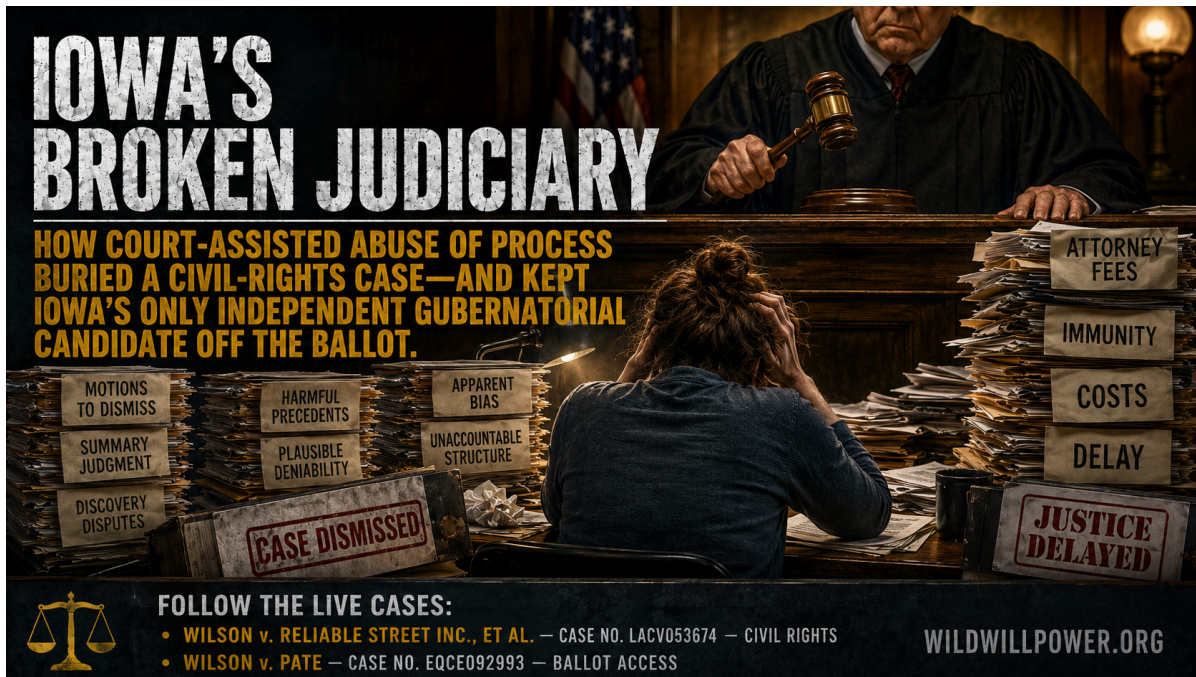


Iowa's Broken Judiciary: How Court-Assisted Abuse of Process Buried a Civil-Rights Case— and Kept Iowa's Only Independent Gubernatorial Candidate Off the Ballot

By [Sondra Wilson](#) | Updated July 31, 2026



This article publicly discloses the record behind *Wilson v. Reliable Street Inc., et al.*, case no. LACV053674, and documents a pattern of procedural rulings that repeatedly favored the defendants. The record reflects not only abuse of process by opposing counsel, but discretionary judicial decisions that enabled that abuse.

Plausible deniability is inevitable in any complex record. Judges may deny bias or defend their rulings as neutral, even when the cumulative record points in a very different direction. That is one reason this disclosure is necessary. Taxpayers deserve to see how their courts operate. And this is not merely political. Some members of the public or elected officials—whether for political, ideological, or faith-based reasons—may dismiss a transgender woman's claims, regardless of the evidence.

But this is not about me. Yes, my rights have been violated, and the harm remains ongoing. But the stakes extend far beyond one litigant. This case concerns every Iowan—our elections, our courts, and whether the justice system still functions as an institution the public can realistically use.

It is about whether Iowa will maintain a system worthy of its people, or whether we will continue subjecting ourselves to a court structure so complex and professionally insulated that it fails the promise of both our state and nation. That is why rebuilding Iowa's justice system became a central part of my gubernatorial platform.

When I describe Iowa’s judiciary as **broken**, I do not mean that judges and attorneys entered into a secret agreement. I mean that the system has accumulated layers of complexity, privilege, and professional insulation that functionally block ordinary citizens from meaningful access to justice. The structure overwhelmingly favors the legal professionals who understand, administer, and profit from that complexity, while citizens who cannot afford counsel are permitted to enter the courthouse but warned they must navigate it with the competence of trained attorneys—or proceed “at their own risk.”

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With Gratitude

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I. The Court Record and the Democratic Stakes

When the Promise of Justice Meets the Machinery of Law

Many people enter court believing that “liberty and justice for all” means the evidence will be examined and the truth will prevail. They assume that even if they do not understand every rule, the system will help guide the dispute toward a fair resolution.

Instead, they encounter doctrines and precedents only after opposing counsel deploys them in a dismissal filing: that self-represented citizens are expected to perform with professional-level competence; that statements may be absolutely privileged even when alleged to be false or malicious; that procedural mistakes can prevent central evidence from ever being reached; and that immunity may foreclose a remedy even where misconduct is alleged.

The financial danger is equally real. A person who turns to the courts after being harmed can be buried beneath motions, deadlines, discovery disputes, fee requests, sanctions arguments, and counterclaims long before the underlying facts are ever decided. Attorney-fee demands are not rare. They are a familiar litigation weapon—one that can leave a self-represented person without justice, and forced to help finance the legal representation of the parties that harmed them.

Retaliatory litigation compounds the danger. When accusations are serious and reputational stakes are high, the threat of a counterclaim becomes another pressure point: withdraw, remain silent, or risk having the original harm multiplied through additional claims, additional expense, and additional damaging material placed into an official record.

Procedural complexity is not just inconvenient — it is dangerous. It can bury the merits, exhaust the person seeking relief, preserve disputed accusations inside government records, and arm opposing parties with doctrines that prevent the underlying truth from ever being reached. A person may enter court seeking relief from one injustice and emerge carrying several more.

A right is not always lost because the law provides no protection. Sometimes it is lost through the machinery used to administer it.

From a Court Record to a Plan for Reform

I am not publishing this record merely to condemn that machinery. I am publishing it because Iowa’s justice system can be rebuilt through democratic government. My proposed reforms were developed through years of firsthand experience navigating Iowa’s courts and administrative agencies. They are designed to make procedure understandable, evidence accessible, judicial accountability meaningful, and substantive rights enforceable without requiring ordinary people to purchase professional access to justice.

Wilson v. Reliable Street also did not remain confined to one courtroom. The years I spent responding to coordinated procedural attacks, seeking central evidence, reconstructing a fragmented record, defending against escalating litigation pressure, and proceeding without counsel consumed the same limited time and resources Iowa required me to devote to collecting thousands of ballot-access signatures.

That collision gave rise to *Wilson v. Pate*, case no. EQCE092993. In that case, I am asking the courts to restore my opportunity to qualify for the ballot—or, at minimum, to recognize that external litigation burdens capable of disrupting an election cannot be imposed without any meaningful avenue for relief.

The irony is stark. I developed a comprehensive gubernatorial platform treating justice as civic infrastructure—proposing reforms no other candidate placed before Iowa voters. Yet the very judicial failures those reforms were designed to address helped prevent voters from deciding whether they wanted them. My platform is not a complaint without a remedy. It is an attempt to repair, through democratic government, a legal system that has accumulated layers of complexity, privilege, immunity, and professional insulation that Iowa voters never consciously chose.

This series therefore asks more than what happened in one civil-rights case. It asks whether Iowa’s courts still function as public institutions—or whether justice increasingly belongs only to those trained, financed, and professionally positioned to navigate the system.

This Is Not Just a Civil Rights Case

Iowa’s courts affect far more than the people whose names appear on a docket. Their rulings shape the rights, remedies, and expectations that future generations inherit.

This series documents what happened when I entered Iowa’s judicial system without an attorney, seeking to correct false accusations and misleadingly presented records placed into a government civil-rights file. But reducing this story to a civil-rights case, a transgender-rights case, or one private lawsuit would understate its importance.

Across two counties, three judges, and years of litigation, the underlying facts were buried beneath simultaneous challenges to service, venue, pleading sufficiency, and the petition’s form. An opportunity to present evidence was invited and later withdrawn. Claims were dismissed before meaningful discovery. Efforts to amend were repeatedly contested. The surviving claim was ultimately dismissed under a sweeping privilege doctrine before the truth or falsity of the disputed submissions was decided at trial.

The articles below reconstruct that record chronologically.

The Case Record: How a Civil-Rights Complaint Became Years of Litigation

Wilson v. Reliable Street began after false accusations and misleadingly presented records entered an Iowa civil-rights file following my discrimination complaint against three businesses: Lockwood Café, Reliable Street Inc., and Love Club LLC.

The case also concerns agreements I allege were breached and later misleadingly reframed in submissions respondents sent to the Iowa Civil Rights Commission.

The prologue and four articles below reconstruct the administrative and judicial record in chronological order—from the evidence-withholding trap that forced the lawsuit to the rulings now requiring appellate review.

Read the Article: Prologue: Iowa's Civil Rights Trap

Iowa's Civil-Rights Trap explains how a community collaboration involving months of authorized work, agreements, friendship, and trust abruptly became a discrimination complaint—and then an administrative trap. After respondents submitted statements and documents that I allege contained false accusations and misleadingly arranged evidence, the Iowa Civil Rights Commission closed the complaint without an investigation, incorporated the allegations into government records, and withheld the underlying submissions while the time available to obtain counsel and file suit continued to run. The prologue shows how the agency process left me with only fifty-five days of the two-year limitations period, forcing me into court without representation simply to obtain the complete record, challenge the accusations, and clear my name.

Click the image below to read the full article.



Read the Article: Part One: Procedural Bombardment

Procedural Bombardment documents how seven defendants answered my two-page petition with twenty-seven pages of coordinated procedural demands while I was participating in DMACC's London Abroad program. In two filings submitted five minutes apart, they challenged service, sought transfer to Story County, demanded dismissal of every claim before discovery, alternatively demanded that I recast and substantially expand the petition, and repeated the same accusations I had sued to correct. The article follows my attempt to answer those attacks, the denial of my recusal request, the transfer ruling based upon what I contend was a materially misleading venue argument, the added financial burden, and the compression of the entire Polk County history into a single 144-page Story County docket entry—creating the fragmented record that the Story County judges would later inherit.

Click the image below to read the full article.



