

All the governor's delusions

By LEE WOLVERTON

A man of wide girth and narrow mind, the governor was prone to fits of smallness. He spoke in a manner that connected with the so-called common man, whomever that might be, and frequently cited the Bible, although some observers speculated his familiarity with that book might have been limited. Not even in Proverbs is there a reference to ends justifying means, but this was the code by which the governor governed and lived.

He championed himself a man of the people, clinging to a cynical brand of hollow-hulled populism embraced by politicians dating to the origins of the art. Tell the people what they wish to hear, lead them in the direction they wish to go, not to a better place because getting there frequently is arduous, but to a nearer place in the mind where the hearer easily can slip into believing the utterer without heed to reason.

Politics of this sort, like that carried out by the governor, and perhaps politics of all sorts, is a kind of religion, which all too often is about thoughts that soothe, that shift the mind's eye from the sight of that which is to that which one would prefer. The human condition is such that many favor the contrived certainty of black and white to the authentic vagaries of shades of gray. The governor uniquely understood this.

But the governor took no chances. When foes arose, he attacked. He could not risk all that he'd built, all that he'd accomplished by allowing people to expose the means he'd justified. He used his political stage as the platform from which to tickle ears and sling poisoned arrows.

The individual merits or character of his targets were of no consequence in the governor's mind. People of the governor's type, who rely on illusions, rhetorical sleights of hand, on peddling not reality but an idea of reality, on perceptions of how things are, rather than a vision of what they can be, these people fall prey to the same distortions upon which they depend.

In this sense, the governor's message to the masses was not to believe the things they saw but rather the things the governor declared, the reality he proclaimed rather than the one that was. In the process, the governor lost sight of himself and tumbled into a world of his own delusion. These are the places where skin thins.

Cast here, the governor found himself insulated against comprehension of criticism of him as it arrived in sundry shapes, forms and fashions. This did not prevent him from hearing criticism. Indeed, the sound of it rang in his ears and drove him mad. But hearing it could not make him understand it and recognize in it points of validity, which, had he understood them, might have allowed him to alter his course, to take a turn toward righting his own wrongs. Rather than repent, he thundered.

One does not have to be particularly perspicacious to peer through the haze of self-talk and chest-thumping to see what a dark, lonely world this must be for its sole inhabitant. Imagine living in a place where one can never accept being wrong, never accept a solitary discordant voice, yet must constantly hear that voice above all others. Imagine believing that one has accomplished wonders and miracles never before seen and yet never escaping the cries of that singular contrarian.

This is precisely how the governor lived, touting his inherent goodness to the masses, citing the Bible and God Himself, and yet facing one who refused to yield, refused to vindicate him, refused to give him his due.

Understanding the governor in this way, one might pass from a feeling of loathing into pity for him. One realizes this figure, this caricature of himself, the embodiment of so much wrong in politics and humanity, was more pathetic than despicable.

Self-aggrandizement is not an expression of swaggering self-assurance but of wrenching self-doubt. The governor's ostensible confidence was but a bare thread snipped by every slight, perceived or real. Despite his stature, he never could be the bigger man because his smallness consumed him. Just as he sold the people on a perception of the world as they desired it so he sold himself on a conception of him that the truth never could match.

Indeed, the governor hijacked his own reality.

Of course, the governor was none other than Willie Stark, the fictive politician depicted in Robert Penn Warren's 1946 classic, "All the King's Men."

Perhaps, you imagined someone else. Silly reader.

#istandwithphil

Secrecy, corruption at full boil

By LEE WOLVERTON

If you have come this far with the intent of reading to the end, the message that follows likely will not be applicable to you, although it might be of interest. You, dear reader, are a rare sort, among a breed of people in this state and country nearing extinction, those who seek and yearn for understanding, those with eyes to see and ears to hear, those, alas, who give a good damn.

Ours are voices in a void, rendered inaudible amid the roar of mindless yammering masses and the buzz of slumbering dullards whose freedom is being stolen while they doze. This state and country are being systematically decimated by idiocy of every kind, that of fools buying the cheap ideological merchandise peddled by policy pimps and that of idlers drifting in a sea of their own oblivion.

Here's the latest:

Roughly three weeks ago, during the political charade known as the governor's COVID-19 press briefing, Jim Justice harangued on Phil Kabler, the longtime Charleston Gazette-Mail Statehouse reporter who has retired but continues penning his weekly column. That column frequently includes criticism of the governor and is a perpetual source of his ire.

Following the governor's rant, Kabler learned that his card permitting him access to the Capitol where he has worked for nearly half his existence had been deactivated.

At this point, to my thinking, none of this would yet be worthy of mention in this space. But, of course, there's more. Kabler was advised by Kevin Foreman, the director of the state Division of Protective Services and Capitol Police, which falls under the oversight of the governor, that a written explanation of the deactivation would be provided. It never was.

