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Tuesday, March 4, 2014

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FULL TEXT

Alabama lawmaker wants to create sales tax holiday for guns, ammo

Al.com

March 3, 2014

Mike Cason

MONTGOMERY, Alabama --- Alabama has sales tax holidays for back-to-school shopping and for severe weather preparedness.

A state lawmaker wants to add a third sales tax holiday,.

Rep. Becky Nordgen, R-Gadsden, has introduced a bill that would create a sales tax holiday for guns, ammunition and firearms supplies.

It would be scheduled the weekend before the Fourth of July.

“The anti-gun agenda being pursued by Barack Obama, Congressional Democrats, and other D.C. liberals has caused the cost of firearms and ammunition to skyrocket, and Alabamians, who embrace guns by long-standing tradition, deserve some relief,” Nordgren said in a news release.

“Holding a firearms sales tax holiday at the anniversary of our nation’s birth is the perfect way to celebrate the rights and independence that we hold close to our hearts as Americans.”

Nordgren’s bill, HB 559, would waive the 4 percent state sales tax on guns, ammunition and firearms supplies from Friday through Sunday prior to July 4 each year. There are 22 representatives listed as co-sponsors on Nordgren's bill.

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Lawmaker wants new tax holiday for weapons & ammo

WSFA

March 3, 2014

Lindsey Rogers

MONTGOMERY, AL (WSFA) -

A proposal in the legislature could make your next gun purchase cheaper in Alabama. You've heard of sales tax holidays for severe weather and school supplies and now, a sales tax holiday is being proposed for weapons and ammunition purchases.

Republican Representative Becky Nordgren of Gadsden has filed legislation, House Bill 559, to create an annual state sales tax holiday for the purchase of guns, ammunition and firearm accessories.

"The reason why guns and ammo prices have skyrocketed is because of the threats from the Obama administration on gun control. And of course, in Alabama, we hold our 2nd Amendment rights very dear," Nordgren told WSFA Monday night during a phone interview from her home. "It would relieve some of those rising costs for the purchasers in our state. It fits in perfectly with the announcement about Remington Arms coming to Huntsville."

Alabama currently has tax holidays for back-to-school shopping and severe weather preparedness.

The firearms tax holiday would waive the state four percent sales tax on guns, ammunition and firearm supplies from Friday through Sunday prior to July 4th each year.

Nordgren says "holding a firearms sales tax holiday at the anniversary of our nation birth is the perfect to celebrate our rights and independence."

And she says tourism dollars will help make up for the sales tax holiday as customers from other states flock to Alabama for the tax break.

"Some Congressional Democrats have proposed federal legislation that would double the 11 percent tax on handguns and impose a 50 percent tax on shells and cartridges," Nordgren said. "I think we could have some gun shows maybe that same Independence Day weekend or week, we can attract customers from other states, we can give a break to our citizens on their guns and ammo purchases. I'm excited about it."

Some of our viewers aren't as excited about the proposed legislation.

On Facebook, one viewer wrote: "Sales tax holidays are a joke. We need tax revenue. Many/most ammunition sizes are still hard to find more than a box or two at a time. How do you support a holiday for a product you can't get?"

Another wrote: "We need a tax holiday on medication, just a thought."

Others said the tax holiday would be something they would take advantage of.

"I think that would be great because I live in the country and me and my kids and my family do a lot of hunting and shooting," one man said.

"Guns and ammo- we need it. More people with guns deters others from doing bad things. That's how I feel. And I think my friends would take advantage of it as well," another said.

There are 22 representatives listed as co-sponsors on the bill and Rep. Nordgren expects that list to grow.

With only 11 days left in the legislative session, it will be hard to get it passed this year but Nordgren hopes to get it before a house committee next week.

The firearms tax holiday is not a new concept. The same thing was proposed in Texas this time last year and South Carolina has had a tax-free event for guns since 2008.

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State lawmaker wants a tax free holiday for gun purchases

Anniston Star

March 3, 2014

Brian Anderson

Gun sales haven't slowed down in Alabama, but one representative says the state can be doing more to get people to pick up a rifle or pistol.