Read the Article: [Part Two: Sudden Reversal](#)

Sudden Reversal reconstructs how the Story County court invited the parties to identify and present evidence, leading me to organize approximately seventy sub-exhibits, but later withdrew that opportunity, declined to consider the referenced record, and dismissed nearly every claim “with prejudice” before meaningful discovery.

The installment also explains why the discrimination claim may still become an important Iowa civil-rights case. After Republican lawmakers, acting under [color of authority](#), removed “gender identity” from the Iowa Civil Rights Act, I began invoking article I, section 6 of the Iowa Constitution and Iowa’s historic equality tradition exemplified by [Clark v. Board of Directors, 24 Iowa 266, 277 \(1868\)](#), which rejected racial segregation in Iowa schools eighty-six years before *Brown v. Board of Education*. That constitutional theory was not fully developed in the operative petition because the pressured procedural and academic circumstances documented throughout this series did not provide a meaningful opportunity to complete the amended pleading.

As covered in *Part Four*, I am now asking the court to reconsider the rulings that prevented the case from developing through amendment, discovery, and trial. The central argument is that Iowa’s constitutional promise of equality cannot depend entirely upon whether a temporary legislative majority chooses to retain a protected class within an ordinary statute—an increasingly urgent question amid what I allege are widespread defamation, discrimination, and rights violations against transgender Iowans under the Trump and Reynolds administrations.

Click the image below to read the full article.



Read the Article: **Part Three: Plausible Deniability**

Plausible Deniability examines how a newly assigned judge inherited a fragmented docket, initially failed to account for orders that had stayed and restarted the reconsideration deadline, and then encountered the defendants' characterization of the case as a "yearslong pattern of delay and obfuscation." The defendants also continued carrying forward a false harassment narrative that created leverage through the threat of a retaliatory counterclaim—an accusation I could not safely leave unanswered. Rebutting that narrative, reconstructing the procedural history, and correcting their misleading descriptions of the proceedings consumed the limited time I had been granted to amend the petition and prepare a motion to reconsider the October 4 dismissals entered by the previous judge.

At the same time, Republican lawmakers, acting under color of authority, removed "gender identity" from the Iowa Civil Rights Act, causing my gender-affirming surgery to be canceled for the third time since *Good v. Iowa Department of Human Services*, 924 N.W.2d 853, 862–63 (Iowa 2019), which held that Iowa Medicaid's categorical exclusion of gender-affirming surgery violated the Act.

I was also attending Iowa State University full-time under a scholarship that had paid my tuition for two years but required continued full-time enrollment or forfeiture of that opportunity. Although I requested a continuance extending until at least fifteen days after the semester, the court nominally granted additional time while setting the deadline to file my motion to reconsider the dismissed claims for April 29—immediately before finals. The combined pressure of the litigation, the abuses of power happening at the state and federal levels, the cancellation of medically necessary care, and the demands of full-time coursework ultimately contributed to my withdrawal from two classes and acceptance of a reduced grade in a third. Meanwhile, the pre-discovery dismissals remained intact and unanswered, as the cumulative stress and mental anguish overwhelmed me.

Click the image below to read the full article.



Read the Article: [Part Four: Dangerous Precedent](#)

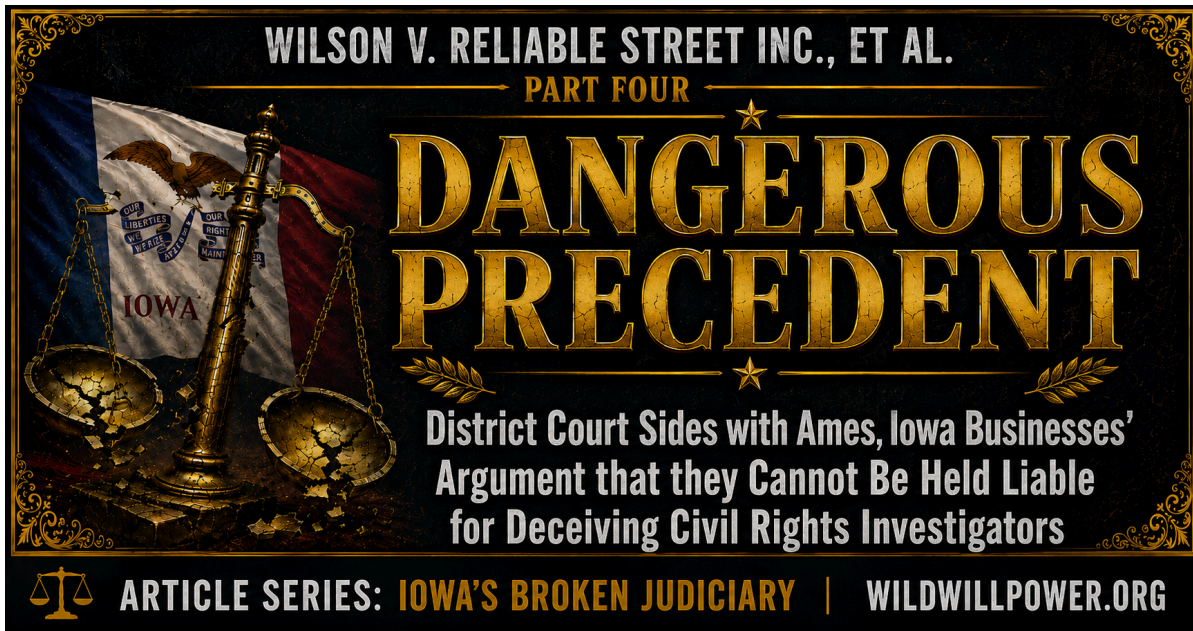
Dangerous Precedent examines the district court's ruling that statements submitted during an Iowa Civil Rights Commission investigation were absolutely privileged—even if allegedly false, malicious, or materially misleading.

I contend that even if the Iowa Office of Civil Rights performs some quasi-judicial functions, absolute privilege should not automatically extend to its preliminary investigative process, particularly where a complainant lacks access to the complete submissions or a meaningful opportunity to challenge them.

The article also argues that alleged document modification, coordinated acts of civil conspiracy, and other misconduct occurring before the final submission should not be collapsed into a single defamation claim or immunized merely because the resulting materials later entered an agency proceeding.

If allowed to stand, the ruling could undermine the purpose of the Iowa Civil Rights Act itself by turning the complaint process into a retaliatory mechanism—one that permits respondents to permanently lodge defamatory statements, false accusations, and misleadingly arranged evidence into government records that may later be searched, quoted, leaked, or used against the discrimination victim. That danger makes the case far larger than my own: it raises whether Iowa's civil-rights system will protect complainants from retaliation or instead create an official record-making process that can deepen the harm they sought the government's help to remedy.

Click the image below to read the full article.



Current status: *Wilson v. Reliable Street* is moving toward appeal. Part Four, *Dangerous Precedent*, will track the latest rulings and appellate developments.

Why This Story Matters Beyond the Ballot

This case is not only about my campaign. It is about what happens when serious accusations enter official records, remain unresolved, and can later be searched, quoted, leaked, or used to shape public opinion.

During an election, that danger becomes especially acute. A false narrative can spread before voters ever see the underlying evidence. Allegations preserved in government records alongside misleading or altered materials can affect a person's reputation, livelihood, safety, and political participation for years.

That is why the systems involved are larger than one candidate, one case, or one election.

II. A Justice System the Public Cannot Realistically Navigate

A System the Public Cannot Navigate Without the Profession That Built It

When I entered this case without an attorney, I was not simply opposing seven defendants. I was facing experienced counsel from an [established law firm](#), supported by the professional knowledge, research resources, staffing, and institutional familiarity that come with legal practice.

The contrast matters. A self-represented litigant must learn the rules while simultaneously investigating the facts, organizing evidence, drafting filings, monitoring deadlines, responding to

motions, and surviving financially. A law firm can distribute those tasks among attorneys and staff who already know the system.

That imbalance becomes especially troubling when procedural maneuvering is treated within the profession as ordinary advocacy—or even as “tricks of the trade”—although its practical effect may be to increase costs, obscure the record, exhaust an opposing party, and prevent the merits from ever being reached.

Lawyers have a duty to represent their clients zealously within the law. But the justice system should not depend upon one side’s ability to exploit complexity more effectively than the other. When procedure rewards resources, specialization, and endurance over factual truth, access to justice begins to depend less upon the merits of a claim than upon who can afford the machinery surrounding it.



Bradley & Riley’s name appears prominently on The Chauncey building in Iowa City, where the firm lists its Iowa City office. The image illustrates the structural imbalance at the center of this case: one self-represented Iowan attempting to investigate, finance, and litigate a complex case alone while facing experienced counsel backed by an established firm. Photo by Annie Smith Barkalow, Corridor Business Journal.

That power imbalance matters. A self-represented person can be buried under motions, deadlines, discovery disputes, fee requests, and dismissal arguments long before the court reaches the

underlying facts. **That is the position in which I found myself.**

Representing Yourself in Iowa's Overly Complex Courts

Like other Iowans, I grew up placing my hand over my heart and reciting the Pledge of Allegiance: “with liberty and justice for all.”

I believed those words. I believed in Iowa’s courts. I believed that, when people were wronged, the legal system existed to examine the evidence, determine what happened, and provide a remedy.

As I grew older—and especially as a transgender woman navigating Iowa’s institutions—I began to understand how far the lived reality can depart from that promise.

The Price of Professional Access to Justice

According to the Legal Services Corporation’s 2022 Justice Gap Study, low-income Americans received no legal assistance, or insufficient assistance, for 92 percent of the civil legal problems that substantially affected them. [1] According to Clio’s 2025 legal-billing data, the average hourly rate for an attorney in Iowa was \$252. [2] Meanwhile, the U.S. Census Bureau reported median annual earnings of \$57,545 for full-time, year-round workers in Iowa—approximately \$27.67 per hour based on a forty-hour workweek. [3] One hour of an average Iowa attorney’s time therefore represented more than nine hours of a median full-time worker’s earnings. [4]

I could not afford an attorney. The legal-aid organizations I contacted could not take the case, in part because their funding restrictions generally prevent them from handling fee-generating litigation.

I therefore had to represent myself.

Building My Own Map Through the Rules

I relied on knowledge I had developed through years of legal research and through transcribing legal definitions for [ReUniteTheStates.org](https://reunite-the-states.org). I began translating Iowa’s extraordinarily complicated [Rules of Civil Procedure](#) into step-by-step instructions that I could follow. To make that material easier to understand and navigate, I also organized the rules into labeled folders in [Wild Willpower’s public Google Drive](#), where they remain available as part of the organization’s broader justice-reform and public-legal-education work. [9] Even then, as a pre-law college student who had already spent years studying law, I had no understanding of what I was about to face.

