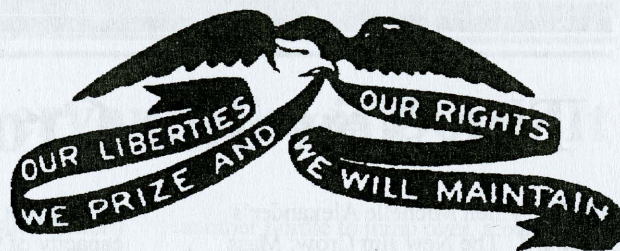


# THE PRAIRIE PROGRESSIVE



Summer 2012

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*A NEWSLETTER FOR IOWA'S DEMOCRATIC LEFT*

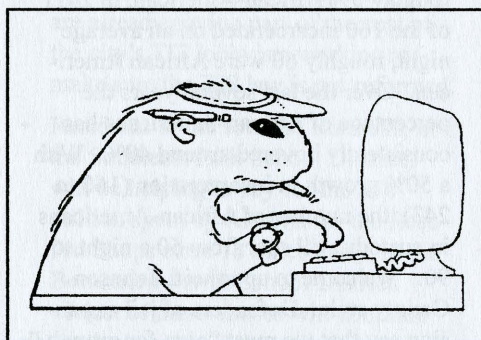
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## Summertime Murmur: Prairie Dog's 2012 Honor Roll

**A**manda Coyne launched a sizzling career in investigative journalism after moving from Iowa City to Alaska. With her husband Tony Hopfinger, Coyne plunged into the politics of Big Oil in Alaska, covering a bribery and tax scandal involving Sen. Ted Stevens. Coyne turned down an offer to write a biography of Sarah Palin, preferring instead to write *Crude Awakening: Money, Mavericks, and Mayhem in Alaska*. She and her husband founded *Alaska Dispatch*, an on-line only news site that quickly became the second-most-trafficked news site in the state. Winners of numerous awards for investigative reporting and public service, the couple's goal is to "take an unflinching look at the state, from its massive riches to its abject poverty, and tell these stories to Alaskans and to the world."

Last year former Iowa State Senator **Jeff Angelo** of Creston started *Iowa Republicans for Freedom* to show support for marriage equality. He continues to promote the conservative principle that government should stay out of the private lives of all Iowans, including gays and lesbians. Once the lead sponsor of a state constitutional amendment to define marriage as between a man and a woman, Angelo criticizes his fellow Republicans who "get lost in senseless debates that do nothing but demean our neighbors and threaten the rights of our fellow Iowans." Unfortunately, no information is currently available on how many members the group has enlisted.

**Tom Vilsack** has made his share of missteps over the years, including the signing of Iowa's "English Only" bill as Governor in 2002. As USDA Secretary in 2010, he again succumbed to rightwing pressure, forcing rural development



director Shirley Sherrod to resign after an out-of-context video appeared on a conservative web site. In both instances, Vilsack later apologized and publicly announced his regret. He's earned his way on to this year's Honor Roll by working hard "to ensure that the civil rights of USDA constituents and employees are respected and protected." Vilsack has helped to implement the 'black farmer' lawsuit, conducted a disparity study of unfair treatment within the USDA, and – perhaps most remarkably – stated in a meeting with black farmers, "When I became Secretary I thought I knew something about racism, but I don't. I'm learning every day."

The June 2012 primary campaign was unusually nasty by Johnson County

standards. The demonization of Auditor Tom Slockett ranged from juvenile and scatological web sites to numerous charges filed against him with the state campaign ethics board (of which only one -- using a personal cell phone for political purposes in a public office -- was found worthy of the board's "least severe" reprimand). Some usually sensible Democrats and public officials fell victim to the nearly hysterical vilification of Slockett, feverishly latching on to every accusation and unattributed rumor that bubbled from the muck. Most appalling, though, was the performance of the *Iowa City Press Citizen*. Unsurprisingly, it editorialized against the incumbent auditor, as it had in the past, but it also allowed itself to be swept up in the vicious anti-Slockett tide when it should have cast a cool eye on the ugliness that seemed to grow exponentially as the primary went on. The only media person to publicly resist the blood-in-the-water vituperation was columnist **Jennifer Hemmingsen** of the *Cedar Rapids Gazette*:

*"We can expect some meaty debate in at least one local race. That is, if some Slockett-haters can get their over-the-top rhetoric under control... Voters must know how Slockett proposes to address these ethical and procedural concerns so they can decide for themselves if he's still the right candidate for the job. But they also deserve an election that's based on more than hidden detractors lobbing rotten tomatoes at the incumbent."*