A bill sponsored by state Rep. Becky Nordgren, R-Gadsden, would create a tax-free holiday the weekend before Independence Day for all gun sales in the state. The bill would also include purchases of ammunition and firearm supplies.

“Owning a firearm is a guaranteed right under the Second Amendment to the Constitution, but the liberals in Washington seem intent to drive the prices so high that average working folks cannot afford to have one,” Nordgren said in a press release. “One of the reasons Remington recently selected Huntsville for the site of its new manufacturing facility is because Alabama is a pro-gun state, and there is no better way to demonstrate that fact than by creating this tax holiday weekend.”

Attempts Monday to reach Nordgren and her Democratic opponent, Michael Gladden, were unsuccessful.

Dennis DeMille, the general manager of Creedmoor Sports, a rifle manufacturing company, said he moved his operations from California to Anniston last year because the state was more welcoming to gun owners. He agreed that Remington made the recent decision to open up shop in Huntsville for the same reasons. And while it hasn’t passed into law yet, DeMille said Nordgren’s bill is more proof the state takes the interest of gun owners seriously.

“It would obviously be great for us,” DeMille said about the tax-free holiday. “I think it would help even more companies think about moving to Alabama.”

Sales tax on gun purchases is 10 percent. DeMille said a typical pistol, Creedmoor’s best selling gun, costs anywhere from \$250 to \$400.

After a surge of gun sales in 2013 following a fear of stricter federal regulations, many sellers expected firearm purchases to level off. But they haven’t in Alabama. FBI statistics show that in January, the agency performed 52,138 background checks for firearms purchases in the state. It was the seventh highest month total on record for Alabama, and trailed January 2013 by less than 100 checks.

Nordgren said the demand for guns has priced them beyond the range of many consumers, but local sellers said the cost of most firearms has come back down in recent months. Mike Burdett, the owner of Mike’s Treasure Chest in Anniston, said an AR-15 rifle could fetch as high as \$2,500 a year ago. Today, he’s selling them for about \$600.

“It wasn’t really about the price, but you just couldn’t get anything,” DeMille said about last year’s rush to gun purchases. “But things have come back considerably. There are still some things, like .22 rifle long ammunition, that you can’t find anywhere, nationwide, but for the most part, things are in stock.”

For Burdett, the timing of the proposed holidays is strange, he said.

“I think before hunting season would work better,” Burdett said. “I don’t know why she would choose Fourth of July, unless it’s a Second Amendment thing.”

But no matter when the holiday falls, Burdett said, he doesn't think guns will fly off the shelves any faster than they have the last 14 months.

"I don't think people are going to base their gun purchases off of that," Burdett said. "They're already selling, I don't know what more you can do to boost sales."

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Ala. State Rep. proposes sales tax holiday for guns and ammo

Yellowhammer News

March 3, 2014

Ala. State Rep. Becky Nordgren, R-Gadsden, announced this morning that she has introduced a bill to create an annual state sales tax holiday on the weekend prior to the Fourth of July for the purchase of firearms, ammunition, and firearm supplies.

"The anti-gun agenda being pursued by Barack Obama, Congressional Democrats, and other D.C. liberals has caused the cost of firearms and ammunition to skyrocket, and Alabamians, who embrace guns by long-standing tradition, deserve some relief," Nordgren said. "Holding a firearms sales tax holiday at the anniversary of our nation's birth is the perfect way to celebrate the rights and independence that we hold close to our hearts as Americans."

Under the provisions of House Bill 559, the state sales tax and use tax on firearms, ammunition, and firearm supplies would be waived on the Friday through Sunday prior to Independence Day each year.

Nordgren said she believed the annual sales tax holiday could attract customers from surrounding states, which would generate revenue through tourism and other purchases made by visitors during their time in Alabama.

Demand for firearms and ammunition by consumers has risen sharply since President Obama took office, which in turn caused prices for those items to spike. Some areas of the country reported that ammunition prices had doubled last year alone.

