

OPINION

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

FIRST AMENDMENT TO THE U.S. CONSTITUTION

NOTES FROM THE NEWSROOM



Opinion Editor Al Franco (top row, second from left) takes notes and leads the questioning during The Desert Sun Editorial Board's panel interview session of California State Senate candidates at The Desert Sun in Palm Springs on Jan. 31. JAY CALDERON/THE DESERT SUN

A farewell, salute to opinion editor Franco



From the Editor

Julie Makinen
The Desert Sun
USA TODAY NETWORK

On the topic of farewells, someone wise once said: “Don’t cry because it’s over. Smile because it happened.” It’s good advice, but often easier said than done.

I’m going to keep my Kleenex handy on Tuesday, when The Desert Sun and dedicated readers of our Opinion Pages will say goodbye to Opinion Editor Al Franco, who is among hundreds of newspaper employees nationwide who have opted to take a buyout being offered by our parent company, Gannett.

Being the modest soul that he is, Al didn’t want me to write this column. More often than not, I follow Al’s good counsel, but today, I’m overruling him in the interest of recording for the community, his co-workers, and posterity, his contributions to The Desert Sun and the Coachella Valley community.

Al has been with The Desert Sun since 1992, and in the nearly three decades he’s been pounding the keyboards here, there pretty much isn’t a piece of the newspaper he hasn’t touched.

The newspaper bug bit Al when he was growing up in Blythe. His first newspaper job was hawking copies of the Palo Verde Valley Times from his Radio Flyer wagon starting at age 7 or so. His dad would take him to the original Valley Times office on Main Street where he could buy 25 papers for \$1 — 4 cents each — and sell them for the cover price of 7 cents each, earning 75 cents profit for the day.



Franco

Al attended USC and his first newsroom job was as a summer reporter/columnist for the Valley Times. After graduation, he was an Associated Press newsman in Houston and then New Orleans, before making his way back to the Southern California desert in 1992.

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Do your part to help save a critical Coachella Valley forum



Your Turn

Joe Wallace
Guest columnist

On Tuesday, The Desert Sun and its readers across the Coachella Valley will say goodbye to Opinion Editor Al Franco, who has served the region’s need for constructive dialogue about the important things that the Greater Palm Springs region has faced for many years. Gannett, the parent company of The Desert Sun, has implemented another round of cost cutting at newspapers across the country, offering buyouts to many employees, including Mr. Franco. While we certainly wish Mr. Franco well and thank him for his ser-

vice, this will leave The Desert Sun without an Opinion editor as the position has been slated for elimination.

What this means to us is that The Desert Sun’s Opinion page — that includes witty cartoons that are designed to teach, letters to the editor from an engaged public, and the all-important Valley Voice column — will vanish from publication unless something is done locally to preserve what is the most important part of any local newspaper for addressing items of local interest.

Over the course of my nine years at CVEP, we have contributed many Valley Voice columns to advise the people of the Coachella Valley about economic drivers like diversification of the economy, the need for a

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OUR VOICE

Farmworkers should be a priority for virus vaccine

Pandemic-pounded America appears on the verge of a game-changing event when it comes to the fight against COVID-19. At least three vaccine formulations — created by Moderna, Pfizer, and AstraZeneca/Oxford University — are in the final stages of vetting and could receive emergency FDA clearance for use in the United States beginning as soon as late December.

We see this as great news, though supplies will be limited early on. As far as who should get the initial inoculations, we agree with advocacy groups that have been making that case that agricultural workers should be among those at the front of the line.

Like medical workers and first responders, these workers play a vital role in our society. In the Coachella and Imperial valleys, the labor of this societal cohort puts food not only on our own tables, but those of the rest of the nation and, indeed, the world. For all our sakes, it is important that they remain healthy.

According to a recent Desert Sun story by Rebecca Plevin, California farmworkers have been especially hard hit by COVID-19. This, Plevin reported, is due to exposure to the virus at work, while carpooling to job sites and in frequently overcrowded housing. The virus is widespread in all of the Golden State’s major agricultural counties.