I filed this lawsuit because I needed a court to examine the actual record: the communications, exhibits, timelines, contradictions, and altered presentations. I needed a judicial determination concerning allegations that had already entered administrative and judicial records. I needed an opportunity to clear my name before those records could be weaponized against me during a statewide campaign.

For me, pursuing the case was not optional. It was a matter of survival.

I did not anticipate that the litigation would continue for years and remain unresolved in 2026. Nor could I have anticipated how thoroughly it would consume the same time and resources that Iowa law required me to devote to gathering thousands of signatures for ballot access.

Civil-Rights Protections That Exist Only on Paper

This experience is one reason my justice-reform platform calls for a stronger, more transparent, and more accountable civil-rights process in Iowa.

Civil-rights agencies should not function as record-making machines for respondents while complainants are denied timely access to the materials being used against them. Complainants should receive meaningful access to their case files, adequate time to challenge an administrative closure, trauma-informed procedures, and a genuine opportunity to contest false or misleading submissions before those submissions harden into government records.

Court accessibility matters for the same reason.

When a low-income discrimination complainant cannot afford counsel, cannot obtain assistance from legal-aid organizations, cannot promptly access the complete agency file, and cannot obtain discovery before the respondent’s statements are declared absolutely privileged, civil-rights protections may exist on paper while failing almost entirely in practice.

A right without a meaningful and accessible remedy is not a real right.

No Justice, No Mercy for Pro Se Litigants

Iowa’s procedural system becomes especially harsh when courts demand professional-level competence from people proceeding **pro se**—without an attorney.

In both *Wilson v. State of Iowa and Kim Reynolds for Iowa* and *Wilson v. Reliable Street Inc., et al.*, opposing counsel invoked substantially the same body of pro se doctrine while seeking dismissal. They did not cite precisely the same cases, but they relied on the same underlying rule: a self-represented litigant may receive limited flexibility in the wording of a pleading, yet remains responsible for complying with the procedural standards expected of trained attorneys.

In the opening dismissal motion filed in *Wilson v. Reliable Street*, attorney Paul Esker first acknowledged the limited accommodation Iowa law provides:

“When a pleading is filed pro se, ‘some leeway must be accorded from precision in draftsmanship.’”

He cited *Knight v. Knight*, 525 N.W.2d 841, 843 (Iowa 1994), and *Munz v. State*, 382 N.W.2d 693, 697 (Iowa Ct. App. 1985), which stated that a pro se applicant is entitled to a liberal construction of the pleadings.

But the filing immediately narrowed the significance of that leeway:

Pro se litigants are not “excused from complying with requirements with which represented parties must comply. In short, the challenges to pro se pleading do not entitle Plaintiff to special leniency with regard to standards of pleading.”

For that proposition, the defendants relied on *Pickens v. Zeien*, No. LACV089735, 2018 WL 7863488 (Iowa Dist. Ct. May 14, 2018), and *Debruin v. State*, 779 N.W.2d 494 (Iowa Ct. App. 2010), quoting the familiar rule:

“The law does not judge by two standards, one for lawyers and the other for lay persons. Rather, all are expected to act with equal competence. If lay persons choose to proceed pro se, they do so at their own risk.”

Thus, even the authorities recognizing that an untrained citizen may lack precision were used only as a brief preface to the more consequential rule: no special leniency in meeting the standards on which dismissal may depend.

Assistant Attorney General Christopher Deist invoked the same principle in the State’s motion to dismiss my amended petition in *Wilson v. State of Iowa and Kim Reynolds for Iowa*. In the first footnote of the filing, the State said it was “sympathetic” to the fact that I was proceeding pro se, but argued that Iowa courts consistently refuse to hold self-represented people to a lower procedural standard than attorneys. The State cited *Kubik v. Burk*, 540 N.W.2d 60, 63 (Iowa Ct. App. 1995):

“The law does not judge by two standards, one for lawyers and another for lay persons. Rather all are expected to act with equal competence.”

Later in the same motion, while arguing that my tort claims should be dismissed for failure to exhaust administrative remedies, the State returned to the point:

“Nor do Iowa courts ‘utilize a deferential standard when persons choose to represent themselves.’”

The State again cited *Kubik* and then relied on *Metropolitan Jacobsen Development Venture v. Board of Review of Des Moines*, 476 N.W.2d 726, 729 (Iowa Ct. App. 1991):

“If lay persons choose to proceed pro se, they do so at their own risk.”

In each case, counsel used this doctrine while seeking dismissal: limited drafting leeway did not reduce the professional procedural standards imposed upon me.

Across different attorneys, defendants, and cases, the institutional message remained the same:

You may enter the courthouse without an attorney — but you will be expected to navigate it as though you were one.

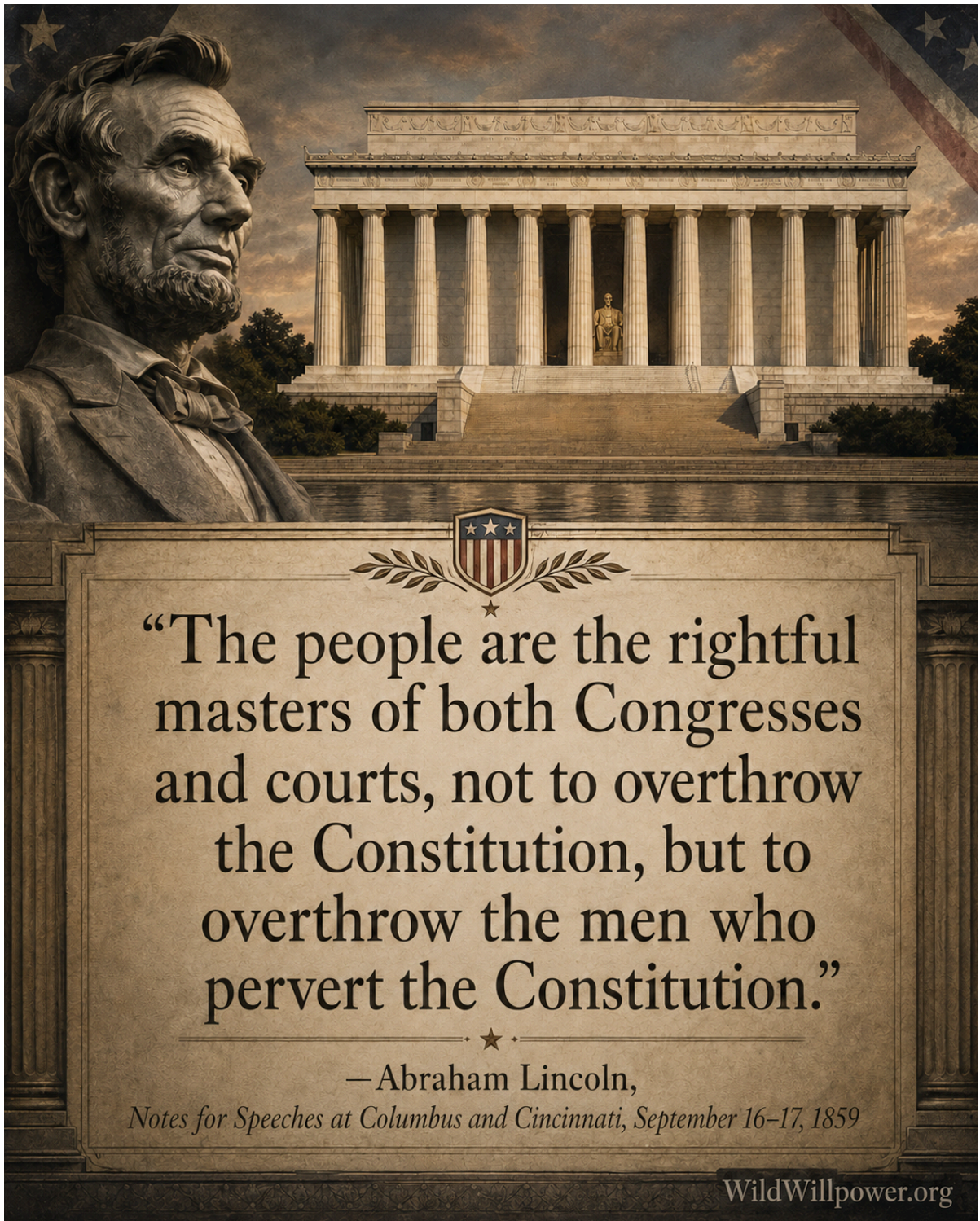
Which raises a fundamental democratic question:

Would Iowa voters knowingly choose a court system in which citizens are permitted to represent themselves, yet expected to navigate it with the competence of trained attorneys?

Abraham Lincoln, the sixteenth president of the United States, expressed the democratic principle at stake more than a century and a half ago: courts do not belong to judges, attorneys, or any professional institution. They ultimately belong to the people.

"The people are the rightful masters of both Congresses and courts, not to overthrow the Constitution, but to overthrow the men who pervert the Constitution."

— **Abraham Lincoln**, *Notes for Speeches at Columbus and Cincinnati*, September 16–17, 1859 [5]



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—Abraham Lincoln,
Notes for Speeches at Columbus and Cincinnati, September 16–17, 1859

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Equal Standards Do Not Create Equal Access

On paper, requiring lawyers and self-represented citizens to meet the same standards is described as equal treatment. In practice, it can create profound inequality.

A self-represented student, laborer, parent, tenant, patient, small-business owner, or crime victim does not enter court with the same resources as an attorney. The citizen may lack subscription research databases, specialized treatises, clerical support, litigation experience, established templates, and years of training in jurisdiction, pleading standards, issue preservation, discovery,

evidence, motion practice, and appellate procedure. The opposing attorney begins with that professional infrastructure already in place.

Yet the citizen is told to perform with “equal competence”—and to bear the consequences alone when they cannot.

Formal equality between people with radically unequal training and resources is not meaningful equality; it is a structural fiction that masks the reality that only those with professional legal training can meaningfully participate in the system.

That inequality becomes even clearer when the training required of attorneys is compared with what courts demand from ordinary citizens.

Citizens Are Judged by Standards That Require Years to Learn

Becoming an attorney typically requires seven years of higher education after high school: a bachelor’s degree or its equivalent, followed by three years at an accredited law school. A prospective attorney must then pass a state bar examination and undergo a character-and-fitness review before receiving a license to practice law. [6]

The financial investment is enormous. At the University of Iowa College of Law, tuition and mandatory fees for the 2025–2026 academic year totaled \$33,489 for Iowa residents and \$54,736 for nonresidents [7] — roughly \$100,467 to \$164,208 over three years [8], before books, housing, food, transportation, undergraduate tuition, bar-exam expenses, or interest on student loans are included.