In addition, some Congressional Democrats have proposed federal legislation that would double the 11 percent tax on handguns and impose a 50 percent tax on shells and cartridges.

"Owning a firearm is a guaranteed right under the Second Amendment to the Constitution, but the liberals in Washington seem intent to drive prices so high that average working folks cannot afford to have one," Nordgren said. "One of the reasons that Remington recently selected Huntsville for the site of its new manufacturing facility is because Alabama is a pro-gun state, and there is no better way to demonstrate that fact than by creating this tax holiday weekend."

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Originator of fetal heartbeat bill wants it to spark challenge to Roe v. Wade decision

The Associated Press
March 3, 2014

MONTGOMERY, Alabama — The Alabama House is set to debate four abortion bills Tuesday, including a "fetal heartbeat" measure that supporters and opponents agree will likely face an immediate court challenge if it becomes law — and in some ways that's exactly what proponents want.

The bill would ban abortions after a fetal heartbeat is detected. Two states that enacted similar fetal heartbeat laws, Arkansas and North Dakota, had those laws temporarily enjoined by federal judges. Abortion opponents see that kind of legal action as a first step toward a U.S. Supreme Court case that could ultimately destroy the legal foundation for abortion.

Ohio-based anti-abortion activist Janet Porter, who pushed for the nation's first fetal heartbeat legislation in Ohio in 2011, said she came up with the idea in the hopes of sparking court cases to challenge the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision that legalized abortion.

"We need to quit regulating abortion and bring it to an end. If ... we can't rescue every child from the burning building, let's get as many as we can," Porter said in an interview.

If Alabama's fetal heartbeat bill wins final passage, it will tie Alabama with North Dakota as having the most stringent abortion ban in the country, opponents of the legislation said.

The Ohio legislation failed, but Arkansas approved a 12-week ban, prohibiting abortions when a fetal heartbeat can be detected using an abdominal ultrasound. North Dakota followed with a law similar to what is proposed in Alabama, to ban abortion once a fetal heartbeat can be detected at all.

"This legislature is yet again putting the state of Alabama at risk of litigation," said Susan Watson, executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Alabama. "Abortion is a constitutionally protected right for women in the United States of America. That law would virtually prohibit all abortions in Alabama."

Nikema Williams, vice president of public policy for Planned Parenthood Southeast, said the proposal would ban abortions beginning at about six weeks, before many women realize they are pregnant.

Both the Arkansas and North Dakota laws were met with lawsuits and put on temporary hold by the courts.

Alabama House Speaker Mike Hubbard, R-Auburn, said the threat of lawsuits should not determine which laws are passed.

"I'm sure we have the ACLU and the Southern Poverty Law Center and all sorts of liberal organizations that will challenge whatever we do. That's not going to prevent us from doing what is right and to protect life," Hubbard said.

Bill sponsor Rep. Mary Sue McClurkin, R-Indian Springs, said a heartbeat is universally equated with life and should be protected.

The Alabama bill would allow exemptions to save the life of the mother, but not for rape or incest.

"It is a life, no matter what the circumstances are," McClurkin said.

Fetal heartbeat legislation has been introduced recently in Kansas, Kentucky and Ohio, said Elizabeth Nash, state issues manager for the Guttmacher Institute. The reproductive rights think-tank tracks state policies on Medicaid abortions.

Three other abortion bills are also set for debate Tuesday in the Alabama House.

Current Alabama law requires women to receive information, either in person or through the mail, about abortion alternatives and possible adverse outcomes 24 hours before having an abortion. A proposal up for debate would increase the waiting period to 48 hours.

"It's giving her a little bit more time to consider her actions, what the outcome will be and what the risks are," bill sponsor Rep. Ed Henry, R-Hartselle, said.

Another bill would require parents to submit a birth certificate or other proof of parenthood when giving consent for their daughter to have an abortion. Proponents of the bill told a House committee it would ensure that the adult accompanying the girl to the abortion clinic is actually the parent. Opponents said many people lack a copy of a birth certificate and the parental relationship could be established through other means.