A coalition of 11 farmworker advocacy organizations has called on Gov. Gavin Newsom and county and local officials to put farmworkers at the front of the line for vaccines when they do become available. They also are urging that officials work with local organizations and leaders to build confidence that being vaccinated is the right thing to do as well as assuage other fears in this largely undocumented community.

These efforts at building this important community buy-in deserve everyone’s support.

Whatever one’s position is on the heated and long-running debate over immigration policy in America, the reality is much of the food we all eat is harvested by those who live among us without immigration status. Too many agriculture workers have little to no access to health care, or insurance or personal means to seek it out when they need it. In addition, many avoid seeking out help in other circumstances, such as legal matters or when they’ve been victims of a crime, due to fear their undocumented status will be used against them.

It is not an unreal expectation that this fear will lead many who might want to be vaccinated to avoid getting it to remain “outside of the system.” This is not a small potential problem by any means, either.

The advocacy group Center for Farmworker Families (farmworkerfamily.org) notes: “California produces over 350 commodities; including one-third of the nation’s vegetables and nearly two-thirds of the nation’s fruits and nuts. California produces 90% of the strawberries grown in the U.S.

“Between one-third and one-half of all farmworkers in America reside in California, or roughly 500,000-800,000 farmworkers. Approximately 75% of California’s farmworkers are undocumented; 83% in Santa Cruz County. Approximately one-third are women, and they range in age from their teens to their 60s.”

These are big numbers.

It’s expected that vaccines will be distributed to individuals at the highest risk before the general public. These ranks include health care professionals and other essential workers, individuals in nursing homes and prisons, and those who are at high risk due to age or other conditions.

Officials must find a way to ensure our essential agriculture workers have access to vaccines in the first wave and have been given the confidence to actually take the shot. It cannot be overstated how important it is for everyone to take part in this important duty for society.

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Create your own ‘Irvine’ in order to survive societal chaos



Connecting California

Joe Mathews
Columnist

Late in this year’s strangest California film, “Palm Springs,” middle-aged Roy (J.K. Simmons) sits in his Irvine backyard and advises Nyles (Andy Samberg) on coping with an apocalyptic reality.

“You’ve gotta find your Irvine,” says Roy, surveying his Orange County idyll.

“I don’t have an Irvine,” replies Nyles, who is in existential despair.

“We all have an Irvine,” Roy says.

The apocalypse, for Roy and Nyles, is the result of wandering into the wrong Coachella Cave, after which they find themselves stuck re-living the same day. Roy,

furiously at their “Groundhog Day” predicament, at first spends this endless time loop traveling to Palm Springs to torture and kill Nyles, over and over again.

But later, Nyles finds Roy unexpectedly content. Roy explains that he has learned to embrace re-living the same day at his Irvine home with his wife and children. Do we all have that place, our own Irvine? How do we find contentment as the world collapses around us? It’s hard to be optimistic, and not just because the median home price in Irvine exceeds \$900,000. And the endless purgatory of “Palm Springs,” while frightening, is nowhere near as scary as California’s future prospects.

Earlier this fall, the Institute for the Future, a Palo Alto-based think tank, produced four post-pandemic scenarios. The visions are pretty dark.

The “Growth” scenario shows fiscal stimulus restoring the economy, but without badly-needed structural change. Employment would recover slowly, with com-

panies automating work rather than re-hiring workers. Educational and income divides would grow, and the benefits of the recovery would go predominantly to rich and powerful sectors, like tech and airlines. Low-wage workers would be shadowed by greater debt, mental illness, and unstable employment.

A “Constraint” scenario envisions the reorganization of society around data systems and algorithms that entrench existing wealth and racial inequalities, and introduce new inequalities. This would be a segregated health dystopia. Under the guise of protecting society from disease and new pandemics, society would segment into geographic and digital clusters, or “germ pods,” separating those with access to testing and treatment from those without. The resulting discrimination — with separate schools, jobs, and public facilities based on your health status — would be just-

YOUR VOICE

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Safeguarding our cultural history

Protection of cultural heritage does not just include documenting and studying languages or restoring relics of indigenous peoples.

