

Missing the mark

Our heroes and our politicians give us exactly what we want: half-truths, says **Gordon Keith**

Wendy Davis has been trucking in shaded truth for years. She's been presenting a collage of herself picked from a pile of messy details and artfully put together to give us a good story. That's what politicians do, feed hungry ears candied inspiration and target the swell of your heart, not the bulk of your brain.

Now that we've found out she didn't give us a complete, unambiguous story, we're shocked, wounded or plain indignant. But we're forgetting a few things.

Nobody likes a true story. We only like parts of a true story. We like edited versions of our lives, even when it counted. Factual stories with complicated motives, endless details and unresolved grayness are poison to our pleasure centers, taxing to our minds. (Read your middle school journal.) Life has a lot of downtime and long explanations. Stories shouldn't. Davis' story is still true, even if some of its details are not. Being offended by peccadilloes is wasted energy.

This is not a defense of Wendy Davis. This is an attack on us. We all edit our own histories, polish our wrinkles and summarize decades of life in short, blunt sentences. We give false impressions to our children, our co-workers and the people we try to bed. (Especially people we try to bed.)

Why should we be held to a lower standard than politicians, a lot that is culturally considered moral bottom-feeders? Have we always been accurate about our lives, even when it counted? Some of us have been telling entertaining biographical stories so long we remember the words better than the events, and many of our own truths are stories that we've sharpened with extra drinks, not fact-checking. This doesn't excuse Wendy, it just holds us equally accountable. She was stupid for not tightening her story, but how do you open your first news conference with, "I'm running for governor, and here's all the inaccurate stuff I've peddled for years..."

We wonder how someone in a high position like Davis thought she could massage the truth and escape detection. Because before she was a politician, she was one of us — a person prone to hero-

making, in herself and others. But a hero is only a hero through careful editing. Thomas Jefferson is an American hero. And a slave owner and a spendthrift. Narrow the spotlight, you find a hero. Open it, and you find a person.

For better or worse, the Internet has made a fuzzy past an extinct luxury. In the future, armchair PIs with a nose for fact-checking will know more about us than we can possibly remember. Plus our high school poetry will live forever. So don't run for office.

When you're a political candidate, you tell stories because people demand them. Voters need to know which archetypal narrative you fit into so that they can quickly slot you. Rags to riches. Trust-fund baby. Self-made man. Drives a pickup. Struts in a Porsche. Married 30 years to high school sweetheart. Married 30 years his junior. Smoked pot and inhaled. Went to elite school. Adopted a special-needs child. Abandoned kids from first marriage. Laughs at Louis CK.

These conditions are more impactful to voters than any voting record. If you hate her politics, you're not going to cut Wendy Davis any slack. If you like her politics, you'll find a nuance that makes her case different from similar ones that suffered your judgment. Consistency is our most elusive virtue.

We love stories of triumph, inspiration, surprise endings and miraculous turns. We also like the false feeling of accomplishment that comes from tearing something down.

We require two things from media: the epiphanies of good stories and the catharsis of gotcha ones. Wendy Davis' "TrailerGate" is both. Liberals get another emotional spit-valve for righteous indignation. Conservatives get an enlarged target for ripe tomatoes. And columnists get a fresh surface for their verbal wallpaper. We all win. Luckily, in the world of outrage, everyone gets a turn on the high horse.



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What others are saying

The critical question for Wendy Davis is how she handles this moment. So far, she's made it a political enemies defense instead of a concession to human frailty. And that's a political mistake. This is a time for her to show humility and direct talk, regardless of whether she thinks this is any of our business or a political dirty trick. Otherwise, she'll find herself buried under relentless questioning of her every move that will drown out the rest of her message — the last thing she needs in what is already an uphill race.

Jim Mitchell, editorial board member, dallasnews.com/opinionblog

It's hard to imagine any publication thinking that they've got a big story upon discovering that a male politician had a loyal wife who supported him financially and took care of things at home while he built up his career. If the genders were reversed, it seems obvious that a woman's support of her husband's career is simply an investment in her family's future. It's nearly impossible to imagine that anyone would think it's a form of abandonment for a divorced male politician to let his ex-wife have custody of a teenager.

Amanda Marcotte, a Brooklyn-based writer and contributor to *Slate's DoubleX* blog

If a man campaigned on something like "family values" or a similar theme, and if he had two failed marriages in his past, and if he had two small kids with a spouse for an extended time a couple thousand miles away, and if he dumped that spouse later on, he would run into the same buzz saw that Wendy Davis hit this week. The public sees when a candidate is trying to have it both ways. And that has nothing to do with a man-woman double standard.

Rodger Jones, editorial board member, dallasnews.com/opinionblog

I don't agree with Wendy Davis on the filibuster that made her famous. But I do agree with her on the arc of her life. She started out dirt poor and rose through pluck and luck to make a huge deal of herself. Nothing that happened over the weekend takes away from that. But still, it's too bad for her she didn't run off to Argentina with a polo player or two. Then she'd be ahead in the polls.

Margaret Carlson, in a *Bloomberg View* column

Legalized pot won't bring peace to Mexico

Cartels will remain strong in dysfunctional nation, says **Alejandro Hope**

Since Jan. 1, Colorado has had a legal marijuana market. The same will soon be true in Washington state, once retail licenses are issued. Other states, such as California and Oregon, will probably follow suit over the next three years.

