

Two Roads Diverging

When I found myself Commander of Atmore VFW Post 7016 several months ago, I decided to change the focus of my regular weekly column in the Atmore Advance from story-telling and general editorializing to a discussion of VFW issues. I thought this might be a more efficient and noble use of my time and writing skills and that it would help our VFW recruiting efforts and improve communications with veterans as well as non-veteran supporters whose generosity we seek and depend upon. I am yet undecided as to whether this has been the case, but I press on.

In a recent column I discussed some of the issues and problems we have experienced in both our VFW and American Legion posts with recruiting, member retention and growth. Though many of our growth issues here in Atmore are shared by VFW posts throughout the U.S., other impediments to our growth and health are unique to us and are fueled by our own personal history. Here is some of that history:

VFW's Post 7016 was founded by a small group of American Legion members about 2000-2002 and was led by Levan Martin as Commander and supported by prominent Atmore citizen Byard Swift. Levan commanded a cadre of loyal followers, many of whom were WW II and Korean War veterans. Most of these older veterans are now passed on. Levan Martin was a capable and beloved leader. By 2008, however, he was declining in health and his family surreptitiously requested of a few of his inner circle comrades that Levan not be nominated for reelection as Post Commander. Levan, of course, loved his post role and was prepared to continue serving. He was, therefore, mildly offended by the fact that his fellow post members had not nominate him for reelection. Once his family's concern for his health was communicated to him, however, he agreeably stepped down from his position as Post Commander, and agreed to continue to serve as a Post Trustee, where he served until his death a short time later.

In this particular election year, circa 2008, Billy Gates, was nominated and elected as Post Commander by a majority vote of post members present. I, a recent recruit, was nominated and elected as the new Post Quartermaster, replacing John James, who had served in the Quartermaster position since Post inception and was desirous to be relieved. I had only recently returned to Atmore after many years of "wandering the earth" in my working career and was completely uninformed of any and all adversarial underpinnings in the VFW group. I accepted the position and was pleased to serve as Post Quartermaster for the next 6-7 years under Billy Gates' leadership. Billy served as our Post Commander for the next seventeen years, until his death from cancer in the Fall of 2025.

I was serving as Billy's Junior Vice Commander at the time of his sickness, surgery and subsequent death and was elevated to the position of Post Commander per member vote and the succession provisions of National and Post by-laws. Having served under Billy Gates' command as his Quartermaster and various other elected and appointed positions, it is my personal opinion that Billy Gates was an honest and honorable man and a capable leader. He was beloved by many, especially those who were former students during his high school teaching career. Billy and I became friends during those years and were friends until his death. We did not agree on all things, but we always found a way to press forward in harmony in the work of the VFW.

This was not so, however, in all cases. In fact, no sooner were Commander Gates and his newly elected staff installed that contention began to brew up in our ranks. It started with the Commander's review of member files in which he determined that several active members of the post were ineligible for membership according to VFW national rules. These members were promptly dismissed, causing no small stir amongst some of their influential Post friends in the post.

At that time, the VFW Auxiliary also boasted a robust following led by Levan's daughter, Pam Martin, who met in our building on the same night each month as we did. When Billy's wife made application to join the Auxiliary, she was declined by vote of the membership. This caused Mrs. Gates no small amount of angst and emotional distress, which prompted Commander Gates to angrily evict the Auxiliary from our VFW facility. This action led to an estrangement and complete absence of cooperation and communication between the main VFW Post and its Auxiliary unit during all the following years until recently.

Another issue arose from Commander Gates' open criticism of the financial management of post funds under Commander Martin's administration. Billy openly asserted after taking command that he had found the Post virtually "broke" and near insolvency. Former post leaders took umbrage to that accusation, responding that they were not "broke," or insolvent, as Commander Gates suggested, but that they had never carried large balances in their bank account because they spent all their money supporting veteran causes instead of hoarding assets.

Another problematic issue had to do with the weekly dance held in the Post Ballroom on Saturday nights. The dance featured a live band and was quite popular amongst many senior citizens in Atmore, but Billy and his new cadre of officers, after examination of post finances, contended that the dance was a financial loss for the post and seemed designed only to profit the band. They also pointed out that most of the regular attendees of the dance were not veterans. Commander Gates promptly discontinued the dance activity and dismissed the band.

No small amount of ire arose between old and new administrations from all these sudden changes, which led to Commander Gates being charged with malfeasance of duty by certain adversarial members. He was brought before a Post Tribunal to remove him from office. The trial was quite a display as I recall, featuring legal drama one normally finds only on television.

Billy Gates put up a splendid defense at his trial. In the end, he prevailed and retained his command. Unfortunately, many of those of the old administration immediately left the post in anger and frustration. Some were so angry that when Levan Martin died they gathered outside the funeral home to prevent anyone from the Billy Gates' "regime" from attending the funeral. I attended Levan's funeral, passing through "the guard" without a problem. Having never taken an active part on either side in the aforementioned broo-haha, I suppose I was not on their "enemy list." In fact, I have remained friends with most of these men over the years since this all happened and I invite them to return to Post activity and put the past behind us whenever we meet. With few exceptions, my invitations have fallen on deaf ears.

In the years since these events, other members have also had conflicts with Commander Gates over various aspects of VFW business. Some of these also left our ranks in anger and frustration, vowing never to return. Billy Gates, in the meantime, was nominated and elected as Commander of VFW Post 7016 seventeen times at seventeen annual elections by a majority of post members in attendance in accordance with National, State and Post by-laws. This phenomenon might suggest that if one disagrees with the way an organization is operated, the best way to change the organization is not to get mad and quit it, but to stay and work for change. We often find this in American politics, where those who complain the loudest often do not bother to vote, much less participate.

Today our post has reconciled with our Auxiliary and we are working together again in harmony, forging steadily forward. Old and new members are returning, little by little, two or three each month. Yet, many veterans who were formerly ardent members and supporters of our post continue to decline our invitations to return, most frequently citing Billy Gates, Billy Gates, Billy Gates, as their reason why. Some former members even advocate energetically for the complete dissolution of established VFW and American Legion posts and the creation of an entirely new veterans' organization in Atmore.

Perhaps this is the solution to our dilemma in Atmore's veterans' organizations. I do not know. I do believe, however, that like all divergent groups of people, changing our name or our hat or our logo will not change our personalities or our nature or our behavior. In the end, if we are to succeed in our mission to serve our fellow veterans and promote patriotism in our communities, I think we must learn to get along and work out our differences with mutual respect, and perhaps just a little compromise from time to time.

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