fine-tuning the budget for the new fiscal year that begins Oct. 1.

Here are a few takeaways from this year's hearings:

During a discussion on the Better Jacksonville Plan, Weinstein said revenues from the half-cent BJP sales tax have rebounded enough from the recession that

the city should be able in the next few months to do some of the plan's promised projects on a pay-as-you-go basis.

And Mousa cleared up what has been a misconception held by some that general fund dollars had been used to bail out BJP when sales tax collections tanked.

Mousa explained that about \$300 million in bonds had to be backed by some general fund revenue sources in order to get the bonds.

But he said the debt service on those bonds was always paid from the sales tax revenues, not general fund money.

City Council President Lori Boyer raised another interesting point: that the city has a habit of getting excited about issues "du jour" and then moves on to another before the work is completed.

Under one administration, it was cleaning up the St. Johns River. Under another, it was dealing with toxic ash sites. Another was meeting American with Disabilities Act requirements for sidewalks and ramps.

Meeting the federal deadline of 2018 to cure those ADA problems will cost \$36 million.

We won't be able to take our eye off the ball on this one, and we shouldn't have on

the others.

There's usually some humor during the hearings.

One such moment came when Boyer showed her potential as an auctioneer as she rushed to read her list of proposed amendments to the budget within the five-minute time limit given council members to speak.

Another came when Peggy Sidman of the General Counsel's Office told council members a proposed action would "obviate" a previous one.

"Points to Miss Sidman for using the word obviate," Brosche said, which prompted a discussion of what it meant.

"To render unnecessary," Brosche chimed in.

During Wednesday's hearing, Weinstein offered this assessment of the budget: "We don't do all the things we would like to do for quality of life, but we are solid."

That's a matter of interpretation. Many things needed for quality of life aren't getting done for a lack of money.

That must be addressed after this budget is put to bed.

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## Clintons have made corruption into an art form

### point of view

charles krauthammer

Clinton scandals are sprawling, complex things. They defy time and space.

The central problem with Hillary Clinton's emails was not the classified material.

It wasn't the headline-making charge by the FBI director of her extreme carelessness in handling it.

That's a serious offense and could very well have been grounds for indictment. And it did damage her politically, exposing her sense of above-the-law entitlement.

### WHY DID CLINTON NEED IT?

But why did she have a private server in the first place?

It wasn't convenience.

It was concealment.

What was she hiding?

If she controls the server, she controls the evidence and can destroy it — as she did 30,000 emails at will.

But destroy what? She set up the system before even taking office. It's clear what she wanted to protect from scrutiny: Clinton Foundation business.

The foundation is a family enterprise disguised as a charity, an opaque and elaborate mechanism for sucking money from the rich and the tyrannous.

Its purpose is to maintain the Clintons' lifestyle, secure profitable connections, produce favorable publicity and employ an entourage of retainer.

Two weeks ago, emails began dribbling out showing foundation officials contacting State Department counterparts to ask favors for foundation "friends."

Big deal, said the Clinton defenders. Low-level stuff. No involvement of the secretary herself. Until the next batch revealed foundation requests for face time with the secretary herself. Such as one from the crown prince of Bahrain.

To be sure, Bahrain, home of the Fifth Fleet, is an important Persian Gulf ally. Its crown prince shouldn't have to go through a foundation — to which his government donated at least \$50,000 — to get to the secretary.

The fact that he did is telling.

### A SORRY STANDARD

Now, a further drip: The Associated Press found that over half the private interests who were granted phone or personal contact with Clinton as secretary of state — 85 of 154 — were donors to the foundation. Total contributions? As much as \$156 million.

Current Clinton response?

There was no quid pro quo.

This is the very last line of defense.

Yes, it's obvious that access and influence were sold.

But no one has demonstrated definitively that the donors received something tangible of value — a pipeline, a permit, a waiver, a favorable regulatory ruling — in exchange.

It's hard to believe the Clinton folks would be stupid enough to commit something so blatant to writing. Nonetheless, there might be an email allusion to some such conversation. With thousands more emails to come, who knows what lies beneath?

We are hardly bothered by the routine practice of presidents rewarding big donors with cushy ambassadorships, appointments to portentous boards or invitations to state dinners.

The bright line seems to be outright bribery. Anything short of that is considered — not just for the Clintons, for everyone — acceptable corruption.

It's a sorry standard. And right now it is Hillary Clinton's saving grace.

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## Caption Contest Winner



## A parent and child winner

A 10-year-old, Aaron Weller Gutierrez, was largely responsible for the winning caption this month.

We couldn't resist the word play.

Nor could we resist the collaboration between Aaron and his mother, Rochelle Weller. For their efforts, they will receive one of our comic strip umbrellas.

Other entries worthy of note:

■ "Don't you dudes know anything besides 'Freebird'?" — Fred Mashburn.

■ "I can get you guys a gig with Gov.

Rick Scott. He doesn't care about noise pollution, or any other kind!" — Will Chakford.

■ "Keep practicing and you may be able to lead the parade for the mayor's new tax beginning in the year 2030." — Jim Brinkman, Jacksonville.

■ "You guys will never open the new amphitheater looking like that." — David Dishaw.

■ "You'll never get gold for the Rio Holdup song." — Pat McElvain.

