

On the subject of...

# Immoral Authority

by Viki Eggers Mason



THE TRUTH IN BLACK AND WHITE

# The Aberdeen Advocate

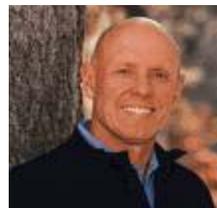
Montana is a very big place with a very small population. Because of this, anyone who lives within 100 miles of you in Montana can be correctly called your neighbor. My neighbors included actresses Glenn Close and Margo Kidder, and television weatherman Willard Scott. Among my less popular neighbors were Tom Brokaw, Ted Turner, Hanoi Jane Fonda and Steven Segal.

Much closer to home, actually just across Hebgen Lake, was the summer home of a moderately successful businessman and author named Stephen Covey, who penned the best-seller *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. Although I never actually met Mr. Covey I have had some dealings with his sister Carol Hoffman, who writes for *The West Yellowstone News* and have found her to be a very pleasant and trustworthy woman. Based on my observations, the Covey clan seems to produce individuals with more than a little good sense

and sterling integrity.

In a recent feature entitled *How to Succeed in 2007*, *cnnmoney.com* asked 50 of today's brightest bulbs in the business world their secrets for success. Mr. Covey had this to say on the subject:

"Most people define greatness through wealth and popularity and position in the corner office. But what I call everyday greatness comes from character and contribution.



**Dr. Stephen R. Covey, Co-founder and Vice Chairman of FranklinCovey, Int'l.**

Sometimes people who possess the wealth and prestige also have everyday greatness, but not that often in our celebrity-obsessed culture because they are primarily focused on what's in it for me. I'm in favor of achievements—degrees and wealth and that sort of thing. Still, those achievements convey formal authority but not

always moral authority. The only way to acquire moral authority is through your character and contribution, to live in such a way as to merit the confidence and the trust of other people. Moral authority is especially important to business. This is because in order to reduce costs, increase production and nurture a culture of innovation - all of which are important criteria in today's global economy - you've got to have high trust among your workers and partners. Why?

Because everyone involved needs to sacrifice. If you don't have high trust, none of those things will happen. You can't fake high trust."

Lately here in Aberdeen, we've seen far too much of what happens when moral authority gets tarnished. I'm speaking of the sad situation

Continued on Page 2

**To say something wrong is a mistake; to say something you know is wrong is a lie**

**By Contributing Editor Don Rowe**

A recent dinner conversation focused on the upcoming state elections, and those present agreed many of the current political advertisements on TV were rife with nothing but outright lies as various candidates for statewide office have developed the nasty habit of spreading untruths concerning their political opponents.

According to the popular website *Wikipedia*, a "lie" is defined as, "a type of deception in the form of an untruthful

statement with the intention to deceive, often with the further intention to maintain a secret or reputation, or to avoid punishment." The phrase "to lie" is to "state something one believes is false with the intention that it be taken for the truth by someone else." Various types of lies include everything from a "white lie" (a lie which is believed to be harmless; a fib) to "perjury" (making false

statements under oath).

Now, I'll be the first to admit that as a kid, I told more than my fair share of "whoppers," not so much as to protect my reputation, but instead, to keep something from my parents or to avoid punishment for one of the many idiotic stunts I had pulled. A product of 12 years of Catholic education, I was also a slow learner, for it took me well into my high school

Continued on Page 3

# Immoral Authority

## Continued from Page 1

recently unearthed at the local Power Company.

In the course of his auditing duties, the city's accountant, Dale Pierce, discovered that the individual who prepares bank deposits for Aberdeen Public Utilities Department had been engaging in some creative banking of her own. Over a period of time about \$3500 had migrated from the APUD's coffers into her own pocket. (I've been warned by several lawyer-types that calling this embezzlement might get me into trouble, so I won't call it that.)

The young woman was suspended for some time while the investigation moved forward and, when all the evidence was in place, the matter was brought to the board of aldermen for disciplinary action. In a stunning demonstration of what can only be called "Immoral Authority," our leaders voted 3 to 2 to allow the young woman to keep her job! (To their credit, aldermen Odom and Buffington both voted to terminate the woman and, in the wake of the board's decision to keep her over their protests, the two have filed formal complaints with the appropriate State offices. Thank you, gentlemen!)

How on earth did this happen? It's simple. This happened because the three aldermen whose decision it was are guilty of similar crimes. Each of these men is guilty of misappropriating money from the taxpayers in one way or another.