Equally important are sustained efforts to safeguard and protect the cultural history of communities and neighborhoods. Maintaining the authenticity and integrity of the Palm Springs Art Museum has been supported and carefully protected because it reflects who we are as a community and how we have evolved over 60 years. Introducing a tourist attraction to the museum district erodes that integrity and puts the museum's cultural heritage at risk.

Hopefully, the council whose apparent intent is towards social awareness, inclusiveness and sensitivity, will find a more suitable location for "Forever Marilyn" should they decide this is an appropriate investment of funds.

Pamela Smallwood, Palm Desert

Art over kitsch

It saddens me that the City Council has decided to place the "Forever Marilyn" statue in front of the Palm Springs Art Museum. Surely another location would be more appropriate.

The architecture of the museum is something to be proud of. That and its location are spectacular representations of our forward-thinking city. Why tarnish it with a backward-looking example of pure kitsch?

The Palm Springs Art Museum has a significant collection. As a working artist in Palm Springs, I am proud to be an active member of the museum. I understand the need to balance the cultural needs of the city and the reality that we are a tourist city.

I ask the City Council to reconsider this decision. There must be several other suitable locations for Marilyn, just not in front of our beloved museum.

We owe it to ourselves to honor the brilliant artistic and architectural movement that honors excellence in a forward-thinking way.

John Fox Haag, Palm Springs

Stranded traveler offers thanks

My gratitude to the CHP and to Officer Rios:

On Nov. 23, on my way to Joshua Tree, I ran out of gas right around the intersection of routes 177 and 62. As per my GPS that guided me all the way from Tucson, Arizona, to that particular intersection, there were accidents all

along Interstate 10, so I ended up on small highways I had never used before and totally forgot that in the desert, the distances are great and gas stations rare ...

There was one-half of the moon and a bunch of stars right above me. And no cell reception. I called 911, not sure if that's the thing to do ... 911 calls go to the CHP apparently and the CHP called AAA and also sent a deputy "to watch over me."

It was incredible. Even though the whole ordeal took about 3 hours, I did not fret about it.

Thank you, Officer Rios, for your humor and comforting conversation and the CHP team for your service. Thank you from the very bottom of my heart.

Burcu Harbert, Los Angeles

Senator selection suggestion

Re: "Xavier Becerra, Alex Padilla favorites to replace Harris," Nov. 24 California Focus column by Tom Elias

I have an idea for our next senator not mentioned in your article today.

First, my idea is based on the thought that there are so many excellent Democrats in office in California at the moment. The article listed at least 10.

If Gov. Gavin Newsom names one of

those, he could be anointing a new senator that will be in the Senate for 30 to 36 years, just by his decision, due to the value of incumbency in an election. Why not let all 10 of those wonderful candidates debate each other for the public's votes in two years by electing a caretaker to the position today?

An excellent caretaker, someone who could do the job, but may not be inclined to run for re-election, would be one of our accomplished elders, such as former Gov. Jerry Brown or former Sen. Barbara Boxer.

Darrell Cozen, Palm Desert

With sincere thanks

Gathered 'round the table,
Virtual, not near,
Sharing smiles and stories
And, perhaps, a tear
Praising all our heroes
Mourning all those lost
Accepting that real gathering
Could have too great a cost
Thankful for our food
And homes
And people we hold dear
Looking forward
To in-person hugs again
Next year!

Lainie Wachter, Rancho Mirage

Franco

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He started at The Desert Sun as a copy editor, then worked his way up to wire editor and then AI editor, overseeing the front page — a testament to his news judgment. Sometimes that meant taking dictation from the late Jan Curran, who would call in with last-minute updates to her society event columns on deadline.

Later, he transitioned to a designer-editor role, responsible for creating most of the paper's non-Sports pages. Around 2011, he returned to overseeing wires and the front page — ensuring the paper got done on time each night.

In late 2014, The Desert Sun and many Gannett papers went through a major and, for some employees, traumatic, reorganization process. Jobs were cut and many journalists got new assignments. At that time, Al was handed the job of Opinion Editor.

It was a post that Al didn't ask for, and as he's told me multiple times, didn't really want. Although Al might say the coat never fit him quite right, he wore it with great professionalism for the past six years.