That education has value precisely because law is difficult. Attorneys spend years mastering legal terminology, jurisdiction, statutory interpretation, precedent, pleading, discovery, evidence, motion practice, trial procedure, issue preservation, appellate procedure, legal research, and professional responsibility—an entire professional vocabulary and skillset that ordinary citizens are expected to replicate without training.

A court cannot simultaneously recognize that legal competence ordinarily requires years of specialized education while expecting a laborer, tenant, parent, student, patient, crime victim, or small-business owner to perform at the same level simply because they cannot afford counsel. If courts do impose that expectation, it underscores the structural problem: Iowa’s procedural system has grown so complex that meaningful navigation is unrealistic for ordinary people.

More Than 1,100 Rules—and Thousands of Sub-Rules

By my count, the Iowa Rules of Civil Procedure contain 370 rules and 1,982 sub-rules; [10] the Rules of Evidence add 110 rules; [11] the Rules of Criminal Procedure add 146; [12] and the Rules of Appellate Procedure add 501 [13]—more than 1,100 rules and over 6,300 sub-rules across the core procedural chapters. No working Iowan can reasonably master this architecture, especially when courts insist that pro se litigants must perform with “equal competence” to trained attorneys.

Some attorneys may resist simplification, but that resistance highlights a deeper civic issue: the public cannot meaningfully access a system whose operation depends upon professional mastery of thousands of rules. Expanding legal literacy—beginning with practical instruction for high-school seniors—would strengthen democratic participation and help ensure that justice is not reserved for those able to purchase professional access to it. A justice system worthy of Iowans must be one the public can understand, navigate, and trust.

That is not equality. It is a professional qualification requirement imposed without providing the education, resources, licensing preparation, or institutional support ordinarily required to satisfy it.

To tell ordinary citizens that they may represent themselves, but will be judged as though they had completed seven years of higher education and acquired the working knowledge of practicing attorneys, is cruel, unreasonable, and absurd. It transforms the right of self-representation into a trap: the courthouse door is technically open, but meaningful entry is conditioned upon possessing knowledge that society ordinarily requires years of study and an enormous financial investment to obtain.

These structural barriers were not theoretical. They shaped how my case was handled, how evidence was excluded, how deadlines were interpreted, and how procedural doctrines were deployed to prevent the underlying facts from ever being reached.

No functioning democracy should accept that arrangement as inevitable.

Procedure Must Serve Justice—Not Replace It

Court rules should be written and organized so ordinary people can understand them. Procedural requirements should be accompanied by clear explanations, usable forms, examples, and reasonable opportunities to correct good-faith mistakes. Judicial opinions, statutes, rules, dockets, and other materials necessary to understand the law should be publicly searchable without requiring expensive monthly subscriptions. Courts should distinguish between mistakes that genuinely prejudice another party and technical imperfections that cause no meaningful harm.

Most importantly, procedure should serve justice rather than displace it.

Courts necessarily interpret constitutions, statutes, rules, and precedent. Judges cannot simply disregard controlling law whenever they personally disagree with it. But neither should judging be reduced to mechanically applying inherited doctrines without confronting whether the result is consistent with constitutional rights, human dignity, equal justice, and the public purpose for which courts exist. Where an unjust rule lies beyond a court’s authority to change, the injustice should at least be identified openly rather than hidden behind the language of inevitability.

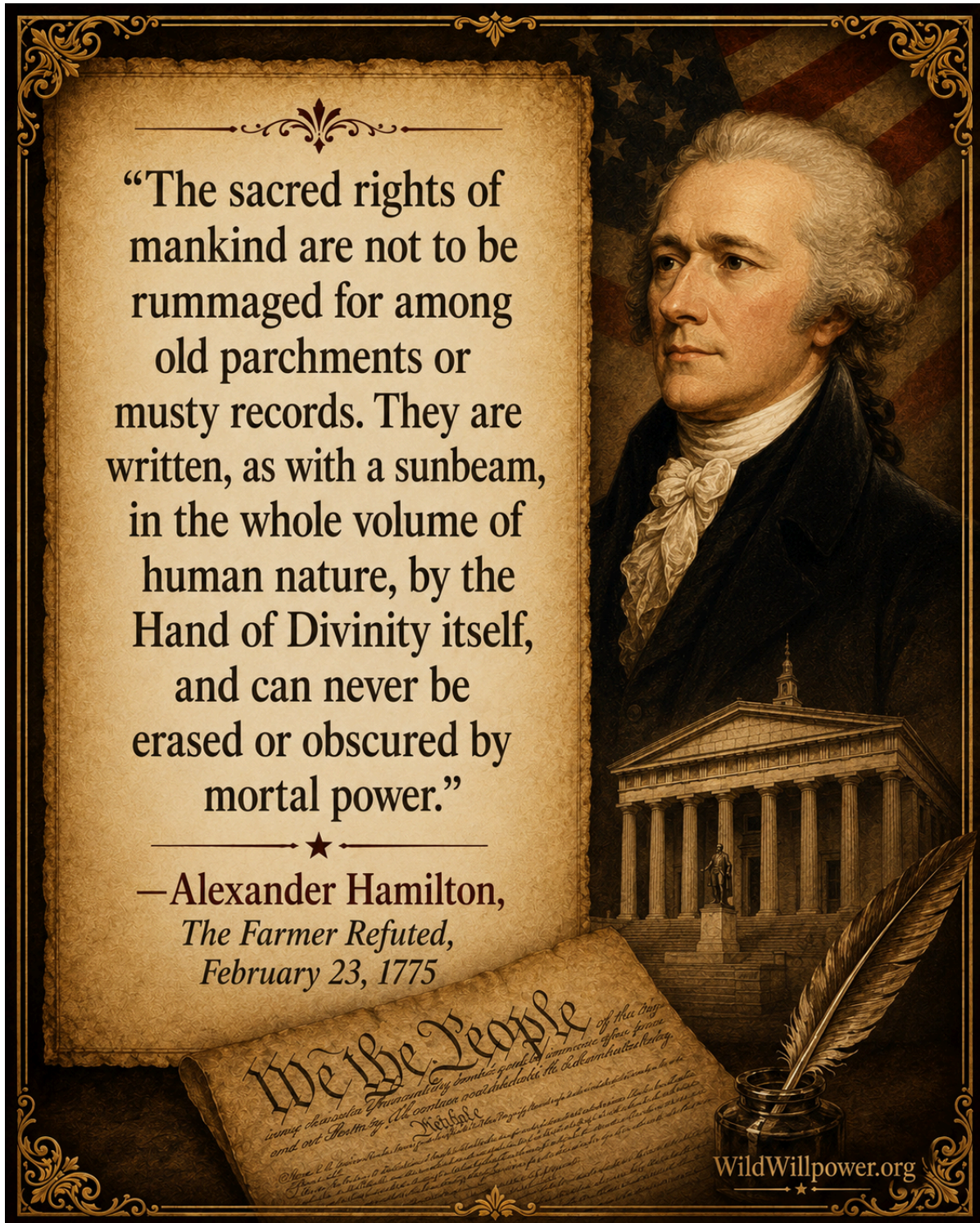
The judiciary ought to be centered first and foremost upon transforming legally remediable injustice into justice. Rules and precedents are instruments toward that end—not sacred objects whose preservation matters more than the people they were created to serve.

Alexander Hamilton expressed the deeper principle in 1775, before the United States Constitution had even been written:

“The sacred rights of [human]kind are not to be rummaged for, among old parchments, or musty records. They are written, as with a sun beam, in the

whole volume of human nature, by the hand of the divinity itself; and can never be erased or obscured by mortal power."

— Alexander Hamilton, *The Farmer Refuted*, February 23, 1775 [14]



Hamilton was not arguing that written constitutions and laws are unimportant. He was arguing that fundamental human rights do not exist merely because officials discover words supporting them in an old document. Legitimate law derives its authority from principles of human liberty and dignity that government was created to protect.

That warning remains relevant when courts treat layers of precedent, technical procedure, and professionally inaccessible legal research as more important than the human beings whose rights those doctrines are supposed to secure. Justice cannot depend upon whether an injured person possesses the education, money, vocabulary, subscriptions, and procedural instincts necessary to locate the correct passage among the modern equivalent of "old parchments or musty records."

The law should preserve rights—not bury them.

If Iowa's courts are to function as institutions genuinely open to the public, the system must be rebuilt so that legal knowledge is not confined to those who can afford professional training.

III. Opening the Law and Civic Education to the People

Opening the Law to the People

This criticism is not an attack upon every attorney, nor is it a demand that Iowa destroy the legal profession. I understand why attorneys expect their education, skill, and labor to be valued. Many spent years completing demanding coursework, borrowed substantial sums to attend law school, studied for the bar examination, and continue carrying educational debt while meeting the responsibilities of professional practice.

That investment deserves respect. But the value of legal education cannot justify designing public institutions so that meaningful access to justice depends upon purchasing it.

My proposed reforms therefore do not seek to eliminate attorneys or diminish the legitimate value of their work. They seek to bring essential legal knowledge beyond law offices and courtrooms and place it within reach of the people whose lives are governed by the law.

Within [the education section](#) and [justice-reform section](#) of my gubernatorial platform, I call for legal professionals throughout Iowa to help teach practical law in high schools and public forums. Attorneys, judges, law professors, paralegals, court personnel, law students, mediators, civil-rights professionals, and other knowledgeable participants could help Iowans understand the legal systems they are expected to navigate.

Practical Law Belongs in Every Iowa High School

Practical legal education is the natural culmination of the education students already receive. Children first learn to read and write. They then develop comprehension, examine history, and learn through civics how government is structured. By senior year, that progression should lead to practical law: how statutes, contracts, constitutional rights, administrative agencies, courts, evidence, and legal deadlines affect the adult lives they are about to enter.

The progression is straightforward:

1. Reading and writing provide the language.

2. Comprehension teaches students to interpret it.

3. History shows how institutions developed.

4. Civics explains how government is structured.

5. Practical law teaches students how to protect themselves and function within it.

Students should not graduate after learning that they possess constitutional rights without also learning how those rights are asserted, preserved, challenged, and sometimes lost through procedure.

High-school seniors should not graduate after years of required coursework while possessing no practical understanding of contracts, leases, employment rights, consumer fraud, debt, insurance, police encounters, administrative complaints, court records, statutes of limitation, evidence preservation, or the consequences of signing legal documents.