Alderman Cloyd Garth not only uses the city's gymnasium whenever he likes for private basketball practice, he also used the facilities there as his campaign headquarters in the last election. He used our paper, our copy machine and our electricity to print his campaign brochures. Perhaps this accounts for the fact that when municipal Judge Adrian Haynes used the copy machine at City Hall to print her campaign brochures, she wasn't punished. It may also explain why when Haynes used our Municipal Court Clerk, Sharon Edmond, to fold and prep the brochures for distribution, she wasn't punished either.

Each month, Alderman Willie A. Cook picks up an \$800 paycheck, insurance benefits and fat travel reimbursement

checks from the taxpayers. Because he is seated illegally – he is not qualified to be an alderman in Ward 3 because he lives in Ward 5 – these disbursements are nothing less than theft. In the course of a year we bestow upon Willie A. Cook benefits amounting to over \$15,000 to which he is not entitled. Since Cook steals from us on a daily basis, he can't find it in himself to punish anybody for a measly \$3500.

Apart from some funding shenanigans that took place at the church he pastors, I must admit that I have uncovered very little dirt on Alderman Alonzo Sykes. Nevertheless, in my mind he is just as guilty as the others—perhaps even more so. You see, he simply has no excuse. He could not have voted with his heart because he claims to be a man of God. God disapproves of thieves and would not suffer us to dilly-dally around with them. If he voted to keep the woman employed, he either did it to help his shameless partners for the sake of keeping their ugly little secrets secret, or he did it because he was voting his color. Either excuse is unacceptable. Sykes is, if for no other reason, guilty by virtue of his association with the other two thugs. Shame, shame.

I believe these acts and omissions demonstrate malfeasance and/or nonfeasance in office. (Malfeasance is defined at dictionary.com as follows: *the performance by a public official of an act that is legally unjustified, harmful or contrary to law; wrongdoing (used esp. of an act in violation of a public trust)*. Nonfeasance, on the other hand, is defined as: *failure to perform an act that is either an official duty or a legal requirement*. I suspect we have both here, and, therefore, probably have grounds to remove these aldermen from office. Naturally the matter would have to be investigated and due process followed.

If you're inclined as I am to see justice served in this matter, I encourage you to contact the office of the State Auditor, Phil Bryant. You may file a complaint in any of three ways:

- Write to the Auditor at the following address:

**Office of the State Auditor**  
501 N. West Street  
Suite 801, Woolfolk Building  
Jackson, MS 39201

- Call or fax the Auditor's office and request a complaint form.

Phone: 800-321-1275

Fax: 601-576-2687

- Visit the Auditor's website and complete a complaint form online:

<http://www.osa.state.ms.us/complaint.asp>

You have the opportunity today to do your part to end the corruption in Aberdeen's city government. Please don't fail your families and your children by allowing this sort of activity to continue in our lovely community! Finally, please take the time to call Alderman Brunson Odom and Alderman Jim Buffington to thank them for their courageous stand in favor of honesty in government. Their numbers are right down here.....



### Your Municipal Employees

**Cecil Belle, Mayor**

**369-4165**

**Ward 1 Alderman Alonzo Sykes**

**369-7705**

**Ward 2 Alderman Cloyd Garth**

**369-5734**

**Ward 5's OTHER Alderman Willie Cook**

**369-9156**

**Ward 4 Alderman Brunson Odom**

**369-2246**

**Ward 5 Alderman Jim Buffington**

**369-4985**



**Becka's Burger Shack**

**North Hwy. 45**

**369-4275**

**Monday thru Wednesday 5 am – 2 pm**

**Thursday and Friday 5 am – 9 pm**

# To say something you know is wrong is a lie

## Continued from Page 1

Years to finally figure out that my father was not inclined to believe me (or any of my pitiful lies) when one of the nuns or priests called our home to report my latest transgression. And, because I didn't always tell the truth as a youth, I will be the first to admit that made me a "liar," a prevaricator or a person who tells lies.

Then, the topic of conversation turned to several recent newspaper articles on the long-overdue retirement of Aberdeen school superintendent Lavon Fluker-Reed, one of which appeared in the local paper, the *Aberdeen Examiner* (aka as the *Aberdeen Excuse*) and the second of which appeared in *The Columbus Dispatch*. Like the political ads inundating us on TV, both stories contained several lies – falsehoods which ranged from outright exaggerations to lying by omission.