Alabama requires minors seeking an abortion to have permission from their parent or a judge. For judicial permission, the bill would require minors to file the legal paperwork in their home county. Currently, they can request judicial permission in the county where the abortion will be performed. The bill would also give the court the ability to appoint a guardian ad litem to represent the interests of the fetus.

A final bill would require women seeking an abortion because of lethal fetal anomalies to be advised about the availability of perinatal hospice services.

Watson called all four bills a "disrespectful" attempt to put up barriers to women seeking an abortion.

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Montgomery woman says Affordable Care Act isn't so affordable

Al.com

March 3, 2014

Bethany Wales

MONTGOMERY, AL (WSFA) -

A Montgomery woman is in desperate need of financial help so she can keep her prosthesis and keep walking. With no job, only disability for income, and no insurance, she recently turned to the government's healthcare plan but is finding it's simply not affordable.

Doris Luster lost her left leg about a year ago. That put her out of work with no insurance. A one-time donation from Easter Seals paid for her initial prosthesis and the supplies that go with it.

Now those supplies are wearing out, and her body has changed so much that her artificial leg needs major adjustments. But on a fixed income and little to spare, there's no money to pay for any of that.

The staff at Alabama Artificial Limb tried to help her get insurance through the Affordable Care Act. For three hours Luster ran into trouble on the website, got disconnected on the phone and found few answers. She also couldn't find anything she could afford.

"The disability I get are \$951, and the insurance that she looked over would be \$400. That would be out of the \$951 trying to live. I couldn't pay that," Luster said. "I'm so used to getting up and going, I felt like if something happened to this leg I would feel like I would be down again."

Luster's application has been sent to the Alabama Medicaid and Medicare systems, but she's been told it will take four to six weeks to process. In the meantime, the team at Alabama Artificial Limb is working to find some creative ways to get her the supplies she needs.

Luster says she knows there are others in similar situations. She hopes telling her story will help her find some answers and lead those others in the right directions.

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Alabama's national parks create \$26.5 million economic benefit, report shows

Al.com

March 3, 2014

Dawn Kent Azok

Visitors to national parks in Alabama spent \$26.5 million and supported 381 jobs in the state in 2012, according to a new National Park Service report.

The parks in the state attracted 717,724 visitors from across the U.S. and the world that year, said Stan Austin, NPS Southeast Regional Director.

"Exploring Alabama's national parks immerses visitors in the struggles of American Indian survival at Horseshoe Bend and Russell Cave, the triumphs of African Americans at Tuskegee Institute and Tuskegee Airmen, and the wilds of the Little River Canyon," Austin said in a prepared statement.

The report also shows that national park tourism is a significant driver in the national economy, returning \$10 for every \$1 invested in the National Park Service, Austin said.

Alabama's national parks include Horseshoe Bend National Military Park, Russell Cave National Monument, Little River Canyon National Preserve, Tuskegee Institute National Historic Site, Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site and portions of Natchez Trace Parkway.

Nationwide, there was \$14.7 billion of direct spending by 283 million park visitors in communities within 60 miles of a national park, the report shows.

The spending supported 243,000 jobs nationally and had a cumulative benefit to the U.S. economy of \$26.75 billion.

Most visitor spending supports jobs in restaurants, grocery and convenience stores (39 percent); hotels, motels and B&Bs (27 percent); and other amusement and recreation (20 percent).

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Robotics and automated manufacturing course starting this fall for Shelby County students

Al.com

March 3, 2014

Martin J. Reed

SHELBY COUNTY, Alabama - The Shelby County Board of Education is preparing to offer a course starting this fall that will get high school students on a path to pursuing a career in robotics and automated manufacturing.

The school district is utilizing a \$500,000 grant from the state to implement the Robotics and Automated Manufacturing program, known as R.A.M., which will be available at the College and Career Center in Columbiana.