These are not obscure professional concerns. They are matters people encounter when renting an apartment, accepting a job, buying a vehicle, opening a bank account, starting a business, reporting discrimination, dealing with an insurance company, interacting with government, or discovering that someone has made false statements about them.

Young Iowans should enter adulthood equipped to recognize fraud, coercion, abuse, corruption, and the misuse of governmental authority before the damage becomes irreversible. They should know where to find trustworthy legal information, how to preserve evidence, how to request public records, when a deadline may be running, when professional representation is essential, and where assistance may be available.

That education would not make every high-school graduate an attorney, and it should not encourage people to handle complex cases without qualified counsel. It would give them the foundational knowledge necessary to recognize when their rights are endangered and to seek help before they become sitting ducks for fraud, exploitation, abuse, or governmental misconduct.

Legal professionals would remain indispensable. Indeed, this reform would create a larger and more meaningful public role for them: not merely representing people after harm has occurred, but helping prevent harm by making legal knowledge part of Iowa’s civic infrastructure.

A healthy legal profession should not depend upon public confusion. Its highest purpose should be helping people understand, preserve, and enforce their rights.

The goal is not to destroy the legal industry.

It is to enlist its knowledge in the service of the people.

Public Funding Requires Public Civil Accountability

Iowa’s Education Savings Account program directs public funds toward tuition and other qualified expenses at accredited nonpublic schools. Beginning with the 2025–2026 school year, eligibility expanded to Iowa resident K–12 students attending accredited nonpublic schools without the earlier income limitations. [19]

Accreditation provides some oversight. It does not resolve the deeper constitutional and civic concern raised when public money supports religious instruction about the identity, morality, and legal rights of fellow citizens.

Teaching a child that the Creator of the universe condemns LGBT+ people is not a morally neutral educational choice. A child who is LGBT+ may carry that message as fear, shame, or self-rejection for the rest of life. A child who is not LGBT+ may carry it into adulthood as a belief about how neighbors should be treated, which civil-rights protections deserve respect, and whether religious doctrine should govern people who do not share that doctrine.

Those lessons do not remain confined to theology class. They can shape jurors, voters, legislators, judges, employers, landlords, parents, and public officials. They can shape whether future adults defend equal protection—or join political movements committed to removing it.

Some religious communities openly speak of establishing "God's kingdom on Earth." That aspiration can inspire extraordinary compassion and service. But when it becomes a mission to place one denomination's interpretation of divine law above the civil rights of people who believe differently, it collides with the constitutional structure that protects religious liberty for everyone.

I do not accept the claim that God declared LGBT+ people sinful. Human beings wrote, selected, translated, interpreted, institutionalized, and enforced the texts through which that claim has been passed down. Many Christians and Muslims sincerely regard their scriptures as the flawless word of God. Other devout Iowans—including me—hold less conventional beliefs about scripture while remaining deeply committed to God and to the life and moral teachings of Jesus of Nazareth.

I describe myself as an unorthodox Christian. I am grateful to live in a country where I may say that publicly without being imprisoned, exiled, or burned as a heretic. Generations of Americans—including veterans who defended our constitutional order—preserved that liberty.

But religious liberty cannot mean freedom for the majority's theology and submission for everyone else. It must protect the Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, atheist, unorthodox Christian, and transgender Iowan alike. It protects the right to teach faith within a religious community; it does not give that community a superior claim to write its theology into civil law for everyone.

Passing a multiple-choice civics examination does not necessarily show that a student understands why constitutional government restrains the majority, why religious liberty also requires freedom from state-imposed theology, how minority rights survive political hostility, or how citizens seek redress when government becomes the source of injury.

Iowa should therefore require meaningful curriculum transparency and civic accountability wherever public education funds are spent. Families and taxpayers should be able to determine how publicly supported schools teach:

- constitutional government and the separation of powers;
- religious liberty and the prohibition against governmental establishment of religion;
- equal protection and minority rights;
- the history of government persecution and religious coercion;
- civil-rights law and the right to petition for redress; and
- the distinction between personal religious conviction and lawful governmental authority.

This is not a demand that Iowa dictate anyone’s private faith. It is a demand that public financing not become a vehicle for preparing future voters to use governmental power against citizens whom their theology teaches them to condemn.

Education should prepare young Iowans to recognize an abuse of governmental power—even when those exercising it speak in the language of their own faith.

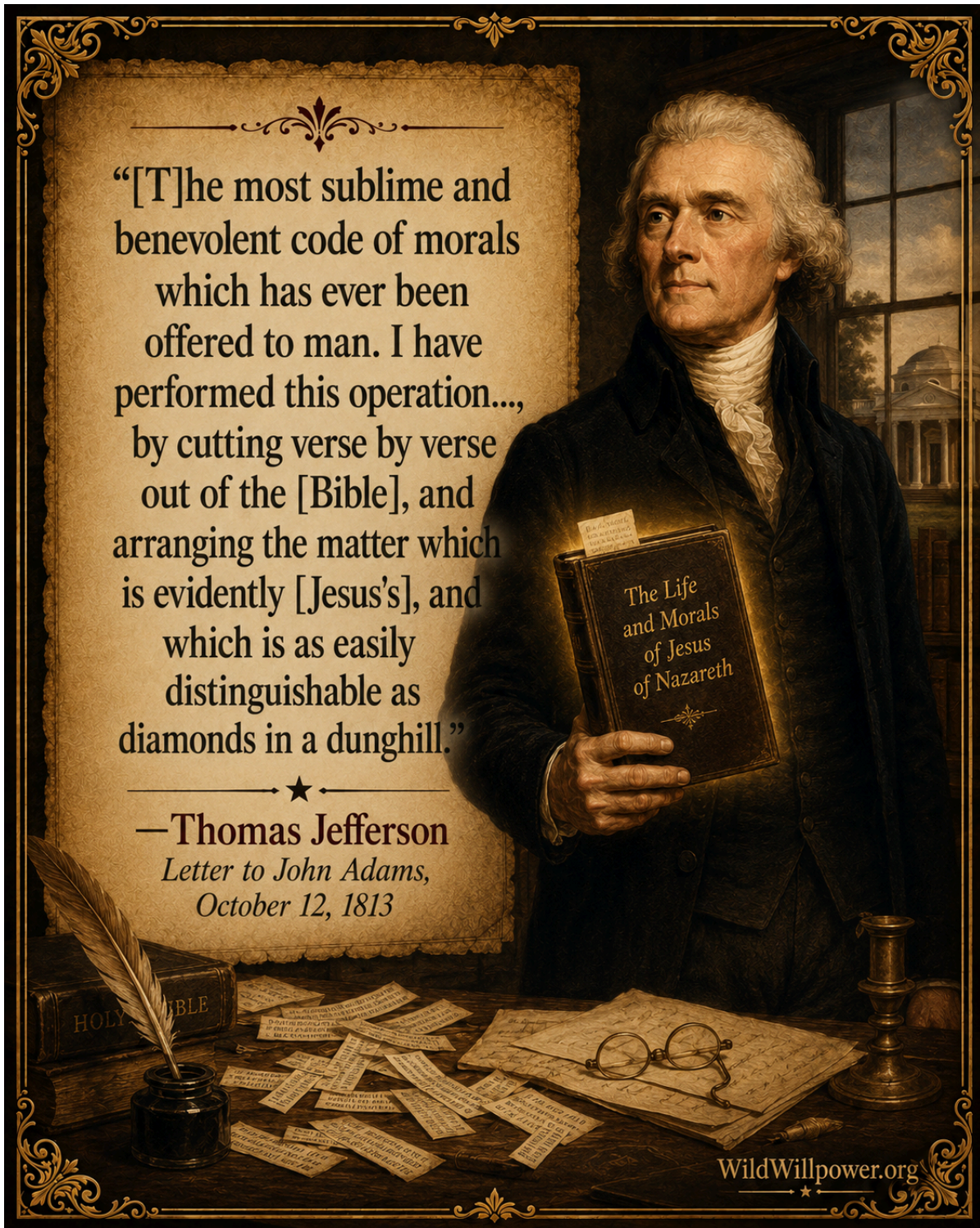
Diamonds Among a Dunghill: Faith Without Submission to Religious Authority

Thomas Jefferson also separated the moral teachings he attributed to Jesus from doctrines and additions he believed had accumulated around them. In 1820, he assembled what became known as the *Jefferson Bible*, formally titled *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*, by selecting passages from the Gospels and omitting material he considered miraculous or inauthentic. The Library of Congress preserves the work and describes that process. [20]

Jefferson repeatedly described the teachings he attributed to Jesus as morally exceptional. In his October 12, 1813 letter to John Adams, he described the material he considered genuinely Jesus’s as

“as easily distinguishable as diamonds in a dunghill.”

He also characterized the resulting teachings as “the most sublime and benevolent code of morals which has ever been offered to man.” [20]



Jefferson's religious conclusions were his own, not a constitutional creed that others must adopt. But his example demonstrates something essential to American liberty: a person may revere Jesus, reject claims made in Jesus's name, question inherited interpretations of scripture, and remain a full participant in public life.

That freedom matters to me personally. My understanding of Jesus centers upon mercy, courage, opposition to hypocrisy, concern for people cast aside by society, and the moral obligation to recognize a wounded human being before defending an institution.

Iowa's publicly financed education system should not teach children—expressly or by omission—that only conventional believers possess legitimate moral voices. Nor should it prepare a single religious voting bloc to use state power to impose its interpretation of God upon minorities.

The consequences are not merely theoretical. Civil-rights litigation arising from my attempt to preserve protections against governmental overreach consumed the same time and resources needed for my ballot-access campaign. Unless the Iowa Supreme Court grants relief in *Wilson v. Pate*, Iowa's gubernatorial debates will proceed without the perspective of an openly transgender, unorthodox Christian candidate whose platform directly challenged the use of religious and governmental power against minorities.

Religious freedom does not mean that conventional Christians alone may define God, morality, citizenship, or the laws under which the rest of us must live.

Legal Research Remains a Barrier Even After the Rules Are Explained

Public legal education would reduce this imbalance, but it would not eliminate another major obstacle: legal research itself can become almost insurmountable for a self-represented person. A litigant must identify the correct legal issue, discover the controlling terminology, locate binding authority, distinguish unfavorable cases, determine whether decisions remain valid, preserve each issue correctly, and present the result in the form the court expects.

A person may possess compelling evidence and a legally recognizable injury yet lose because they did not know the procedural language required to place that injury before the court.

Meanwhile, experienced attorneys can draw from an established body of pro se precedent and place it near the beginning of a dismissal filing. Before the evidence is examined, the citizen's lack of professional training has already been reframed as a risk the citizen voluntarily assumed.