I requested an explanation, calling and emailing Foreman, and never received a reply.

Presumably, this means there is no objective rationale for the action. It certainly could not have been based on Kabler now being part-time, since the Capitol is largely occupied by part-timers, from lawmakers to the governor himself.

The latest Kabler clash followed Justice's counsel denying the Gazette-Mail's request last year for utility records from the Governor's Mansion. Justice's lawyer comically said he was not legally required to provide the documents on the grounds that the mansion is the governor's personal residence. The most open secret in Charleston is that the governor does not reside in the city, despite having signed an agreement to do so.

Whether one favors his politics or not, it ought to matter that Justice holds the state's highest public office yet refuses public accountability. The Governor's Mansion is not his house. It belongs to the taxpayers of West Virginia, and its records are the public's. Capitol Police are not his private force but an agency of the taxpayers. The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, providing for freedom of the press, is not a line item for him to veto.

His is a regime that views itself above the public, above transparency, above providing explanations or records or responses to anyone but its admirers. It is a regime answerable only to itself.

And its disdain for accountability is cancerous.

North of the city where Justice never sleeps, in Monongalia County, the Gazette-Mail is continuing what so far has been a losing battle to compel the West Virginia University Board of Governors to obey open meetings law.

Similar breaches of that law are occurring in Fairmont, where the Pierpont Community and Technical College Board of Governors has discussed in secret such topics as cost-cutting and relocating programs, according to a recent report in the Times West Virginian.

Anyone who believes in the principles upon which this country was founded, that we are to be a free republic rather than a flock of sheep ruled by despots, should be outraged by government slinking into secrecy, shutting the door to the public with one hand while confiscating the public's money through taxes with the other.

That is at the heart of the concept of open government: Those who govern can take your tax money, but they must let you see how they operate. This is partly why a free press is needed.

Streets and highways are policed by men and women with badges. Imagine what would happen if drivers knew no one would police them. We the people police government. What happens when those who govern know we won't police them?

Readers who've come this far know the answer and see it unfolding before them. But we are too few. The masses are frogs in pots, unaware of the water bubbling.

Why is the governor hiding?

By LEE WOLVERTON

Jen Psaki, press secretary to President Joe Biden, is a brave soul.

At least in comparison to Gov. Jim Justice.

Psaki displays her comparative valor daily. In what must seem to Justice a feat of insane courage, she gathers with reporters in a room for a press briefing. Every day. Can you believe it? Wednesday's briefing lasted 47 minutes. During that time, she fielded more than 50 questions from living, breathing human beings — well, reporters — gathered with her in the James S. Brady Press Briefing Room at the White House. She dared to share the air with representatives of the Fourth Estate. One can only imagine how harrowing the experience must have been. But Psaki appeared peculiarly unfazed.

She behaved, in fact, as though she were doing something ordinary. Of course, it must seem rather ordinary to her, given that she's been conducting press briefings in the Brady room since Jan. 20, 2021, the same day Biden was inaugurated.

Justice knows better. Doesn't he always?

As of Friday, it had been precisely 750 days since the governor's first virtual COVID-19 news briefing, held March 19, 2020. He has not held such a news conference in person with reporters since.

He dares not risk occupying the same space as them. God knows where they've been, always sniffing in dark corners. Justice briefs reporters on the virus only via livestream video, him in one room and reporters watching from another, speaking only when permitted, like children who know they are to be seen (somewhat) and not heard.

Never mind that the pandemic has ebbed. Forget that thousands of people turned out in the fall for the unyielding mediocrity that has become West Virginia University football and are attending other events across the country, from the Super Bowl to a night at the Oscars slap. Justice knows where to draw the line. He can stand in legislative chambers with lawmakers showing his dog's hindquarters and his own, but, by God, West Virginia, he can't appear in a room with reporters and endure them and their damn questions.

With no one willing to step forward and do what needs done — hijack reporters' trains — Justice does what he must. He applies a political prophylactic to his briefings, insulating himself in the safety of a YouTube presser. It's a layer of protection for a thick man of thin skin.

Of course, some silly people think these so-called press sessions, whatever they once were, no longer are about a pandemic, not about whether to get vaccinated or boosted, not about whose lives the virus claimed today, but about him, about providing a stage for a small man of large stature. Some suggest the virtual briefings are not products of necessity but of fear. He doesn't meet with reporters in person because he is afraid they will pose difficult questions, afraid he'll lose control of his message or himself.

Some people see the governor coasting through a second term, avoiding difficulty like a boxer ducking ranked contenders. If the facts get in the way of the story he prefers told, either to the world or himself, he can turn to his favorite tool, railing against a particular reporter or newspaper. The governor acts softly and carries a big schtick. His sycophants respond in Pavlovian fashion, clapping like seals at the aquarium.