Many Iowa City Community

*Prairie Dog's 2012 Honor Roll,  
Continued on Page 5*



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# The New Jim Crow Comes to Iowa City

When Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* was published last year, it was discussed widely in Iowa City. Alexander's title pretty much says it all. The Land of the Free is now the world's largest prison, with an incarceration rate that exceeds the most repressive regimes in the world, including China and Russia. The increase in incarceration is driven largely by our out of control war on drugs, and the victims are overwhelmingly black. With 12% of the U.S. population, African Americans constitute 45% of American prisoners. Perhaps worst of all are the long term effects of the New Jim Crow: one in three adult U.S. black males carries the life-long stigma of a felony conviction.

For the last several months Johnson County has been carrying on its own discussion about incarceration. Community leaders of all stripes have united behind a proposal to build a new "justice center" which includes, among other things, a new jail. Readers of the Iowa City Press Citizen and The Gazette are bombarded almost weekly with new articles, based on press releases from the county supervisors or the sheriff, promoting the new jail as simple common sense.

Our colorblind community leaders, and the journalists who cover them, have conducted this conversation without mentioning race. On his private blog, County Supervisor Rod Sullivan has raised the issue of racial disparities in both detention and arrests of juveniles, but has carefully segregated those statistics from any discussion of the new jail, which he strongly supports—a classic example of cognitive dissonance among liberals.

The new justice center is a plan to jail more people. That is what the New Jim Crow is all about—the growth of incarceration. Perhaps before jumping headlong into a large expansion of jail capacity in Johnson County, Iowa City liberals should consider some facts that have been conveniently omitted or downplayed in public discussion of the jail.

The current Johnson County jail has as capacity of 96. The average number of people in custody on any given night is roughly 160, requiring the Sheriff to send prisoners to neighboring counties with excess capacity. The new "justice center" will have a capacity of 243, i.e. a 50% growth in the number of people incarcerated.

**"They should plan to incarcerate fewer people, not more."**

Although Johnson County is roughly 5% African-American, in 2011 of the 160 incarcerated on an average night, roughly 60 were African American. Over the last several years the percentage of African-Americans has consistently hovered around 40%. With a 50% growth in incarceration (160 to 243), the number of African-Americans in custody will soar from 60 a night to 90. Welcome to apartheid, Johnson County style. Defenders of jail expansion say that we must "plan for growth," but the growth that they are planning is what drives the most harmful form of racism in America.

Arrest rates and incarceration rates are falling in many Iowa counties. Polk County actually has room to house 400 additional prisoners in its jail. In Johnson County, though, arrest rates have grown as the African-American community has grown. In Linn County (Cedar Rapids), the juvenile arrest rate fell last year, while in Johnson County it grew from 467 to 533, an increase of over 14%. In 2010, black youth made up 38.3% of the juvenile arrests in Johnson County, and blacks accounted for 40.6% of juveniles placed in "secure detention."

Alexander documented the primary cause of the increasing arrest rates:

the war on drugs. In Iowa City, where marijuana is the overwhelming drug of choice, drug arrests by the Iowa City Police Department have soared from 332 in 2007 to 626 in 2011. Defenders of Iowa City's arrest-happy police department often claim that the high arrest rate is the result of unusually high levels of criminal behavior in Iowa City compared to comparable communities. Anyone who knows anything about policing knows that arrest rates are as much a result of policing policy as the level of criminal behavior. Iowa City Police Lt. Doug Hart admitted as much in explaining the soaring drug arrest levels: "It could be increased drug problems, or it could be as simple as the fact that we have more officers working in the street."

In their high arrest policy the Iowa City Police Department has been joined by the University of Iowa Police. Now fully armed with tasers and guns, their budget has doubled over the last ten years, paid for by student tuition and state taxes. The University police now trawl the downtown bars along with the Iowa City police in order to arrest students. The last time anyone counted, 17% of UI students had an arrest record when they graduated, one that they will be required to disclose to graduate schools and employers all of their lives. In 2009 the University of Iowa police arrest rates were 13% higher than those at Iowa State, a school with roughly the same number of students.