Being Opinion Editor is a tough job with multiple facets. You're an editor — selecting letters and columns that aim to inform the residents of the Coachella Valley and represent their views.

You're also a convener — organizing the weekly meetings of the Editorial Board, which today includes seven members, a majority of whom are not Desert Sun employees but citizens of

the Coachella Valley. These sessions can get heated, or meandering — depending on the topic — and the editor's job is to listen to the discussion, and probe for consensus. Then you've got to be a writer, synthesizing the points of seven people into a cogent opinion piece. (He also took care of ordering lunch, which provoked perhaps the strongest opinions of all!)

Al also organized the Editorial Board's endorsement process, which in most election years would see scores of candidates for small offices like a local water board right up to the U.S. Senate come for in-person interviews. During election years, Al would write dozens of endorsements based on these interviews with our board.

As Opinion Editor, you deal with many members of the public who, not surprisingly, have strong opinions. Not infrequently, these folks can come in hot and, to be sure, a bit mad about something — be it something happening in the community, in the country, or something printed in the pages of The Desert Sun. Some people even write Al to complain about their newspaper delivery — even though he hasn't worked in circulation since his Radio Flyer days.

Al made a great ambassador for The Desert Sun, though I know some days he would describe his role more as a punching bag. In recent years, the tone of civil discourse has become much less civil. The Desert Sun's Opinion Page has strived to maintain a forum where views can be aired in a respectful, transparent and fair way. We have rules that letters and columns must be signed with the author's real name — no anon-

ymous attacks. We have frequency limits, so prolific letter-writers (and blowhards) don't hog up all the air-space. And to the extent possible, we strive not to publish letters that contain baseless or unsubstantiated information.

Al was charged with refereeing all that.

Along the way, it was not just me who recognized Al's proficiency. He was honored multiple times by the California News Publishers Association for his editorial writing skills.

I will miss Al's encyclopedic knowledge of the Coachella Valley, his sense of history, his commitment to clarity, his organizational skills, his diplomacy. And I will miss him strolling into my office, waving an envelope from a reader, and saying with a wry smile, "Hey boss, got a minute?" Most of all, Al, I want to say thank you — for serving our paper and our community with such dedication and professionalism. I wish you all the best in the new adventures I know you will find.

It will be hard to keep up the Opinion Pages without Al, but I am determined to find a way to do that. It can't, however, happen without your help. For more on how you can ensure these pages remain a vibrant forum for our community, please see Joe Wallace's Valley Voice column, also being published today.

So, Al, it's *adios amigo* — I'm sending you off with a tear and a smile. And I hope you'll write me a letter now and then. Just remember to keep it to 200 words!

Julie Makinen is executive editor of The Desert Sun. Email her at julie.makinen@desertsun.com.

Mathews

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fied on the basis of protecting public health and safety.

That sounds like paradise compared to the darkest scenario, "Collapse — Ungoverning," in which military-style confrontation becomes routine in our streets. COVID-19 triggers more systemic collapses across the country, and the battle lines are drawn: "Red Hats against Blue Masks, militant police against unprecedented numbers of protestors, armed vigilantes against all calls for unity and a new order." Mass deaths become acceptable, and with Red Hats dominating government, every city sees blue guerrilla warfare. Police and military organizations divide, and fight each other.

"By 2030, the union is mortally fractured along political lines: cities, states, and regions are governed not by a single sovereign nation, but by a thicket of tenuous inter-jurisdictional agreements and looming violence," the scenario map document reads.

The only ray of light comes from the "Transformation: Social Solidarity" scenario, and it feels improbable. Under this scenario, systemic breakdowns during the pandemic inspire a renewed public commitment to broad social agendas, and to greater collective well-being. The mutual aid arrangements of today evolve into new income and health supports, and society begins to transform and redesign its broken systems. Public education is reinvented around experiential learning, while new digital governance structures, including data unions, protect privacy and marshal digital power for civic purposes.

By 2030, a Global New Deal has emerged around "universal basic assets — every human's right to the core resources that are essential to well-being."

