



op/ed

by John P. Sparkman

THE LAW OF UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

Where one lives can change one's perspective.

Six years ago we moved from Lexington, Kentucky to the Tennessee county with the lowest population density and lowest per capita income of any county in a state where per capita income as a whole is 13.2% lower than the national average, according to 2010 census data. As a direct result of that move, my immediate, gut reaction to last week's brief suspension of exports of horses for slaughter to Canada was different than it might have been had I remained surrounded--insulated, actually--by the wealthier confines of Fayette County, Kentucky.

Although never as whole-hearted in my support as most in the Thoroughbred industry, I approved of the closure of horse slaughtering plants in the United States over the last decade. After our move south, however, I witnessed the iron hand of the law of unintended consequences.

First popularized by sociologist Robert K. Merton in the 1930s, the law of unintended consequences says that intervention in any complex system tends to create unanticipated and often undesirable outcomes. Those consequences can be positive or negative, but the phrase is most often applied to situations where an intended solution makes a problem worse, sometimes even causing actions opposite to the solution's original intent.

Even before our move, my Tennessee friends and relatives who raise Tennessee Walking Horses and Quarter horses were lamenting the demise of slaughterhouses, not because they are heartless souls who want to see horses killed, but because they are horse lovers who cannot bear to see horses starve. They knew that many horse owners in our area do not have the means to keep horses they do not need. Three winters ago I witnessed direct evidence of their worst fears coming true.

Along the two-mile road from the major four-lane highway to our house we watched three horses in a 10-acre field next to the road grow steadily thinner as autumn darkened into winter. There were none of the big round bales of hay that we use here to feed livestock and no feed troughs or buckets visible in the pasture.

My cousin and her husband own the 300-acre farm across the road from the starving horses, a farm that produces around 600 bales of hay a year. They placed a bale of hay over the fence of their neighbor for the horses.

The next day a crude, hand-lettered cardboard sign appeared attached to the bale of hay: "Please do not feed our horses."

Report the offenders to the authorities you say? Only at the risk of having your hay barn or other buildings burned down. People do not take kindly to what they see as snitches in this area. It has happened.

Thus my reaction to the brief closure of the Canadian border to slaughter transport was decidedly more ambivalent than it would have been a few years earlier. The overwhelming majority of the more than 130,000 horses shipped to Canada or Mexico for slaughter each year are not Thoroughbreds. Many of them are horses like those in my unconscionably recalcitrant neighbor's field, horses that no one wants, have no useful purpose, and no one to feed and care for them properly.

The Thoroughbred industry and the people who own and breed Thoroughbreds can afford to arrange for the care of retired racehorses. Indeed it is imperative that we do so if we want to survive the scrutiny of a public that is already doubtful of our humanitarian impulses. The numerous retirement farms that have cropped up around the country and organizations like the Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation, CANTER, ReRun, and the Thoroughbred Adoption Network are necessary, highly admirable, and deserving of the monetary support of everyone in the industry.

We simply must support our retired racehorses to survive in the court of public opinion, regardless of any moral or ethical considerations, although those should be powerful enough incentives.

We can afford to do that. Many of the backyard breeders who produce warm-blooded and cold-blooded pleasure horses or utility horses all over the United States, however, cannot.

No matter how much we try, no matter how much money we spend on Thoroughbreds, horse slaughter is not going to go away. And the law of unintended consequences, along with the Great Recession, has inevitably produced more starving horses, not less.

You may not see them near Thoroughbred farms in Kentucky, Florida, New York, California, Maryland, Virginia, or any of the other major breeding states. But I see them.

Those three horses disappeared from the field a few weeks after the hay incident. More have come and gone since. Attempts to reason with the owner have met with hostility, but thankfully, other animal abusers in the area have been arrested recently.

The arc of history bends toward justice.
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