



## Look Back in Rancor: The Worst Op-eds of 2014

[Gene Healy](#)

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Some people make New Year's resolutions; I prefer New Year's recriminations. For five years running, I've made [an annual tradition](#) of looking back in rancor at the worst opeds produced during the 12 months previous.

"Pick up a newspaper anywhere in the United States, and you will be addressed by insistent strangers known generically as columnists," Karl Meyer writes in the introduction to Oxford University Press's [Pundits, Poets, and Wits: an Omnibus of American Newspaper Columns](#). Who are these busybodies, and what have we done to deserve this? How did it happen?

We have one [Herbert Bayard Swope](#) to thank for the delights of the modern opinion piece, Meyer explains. In 1921, as editor of the *New York Evening World*, Swope wondered why the page facing the house editorials had become a dumping ground for "book reviews, society boilerplate, and obituaries." "It occurred to me," Swope wrote, "that nothing is more interesting than opinions"—everybody has one, after all—so he "devised a method of cleaning off the page opposite the editorial, which became the most important in America... thereon I decided to print opinions, ignoring facts."

The printed newspaper may be going the way of the 8-track cassette, but whether in paper or digital form, the op-ed remains true to its fact-snubbing origins. In picking the worst of 2014's worst, I've favored those that privilege feelings over evidence, exhibiting bad arguments, bad writing, and bad faith, with extra points awarded for warped values. It's an idiosyncratic list, reflecting my own ideological biases, so feel free to make your own nominations in the comments. Given the sprawling pundit-industrial complex spawned by Swope's folly, there's a richness of embarrassment to choose from.

### [It's time for an "American jihad"](#)

Dr. Keith Ablow, *FoxNews.com*, October 28, 2014

"We need the spirit of an American jihad" insists psychiatrist and Fox News commentator Dr. Keith Ablow—not, he hastens to add, the behead-the-infidel kind. Instead, he means "jihad" in

the sense of "a 'war or struggle against unbelievers'"—those scoundrels, at home and abroad, who doubt the self-evident truth that "We the People of the United States are good and we are right." As Kenny Powers, the tubby, loudmouthed ex-baseball star from the HBO comedy "Eastbound and Down," [once put it](#): "I honestly just feel that America is the best country and the other countries aren't as good. That used to be called patriotism."

At home, Dr. Keith's jihad would institutionalize the notion that "our Constitution is a sacred document" and establish self-worship as our national civic religion. "An American jihad would make every teacher of American history not only a public servant, but a servant of the Truth," he writes.

Abroad, star-spangled holy warriors would "spread around the world our love of individual freedom and insist on its reflection in every government," working to ensure that "every nation on earth" is eventually "governed by freely elected leaders and our Constitution." Achieving that dream will likely require "an international mercenary force for good," "boots on the ground in many places in the world," and "no quarter" for evil-doers.

For other countries, however, we may opt for a lighter touch. Instead of Americanizing them at gunpoint, we'll just ship them our unemployed politicians: "We would urge our leaders, after their service in the U.S. Senate and Congress, to seek dual citizenship in other nations, like France and Italy and Sweden and Argentina and Brazil and Germany, and work to influence those nations to adopt laws very much like our own." "We might even fund our leaders' campaigns for office in these other nations," Dr. K enthuses.

Picture Michele Bachmann moving to Norway to eat pickled herring, kiss babies, and hector the Norskies about American exceptionalism. As a goodwill-promotion strategy, I suppose it's better than airstrikes. But it seems unlikely to work, and somewhat in tension with Dr. K's notion that "an American jihad would make every tax dollar a tithing and the squandering of those dollars a sin."

### [A 'Dark Winter' of Ebola terrorism?](#)

Marc Thiessen, *Washington Post*, October 20, 2014

At the height of last fall's Ebola freakout, while apparently free-associating from Fox's frantic newscrawler, former Bush speechwriter Marc Thiessen had an epiphany: "The world is experiencing virulent outbreaks of Ebola and Islamist radicalism," he mused, "What if the two threats converge into one?" Two great scares that scare great together: it was such a perfect, of-the-moment combination of all that unnerves us that I'm still amazed it didn't take off like [Sharknado](#) or [Reese's Peanut Butter Cups](#).

Thiessen's just spitballing here, but hear him out: "In a nightmare scenario, suicide bombers infected with Ebola could blow themselves up in a crowded place — say, shopping malls in Oklahoma City, Philadelphia and Atlanta — spreading infected tissue and bodily fluids."

Contra Thiessen, it seems to me that "a perfect bioweapon" would have a [much higher transmission rate](#) than Ebola, nor would it be as easily contained by Western health systems. But even though Thiessen's "nightmare scenario" would be unlikely to cause mass casualties, he's surely right that it would induce mass panic.