"It is preparing students to work in the field of industrial maintenance and automated manufacturing, which frankly, I think, the first thing that will come to mind is jobs like Mercedes and Hyundai," which have plants in Alabama, said Rene Day, the district's coordinator for career and technical education, college and career planning, and community partnerships.

"When people think of manufacturing in Alabama, they still think of a dirty plant," Day said, noting the thought is a common misconception. "Basically the automated manufacturing is when those robots go down, we have to have people who are highly skilled to get those production lines back up, get those robots back up, and that's what this program will do."

The course will begin in the fall semester and be available to high school students in grades 10th through 12th in the Shelby County system. The program will be a partnership involving Lawson State Community College, which will supply a part-time instructor while students can earn dual-enrollment credit toward college.

Students will be able to get a head start on a two-year degree by taking the program, Day said.

"They'll be getting manufacturing credentials that will certify them in certain areas so they can leave with certain work skills," she said. "They will be basically building and programming robots. They will learn how to program automated manufacturing lines, and they will be learning some simple computer programming as well."

Students interested in enrolling in the program can contact Patti Fant at the College and Career Center at 682-6650 or Day at 682-5254.

"We're looking for students that love to work with computers and love the idea of programming robots," Day said.

The course can create skilled workers sought by manufacturing businesses.

"Industry is crying for this right now," Day said about jobs going unfilled. "They just can't find people who are trained in this area. We're looking at kids who can come out with a two-year degree and be making close to \$60,000 a year and more in some cases."

Funding for the program is coming from a \$50 million bond approved by the state Legislature last year to pay for career and technical education. The district is purchasing about \$400,000 worth of new equipment for the course that will include robots and other equipment on an automated manufacturing line.

"What we're really trying to do is align what we teach in Shelby County with what we see in the real world," Day said. "We're really trying to strategically look at what we're teaching and make sure there's a use for it."

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How much does Alabama A&M mean to state? Even economist admits, 'I was amazed'

Al.com

March 3, 2014

Paul Gattis

HUNTSVILLE, Alabama - Alabama A&M University had an economic impact of almost \$350 million on the state in the 2011-12 academic year, according to a University of Alabama study.

The study was presented Friday to a group of Alabama A&M trustees who gathered for the board's February meeting. A quorum of trustees was not present, however, and those who were there received the report.

Samuel Addy, an associate dean at the Culverhouse College of Commerce at the University of Alabama, presented the report to the trustees.

"I was amazed at the end of our study," Addy told the trustees. "I have thought of Alabama A&M as a small university in the north part of Alabama. But you do have a large impact on this state and on this special area. "

According to the study, Alabama A&M had a \$349.8 million impact on the state for the 2011-2012 academic year, providing 1,612 jobs and \$12.3 million in income and sales taxes. The study said the school created an impact of \$8.66 for every \$1 in state appropriations. Alabama A&M received \$40.4 million in state funding in 2011, according to the report.

In the Huntsville metro area, made up of Madison and Limestone counties, Alabama A&M's impact was \$227.8 million, 1,404 jobs and \$2.9 million in local sales tax.

"Clearly, AAMU is an attractive investment for both its graduates and the state of Alabama," the report states. "The university provides many other public and private benefits as well, some of which are difficult to quantify."

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EDITORIAL: Vice president shouldn't hate the push for legal votes

Tuscaloosa News

March 1, 2014

When Vice President Joe Biden opens his mouth, you never know what will spill out. Even his supporters are known to cringe when he steps in front of a microphone. Tuesday, he proved that he can still dole out nonsense with the best of them.

This time the vice president said that people who support voter ID laws are filled with hatred.

"These guys never go away," Biden said, speaking at a reception celebrating Black History Month. "Hatred never, never goes away. The zealotry of those who wish to limit the franchise cannot be smothered by reason."

Certainly, if hatred were ever to go away, Biden and those who trade in it as if it were baseball cards would go out and find it, bring it back home and feed it. Fomenting hatred and division is a potent political weapon that can be used to a shrewd politician's advantage.