That gives the represented party an enormous structural advantage.

IV. Professional Insulation and Judicial Accountability

A Profession Judging Those Outside the Profession

Because judges and practicing attorneys emerge from the same profession and operate within the same institutional culture, the system carries an inherent risk of professional insularity: procedures that appear ordinary from inside the profession can function as nearly impassable barriers to the public outside it.

This does not require a secret agreement among judges and attorneys. The problem is structural. The legal profession largely develops and transmits the language, arguments, precedents, and procedural expectations by which citizens are judged, while legislatures and courts formally enact or adopt many of the governing rules. Judges drawn from that same profession then decide

whether people outside it have navigated those requirements competently enough to have their claims heard.

Practices that appear obstructive, financially ruinous, or fundamentally unfair to an ordinary citizen may appear routine to people who have spent their careers inside an adversarial system.

Procedural attacks may be normalized as advocacy. Complexity may be treated as inevitable. The inability of an unrepresented person to comply may be characterized as personal failure rather than evidence that the institution has become inaccessible.

The courthouse may be publicly funded, but meaningful access to it increasingly depends upon purchasing the services of the profession that controls its language and procedures.

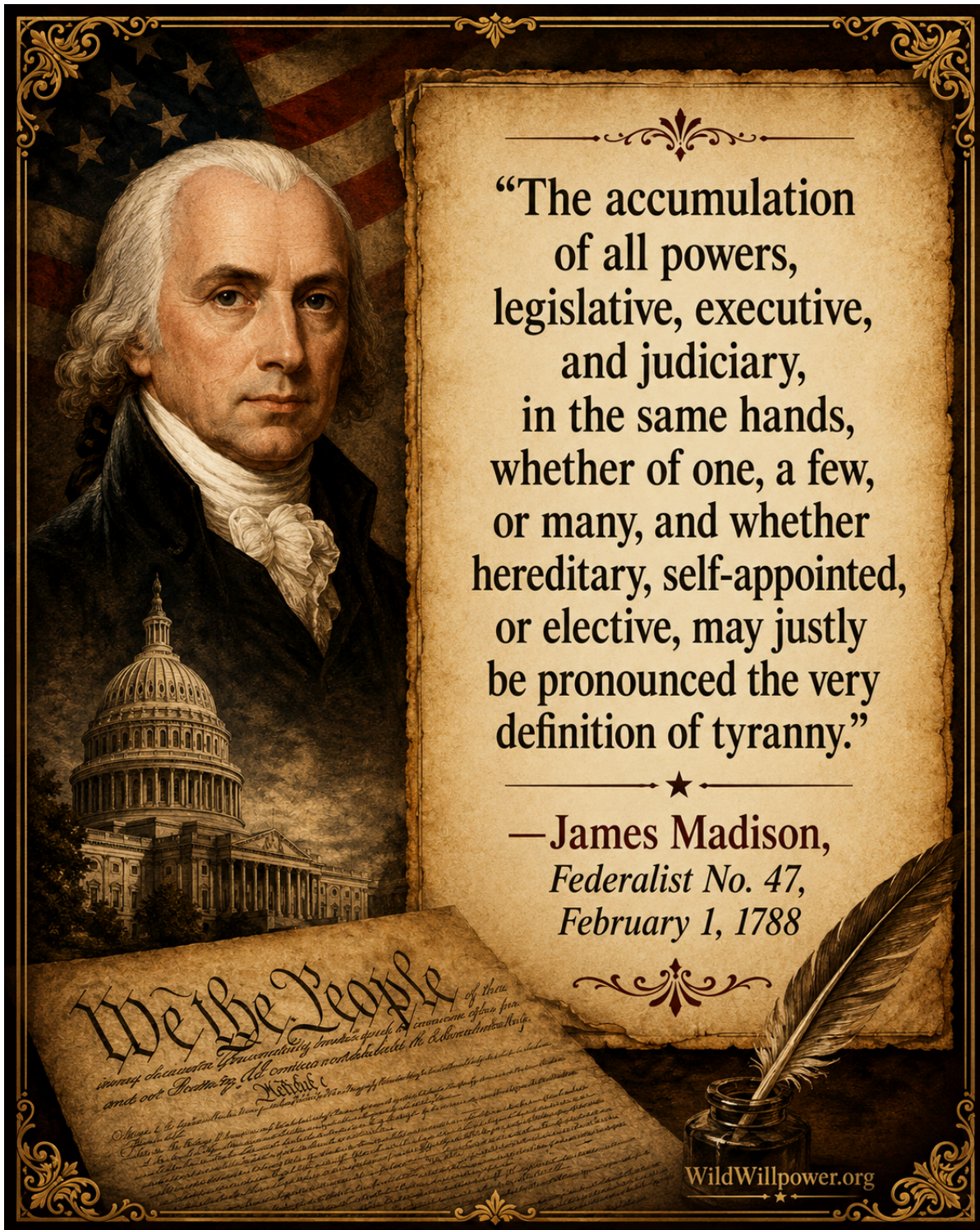
That is the conflict Iowa must confront—not a secret agreement among individual lawyers and judges, but a structural alignment in which the profession creates, interprets, and administers a system whose complexity makes the public increasingly dependent upon that same profession.

When Professional Insularity Becomes Concentrated Power

James Madison, principal architect of the Constitution and fourth president of the United States, warned that tyranny does not depend upon whether concentrated power is held by one person, several people, or even elected officials. The danger lies in the accumulation itself:

“The accumulation of all powers, legislative, executive, and judiciary, in the same hands, whether of one, a few, or many, and whether hereditary, self-appointed, or elective, may justly be pronounced the very definition of tyranny.”

— James Madison, *Federalist No. 47*, February 1, 1788 [15]



Iowa’s legal system does not formally place all three branches in the hands of one institution. But Madison’s warning remains relevant whenever lawmaking, rulemaking, professional regulation, precedent, and adjudication become concentrated within a closely connected institutional culture that is difficult for the public to enter, understand, or meaningfully challenge.

When courts preserve precedents declaring that citizens proceed “at their own risk,” without also ensuring that rules are comprehensible, records are accessible, legal research is realistically available, and meritorious claims are not lost through technical error, the judiciary is not merely applying neutral standards. It is enforcing a professional barrier to entry.

Liberty and justice cannot truthfully be described as “for all” when only those with legal training—or enough money to purchase it—have a realistic chance of navigating the system.

The Unaccountability Problem

Legal authorities describe an “**abuse of discretion**” as decision-making that may be legally unsound, unreasonable, arbitrary, unsupported by the record, or directed toward an end not justified by reason and evidence. The term does not necessarily establish intentional misconduct. But it recognizes that judicial discretion can be exercised so improperly that it produces a practical denial of justice.

That distinction raises a larger institutional question: What happens when a judicial officer knows that even an intentionally abusive exercise of authority may produce no personal civil liability, no meaningful remedy for the injured person, and little prospect of discipline?

Judicial independence is necessary. Judges cannot decide cases fairly if every unpopular ruling exposes them to personal retaliation. But independence is not the same as immunity from meaningful accountability. In a highly political atmosphere, a structure that protects good-faith decision-making while leaving almost no effective remedy for deliberate abuse creates too much room for power to be exercised through whim, bias, institutional loyalty, or improper purpose.

When I Sought Accountability Through the Existing System

To **exhaust my administrative remedies**, on July 17, 2023, I filed **a complaint against Judge Steven Van Marel** with the **Iowa Judicial Qualifications Commission** before filing ***Wilson v. State of Iowa and Kim Reynolds for Iowa***, Case No. LACL157953.

The article ***Falsely Accused of Assault***, within my backstory, explains why. In summary, I alleged that Judge Van Marel was required to recuse for reasons unknown to me at the time and that he committed an **abuse of discretion**.

Following the officers’ warning that I should leave Iowa for my safety, I remained homeless and afraid to return to my home state for years. During that period, I endured violence, sexual assault, harassment, and repeated theft. Those experiences are discussed more fully elsewhere in this series. They matter here because I eventually turned to Iowa’s courts believing they might provide the accountability and relief that other institutions had denied me.

The State’s Answer: Absolute Immunity

Instead, Assistant Attorney General Christopher Deist, representing the State, relied on the following immunity doctrines:

“The Iowa Supreme Court has unanimously stated that government officials are ‘absolutely immune from suit and damages with respect to any claim arising out of the performance of any function intimately related to the judicial phase of the criminal process whether the claim arises at common law or under the state constitution.’”

Venckus v. City of Iowa City, 930 N.W.2d 792, 803 (Iowa 2019).

Further, “[t]he immunity benefits the public by protecting government officials involved in ‘the judicial process from harassment and intimidation associated with litigation.’”

Id. at 801.

“Judicial process immunity ‘immunizes conduct without regard to the substantive source of the legal claim.’”

Id. at 802.

“Few doctrines have been more well settled than the absolute immunity of judges from damages for acts committed within their judicial jurisdiction.”

Blanton v. Barrick, 258 N.W.2d 306, 308 (Iowa 1977).

Further, “[t]his immunity applies even when the judge is accused of acting maliciously and corruptly because as a matter of policy it is in the public best interest that judges should exercise function without fear of consequences and with independence.”

