

Opinion

Kansas City is poised to lead in economic justice

BY GREG GRAVES
Special to The Star

Can the solution for economic justice be best found in the heart of America?

We know that Kansas City has been experiencing exciting momentum the last several years. In fact, some of the most successful companies with the happiest employees here in the metropolitan area are employee-owned. What does this mean and how can we lead by example?

The topic of economic democracy isn't new, just before the COVID-19 pandemic, the ideals of economic democracy were in the spotlight for a shining moment, a hot topic of

American political debates. They were almost always supported by members of both parties. Then came the pandemic and the focus rightly shifted to the health and safety of our nation. As the pandemic turned to endemic (at least in our hearts) this year, the topic of economic democracy rose again. Then came Ukraine.

Let's be honest: Something immediate will always grab our interest and emotions, but economic democracy deserves your attention now.

Separate work at Boston College, Rutgers and Stanford universities all suggest the same: Wealth disparity hasn't been this severe in America since our nation began — a notion that rings distinctly

undemocratic.

In America today, almost 30% of all accumulated wealth is owned by 1% of Americans. Worse, CNBC and the last census suggest that 50% of all Americans have no savings at all. And I mean nothing — zip, zilch, nada. Many solutions offered to fix this problem are only short-term Band-Aids and do not solve the root problem.

Charitable help, government safety nets and Medicaid are all critical. Likewise, Social Security, pensions and 401(k)s, while great programs, only create non-poor retirements. Some believe the solution is a higher minimum wage. I support a higher minimum wage, but all of these initiatives do little to

nothing in terms of long-term, sustainable wealth creation. Equal-but-poor is not the end goal.

Extreme wealth disparity may just be the natural conclusion of all-out capitalism, but it is not in the best fiscal interest of our nation. That's not a left or a right conclusion — it is a fiscally conservative requirement for the continuation of economic greatness.

I love Thomas Jefferson's principle of economic democracy. He believed economic success was possible only if we made the American farmer, manufacturer and fisherman owners. It was the productivity of ownership that Jefferson believed would allow American workers to outcompete their European counterparts, and it permanently changed our nation for the better.

The same principle can — and does — work today.

So, what can fix the wealth disparity? Employee stock ownership plans, or ESOPs. I'm sure Jefferson's favorite companies would be ESOPs. We know that when employees are the owners and the owners are employees, they're set up for shared success and shared wealth. Today, approximately 7,000 ESOPs exist in America with around 14,000,000 employee-owners. The success of employee-owned firms is predictable. They grow faster, are more profitable and are almost always great places to work.

In Kansas City, we may be America's best town to incubate or convert an existing firm to an ESOP.

Right here, you will consistently see great examples of employee ownership not only working for the individual, but also benefiting the firm. From my personal favorite, Burns & McDonnell,

to other terrific local firms such as Black & Veatch, PBI Gordon, Global Franchise, McCowen Gordon Construction and a brand-new member to the ESOP world — Henderson Engineers — I love seeing the Kansas City ESOP pool continue to expand.

If the American economy wishes to remain a global competitor, it must be more entrepreneurial, more owner-based and its success must be more democratic.

America always shines brightest when she cares the most.

More than 90 million Americans work at firms where an ESOP is possible and where economic justice is calling. Consider this path for your firm, your employees and a more democratic future for America.

Greg Graves is retired CEO of Burns & McDonnell and author of the new book "Create Amazing."

Walt Disney's legacy deserves special commemoration

BY DAN VIETS
Special to The Star

One hundred years ago, 20-year-old Walt Disney incorporated his first professional film studio, Laugh-O-Gram. He opened it in a building designed by noted Kansas City architect Nelle Peters at 31st Street and Forest Avenue.

Film historian and critic Leonard Maltin called Disney "the most successful and influential producer in the history of movie making." He personally earned 32 Academy Awards, a record which is unlikely ever to be equaled. He revolutionized the theme park and resort industries with his creation of Disneyland in California and the plans he made for Walt Disney World in Florida.