Voter ID laws do, admittedly, try to limit the franchise — to legal votes. But then again, discriminating against voter fraud is no crime. In fact, we would contend that it is a duty. Voter ID laws are an important tool in preventing voter fraud.

It is absolutely absurd to contend that requiring voters to present a photo ID to poll workers, an act they're required to do when writing a check for groceries, in any way impedes a legal, registered voter from exercising his or her rights. It does help prevent people from misrepresenting who they are and casting an illegal vote.

It is equally ridiculous to contend that voter fraud is nonexistent when it is so well-documented right here in West Alabama. It has happened repeatedly in this area and not in isolated incidents. We do not believe that West Alabama is exceptional in that regard, either.

Biden was, no doubt, pandering to a crowd that has made overturning voter ID laws a top priority. But there is only one reason to oppose requiring voters to show a photo ID at the polls and that is to make voter fraud easier to commit. And it is troubling to see the vice president of the United States participate in a charade that pretends otherwise.

All barriers to obtaining a photo ID have been broken down in Alabama. Poverty is certainly no excuse. Free photo IDs can now be obtained at the county Board of Registrars office and at Department of Public Safety offices where driver's licenses are issued. The state is virtually begging people to obtain a photo ID.

Opponents of voter ID laws ignore these obvious truths and simply repeat baseless complaints about the burden the law places on minorities. They ignore the fact that all people, regardless of race, will be required to show a photo ID at the polls. The law does not single out minorities.

Photo IDs help protect the integrity of elections. Hatred? Yes, we hate voter fraud. If that's what the vice president means, he's spot on.

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Strange fights subpoena to testify in Barron trial

The Associated Press

March 3, 2014

Phillip Rawls

MONTGOMERY, Ala. (AP) — Alabama's attorney general is fighting efforts by former state Senate leader Lowell Barron to call him as a defense witness in Barron's trial on campaign finance charges.

Attorney General Luther Strange argues in court papers that he shouldn't be called as a witness because his office conducted the investigation that led to a grand jury indictment against Barron and a former campaign assistant. He also argues that he "has no direct knowledge about issues relevant to this criminal proceeding."

Barron said Strange is seeking special treatment. "The fact is that at no time has Luther Strange spent one day or even one hour in DeKalb County on this matter. Instead, as we like to say up here, he is hiding out and running for the hills," Barron said Monday.

DeKalb County Circuit Judge Randall Cole has scheduled a hearing Friday in preparation for a trial starting April 14 in Fort Payne.

Barron, a Democrat from Fyffe, served in the Alabama Senate from 1982 until his defeat in 2010. He held a variety of leadership positions, including president pro tem of the Senate and Senate Rules Committee chairman.

Presented with the results of Strange's investigation, a DeKalb County grand jury indicted Barron and former assistant Rhonda Jill Johnson in April 2013 on charges of diverting \$58,000 from Barron's 2010 campaign account and a campaign car for Johnson's personal use and for noncampaign uses. Both have pleaded not guilty.

Barron's attorney, Joe Espy, recently had a subpoena issued for Strange to testify at the trial.

In court papers filed Friday, the attorney general sought to block his subpoena, arguing that it is inappropriate and unnecessary.

"Defendant Barron cannot show a 'compelling need' for the testimony of the chief prosecutor for the State in a case being prosecuted by the Office of Attorney General," Strange's staff wrote.

When Barron was indicted last April, he said he was "the victim of a vicious witch hunt by Luther Strange from Montgomery."

In court papers, Strange is asking the judge to bar Barron's attorneys from using the trial to question the motivations of the prosecution. "Claims regarding the motivation for prosecution, or of selective-prosecution, are not defenses on the merits of the criminal charge itself, and therefore are not relevant to any material issue in this case," the attorney general's brief says.

The attorney general's spokeswoman, Joy Patterson, said Monday that Strange would have no comment beyond what is in the court papers.

Barron's trial comes as Strange campaigns for a second term. He has no opposition in the Republican primary June 3 and is opposed by Democratic state Rep. Joe Hubbard of Montgomery in the general election Nov. 4.