The new "justice center" would improve facilities for lawyers, jailers, judges, and prosecutors. Defenders of the new jail also claim they have the interests of prisoners at heart. After all, the additional people we incarcerate through "growth" will have better facilities in a new jail. Thanks! There is every reason to believe that the Iowa City Police Department will fill up every new jail bed, and that 40% of the additional prisoners will be African-American. Any good that comes from a new jail will be more than

*Jim Crow,  
Continued on Page 5*



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# Tax Increment Financing: Everyone Else is Doing It

This was supposed to be the year for serious TIF reform. The abuse of TIF by the City of Coralville, which granted upwards of \$18 million in incentives to lure Von Maur from Iowa City (or from the Coral Ridge Mall, if that was the real alternative) to Coralville's Iowa River Landing, along with my report outlining the abuses throughout Johnson County, appeared to have finally brought the problems with the TIF law to the attention of state legislators. In fact, a strong bill confronting many of the abuses passed the Iowa House (with no Democratic support). No doubt the bill had some provisions that needed fixing, but it was a good start.

In the Senate, despite valiant efforts by Joe Bolkcom and Bill Dotzler, the bill was weakened continually in order to get the 26 votes needed for passage. For reasons that are unclear, the Senate Republicans were no help, and in order to get the last few Democratic votes the bill was gutted of nearly all of the reforms except reporting requirements. The League of Cities and the development lobby objected even to the most modest of reforms. One provision would have required, beginning several years from now, that once a TIF had been in place for 25 years (25!) a city would have to free up at least 20 percent (oh my!) of the increment and let it flow back to the county and the schools. This was too much for the League and the Chamber types; they wanted, and got, no limitations whatsoever; many TIFs can still go on forever. Even Iowa City, a very moderate user of TIF and chief complainer with regard to the abuses of Coralville, joined with its fellow large cities in registering against serious TIF reform.

Here is a sampling of the bizarre results of the use of TIF in the name of economic development in Iowa:

- Residents of Davenport are paying higher county taxes so that the residents of LeClaire can have a new library, and upgrade their sewer

system (serving a luxury subdivision) without having to increase their sewer fees.

- Some farmers and rural residents of Linn County are paying higher school taxes to finance a new city hall and street improvements in Shueyville, in Johnson County.
- Taxpayers in Oxford — in the Clear Creek Amana School District — will soon be helping to pay for incentives to entice a brewery to locate in the Iowa City School District.
- The owners of the Sycamore Mall in Iowa City will soon be paying for part of the \$18 million in incentives and infrastructure provided to lure their mall's anchor store to neighboring Coralville; adding insult to injury, they are already paying part of the cost of the city's TIF lobbyists working to make sure the TIF law is not reformed.
- Residents of the town of Runnells, in the Southeast Polk School District, will be helping to pay for the \$56 million spent by Altoona for the Bass Pro Shops store 18 miles away, in the Bondurant-Farrar School District.

Most of these abuses will continue under the new law. Taxpayers in one school district may still pay higher taxes to finance development in a neighboring district. There are no limits on the use of TIF for residential subdivisions, high end residential projects, or retail uses, where incentives are almost always a waste of money. Cities may still include the entire city in a TIF. Blighted area TIFs and pre-1993 economic development TIFs still have no sunset date. Cities are still unrestricted in their use of annual appropriation debt to get around constitutional debt limits. Cities need not demonstrate that a project needs incentives. The new requirements on the use of TIF revenue to finance tax-exempt public buildings may prove to be something of a deterrent, or they may turn out to be little more than

another hurdle to jump over, a bump in the road on the way to continuing to get rural taxpayers to finance city facilities that will never add to the school or the county tax base.

Counties can continue to divert school tax revenues from wind farms even if the TIF started after the wind farm was built, and even if the county incurred no expenses because of, and provided no incentives to, the wind farm. Most importantly, the diversion of TIF revenues need not end when the initial project, which may or may not have needed TIF incentives, is paid for; instead the incremental revenues can continue to be diverted, giving the cities a cash cow to finance other projects essentially unrelated to the TIF and the rationale for its initial adoption.

On the bright side, the anti-piracy provision is significantly strengthened, making it difficult for a city to repeat a Von Maur-type use of TIF in the future. The bill also mandates new reporting requirements that are extensive and important, and it is possible that they will help lay the groundwork for more substantive reforms in the future. I am not optimistic.

It is important to note that the reforms that were part of the public discussion and part of earlier and stronger drafts of legislation dealt only with obvious abuses of the law where TIF is used in ways clearly counter to its original intent, which was to spur redevelopment that otherwise would not occur, and where the diversion of taxes from the county or the schools was justified because they would soon benefit from additional tax base. Iowa has one of the most lax TIF laws in the country but it has become so entrenched, and cities so enamored of the ability it gives them to force other jurisdictions to raise taxes for their projects, that it apparently is nearly

*TIF*  
*Continued on Page 4*



## Sometime

impossible to rein in even the most egregious abuses.