For example, in *The Commercial Dispatch* article entitled *Schools chief reflects on upcoming retirement* written by Garthia Elena Burnett (a naïve reporter unfamiliar with our superintendent's well-honed methods of deception which she has mastered over the past dozen years), Reed's story contained a blatant example of what is known as "careful speaking" (avoiding imparting certain information or admitting certain facts by using carefully phrased statements to give a "half-answer").

"Under her 12 years of direction, Aberdeen School District's state accreditation level rose from Level 2, under-achieving, to Level 3, successful, and a number of the schools rose individually to Level 4, exemplary," wrote Burnett, who told me she utilized information furnished by Reed for the story.

Now, technically, Reed was correct in telling the reporter that Aberdeen was a Level 2 district and it rose to a Level 3 district when she took over back in the summer of 1995. What she didn't share, however, was the fact that according to the State Department of Education's own website, each school district was assigned an accreditation level from 1992-99 and was also assigned a performance index (based solely on student performance, not on compliance with the ac-

creditation process standards) the last four years (1996-99) the system was in place.

The performance index, which provided a more sensitive measure of each district's performance, ranged from 1.0 through 5.0 and indicated where the district's performance fell within its assigned accreditation level. For example, one Level 3 district might have a performance index of 3.1, while another might have a performance index of 3.9. The district with the performance index of 3.9 exhibited greater performance than the district at 3.1 and very similar performance compared to a Level 4 district with a performance index of 4.0.

What Reed failed to point out to the *Dispatch* reporter (which could also be considered lying by omission) was the fact that Aberdeen's performance index the year before she took over was a 2.9, which should have compared favorably with a Level 3 performance index. It did slightly improve to a 3.0 Reed's first year on the job, but then slipped back to a 2.9 and then a 2.8 the next two years.

Cunningly, Reed planted the seed that Aberdeen was a Level 2 district before she took over and then let Burnett make the connection that a Level 2 district is described as "under-achieving." Sadly, the reporter took the bait. Too, in yet another case of "lying by omission," Reed never mentioned the fact that the district slipped backwards ever so slightly to a 2.9 and then a 2.8 her second and third years at the helm.

Incredibly enough, Reed contradicted herself later in the *Dispatch* story when she said, "When I came here, Aberdeen School District was a good school district..." That statement left me a tad confused, for if Aberdeen was a Level 2 under-achieving district when she took over, how then could Aberdeen have been a "good school district?"

Unfortunately, this isn't the first time Reed has been caught playing fast and loose with the truth, for there have been other numerous instances in the past where her veracity has come into question. For example, there was the Teresa Price fiasco in the spring of 2000 when Reed personally assured literally dozens of her teachers that Price's contract would not be renewed at AHS after a disastrous year as interim principal. But after a contentious school board meeting at which a group of 16 concerned AHS teachers presented a signed petition to the board (in executive session)

urging them not to renew her contract, Reed announced to the assembled crowd (reporters included) that Price's contract had, indeed, been renewed and she was named AHS principal on a permanent basis.

Despite the petition and concerns of the teachers, Reed indicated the board had based its vote (in executive session held behind closed doors) on the information members had before them and its decision was in the best interest of the school district. "The board thought it was best to go back and renew the contract," Reed was quoted as saying. Reed went on to say that Price was a good choice for the job and had done her job in dealing with issues such as discipline, working with students and working with the budget. "She has come in and done the things we required her to do," said Reed.

What the superintendent failed to state, however, was the fact that according to the school board's own minutes, "On a recommendation from Dr. Lavon Reed, vice-chairman Eric McGee entertained a motion that Price's contract be renewed for the 2000-01 school year although she will be placed on a plan of improvement effective immediately, also effective through the next school year."

(Now I don't know the whys and wherefores of every plan of improvement ever devised, but I do know that in over 30 years of employment locally, had I been put on a plan of improvement by my superiors, they were telling me that I had to either "shape up or ship out." In other words, I wasn't doing the job and had a short period of time – not a year and a half – to improve my performance or I would be fired.)

Of course, all of this took place behind closed doors, so Reed was confident that her dirty little secret wouldn't see the light of day. Unfortunately for her, however, I obtained the school board meeting minutes and discovered what really happened. True to form, the *Aberdeen Excuse* never did a follow-up story, just as it has never "held her feet to the fire" for any of the other lies she has told through the years. Could that be because Reed serves on the CREATE Foundation's *Commission on the Future of Northeast Mississippi* Board of Directors? (The CREATE Foundation owns The Journal Publishing Company, the parent company of the *Aberdeen Excuse*.)



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*“If the ladder is not leaning against the right wall, each step we take just gets us to the wrong place faster.”*

*...Dr. Stephen Covey*