Which is why I'm so confused about what he's up to here. Normally, Thiessen is vigilant to a fault about threats to the home front. After the Snowden leaks, he warned us that just letting Americans know that the federal government was secretly Hoovering up their phone records was "[incredibly damaging to national security.](#)" So, if Thiessen thinks Jihadebolabombing is a viable plan, what's he doing spelling it out for the terrorists on one of the nation's top op-ed pages? Isn't mass panic a *bad* thing?

### [War Is Being Waged on Our Homeland](#)

Bernie Kerik, *Time*, December 22, 2014

As if the war on terror wasn't alarming enough, there's another "war being waged on our homeland," says former NYPD commissioner Bernie Kerik: "It is a war on cops who live to protect those they serve," and it's "as dangerous as any global enemy we face." Criticism of police misconduct "has caused protests and riots all over this nation... and horribly, two New York City police officers to be assassinated." If unchecked, it could "cause damage far worse than any attack on our country, including that on 9/11/2001."

Stylistically, Kerik's jeremiad shares a lot with conspiratorial chain emails: "It's a lie!"; "America will look more like a wasteland than the greatest country in the world in just a few short years..."; "THAT IS THE TRUTH!" Too many exclamation marks spoil the prose: they should be used sparingly, as when you're quoting somebody who's screaming or writing [a friendly letter to a Russian](#). Moreover, any writer who whipsaws the reader from "Michael Brown committed a strong armed robbery, attacked and assaulted a uniformed policeman, attempted to take the officer's gun... and he did not have his hands up!" to "Eric Garner was selling cigarettes illegally..." really needs to work on his transitions.

In terms of substance, the actions of a lone madman who also killed his girlfriend hardly discredit legitimate criticism of police militarization. Thankfully, there's no war on police in this country, even [if they're dressed for one](#). In fact, there's "[never been a safer time to be a cop.](#)" But if Kerik's view is representative of how America's law enforcement leadership feels, then they've really turned their backs on rational argument.

### [Only America Can Prevent a Disaster in Iraq](#)

L. Paul Bremer, *Wall Street Journal*, June 15, 2014

When the ramshackle Iraqi state started collapsing (again) last summer, the bright boys who got us into this mess in the first place [were inescapable](#) on cable news and the op-ed pages. [This piece](#) by Dick and Liz Cheney stood out for its deadpan brazenness: "Rarely has a U.S. president been so wrong about so much at the expense of so many," the Cheneys write.

But there's a special place in my gallbladder for this column by L. Paul Bremer. Bremer, you may recall, was head of Iraq's Coalition Provisional Authority from 2003 to 2004, widely regarded as having helped stoke a civil war by summarily disbanding the Iraqi army. And yet, here he is, 10 years later, lecturing everyone about how to build a stable and democratic Iraq.

Some years ago, after his tour in Iraq, Bremer kept a lower public profile, only showing up in places like the *Post's* [Food section](#), where he proudly displayed his "Fontainbeau, garnished with pomegranate molasses." As Francie Bremer commented on her husband's cooking: "when Jerry goes at something 100 percent, you just have to stand back."

### [The Spiritual Recession,](#)

David Brooks, *New York Times*, June 26, 2014

In this column, perennial "Worst Opeds" favorite (and [last year's prizewinner](#)) David Brooks gives us a "kinder, gentler" version of Dr. Ablow's call for an "American Jihad"—or maybe it's a neocon take on Jimmy Carter's "malaise" speech. Either way, Brooks is sorely disappointed in you, the reader, and the American people as a whole.

There was a time, he says, when Americans believed heartily in grand national crusades, like the promotion of the "democratic gospel" abroad. Now that "vibrant faith" has waned, and our ambitions are contemptibly prosaic: instead of perfecting the world, we'd rather go on with our lives. But "without the faith, leaders grow small; they have no sacred purpose to align themselves with," Brooks laments. And then you're stuck with small leaders, who won't go around lighting fires in the minds of men and ["ending tyranny in our world."](#)

Brooks just can't see any point to an America that minds its own business at home and abroad: "if America isn't a champion of universal democracy, what is the country for?" he sputters. "We have slid into a debauched libertarianism. Nobody envisions the large sweep of events; we just go our own separate ways making individual choices."

Jefferson called that "the pursuit of happiness"; apparently, it's David Brooks's vision of Hell.

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In his historical survey of the American newspaper column, Karl Meyer concedes that oped-writing is "at best an uneven popular art," but maintains that "in the voice of the columnists one can hear, if at times discordantly, the joyful noise of a free people." In a year when so many American "Thought Leaders" used their platforms to stoke morbid alarmism and the war mentality, you really had to strain.

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