At Laugh-O-Gram, Walt created a series of excellent one-reel, black-and-white, silent cartoons. He not only worked at the Laugh-O-Gram building — he lived there. He would go to Union Station for a shower, at least once a week.

Perhaps the most significant event at Laugh-O-Gram was Walt taming a mouse and keeping him as a pet. He said many times that while he slept in his studio, he would be awakened by mice taking the remains of his employees' lunches from a wire wastebasket. Walt began to put food out for the rodents and found that one little mouse seemed to be braver than the others.

Walt tamed him, and the

mouse would play on Walt's drawing board. He lived in a drawer of Walt's desk, and later in a small cage. Five years later, when Walt lost the rights to his character Oswald the Lucky Rabbit, it was that little mouse in Kansas City that inspired the creation of the world's most famous fictional character, Mickey.

The company Walt contracted with to make cartoons went bankrupt, forcing his own company into dire financial straits. His last attempt to save Laugh-O-Gram was an ambitious production he called "Alice in Cartoonland." He had met 4-year-old Virginia Davis while he worked at the Kansas City Film Ad Service. He recognized her innate talent and charm. He cast her as Alice in what he hoped would become a successful series of cartoons in which she, as a live-action character, interacted with cartoon characters.

Walt began to correspond with Margaret Winkler, the nation's foremost distributor of animated cartoons. She was favorably impressed with the unfinished Alice comedy Walt sent her.

Walt was forced to take bankruptcy himself in the late summer of 1923. He liquidated the assets of his little company and headed west, buying a first-class ticket on the Santa Fe Railway. His brother Roy advised Walt to resume what he knew best: producing animated films.

On Oct. 16, 1923, Winkler offered him a contract to produce the "Alice Comedies," on the condition

that the same little girl who appeared in the pilot episode would continue to play the character. Walt persuaded Virginia's parents to move to Los Angeles so she could continue in the role.

As the Disney Brothers studio began to make money, Walt called on his old friends in Kansas City to join him. Ub Iwerks was the first to do so. Hugh Harman, Rudy Ising, Fritz Freleng and others followed.

After working with Disney, Harman and Ising became the founding animators at Warner Bros., and then did the same at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. Along the way, they trained Bill Hanna and Joe Barbera to animate. Young leader "Fritz" Freleng worked for Disney briefly and later became one of the most important creative forces at Warner Bros. Animation.

Virtually the entire Hollywood animation industry, from its earliest years through the middle of the 20th century, was founded by animators who got their start working in Kansas City.

For many years, Thank You Walt Disney Inc. has worked to preserve and restore the Laugh-O-Gram building, which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. It would have been demolished long ago if not for our efforts.

We are working to restore the building to become a place where young Kansas City animators will once again learn their craft in the digital age, and also to create a museum telling the amazing story of how Hollywood animation began in a red brick building at 31st and Forest in Kansas City.

Dan Viets is president of the SOI(23) nonprofit Thank You Walt Disney Inc. at thankyouwaltDisney.org

OFF THE EASEL

Tim Campbell's Cartoonist

Tim Campbell

THERE'S NO CASH IN THE BACK. THEY'RE ON HIGH ALERT BECAUSE WE HAVE A FULL TANK OF GAS.



Now is not time to go tentative on military aid for Ukraine

BY GEORGE F. WILL
The Washington Post

"If you start to take Vienna, take Vienna" — Napoleon, reportedly was Napoleon.

A prolific maker of widows, orphans and history, Napoleon was a war savant who understood the perils of tentativeness. As U.S. and allied weapons — including information — are wielded by Ukraine against a Russia that aspires to be rampant in its region, the military and diplomatic dangers of hesitancy are mounting.