Given this sorry history, it is surely tilting at windmills to challenge TIF more fundamentally; that is, to question whether cities should view the granting of public funds to developers as a routine and necessary practice to begin with. There is a pervasive belief among public officials at all levels that state and local government's chief role in economic development is not educating the work force and providing the infrastructure for the economy to function, but rather bribing the private sector to do what they — in most cases — need to do anyway to earn a profit. The average legislator or city council member or county supervisor, whether Democrat or Republican, and however progressive they may be on other issues, has bought into the competitive economic development mindset. "We have to do it because everyone else is doing it." That is logic worthy of a teenager, not an adult charged with ensuring that government serves the general good.

Without serious TIF reform, we can look forward to a future in which increasing numbers of cities TIF all or most of their city for the primary purpose of shifting taxes to non-residents, and the incentive wars between neighboring cities escalate. The end result will be a local property tax system that is increasingly unfair, and an erosion of revenues that threatens the ability of cities and counties to finance important public services that are part of the foundation for future economic growth. Ironically, this result will have been arrived at in the name of promoting "economic development." ✕

— Peter Fisher lives in  
rural Johnson County

Crack! The sound of rifle fire filled the air, a loud thud yards away, we were under attack, a round hit the grass beside me, two friends six meters away, one got his arm blown off, and the pieces filled the air. He must be dead, no screams, the other friend lay on top of him in shock. We thought the fire came from ahead, maybe in the trees. We figured there must be three or more, we couldn't get positioned, and my radio got hit. My body became twisted in the elephant grass, it was so loud, I became paralyzed by my own rucksack, I struggled, and it came off. I thought I spotted someone ahead and to the right, I fired, he dropped from the tree, twice.

Rounds were still hitting all around, now from the rear, they were surrounding us, I had to move fast. I broke off from my squad. I had to out-flank these guys. I moved directly to my left, first I fell, my m-16 started to fire, I threw it aside, the grass was so thick I had to crawl. I reached a spot where I could see two guys reloading; I fired on them immediately, one guy's head blew off and hit a tree, the other was hit in the leg. I shot twice more. The second time I hit their pack, a grenade exploded, and took any visible signs of the two away. I turned quickly back, an explosion, my face and hands burnt like fire, it was white hot, and my skin was burning, my tee shirt on fire, someone had popped a phosphorus round toward me, forgetting I was there. I pulled grass as fast as I could, and put it on my face, I had to take the oxygen out of the fire, and it worked.

I had to move but now I was the enemy, I had to think like the enemy. I was in severe pain; every drop of sweat was like a match going off on my body. God please be kind. I couldn't fire back, I didn't know how close or far I might be. I had to be still, and listen. I was close but not close enough to hear voices, a round from an ak-47 split the air over my head, and someone saw me for sure. I

moved to the rear and left, another round over my head this time I got the direction of fire, I turned back to the right and fired a burst, I listened but no sound, it couldn't be this easy, but I think I did something, I was burning bad, I tried to keep my mind clear, I had to find my squad.

I knew my squad's last location had to be ahead to the left, I very quietly moved in that direction, nothing happened, I mean I wasn't drawing fire, I kept moving then I heard a voice ahead, I raised my m-16 in the air hoping they'd see my arm, I looked over the grass, they were coming for me the medic rushed over, he saw my burns. I washed off my face and arms from a canteen of water the medic gave me, it really burned, but I had to clean myself off, I couldn't do anything else until I got back in.

I didn't have any way of calling a medivac, we didn't have a radio, we were going to have to take our dead with us, and I couldn't carry anything. We were going to have to hump our way out of here to our next landing zone, I'm not sure we can make it, the ground cover is so thick, and this whole thing could start all over any minute. We gathered up our two friends on poncho liners, we had to somehow make them easy to carry, or drag. I figured we had at least three hours of humping, not far according to my map, but always farther than you think. The L.Z. was in sight, as we broke thru the chest high grass, the crackle of a Chinese water-cooled, thirty caliber machine gun tore thru our point man, he had been hit in the midsection, blood, skin, the contents of his stomach covered me like a painting, I ran to him, I grabbed him and pulled him aside, his eyes wide open, still alive, blood flowing from his mouth, he said SOMETIME. ✕

— Don Place lives in Cedar County.  
This is an excerpt from his new  
book, *Days*, published by Trident.





