



Hear us roar

Women step up in bridge battle

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SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

Editor's note: This is Part 3 of a multi-part series on the White River Bridge at Clarendon.

Since we were children, we have watched the White and Cache rivers flood every few years. The rivers are lower than the surrounding Arkansas Delta, so it is natural for them to flood. Usually the flood covers only the low areas around the rivers, and sometimes it covers the surrounding farms. The low areas that flood regularly are known as the "Big Woods" and cover more than 550,000 acres.

Because the Big Woods flood so often, it is not suitable for farming and has never been cleared like the rest of the Delta. By the 1930s, it had been mostly cleared of timber, and after that, it was left alone. In 1935, the federal government created the White River National Wildlife Refuge and now owns 160,000 acres that is protected forever from encroachment of any kind. In 1986, the federal government created the Cache River National Wildlife Refuge on which it now owns 68,000 acres.

There is one easy and accessible place to see the Big Woods up close: the old bridge at Clarendon. The bridge is ideal because it looks down on the canopy of the trees in the Big Woods and travels east/west across its entire width. The three of us want to convert the bridge into the place where you can experience it easily.

After a long and expensive study of tearing down the old bridge and building a new one, all of the federal and state agencies involved agreed in 2006-2007 to tear down the bridge. The federal government's view is that it wants to execute the plan all the agencies agreed upon and tear it down.

We and a group of our fellow Arkansans created Friends of the Historic White River Bridge at Clarendon to save the bridge and repurpose it into a tourist destination. We came late to the issue, starting in 2013.

So why should this long-ago decision be changed?

1. What we have seen in Little Rock with the Big Dam Bridge is the first. Bicycling has taken off in America. Millions of new cyclists are on the roads. The City of Memphis and a private philanthropist spent \$40 million and built a hiking and biking bridge adjacent to a railroad bridge across the Mississippi River. They estimate over a million cyclists a year will ride into Arkansas from Memphis. And bike trails are being built all over Arkansas and along the Mississippi from St. Louis to New Orleans. Biking is the new thing in outdoor recreation

Guest writer

in America. The Clarendon Bridge can be the connection between Little Rock and the Mississippi River biking trails.

2. One main reason for removing the old bridge is that supposedly it exacerbates flooding above the bridge in the flood plain. When the study was done years ago, that was true. But since then, 9,000 feet—almost two miles—of the original bridge that was an earthen berm was removed so water could flow freely. Studies show that the still-standing bridge could add 0.36 of an inch to flooding—less than one inch. That is not going to hurt farming above the bridge or have an impact on hunting and fishing.

Instead of spending \$11.3 million to demolish the bridge, the law says we can use that same money to repurpose our bridge, which would save the government almost \$6 million. It has cost Arkansas less than \$15,000 annually to maintain the old bridge when it had traffic flowing over it. We can raise that from foundations and local supporters who are ready to support us once the bridge is saved.

We have watched our county decline for our entire lives. Monroe County (Brinkley, Clarendon, Holly Grove) lost a bigger percentage of its population than any county in Arkansas between 2000 and 2010. The bridge can make the entire Arkansas Delta into a major tourist destination. We have a plan to do that. You can read it by emailing porter@porterbriggs.com for a copy.

We remember long ago using the White River sand bar at Clarendon as a "beach." Weekends there would find 150 people at the beach swimming and tubing in the river. The beach is still there, unused. And it can be reclaimed for visitors to our bridge. See its beauty at WhiteRiverBridge.org/videos, and you'll understand why the three of us want the bridge saved. It's beautiful. And it will draw tens of thousands of visitors to the entire Delta.

We three women and thousands behind us roar to our political leaders: Stop the tragedy of tearing down this bridge. It is the *one* chance we have to turn around our economic decline. The money to repurpose the bridge is there—it's already appropriated, and a \$6 million savings.

It's personal with us. Save our bridge.

Connie DePriest, Sandra Kemmer, and Susan Caplener are members of the Board of Directors of the Friends of the Historic White River Bridge at Clarendon, of which Connie serves as president.