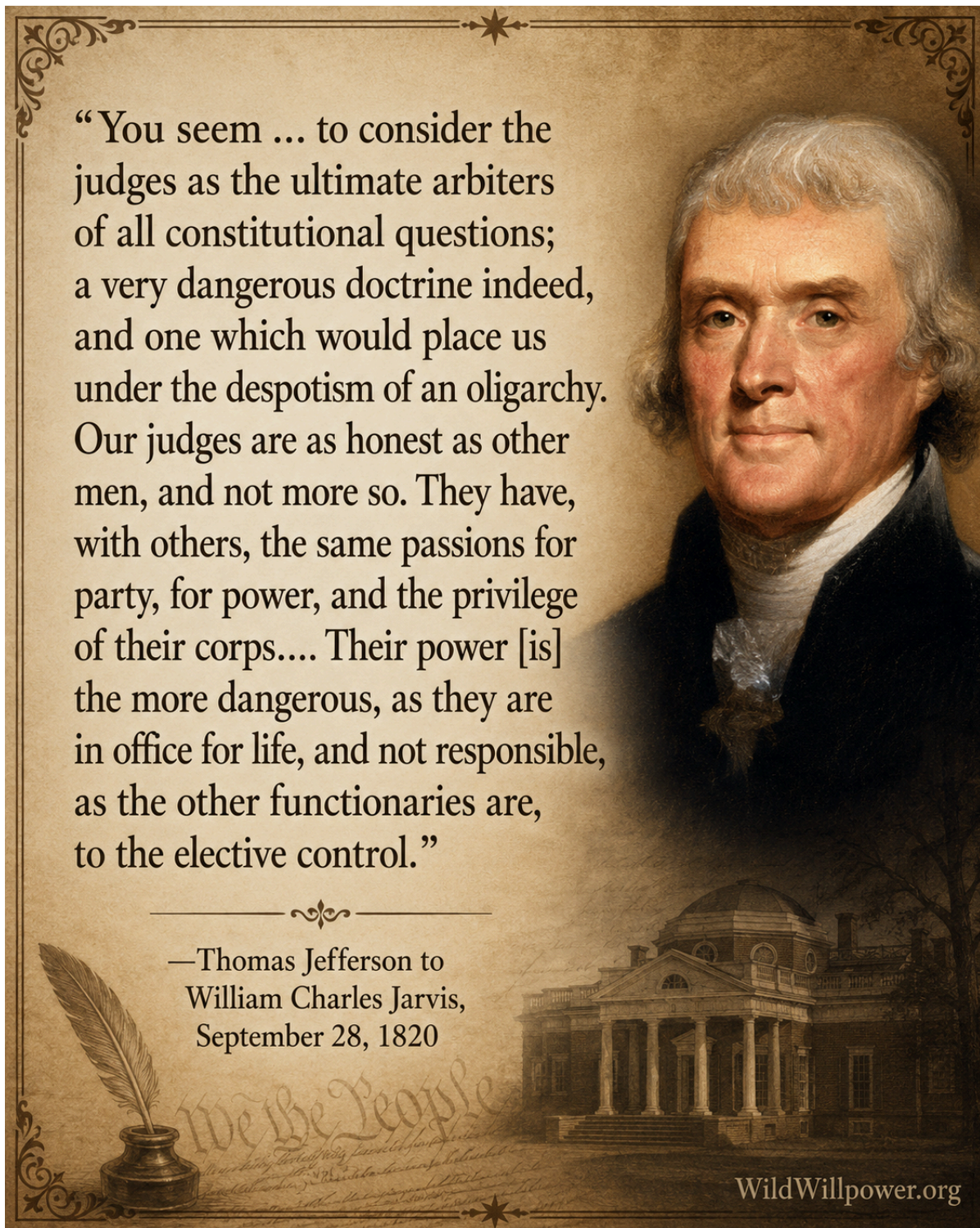
Id.; see also *Muzingo v. St. Luke’s Hosp.*, 518 N.W.2d 776, 777 (Iowa 1994).

In other words, the State argued that judicial-process immunity can defeat a claim not only when an official acted properly, but even when the alleged conduct was malicious or corrupt. Judge Huppert accepted the State’s argument and denied relief.

The concentration of judicial authority behind such sweeping immunity doctrines brings to mind a warning from Thomas Jefferson, the principal author of the Declaration of Independence and third president of the United States:

“You seem . . . to consider the judges as the ultimate arbiters of all constitutional questions; a very dangerous doctrine indeed, and one which would place us under the despotism of an oligarchy. Our judges are as honest as other men, and not more so. They have, with others, the same passions for party, for power, and the privilege of their corps. . . . Their power [is] the more dangerous, as they are in office for life, and not responsible, as the other functionaries are, to the elective control.”

— Thomas Jefferson to William Charles Jarvis, *September 28, 1820* [16]



Jefferson's warning was not that judges are uniquely dishonest. It was that judges are human and subject to the same institutional loyalties, ambitions, and desires for power as everyone else. Judicial independence is essential—but independence without meaningful accountability can become insulation.

When immunity applies even where malicious or corrupt conduct is alleged, the public is entitled to ask a basic question: **What meaningful remedy remains for the person who was harmed?**

When Judicial Independence Becomes Institutional

Insulation

The danger is not simply that a judge may make an erroneous decision. Human beings make errors, and appellate courts exist in part to correct them. The deeper danger is institutional: **broad immunity can protect not only good-faith legal error, but conduct alleged to be malicious, corrupt, arbitrary, or deliberately abusive—while leaving the injured citizen without a realistic remedy.**

Historically, courts have called certain grossly unsound or arbitrary decisions “abuses of discretion.” The phrase itself recognizes that discretion is not unlimited. Judicial authority must be exercised honestly, legally, reasonably, and for purposes supported by the evidence. Discretion exercised through whim, caprice, bad motive, or an end unsupported by reason ceases to serve justice.

Yet precedents developed and preserved by the judiciary have created broad immunity doctrines that can prevent allegations of intentional wrongdoing from ever producing civil accountability. The institution thereby defines the scope of its own authority, interprets the limits of that authority, and develops doctrines protecting those who exercise it. Even where those doctrines began with legitimate concerns about judicial independence, their cumulative effect can become a level of professional insulation fundamentally incompatible with government accountable to the people.

Immunity does not automatically prove misconduct, and removing all protection from judges would create dangers of its own. Judges must be protected from personal retaliation, harassment, and lawsuits filed merely because one party disliked a lawful ruling. But protection from harassment should not become protection for deliberate injustice. Iowa needs reasonable guardrails that preserve decisional independence while distinguishing good-faith legal error from knowing, malicious, corrupt, or constitutionally forbidden conduct.

When the law provides no meaningful distinction, the public is asked to trust that power will not be intentionally abused simply because those exercising it are judges.

The founders of this country did not design republican government around unquestioning trust in any office. They divided power because every human institution is capable of error, ambition, faction, and abuse.

V. Iowa's Constitutional Path to Reform

Popular Sovereignty: Iowa’s Constitutional Path to Reform

Iowa does not have to remain resigned to this system.

The Iowa Constitution begins from a principle more fundamental than any judicially created immunity doctrine: “All political power is inherent in the people.” Government exists for the people’s “protection, security, and benefit,” and the people retain the right “at all times, to alter or reform the same, whenever the public good may require it.” Iowa Const. art. I, § 2.

That promise is not decorative language. It means Iowa’s governmental institutions are not the permanent property of judges, attorneys, political parties, or officeholders. They are public

structures created to serve the people, and they may be reformed when they cease to do so.

Iowa is still a relatively young state within a relatively young nation. This is not the time to fall asleep at the wheel or surrender to the belief that institutional injustice is too entrenched to repair. Iowa is a state of farmers, builders, engineers, veterans, service members, innovators, and working people accustomed to confronting difficult problems. Generations before us preserved an opportunity for self-government that many people throughout history never possessed—and for which many sacrificed their lives.

The question is therefore not whether Iowans should act when a public institution becomes inaccessible or unaccountable. The question is how we will act responsibly, constitutionally, and effectively.

That principle is one reason justice reform became central to my gubernatorial platform.

Professional Doctrine Is Not the Same as Public Consent

Most Iowans do not have the time, legal education, subscription databases, or financial resources required to trace the origins of immunity doctrines through generations of judicial opinions. They are working, farming, raising families, caring for relatives, running businesses, serving their communities, and trying to survive. Many will never know these doctrines exist until they enter a courtroom seeking help and opposing counsel invokes them as a reason the alleged misconduct cannot produce a remedy.

That creates a profound democratic imbalance. The legal profession develops, interprets, teaches, and repeatedly invokes doctrines that ordinary citizens may never have heard of, while the people who bear their consequences are effectively expected to research and challenge them one case at a time.

Attorneys can locate these precedents at will, deploy them in dismissal motions, and bill for the work. The person whose claim is defeated may leave court without relief, without a clear understanding of what happened, and sometimes facing demands that they pay part of the opposing side's legal expense.

I am not neutral about that arrangement. A doctrine does not become just merely because it has been repeated for decades, embedded in precedent, or accepted within a profession whose members possess the specialized knowledge required to invoke and navigate it. When a body of law protects governmental actors from accountability while remaining practically invisible to the public, the answer cannot be to tell ordinary Iowans that they should have understood the machinery before entering it.

Nor should Iowa depend exclusively upon the legal profession to volunteer reforms to doctrines that give that profession extraordinary control over access, interpretation, procedure, and remedy.

Professional familiarity with a doctrine is not public consent to it.

Judges and attorneys possess indispensable knowledge and must be part of the discussion, but they cannot be the only participants.

A Public Review of Immunity Doctrines

As governor, I will initiate a public, evidence-based review of Iowa's immunity doctrines and work with the General Assembly and the people of Iowa to establish meaningful remedies for malicious, corrupt, knowingly unconstitutional, or deliberately abusive exercises of governmental power—while preserving necessary protections for good-faith judicial decision-making.

That review would examine not only judicial immunity, but judicial-process immunity, absolute privilege, procedural precedents, barriers confronting self-represented litigants, and accountability mechanisms that may no longer serve the public good. It would invite testimony from judges and attorneys—but also from self-represented litigants, crime victims, civil-rights complainants, constitutional scholars, veterans, workers, farmers, small-business owners, and other Iowans whose experience with the justice system rarely becomes part of the rulemaking record.

The purpose would not be to place pending cases before a political tribunal or subject judges to retaliation whenever someone dislikes a ruling. It would be to place the doctrines themselves before the public: where they came from, whom they protect, what harms they prevent, what harms they permit, and whether their present scope is compatible with the constitutional promise that government exists for the people's protection, security, and benefit.

The review should identify which protections are genuinely necessary for decisional independence and which doctrines have grown so broad that they deny remedies even where malicious, corrupt, or knowingly unconstitutional conduct is alleged. Its recommendations could be submitted to the General Assembly for prospective legislation, referred to the judiciary for court-rule reform, or—where constitutional limitations require it—developed into a proposed constitutional amendment for consideration by the people.

What a Governor—and Iowa Voters—Can Actually Change

Iowa voters cannot directly erase a judicial precedent through a simple statewide vote. Under Iowa's constitutional amendment process, a proposed amendment ordinarily must be approved by two successive General Assemblies before being submitted to the electorate for ratification. The General Assembly may also address some state-law doctrines through legislation, subject to constitutional review and the separation of powers. A governor cannot unilaterally abolish precedent, and Iowa cannot eliminate immunities imposed by controlling federal law merely by changing state law.

But those limitations do not make the governor powerless, and they do not make the people irrelevant. A governor can expose the issue, convene a credible public process, require competing arguments to be presented in language ordinary citizens can understand, propose legislation,

recommend constitutional reform, and insist that doctrines affecting the public no longer remain buried within legal research systems accessible mainly to professionals.

