

A-pathetic cause

White supremacists should be opposed, not ignored



MATT PETERSON is a senior English and news-editorial major and a Daily Nebraskan columnist.

The leader of a Mississippi-based white-supremacy group is planning a parade in York on Monday, and the mayor of the town is reportedly hoping for "a real cold Nebraska day" to spoil the group's plans.

Other city officials share Mayor Greg Adams' passive sentiment.

"We feel the best response is no response," said City Administrator Jack Vavra, as reported in a Lincoln Journal Star editorial. "We hope this will be the biggest nonevent in the history of York."

Unfortunately, it is a recent event in the history of York that served to attract Richard Barrett and his Nationalist Movement in the first place.

Linda Eastman, one of York's few black residents, said the event and its organizers were not worthy of attention. And although she said she planned to videotape the event to record any participating York residents, she added her voice to the collective apathy of city hall.

"If you ignore these people, then they can't exist," she said, as quoted in a Jan. 5 Omaha World-Herald article.

I'm a firm believer in peaceful protest, as the legacy of Martin Luther King Jr. prescribes: "the need for man to overcome oppression and violence without resorting to oppression and violence."

But passivity has nothing to do with being a pacifist, and while silent

protest certainly has its place, absent protest is an oxymoron.

Ignorance cannot be ignored. If no one shows up to protest Barrett's demonstration, he and his followers will assume such racist tripe is supported or, at the very least, tolerated around here since York is, after all, just 40 short minutes west on I-80.

And they have good reason for expecting this support.

For those with short, or simply selective, memories, York was the site of a hate crime in September 1998.

Forty young men hoisted Confederate flags and marched on the house of an interracial couple. Some men carried baseball bats and shouted racial slurs as they vandalized the couple's property.

Three of the men were charged with felony criminal mischief while 11 others were cited for disorderly conduct.

This regrettable incident inspired Barrett to bring his sideshow further north than it typically ventures.

According to the Nationalist Movement's Web site, Monday's 10:30 a.m. parade has two purposes: to protest the observance of Martin Luther King Jr. Day and to call for an end to miscegenation, marriage or cohabitation between members of different races.

Unfortunately, despite the meteorological hopes of Mayor Adams, it can never rain on this parade.

Indeed, it is Barrett's constitutional right to assemble wherever and whenever he chooses.

The predominant interests of those he subjects to his opinions are insignificant legally, as exemplified by an anti-homosexual parade held by Nationalists in Boston in 1994 when Barrett's group of 20 met a hostile throng of more than 300 protesters.

Barrett, who is an attorney by trade, and his Nationalists have developed a reputation in courts across the country for suing city governments that refused the group's

right to assemble.

This "roving one-man operation" as he has been described by the Anti-Defamation League, has gone so far as to compare his methods to those of the man whose holiday he is protesting.

"Richard Barrett is doing in the 1990s for the majority what Martin Luther King did in the 1960s for the minorities," said Barrett of himself, as reported by The Associated Press.

The city of York cannot be held accountable for Barrett's choice of venue. Indeed, despite being obliged to approve the group's application for assembly, the York City Council also passed a resolution "disassociating" the city's interests from the organization's beliefs.

Disassociation is certainly safer than outright opposition.

I have come to expect institutional apathy with respect to such divisive matters, but the passive consent of local citizens, as well as major local newspapers, is cause for concern.

A letter to the editor from a York resident published in the Jan. 10 World-Herald actually pleaded for the media to ignore the event altogether.

"The media will cover it because they feel it is newsworthy," Ruth Pohl wrote. "But if they didn't cover it, I doubt he would bother to come here."

Yet another conscientious objector pleaded for the media to abstain from covering the event in a letter published in Thursday's Journal Star.

"I realize covering the news is a reporter's job," wrote Sheila Novotny of Lincoln, "but giving this individual and this event air time or newspaper space is not only encouraging to him but also a subtle show of support. It's what feeds his efforts."

A white supremacist marching through the streets of York is unquestionably news. It may not be nationally relevant news as the Nationalist Movement's self-important Web site contends, but it certainly merits local media attention — arguably more

attention than it has thus far garnered in local papers.

The World-Herald lent its own approval to the clarion call of apathy in a Jan. 6 editorial titled "Supremacists should get cold shoulder," and the Lincoln Journal Star also encouraged people to stay away in a staff editorial titled "Free speech includes the right to ignore them."

Despite the good intentions of this passive multitude, silence is often interpreted as tolerance, and Barrett's ignorance on parade is not

tolerable.

Because of the actions of 40 rash, young men, Barrett expects to find an audience for his ignorance on parade.

He is already aware of the support in this area for his racist opinions.

Spend your holiday Monday celebrating the memory of one of the most significant men in our country's history.

Make Richard Barrett aware of the opposition.



MELANIE FALK/DN

Natural-born killers

By carrying out executions, the state is no better than the murderers it wants to punish



TIM SULLIVAN is a third-year law student and a Daily Nebraskan columnist.

Today is Friday. A very good Friday.