Beware of Guard Dog

He's either/or ... or both

Many of the progressive persuasion are praising a column by Pulitzer Prize-winning Tom Friedman published Sunday in the *New York Times*.

It contended that President Trump is now exposed as either "totally compromised by the Russians or ... a towering fool, or both."

The context is that we now know that the Russians cyber-invaded our presidential election to harm us. Yet Trump won't even begin to attend to his presidential responsibility to lead by responding forcefully against Russia in the nation's defense.

Friedman writes that Trump cowers either because he is compromised by something the Russians have on him—either finance-related or personally scandalous—or is incompetently oblivious to the dire urgency that a Russian invasion of our sovereignty poses.

Or, again, both.

Trump has generally responded only to argue (1) that he won the presidency on his own without Russian help and (2) the Russian meddling wasn't his fault because Barack Obama, president at the time, was the one who should have run the Russians and their Web-crawling robots back to wherever they came from.

First, a word about blaming Obama: The evidence of Russia's computer operation in St. Petersburg wasn't nearly as conclusive in 2016 as Special Counsel Robert Mueller made it the other day with the vivid detail and gripping narrative of his indictment.

Anyway, an aggressive stance by Obama against Russian meddling in the heat of the '16 race would have been decried effectively at the time by Trump and his allies as a bogus and scandalous injection of government resources to try to defeat Trump and elect Hillary Clinton.



John Brummett

That aside: While I respect Friedman's work as always, I believe he has erred in this case by his singular and/or—Trump's corruption and/or Trump's incompetence.

It could be neither. And it could be something else.

It is possible that Trump no more actively colluded with the Russians than did Bernie Sanders, who also received Facebook promotion from them. It is possible that Trump was candid when he said there was no way he ever would have behaved with prostitutes while in Russia in a way that had been described in a dossier, considering that he, famously, is a "germaphobe."

And it could be that Trump understands well enough the menace posed by Russia's meddling, but doesn't believe there's any point in essentially restarting the Cold War when the real job is to use the new awareness of what happened to try to limit its recurrence.

That one is counterintuitive, I admit. Trump does not typically hold his tongue strategically. He regularly runs it amok.

But limiting Russia's cyber-invasion is probably the best we can hope, at least for 2018. The digital world is the modern Wild West frontier. We couldn't stop all the outlaws in those days either. And the horses are much faster and sneakier now.

Or, yes ... Trump's subdued reaction could be something else entirely. That is where I seem inevitably to lean with Trump, perhaps, as some

say, from naïvete.

I do not deem Trump intelligent enough or conspiratorially competent enough to commit high-level international financial conspiracy. The man has repeatedly demonstrated that he can think only short-term and in tweets, slogans and insults—in spasms.

Most of us are sufficiently certain by now of Trump's adultery, immorality and Clintonian sexual appetite that very little the Russians could show us in a secret video would shock or even interest us.

I suspect Trump's base would gather at watch parties to cheer the carnal power and precision of the great white leader. The rest of us would shrug or recoil or regurgitate.

Finally, there is this: It is possible that Trump is such a human distortion wrought of insecurity, self-absorption, ego and raging superficiality—such a monstrous eternal brat of a child—that what his Russian response reveals is merely the same old, same old.

It is that he can think of nothing other than himself.

It's conceivable that the only thing the new evidence of Russian meddling means to him is that he must exploit or deflect it to extol and defend himself. It's to insist he won the presidency fair and square in his singular glory. It's to apply the trusted grade-school playground refrain: I didn't do it, he did it (as he points to Obama).

I don't know that we need to impeach Trump as much as we need to consider removing him from office on the basis that he doesn't meet the Constitution's minimum age requirement.

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LETTERS

False narratives flow

Once again we find our government advancing a false narrative to advance a second false narrative. "We the People" are to believe that after decades of use, the historic bridge at Clarendon has suddenly become a deterrent to flood-control management on the lower White River.

The second false narrative is that "We the People" will somehow reap the benefit of spending \$11.3 million to destroy the one thing that might save another of our rural communities from destruction, when it would cost less than half that amount to keep Clarendon relevant to the Arkansas community. Destroy the bridge—destroy Clarendon.