Espy, Barron's attorney, said Monday he plans to file a response to the attorney general before the hearing Friday.

Espy is a University of Alabama trustee and is known for taking on high-profile cases. In 2013, he successfully defended VictoryLand casino owner Milton McGregor on federal bribery charges. He also successfully defended Democratic state Sen. Roger Bedford of Russellville on extortion charges in 2003, and he helped former Democratic Gov. Don Siegelman with his unsuccessful effort to get a recount after the 2002 election.

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Support for Carly's law driven by Spirit of Compassion (State Rep. Mike Ball)

Al.com

March 3, 2014

Carly's Law is a spiritual issue, not a political issue. It is clothed in the Spirit of Compassion. I never thought of Compassion as a powerful force until I started working on Carly's Law. It has led me to really comprehend the ramifications of the shortest verse in the Bible, "Jesus wept." Since I started this journey with Carly's Law, I have struggled with uncontrollable tears.

Although I have been an active participant in formulating, sponsoring, and promoting "Carly's Law;" in many ways I have been more of a spectator as I watch the power of Compassion do the heavy lifting of changing hearts. Jesus was clothed in Compassion when he raised Lazarus from the dead, healed the sick, and opened blinded eyes. I believe it was even Compassion disguised as Anger that compelled him to overturn the moneychangers' tables in the temple.

Politics is a messy business that gets even messier during election season. Our form of government makes it inevitable. I strongly suspect much of the messiness was intentionally built in by our Founding Fathers as a means to keep powerful forces in check. But it has unpleasant side-effects.

If Carly's Law is successful, it will not be because its supporters yelled the loudest, sent the most cut-and-pasted emails, or had the most money.

Legislators are bombarded on all sides by many individuals and groups with many needs, opinions, ideas, pleas and demands. We squabble among ourselves. We are often surrounded by chaos and confusion. As we search for clarity among the confusion, we sometimes get defensive and hard-hearted. It's not because we're cruel and don't care; it's just human behavior.

If Carly's Law is successful, it will not be because its supporters yelled the loudest, sent the most cut-and-pasted emails, or had the most money. It will be because its supporters are driven by Compassion. Compassion for suffering children. Compassion for their families who suffer with them. Compassion for our adversaries. And even Compassion for legislators. Compassion that makes hard hearts tender. Compassion that cuts through the chaos. Compassion that makes me and Jesus cry.

State Rep. Mike Ball represents the 10th District in north Alabama.

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'A hothouse of sexual violence' or 'hell on earth'? National publications scrutinize Tutwiler, Alabama prison system

Al.com

March 4, 2014

Kelsey Stein

Issues of sexual abuse, harassment and overcrowding at Alabama's Julia Tutwiler Prison for Women remain in the spotlight as national media outlets have taken notice and painted a grim picture of the prison.

According to The New York Times, "there are few places worse" than Tutwiler. VICE dubs it a "hothouse of sexual violence," while Cosmopolitan calls it "hell on earth."

A report released by the Department of Justice highlighted the findings of an April 2013 investigation and condemned the "toxic, sexualized environment" at Tutwiler. The violations range from verbal abuse and voyeurism to forced sexual contact between prisoners and Tutwiler staff members, according to the report.

In a Feb. 25 article, VICE highlights the case of an inmate named Felicia Dixon who, according to court records, was ordered to perform oral sex on a nurse in 2008.

Here's an excerpt: "In many contexts Dixon, as a woman, maybe even as an exceptionally comely or vaguely manipulative woman, would have the right to ignore this pressure; every woman has a right to refuse sexual contact, no matter what the circumstances. But that entitlement to civil liberties, in many cases, is functionally revoked when you're incarcerated."

[Read the full article from VICE here.]

In a March 1 article, the New York Times describes conditions at Tutwiler through the eyes of several inmates and also notes similar issues abound in Alabama's prison system.