The annual World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, earns some of the derision it receives ("Where billionaires tell millionaires what the middle class is thinking"), but occasionally it puts a world leader in a useful spotlight, hence on the spot. On May 26, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz told the forum: The world "experienced a thunderbolt" when Russia invaded Ukraine. This will "end Germany and Europe's dependence on energy imports from Russia."

"We cannot allow Putin to win his war," so we must "make it clear to Putin that there will be no victor's peace."

Another German, Ursula von der Leyen, president of the European Commission, says Ukraine "must win" because it is "one of us." She thereby supplied the answer to the foolish question of whether Ukraine — geographically, the largest nation located entirely in Europe — belongs in the

European Union.

Scholz's thunderous words included: "We have an unequivocal message for our allies: You can rely on Germany." And: "For the first time ever, Germany is supplying arms to a war zone — including heavy weapons." Words are, however, unable to enable Ukraine to defeat Russia's patent aim of piecemeal dismemberment of it. The Wall Street Journal reports that Germany has not sent tanks to Ukraine, has not yet sent to Poland and the Czech Republic the promised weapons to replace the tanks those nations have sent to Ukraine. Germany, the Journal reports, has "agreed to ship" seven heavy artillery pieces, but Europe's largest economy has actually sent military aid worth just \$215 million — less than Estonia's contribution.

In his 1951 speech to Congress after President Harry S. Truman relieved him of command in the Korean War, Gen. Douglas MacArthur proclaimed:

"There is no substitute for victory." Actually, there are gradations of victory, hence there were substitutes for victory as Americans — fresh from a world war concluded by unconditional surrenders — then understood it. In December 1952, what President-elect Dwight D. Eisenhower saw, hunched in a tiny plane flying over the Korean front, confirmed his intuition: Military victory would require effusions of blood disproportionate to any U.S. geopolitical gain — and beyond Americans' tolerance.

The United States' choice today is different. The country's potential gains from sustaining Ukraine's valiant expenditure of its blood are enormous. After visiting Kyiv, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said on May 1 that the United States is "with Ukraine until victory is won." Victory should have two elements.

One is that combat ends with Russia diminished — more militarily vulnerable, economically ramshackle and internationally disdained than it was when its aggression began. This has been achieved, but the achievement must be preserved by a second element.

Never mind war reparations; war-crime prosecutions; the return of Ukrainian territory previously annexed by Russia, such as Crimea; or even the end of Russian mischief in Ukrainian regions with large Russian-speaking populations. What matters in preventing Scholz's "victor's peace" is restoration of the (albeit untidy) geographic status quo of Feb. 24.

Putin wanted to restore his nation's swagger. Russia now limps into a shrunken future as a moral pariah, its stunning military in the shadow of an enlarged NATO. Gideon Rachman of the Financial Times reports U.S. estimates that Russia has lost about 1,000 tanks, that shortages of components have forced two tank manufacturers to halt production and that Russia's semiconductor shortage is so severe they are "using computer chips from dishwashers and refrigerators in military equipment." This is the time to increase Ukraine's sting.

SHORT TAKE: THE PRO-TRUMP MEDIA BLITZ AHEAD

Now that the House committee examining the Jan. 6 insurrection has announced the first of six hearings set to begin this week, Donald Trump and his allies are gearing up for a major media push in response. Axios describes this as a "counterprogramming" of the committee's presentation.

That's a polite way to say that Trump's propagandists will flood the media zone with a rancid gush of disinformation

and lies, designed to dupe GOP voters into seeing themselves as the hearings' victims and to pollute the information environment so the media activates its worst both-sides instincts.

The ruse is to project swagger at a time when Democrats will command the national spotlight with a powerful tale of Trumpian violence and treachery.

Yet this effort does point to a big challenge

Democrats face with these hearings: It shows that large swaths of the GOP and conservative establishment have fundamentally invested in full-blown denial that Trump's effort to destroy our constitutional order requires any serious national reckoning.

That, in turn, could make a meaningful breakthrough harder for these hearings to achieve.

Greg Sargent, The Washington Post

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