This is how some see it, anyway. They think the governor does as he wants and wants to do little. Few people notice and fewer care. The governor knows, if he says the right things, appeals to the right audience, possesses the right name and wears the right letter behind it, the world might not be his oyster, but West Virginia damn sure is.

So, why go without virtual briefing protection? The only people complaining are the editors and reporters at godforsaken newspapers, and no one worries about them anymore. He is Jim Justice, and he answers alone to the electorate in a state that sent him back to Charleston — well, Lewisburg — with two-thirds of the vote. It's Jim Justice's West Virginia, and we're only living in it.

I don't know whether any of these explanations is correct. Editors know only what the facts tell us. The facts tell us the White House and the world finally have advanced beyond the worst of the coronavirus pandemic, the country is returning to normality and, as this is happening, Justice remains in virtual hiding, cocooned, briefing the press like it's March 19, 2020. What the facts don't tell us, and about which we can only speculate, is: Why?

Justice remains concealer-in-chief

By LEE WOLVERTON

On goes the beat in the administration of Gov. Jim Justice, the ranks of those parting from it growing as the cocoon around him thickens.

Top health officials frequently find their differences with him irreconcilable, but details are scant. Justice declares it his mission to be transparent. It is his mission to be this in the way it was Edward Smith's to reach shore by crashing into an iceberg.

Jeremiah Samples, former deputy secretary of the massive state Department of Health and Human Resources, is the latest to split from Justice. During his online virus news briefing Monday, the same day Samples released a statement about his departure, the governor noted of his former administrator, "if things didn't work out or anything, you know, he's an at-will employee," meaning Samples legally could be fired without cause or for any cause within the law.

Whether this happened in Samples' case is not publicly known, although the governor's remark and Samples' own, noting differences between him and his superior, Health and Human Resources Secretary Bill Crouch, indicate a forced departure.

The two sides divided over splitting the agency, a move Samples favored and the Legislature approved in a bill Justice vetoed March 30, a week before the deputy secretary's termination of employment. Crouch was an outspoken opponent of halving his agency. Justice acknowledged the DHHR's myriad struggles but said Monday the bill he rejected "could have blown our legs off."

By Samples' account, the DHHR already is hobbled and growing lamer.

"Despite having an allocated budget of [about] \$7.5 billion, tireless dedication by wonderful staff and commissioners, and an expectation for success from the Governor, [the] DHHR has struggled to make, and even lost, progress in many critical areas," Samples wrote in his release. "Child welfare, substance use disorder, protection of the vulnerable, management of state health facilities, EMS and provider capacity, supporting client transition from public assistance to the workforce, contract management, and many more DHHR responsibilities have simply not met anyone's expectation, especially my own."

Few people dispute Samples' assessment. The problems he cites are a plague in this state. The DHHR is a shepherd's stew of agencies ranging for the Bureau of Behavioral Health to the Office of Inspector General. Large bureaucracies are, by nature, clumsy and plodding. This perhaps ill equips the DHHR and its staff of 6,000 to respond nimbly to health and other crises perpetually forming in this state.

It also is the nature of those leading bureaucracies and those inhabiting government's halls to clutch at power and jockey for it, meaning there could have been a struggle between Crouch and Samples that the latter ultimately lost.

We, of course, know nothing for sure. We do know it's not the first time Crouch clashed with one of his own. He forced the resignation of former state health officer Cathy Slemp in June 2020 over her failings in "a series of recent events involving issues under her direct control." Justice publicly criticized her over coronavirus reporting errors. She urged Crouch and others to "stay true to science."

Speculation abounded that the governor would have preferred numbers cooked to those that showed the state struggling to keep pace with the spread of COVID-19. All that was clear about Slemp was that she was abundantly qualified, having obtained her doctorate from Duke and a master's from Johns Hopkins, and she left her post by way of a high road to Justice's customary low.

I don't know Jeremiah Samples from Junior Samples, and maybe the former is no more suited to the job he left than the latter. But the worsening of the maladies Samples listed in his release is mostly, if not entirely, irrefutable.

It chagrins Justice that he is not universally appreciated for his efforts to combat COVID-19, but the facts speak ill. He refused to rile the masses by imposing mandates. West Virginia ranks high for death rates and low for vaccination rates, another variation of, as Aerosmith's Steven Tyler might put it, "the same old story, same old song and dance" in a state where political excuses run as high as the mountains.

Only the blithely obtuse could think we're getting straight answers about Crouch's DHHR. This is the same administration that won't release records on the Governor's Mansion, on the grounds that he lives there when everyone in town knows he does not, the same one that won't allow the governor in the same room with reporters for his COVID-19 news briefings.

His answer is to simply trust him, the line of every hustler since George Parker began selling the Brooklyn Bridge. Some of us simply aren't buying what he's selling.