Here's an excerpt: "But Tutwiler, whose conditions are so bad that the federal government says they are most likely unconstitutional, is only one in a series of troubled prisons in a state system that has the second-highest number of inmates per capita in the nation. Now, as Alabama faces federal intervention and as the Legislature is weighing its spending choices for the coming year, it remains an open question whether the recent reports on Tutwiler are enough to prompt reform."

[Read the full article from the New York Times here.]

In a March 3 article, Cosmopolitan gives a nod to coverage from the Associated Press and the Times and describes the prison as "horrific."

Here's an excerpt: "Women sent to prison expect a few things. They expect the isolation to weigh on them. They expect to miss their families. They even expect a few pushy prison guards and maybe even an altercation with an inmate. But few expect to be repeatedly sexually assaulted, beaten and psychologically abused at the hands of the prison staff."

[Read the full article from Cosmopolitan here.]

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Martha Roby: Military budget should reflect strategies

Montgomery Advertiser

March 3, 2014

Last week, Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel previewed some significant changes coming for our nation's military. Though the details won't be public until President Obama releases his proposed budget today, we know the size and scope of our Armed Forces will be greatly reduced. In fact, under the president's proposal, the Army would shrink to its pre-World War II size.

Every American should be concerned about how budget cuts are affecting our Armed Forces and what that means for our national priorities. No area of the budget is immune from belt-tightening and that certainly includes the military. And, with the drawdown of forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, certain changes to the military are expected and, in many ways, necessary.

However, any changes to our Armed Forces should reflect national priorities, not budgetary or political circumstances. The United States must first decide what is required to protect this country and its interests, and then budget accordingly. I fear we are doing the opposite, letting limited funding dictate strategic decisions.

One of the reasons I opposed the Budget Control Act of 2011 was because of the way the bill cut a disproportional amount from defense relative to other areas of the budget. The sequestration cuts imposed by that law took 50 percent from the military when defense spending represents only 20 percent of the federal budget.

Now, the drastic military cuts most thought would be a one-time occurrence have become the new normal, and the problem is getting worse. Why? Because out-of-control spending elsewhere in the federal government continues to consume a greater and greater portion of our resources, and there's only so much to go around.

A lot of politicians in Washington don't like to talk about it, but the fact is unrestrained growth of "auto-pilot" social programs is threatening our ability to properly fund the military. A recent report from the non-partisan Congressional Budget Office outlined how, without changes to current law, mandatory spending on social programs and subsidized health care will grow at an extraordinary rate over the next 25 years, while non-mandatory spending, where military funding comes from, will shrink to dangerous levels. Mandatory spending is automatic in nature and does not change unless the law does, which is the reason behind its "auto-pilot" growth.

The CBO prediction would fulfill a decades-long trend. Mandatory spending has increased dramatically over the decades, going from about 20 percent of the budget in the 1960s to about 45 percent in the 1980s to more than 60 percent today. And, as mandatory spending has consumed a greater share of the budget, the military's portion has decreased just as dramatically.

To put this in perspective, in ten years the United States could spend as much or more on our annual debt payments than we do on national defense if we continue down this path. What kind of message does that send to our enemies or those who seek to undermine our global influence?

Admiral Mike Mullen, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, recognized how failure to reform mandatory spending would lead to military cuts, stating in 2010 that "national debt is our biggest national security threat."

The problem isn't limited to the military. Funding for other American priorities like transportation infrastructure, education, agriculture, or other legitimate interests is also threatened by unrestrained growth of social welfare programs.

Unfortunately, our commander-in-chief has failed to show leadership on this issue. President Obama's budget proposal reportedly contains no reforms to rein in mandatory spending, despite widespread agreement that reforms are desperately needed. Too often, President Obama and his party choose to believe the falsehood that the government can somehow tax its way out of every problem.

Congress took a small step in the right direction late last year by passing the Bipartisan Budget Act, which restored some military funding cut by sequestration and made modest reforms to mandatory spending. I hope we can use that step to build momentum for more long-term reforms that help get our fiscal house in order.

The Constitution calls on the United States government to "promote the general welfare" as well as to "provide for the common defense." We cannot allow one responsibility to continue to undermine the other.

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