## Trump is losing the young



**michael gerson**  
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People always remember their first presidential vote — their first participation in the largest decision of American democracy. In 1984 I cast my first presidential vote for Ronald Reagan.

Reagan had demonstrated personal courage and a capacity to govern. He seemed to embody something hopeful and decent about the country.

I was not alone.

In 1984, voters aged 18 to 24 supported Reagan over Mondale by 61 to 39 percent. "The oldest president in U.S. history and the youngest members of the nation's electorate," said the Philadelphia Inquirer in 1986, "have forged one of the strongest bonds in American politics."

Now jump forward to a recent USA Today/Rock the Vote poll that shows Hillary Clinton beating Donald Trump by 56 to 20 percent among voters under 35.

Let that sink in.

Trump is supported by 1 in 5 younger voters, an astonishing and consequential collapse for the GOP.

The 2016 election excludes some explanations for Trump's youth problems.

It cannot be that Clinton is making an inspiring, Barack Obama-like appeal to youthful idealism.

During the primaries, Clinton was routinely trounced among the young. In Iowa caucus entrance polling, Bernie Sanders bested Clinton among 17- to 29-year-old Democrats by 84 to 14 — the previous most laughable showing among the young.

And it cannot be that younger voters are rejecting Trump because he is too socially conservative.

He got applause during his convention speech for promising to defend "LGBTQ citizens."

Trump's nomination represents the advance of gay rights (though not of gay marriage) within the Republican coalition and the marginalization of social issues.

I would venture that Trump's failure among the young has something to do with his assault on the idea of tolerance,

*Trump's lack of appeal among young voters may be a product of his intolerant rhetoric.*

particularly racial and religious tolerance.

Younger voters are less likely than other age groups to regard racially inclusive language as "politically correct."

They are less likely to believe in "reverse discrimination" and to embrace anti-immigrant attitudes.

And, according to the USA Today/Rock the Vote survey, they were not impressed by the GOP nominee's convention speech.

### A HUMANITY PROBLEM

While Clinton has an ethics problem, Trump has a humanity problem.

His combativeness and lack of political polish could be advantages among younger voters, but these are tied to a discrediting lack of empathy.

He mocked a disabled reporter, stereotyped Mexicans as rapists, condemned a judge because of his ethnicity, attacked the faith of a grieving Gold Star mother or called for systematic discrimination against Muslims.

These are violations of human decency, revealing serious moral impairment. Here is something for Reince Priebus, Paul Ryan, Mitch McConnell and other Republican leaders to consider.

At high schools and colleges with Latino or Muslim students, spray painting "Trump 2016" on a wall or poster is properly taken as a racially charged incident.

When white students chant "Trump! Trump!" at a basketball game against a team including minorities, it is properly taken as a racial taunt.

Young people understand the logo of the Republican nominee — the very name of the Republican presidential candidate — as conveying a message of exclusion.

These are the first serious political impressions of my younger son, voting in his first presidential election this year.

It is the way to lose a generation.

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## The conservative right wing's war on truth, reality



**leonard pitts jr.**  
mclatchy newspapers

Last week, a prominent conservative pundit conceded a point yours truly and countless others have been making.

In their constant assaults on mainstream news media, conservatives have

wrecked the very idea of objective, knowable fact. They broke reality.

And Donald Trump oozed out.

"We've basically eliminated any of the referees, the gatekeepers," said Wisconsin radio host Charlie Sykes in an interview excerpt that was tweeted by Oliver Darcy of Business Insider.

### NO RESEMBLANCE TO REALITY

The net effect, he said, is that Trump will say some stupid thing Sykes knows to be false, but that his listeners still expect him to parrot. And if he doesn't, "then suddenly, I have sold out."

"At a certain point, you wake up and you realize you have destroyed the credibility of any credible outlet out there." As a result, he said, conservatives "are reaping the whirlwind."

News media, like any institution created by human hands, harbor biases, including against the political right.

I remember when a conservative media critic decried the frequent use of the modifier "arch" to describe those who hold staunch right-wing views.

When's the last time you heard someone on the left called an "arch liberal"?

But instead of calling out biases in the mainstream media structure or simply creating a parallel media structure to tell their side of the story as women, African-Americans, LGBT people and other marginalized communities have done, conservatives sought instead to raze mainstream media to the ground.

Sykes, Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity and others advanced a narrative in which no institution or authoritative source is legitimate if it contradicts conservative orthodoxy or simply questions the latest harebrained conspiracy theory.

### WE'RE ADDICTED TO JUNK

We have become a nation of junk history, junk science, junk fact, junk logic, a nation where not knowing things is no longer a bar to high office and may even be an advantage, a nation where it is necessary to debate whether a birth certificate is really a birth certificate and Trump followers think the election will be "rigged."

Nor are bizarre conspiracy theories limited to the right. As anyone who has ever argued the supposed link between vaccines and autism can attest, they have infiltrated the left, too.

This, then, is the legacy of modern conservatism: a nation where left and right have no real ability to communicate across the issues that divide because in a fundamental sense they have no language in common.

We cannot confront our most pressing problems because we cannot even discuss them.

It's gratifying to hear Sykes admit conservative culpability, but any temptation to gloat is drowned by the reality of America's plight.

We've now had a generation of young people come of age with ignorance, intransigence and incoherence as their daily norm. The damage from that is profound and will not be easily fixed. It took us years to get here.

It will take years more to find our way home.

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