Aug. 2, 1937

FDR signed Marihuana Taxation Act

Aug. 9, 1932

Farmers went on strike in Iowa

Aug. 15, 1947

Non-violent campaign culminates in independence for India

Sept. 15, 1982

USA Today debuts

Sept. 19, 1957

First underground nuclear test conducted in Nevada

Sept. 25, 1957

Army troops sent by Eisenhower escorted 9 children to high school in Little Rock, Arkansas

Sept. 30, 1962

University of Mississippi students rioted over admission of James Meredith

*Jim Crow,  
Continued from Page 2*

offset by the lifetime harm that will be done to African-Americans by incarcerating many more in an expanded jail.

If the jail advocates are serious about improving conditions for current inmates, they should go back to the drawing board and design a justice center with jail for 160 inmates, which is the current demand. We should plan to incarcerate fewer people, not more. By planning for growth, they are planning to expand the New Jim Crow in Johnson County, making a mockery of our commitment to "equal justice under the law." ✂

— Jeff Cox

P.S. As I finished writing this column, the news came of the unexpected death of the best political columnist in America, Alexander Cockburn. His columns in *The Nation*, and in his political newsletter *Counterpunch*, were lifelines of sanity, beautifully written. Cockburn infuriated many liberals, including me, because of his skepticism about the human contribution to global warming, and his occasional bouts of nostalgia for Communism. He was at his very best when skewering the hypocrisy of liberal Democrats for their support of the neo-liberal corporatism and dangerous militarism of Presidents Carter, Clinton, and Obama. He will be missed.

**Lauren Reece Flaum  
1960-2012**

*Prairie Dog's 2012 HONOR Roll,  
Continued from Page 1*

School District watchers believe that the School Board of the early 2000s was exceptionally effective, productive, and transparent. Much of the credit goes to Lauren Reece Flaum, who served two terms from 1999 to 2005 and as board president from 2001 to 2004. Her leadership helped pass a \$39 million bond referendum that led to the expansion of classrooms and built a new high school, junior high, and elementary school across the district. The *Prairie Progressive* will miss Lauren's friendship, her extraordinary ability to bring people together, and her clear and thoughtful writing.

We offer a brief sample from her article *Summertime Murmur* in the August 2009 PP:

*"I often wonder what it is that gets hold of fair, open-minded people once they join a school board. How quickly it's forgotten that the board's job is to lead the superintendent and not the other way around! But I do remember that courage is not revered in the climate of the board committee; conformity is. The complexities of school finance formulas in conjunction with the steep learning curve of other issues conspire to intimidate rather than embolden. People fall in line. I often did myself." ✂*

— *Prairie Dog*

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# Who Guarantees Freedom of Speech?

**A**m I the only Iowan who is fed up with hearing the oft-repeated assertion that any member of the U.S. military fighting anywhere in the world is guaranteeing our right to free speech? This is nonsense.

Military personnel in Iraq and Afghanistan have spent no time guaranteeing my free speech — or that of any other Iowan — and neither have other U.S. military personnel currently stationed in more than 150 foreign countries. That right of free speech is guaranteed by the 1st Amendment in the Bill of Rights, which has been upheld and generously reinforced by those federal judges so many people seem to despise.

It can be argued that the Revolutionary War resulted in free speech for some; and one can rationally suggest that Union troop sacrifices led to slaves eventually gaining a limited form of free speech. But if the U.S.

had never sent one soldier to fight in Iraq or Afghanistan, my free speech rights would still be intact today.

Although the specific rationales change, the one constant from imperial leaders is they rally their citizens to support military adventures far from their homeland. And they spend a lot of time and energy making their military veterans into heroes. Our young men (and now women) grow up indoctrinated with the idea that military adventurism equals heroism and protection of our basic civil rights. Most progressives and Democratic politicians know this is pure fantasy, but are afraid to speak the truth because they fear being accused of 'not supporting our troops.'

It's time for our youth to hear an alternative narrative: that military occupations abroad are a waste of both

precious lives and valuable national resources that could be used more productively here at home.

During the past few years Tea Party folks have gotten a lot of attention by using miniature copies of the Constitution as their primary visual prop, implying that the Constitution reflects their views. Progressives need to be more courageous. Let's start carrying around our own little Constitutions, and not be shy about pointing out that our free speech has nothing to do with military domination abroad. ✕

— Dennis Harbaugh lives in Waterloo

## THE PRAIRIE PROGRESSIVE

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"You must be for the  
civil rights of everyone,  
or you're not for the  
civil rights of anyone."

— Al Sharpton