Today is the day after the state was scheduled to use its power to kill a fellow human being.

Randolph Reeves almost died in Nebraska's electric chair yesterday.

And every one of us would have been responsible for that.

Why?

Because the state acts for the collective. For the people.

In the late 1960s, Charles "Tex" Watson, Squeaky Fromme, Leslie Van Houten and Patricia Krenwinkel, members of the "Manson Family," committed the gruesome Tate-LaBianca murders that shocked not only California, where they occurred, but the entire nation.

Charlie Manson, the reputed leader of the clan, was convicted for the crimes, even though he may not have physically participated in the murders. He used drugs, the music of the Beatles and Armageddon-like, end-is-near rhetoric to preach to his "Family" that he, and they, would be

among the chosen to be spared when the end of all things came.

Manson believed the "end" would come after a war between the races, which he intended to incite by making it appear that blacks had killed famous, influential whites.

In Charlie's twisted, demented mind, his incitement of a war between the races would be the beginning of the end.

"It would be all the wars that have been fought built one on top of the other, something that no man could conceive of in his imagination. You can conceive what it would be like to see every man judge himself and then take it out on every other man all over the face of the earth," said Charlie.

The lyrics of the Beatles song Helter Skelter contained the message that "Blackie" would win the war, according to Charlie.

Charlie and his "Family" would be among the 144,000 "chosen," however, who would survive Armageddon. Revelation 7 is the Biblical reference Charlie seized in order to maintain and promulgate this particular delusion.

Charlie got the death penalty. But that was the late 1960s.

His death penalty was commuted to life in prison by virtue of the landmark 1972 Supreme Court decision of Furman v. Georgia. It was a case that struck down all then-existing death penalty laws in the United States as unconstitutional.

Even though the 1976 decision of Gregg v. Georgia restored the availability of the death penalty, some

1,000 inmates across the country, including Charlie Manson, benefited from Furman.

Charlie's death sentence was commuted to life in prison.

Charlie is still alive today.

So is Randolph Reeves, thank God.

The Nebraska Supreme Court stayed Reeves' execution and withdrew his death warrant on Tuesday, with just two days left before his scheduled execution and one day after the Pardons Board declined to hear his plea for clemency.

Reeves' attorney, Paula Hutchinson, argued that Reeves has been denied his right to equal protection under a newly enacted equal protection clause.

But Nebraska District Court Judge Earl Withoff disagreed, saying the law was not retroactive. He also said Reeves could not prove the specific discrimination that the U.S. Supreme Court has interpreted the equal protection clause of the U.S. Constitution to require.

Reeves' attorney argued the process itself is racist. Because of Reeves' Native American ancestry, he was far more likely to receive a death sentence than his white counterparts.

I buy that.

I buy virtually every argument against the imposition of the death penalty.

Maybe with two new justices on the Nebraska Supreme Court, his attorney's arguments will prevail and Reeves' life will be spared.

On December 2, 1997, Robert Williams, who confessed to murdering three women and trying to kill a fourth during a three-day, three-state rampage in 1977, was executed in Nebraska's electric chair.

It was Nebraska's first daytime execution and the first to be witnessed by a victim's relative since the state resumed carrying out the death penalty in 1994.

Williams, who was 61 at the time, was pronounced dead at 10:23 a.m., 6 minutes after the first jolt of electricity.

The execution came within hours after the U.S. Supreme Court rejected his request to review the dismissal of his lawsuit alleging that the electric chair is cruel and indecent. Nebraska is one of only four states that use the electric chair exclusively.

I was there that morning. I stood in the parking lot of the Nebraska State Penitentiary in a fenced area reserved for opponents of the death penalty.

Three television stations interviewed me as I stood in quiet protest of the state killing someone, supposedly on my behalf.

I told each of the television news reporters that interviewed me the same thing:

I had worked in the prison system for 13 years, and had come to the conclusion that life in prison was a far worse punishment than death.

Two of the three stations ran the "sound byte," as I call it.

Why did they run it? Because they could tell that what

I had to say must be true.

Unless you have experienced 13 years of life behind those walls, you can't begin to fathom the horrible torture that it is on the minds and souls of the men and women we commit to its confines in order to "punish" them.

Death, it seems to me, would be a welcome alternative to a life behind those bars.

Life without the possibility of parole seems to be the clearly preferable choice to punish those convicted of the most heinous of crimes.

The death penalty must be abolished. When Moses carried the tablets down from Mt. Sinai, they read "Thou shalt not kill."

That should include the state. How do we make such a leap in our logical thought as to conclude that by transferring the act from an individual one-to-one for the benefit of the collective, that it somehow excuses it on an individual level?

In a way, the state is no different than Charlie Manson. It organizes cold, calculated executions.

Members of the families of Reeves' victims came out in opposition to the state's exercise of this power on their "behalf."

They don't want Reeves' blood on their hands. Neither do I.

But just in case you forgot, if and when Reeves is executed, as Attorney General Don Stenberg promises will happen, my hands will get bloody. The hands of the families of Reeves' victims will get bloody.

And so will yours.