All four scenarios suggest that the future will turn on how we address our broken systems and faltering institutions. And the Institute for the Future argues for replacement over repair of systems. "Whether we simply shore them up as best we can or make major structural changes, will largely determine whether we see a decade of renewed growth or collapse, a reckoning with long-term limits to growth, or a deep shift in both economy and culture," reads the Institute's map of the scenarios.

The next decade, the map adds, "will call on us to find our way through the multiple collapsing systems." And as these systems fail, "they also open pathways to something new — to truly bold visions of transformation that reinvent the way we work as a society, as an economy, and as friends and neighbors."

California does have success in creating master planned communities — like Irvine.

In other words, our Irvine isn't just sitting out there waiting for us to find it. Instead, we'll have to imagine and build new Irvines for ourselves.

Joe Mathews, joe@zocalopublic-square.org, writes the Connecting California column for Zocalo Public Square.

Wallace

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comprehensive university, improved internet bandwidth, Amazon's HQ2 metrics and how we stack up, plus how important it is for a group of small cities to act regionally to address opportunities for improvement. If the Opinion page of The Desert Sun goes the way of the dinosaur, this important forum for regional discussion will go with it.

About a month ago, I was approached to become a founding member of a nonprofit organization called the Coachella Valley Journalism Foundation. The mission of this nonprofit is to solicit participation from the people of the Coachella Valley to support quality journalism in a variety of mediums — print and online for starters, but perhaps also broadcast and audio down the road as well.

We didn't know our first project would be to save the Opinion pages of The Desert Sun, but the need has arisen and we are eager to step up to the task.

Philanthropic support for an important function of journalism is not unprecedented: Several positions at The Desert Sun already being sustained by the generosity of people and organizations that derive value in doing so. The paper already has partnerships of this variety with Report for America, ProPublica and the College of the Desert Foundation. Right now, two Desert Sun interns and three reporters are sustained wholly by philanthropic sup-

port. And the need will continue to grow.

The printing press for The Desert Sun was closed down in September and print operations moved to Phoenix. Now, the newspaper's building is for sale. This is not just happening in Palm Springs. In Stockton, where Gannett owns the hometown newspaper called The Record, the building is up for sale as well, and one potential buyer is a local government agency that is interested in converting the property into a homeless shelter. The divestment of assets and the centralization of where news is aggregated for publication has reached a fever pitch across the country, and the business model for newspapers has been diminished by online publishing.

Since Thomas Paine started a small paper called "Common Sense" to advocate for an independent United States of America from Great Britain, local opinion pages have provided a forum to discuss local issues. The opinion pages of newspapers are operated editorially independent from the rest of the operation.

The Desert Sun has a seven-member editorial board, and a majority of these members are not employees of the newspaper, but community members. They hail from a diversity of backgrounds and live in different cities throughout the valley. They meet weekly to consider important issues from our community, talk with local people, and formulate opinion pieces that speak to the critical matters facing all of us, pointing out problems, but also suggesting solutions.

That said, The Desert Sun Opinion pages are much more than that. The unique function of the Opinion page is to provide a forum where local people can submit opinions for publication on local issues, and the opinions published in the pages of The Desert Sun often run counter to the opinions of the newspaper's editorial board. That dialogue — civil and transparent — is part of the bedrock of our republic.

The Desert Sun's Opinion page has been invaluable to the growth, prosperity and honest dialogue of the Coachella Valley since 1927, when the population of the valley was a small fraction of what it is today. Through two world wars and the emergence of the Coachella Valley as a significant tourism destination, The Desert Sun's Opinion page has guided us on all things of local importance.

Sustaining a professional, full-time Opinion editor for The Desert Sun in 2021 will cost approximately \$60,000. We are starting today to raise these funds, and we ask you to join us with a tax-deductible contribution, large or small.

Please join the Coachella Valley Journalism Foundation as we seek to keep our opinion pages from dying in darkness. To find out how you can help, please visit our website at cvjf.org or email us at info@cvjf.org. Together, we can sustain this vibrant forum.

Joe Wallace, Joe.Wallace@cvep.com, is CEO of the Coachella Valley Economic Partnership and treasurer of the Coachella Valley Journalism Foundation.