We need Clarendon to be relevant to commerce through tourism, and preserving the bridge is the only way. This "destruction" rationale is mere pretzel logic and equal to that used to advance the recent "stimulus package." The only ones benefiting are the politically influential few who benefit from the multimillion-dollar contracts—not "We the People."

CLIFFORD M. COLE
Piggott

Congress any time soon, so having a system to alert us to the possibility of a tragedy that seems to be recurring at our schools needs attention now. If we can propose billions for a border wall, we certainly can act on an urgent need to construct an electronic wall that will provide information to our law enforcement agencies. Certainly, even the National Rifle Association can buy into a system like this.

The news program I spoke of mentioned that some parts of the system were already in place, but that coordination between law enforcement agencies is necessary. We have large technology companies that I am sure can provide the assistance needed to construct such a system. The military may already have a system to vet potential terrorists, and perhaps it can be adjusted to be used on a civilian basis.

Social media organizations already acquire personal data on individuals. Computers can easily watch the communications to see if certain phrases are mentioned to indicate a problem and action then be taken.

Folks, this is not difficult, so what are we waiting for?

GEORGE WILKEN
Little Rock

Centralize that data

The United States is one of the most technologically advanced countries on this planet, yet we apparently cannot construct a system that provides a central location for background checks, psychological reports and criminal alerts. I watched a news program the other day with law enforcement experts who claimed such a system would provide the necessary clearinghouse for those wishing to purchase weapons.

Unhackable machines

Of course, there is a way to stop Russian interference in elections, and it may even be sitting around in storage. It is the same device used to break machine politics in our fair state: mechanical voting machines—big, heavy, tamper-proof, honest. Where are they and who owns the patent? Surely the nation that won World War II and the Cold War can find out.

GALE STEWART
Little Rock

LETTERS

Of our true allegiance

My thoughts based on the indictments handed down last Friday by Robert Mueller's office: I'm a military veteran and I now firmly believe our country, the United States of America, is under siege from an outside government. An effort that constitutes an act of war. The evidence has gradually been uncovered and presented to us by our military and intelligence agencies.

In times like these in the past, all Americans have come together to fight the common enemy. Usually, only after we have had our noses rubbed in the fact that we have a common enemy.

The U.S. military and these agencies are not that enemy. The media are not that enemy. Gun owners and gun-control advocates are not that enemy. Americans arguing between themselves about a thousand other things that constitute what our country is are not that enemy.

Vladimir Putin and the Russian military and intelligence agencies are

our enemy and they are attacking all of us and our democratic way of life. They are doing this by hacking our systems, flying false flags, and contributing to certain individuals and entities who are selling America down the drain.

Here's the hard part you need to come to grips with. To the extent you aid and abet this enemy's efforts to destroy our country from the inside, by promulgating their attacks, their misdirections and falsehoods as truth, you, my fellow Americans, are also, sad to say, helping that enemy.

Make a commitment now. Decide where your real allegiance is—with your fellow Americans you disagree with on many issues, or the outside forces that see as their goal our destruction as a free country.

It's time to decide.
JEFF REDDEKOPP
Fayetteville

VA's been wonderful

It's high time to speak positively about the Veterans Administration!

In the last several years, the doctors at the VA have done a wonderful job caring for my husband. His team of doctors has provided great office care, physical therapy (when need-

ed), and hospital care (three days). He recently broke his hip and had surgery. The VA will be providing and installing equipment for him when he is able to come home. Should he need more home health care over what Medicare provides, they will provide that.

The VA has recently had some bad press. It is not perfect. But may I please insist that the VA is there, and will continue to provide the best care that it can for our deserving veterans. Kudos to our vets, and kudos to the VA.

ANNE BRANTLEY
Little Rock

Thinking for himself

I retired and moved to Arkansas last month. Imagine my elation when I discovered I have landed in the district of the only member of the all-GOP Arkansas congressional delegation to vote against a budget bill that adds billions to a deficit that will pass \$1 trillion next year.

Rep. Bruce Westerman, I salute you. A politician who votes in accordance with his campaign rhetoric just might represent an exotic new species. Every state should have one.

ED FOWLER
Hot Springs Village

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