So does this creeping legalization of marijuana in the United States spell doom for the Mexican drug cartels? Not quite. The illegal marijuana trade provides Mexican organized crime with about \$1.5 billion to \$2 billion a year. That's not chump change, but according to number of estimates it represents no more than a third of gross drug export revenue. Cocaine is still the cartels' biggest money-maker, and the revenue accruing from heroin and methamphetamine isn't trivial. Moreover, Mexican gangs also obtain income from extortion, kidnapping, theft and various other types of illegal trafficking. Losing the marijuana trade would be a blow to their finances, but it certainly wouldn't put them

out of business.

But wouldn't Mexico experience less violence if marijuana were legal? Yes, to some extent, but the decline wouldn't be sufficient to radically alter the country's security outlook. In all likelihood, marijuana production and marijuana-related violence are highly correlated geographically. Marijuana output is concentrated in five states (Chihuahua, Durango, Sinaloa, Michoacán and Guerrero) that accounted for approximately a third of all homicides committed in Mexico in 2012. Assuming improbably that half of all murders in those areas were marijuana-related, we can estimate that the full elimination of the illegal marijuana trade would reduce Mexico's homicide rate to 18 per 100,000 inhabitants from 22 — still about four times the U.S. rate.

Well, but couldn't the Mexican government gain a peace dividend by redirecting some resources from marijuana prohibition to other law enforcement objectives? Yes, but the effect would probably be modest. Only 4 percent of all Mexican prison inmates are serving time exclusively for marijuana-related crimes. In 2012, drug offenses

represented less than 2 percent of all crime reports in the country. When it comes to only federal crimes (7 percent of the total), the share of drug offenses rises to 20 percent, but that percentage has been declining since 2007. So the legalization of marijuana won't free up a huge trove of resources to be redeployed against predatory crime.

Whatever the legal status of marijuana, Mexico needs to tackle its many institutional malfunctions. Its police forces are underpaid, undertrained, undermotivated and deeply vulnerable to corruption and intimidation. Its criminal justice system is painfully slow, notoriously inefficient and deeply unfair. Even with almost universal impunity, prisons are overflowing and mostly ruled by the inmates themselves.

Changing that reality will take many years. Some reforms are underway, some are barely off the ground. As a result of a 2008 constitutional reform, criminal courts are being transformed, but progress across states has been uneven. With a couple of local exceptions, police reform has yet to find political traction. The federal Attorney

General's Office is set to become an independent body, but not before 2018.

The reformist zeal that President Enrique Peña Nieto has shown in other policy areas (education, energy, telecommunications) is absent in security and justice. Security policy remains reactive, driven more by political considerations than by strategic design. Homicides have been mixed at best: Homicides declined moderately in 2013, but kidnapping and extortion reached record levels.

Marijuana legalization won't alter that dynamic. In the final analysis, Mexico doesn't have a drug problem, much less a marijuana problem: It has a state capacity problem. That is, its institutions are too weak to protect the life, liberty and property of its citizens. Even if drug trafficking might very well decline in the future, in the absence of stronger institutions, something equally nefarious will replace it.



Former intelligence officer Alejandro Hope is a security policy analyst at IMCO, a Mexico City research organization.

Education begins with school board

Voters key to ensuring group works together for common good, says **Anne Foster**

While it may not be evident from voting patterns, casting votes for local school board members may have greater impact on a community's overall quality of life than any other vote cast. Quality public schools bring the things that ensure a high quality of life — strong economic climate, better jobs, civic engagement, more citizens voting and an emphasis on the arts. And quality public schools are tied directly to the performance and effectiveness of their school boards.

All of us should pay more attention to our school boards — to electing them, supporting them and monitoring them. While many people today believe that too much local control has been wrested from local school boards, their role remains critical to the success of the schools they govern.

Voters elect a school board to represent them in the oversight of their schools. That is our system of government, and it's a good one. School boards then spend the public's money on educating children, touching the future as no other entity does. School boards set the tone for school districts — for student achievement, continuous improvement and financial management.

Successful school boards are made up of individuals without personal agendas and with a desire that all children have the opportunities that come with great schools. They understand that they are a bridge between the community and its schools, with one foot in each. They know they are stewards of the public's interest, and they are responsive when the public reaches out to them with questions or issues.

They also recognize that they and the superintendent are the face of public education in their community. They take this duty seriously, and they engage the public with public schools. They work to gain the support and trust of the public, and when that happens, the climate is right for quality public schools.

Successful school boards do not bicker. Members respect that each of them got there the same way — voters put them there. They find ways to work together, because the only power that they are given is as a corporate body. They tackle issues that they do not agree on with an understanding of various viewpoints and the ability to compromise. They debate policy until they can reach agreement and stand strong together in support of educators and students.

January is School Board Appreciation Month. Many local school districts will be saying thanks to their school boards this month, and with good reason. North Texas is fortunate to have many strong, successful school districts that draw the majority of their families to public schools and keep them there. The performance of their school boards is directly linked to the success of those districts.

For example, Coppell ISD's Board of Trustees in 2011 showed a visionary agenda when the district opened New Tech High School, offering creative and alternative ways for students to learn. Denton ISD is served by a school board with a vision for using technology in new and innovative ways that serve students, teachers and families. District families can easily access grades and attendance records, as well as register their students online. The Hurst-Euless-Bedford ISD school board has used the Baldrige model to ensure continuous improvement, making students responsible for their own learning.

In case you think things are easy out in the suburbs, these districts share many of the same challenges as urban districts, with large numbers of students speaking multiple languages and living in poverty. Successful school boards do not use demographics as an excuse.

For those school trustees who bicker and refuse to work together, and who offer nothing but split votes, no such thanks is due. But perhaps a wake-up call to their public is long overdue. It matters who you elect to your school board.

If a community truly wants great schools, its citizens must elect an effective school board and then support and monitor that board. And who knows? Some of those citizens may have to run for their school board themselves!



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