Accountability Without Destroying Judicial Independence

Reform need not mean imposing personal liability every time a judge is reversed. Ordinary legal error, good-faith interpretation, and unpopular but lawful decisions require substantial protection. A carefully designed system could use demanding evidentiary thresholds, independent screening, declaratory or equitable relief, transparent disciplinary reporting, and narrowly defined remedies for conduct proven to be malicious, corrupt, knowingly unconstitutional, deliberately abusive, or wholly outside legitimate judicial authority.

But reform cannot leave the injured citizen without any remedy at all.

In *Wilson v. State of Iowa and Kim Reynolds for Iowa*, I invoked the doctrine of **respondeat superior**. Black’s Law Dictionary defines it as the doctrine holding an employer or principal liable for wrongful acts committed by an employee or agent within the scope of employment or agency. [21] My later motion to reconsider described the State as the principal and the officials exercising state authority as its agents.

The doctrine does not mean that an employer is responsible for every private act of an employee. “Scope of employment” generally concerns conduct undertaken in furtherance of the employer’s business or within the duties assigned to the employee. Conduct entirely outside that scope ordinarily presents a different question.

The State nevertheless argued that judicial immunity extended beyond the individual judge:

“Based on the contents of Plaintiff’s Amended Petition and as a matter of law, Judge Van Marel—and, by virtue, the State—is absolutely immune from Plaintiff’s claims.”
Defendant State of Iowa’s Motion to Dismiss Amended Petition, filed July 26, 2024; D0031, p. 14.

I answered that argument directly:

“While judges in fact have been granted absolute immunity by the state, the State is not, as the State argued, ‘by virtue’, also immune. If the State grants immunity to Judges—even for malicious acts, the State in such cases thereby assumes liability for such malicious acts.... In fact, ‘by virtue’ the state is liable, for it would be without virtue to deny redress to individuals who are harmed by rights violations and crimes performed by judges.”
Plaintiff’s Omnibus Resistance and Motions, filed August 5, 2024; D0032, pp. 35–36.

The district court later characterized one of my positions as the argument that **“the state should assume the liability of judicial officers who are immune from civil liability,”** but concluded that the State’s immunity arguments were supported by legal authority and dismissed the claims with prejudice.

I requested a jury trial because central factual questions remained disputed. But the claims were dismissed on threshold legal grounds before a jury could examine the underlying record. A jury could not simply disregard controlling immunity doctrine; that doctrine was for the court to address. My concern is that its application ended the case before ordinary citizens could determine what occurred, whether the evidence supported my allegations, and what injuries resulted.

That sequence matters democratically. When judicially developed doctrines prevent a jury from ever reaching the facts, the doctrines themselves may remain practically invisible to the public. There is no public trial, little media attention, and no citizen verdict—only a legal ruling that the alleged conduct cannot produce the requested remedy.

The question is not whether jurors should disregard law. It is whether Iowa's law has become so protective of governmental authority that citizens are systematically prevented from examining serious allegations through the institution the Iowa Constitution describes as inviolate.

This leaves a fundamental problem. If the judge is immune because Iowa has chosen to protect decisional independence, and the State is then declared immune "by virtue" of the judge's immunity, the person allegedly harmed can be left without any defendant from whom redress may be obtained.

There is nothing virtuous about immunity flowing in every direction while accountability disappears.

Iowa should adopt a clear principle: **when the law forecloses personal liability against the official exercising governmental power, it must preserve an effective remedy against the governmental body responsible for that exercise of power.** Otherwise, immunity ceases to allocate responsibility and instead extinguishes it.

That would not make the State liable whenever a litigant disagrees with a ruling or whenever an appellate court reverses a judge. Liability could require an independently reviewed and demanding showing of malicious, corrupt, knowingly unconstitutional, deliberately abusive, or wholly unauthorized conduct.

But once that high threshold is met, someone must answer for the injury.

A Remedy That Exists Only at Prohibitive Cost Is Not Meaningfully Accessible

Some may respond that an injured person should simply sue every government official individually.

Consider what that means in practice. A case challenging coordinated action by dozens of officials may require identifying every proper defendant, preparing an original notice for each, arranging service across multiple counties, paying service fees, tracking returns, addressing failures of service, and responding to separate appearances and defenses. Each official may be represented separately or through publicly funded legal resources, while the injured citizen must finance service and manage the multiplying litigation alone.

In litigation involving approximately one hundred officials, service costs alone could reach thousands of dollars before the court considers a single underlying fact. That does not include filing

fees, records, transcripts, copying, travel, discovery, expert assistance, or the time required to litigate against scores of represented defendants.

A nominal cause of action is not meaningfully accessible when invoking it requires resources far beyond those possessed by the people most likely to need its protection.

Respondeat superior and governmental liability are therefore not merely abstract doctrines. They address a practical question: when government acts collectively through many officials, must the injured citizen chase every individual actor through a maze of separate proceedings—or may the government itself be required to answer for the exercise of governmental power?

The Right to Petition Becomes Hollow Without a Meaningful Path to Redress

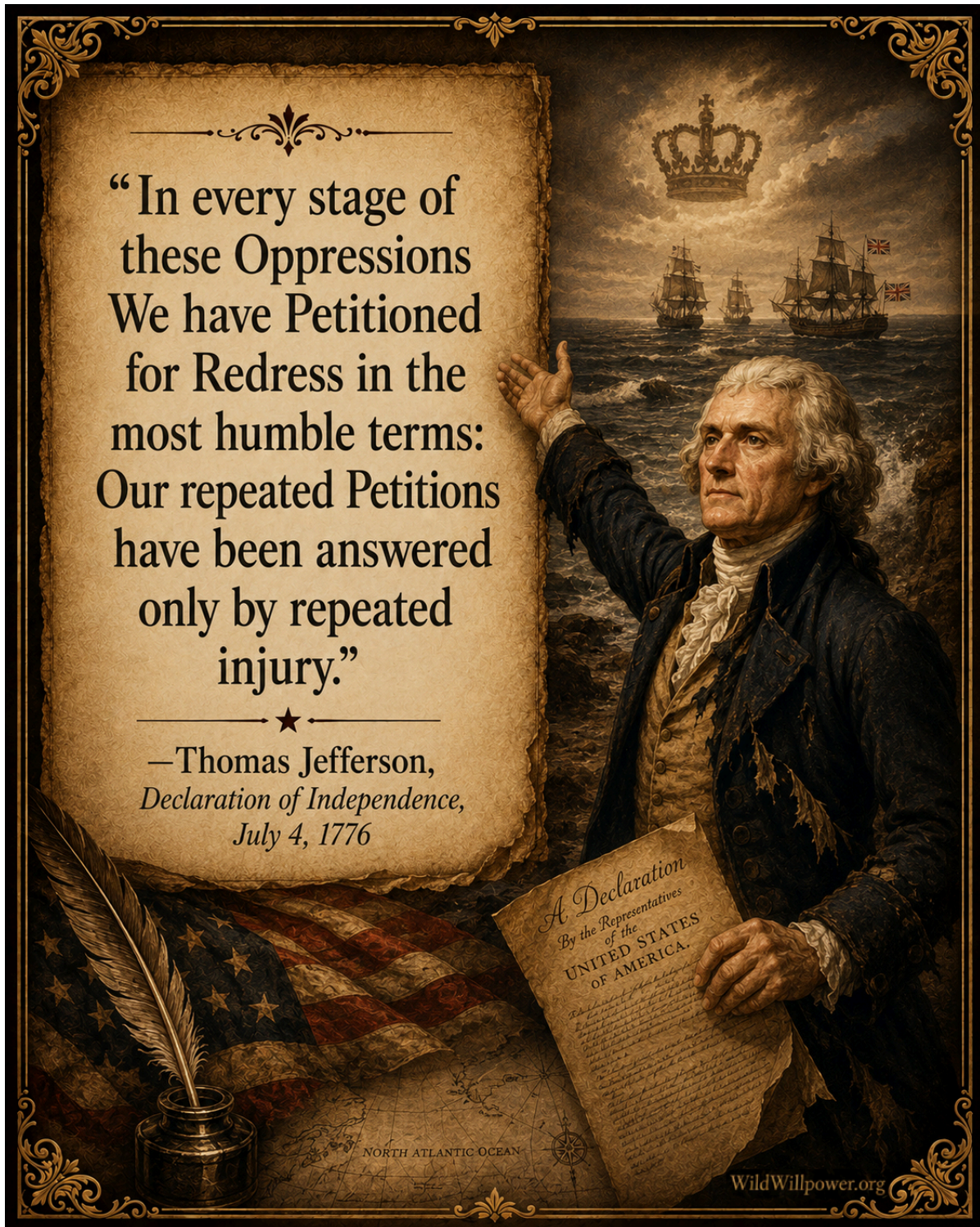
The American system was founded upon opposition to government power that denied accountability and redress.

The First Amendment protects “the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.” [17]

That right guarantees access to petition government, but its democratic promise becomes dangerously hollow when government may receive a grievance and then invoke layers of sovereign, judicial, or absolute immunity that prevent any institution from examining the alleged wrongdoing or providing an effective remedy.

The Declaration of Independence described the same failure of redress:

“In every stage of these Oppressions We have Petitioned for Redress in the most humble terms: Our repeated Petitions have been answered only by repeated injury.” [18]



The Declaration placed that failed petitioning within a broader “long train of abuses and usurpations.” It was not objecting merely to one mistaken decision. It described a structure in which concentrated governmental power repeatedly inflicted injury while refusing meaningful correction.

Iowa must ask whether its immunity doctrines are grounded in the constitutional principles of a republic or inherited from older legal traditions developed when sovereign authority was treated as inherently beyond the reach of ordinary subjects.

In my August 5, 2024 filing, I challenged sovereign immunity as a doctrine derived from the premise that “the King can do no wrong” and argued that such a principle has no proper place in American

law. [22]

I examine that history more fully in my forthcoming book, *Unjust Iowa*, including how legal doctrines associated with sovereign authority survived the American Revolution, entered state law, and became embedded within modern immunity jurisprudence. I will not attempt to reconstruct that full history here. The immediate democratic question is simpler:

Are Iowa's immunity doctrines necessary constitutional protections—or inherited legal habits that were never knowingly placed before Iowa voters?

Professional acceptance of a doctrine is not the same as democratic consent to it.

The public should not be forced to choose between judicial independence and judicial accountability.

Good-faith judicial decision-making can be protected without requiring Iowans to accept that deliberate injustice—if it occurs—must remain without an effective remedy.

Iowa's Constitution does not say that political power is inherent in the judiciary, the bar, or the legal profession. It says that **all political power is inherent in the people**, that government exists for their protection and benefit, and that they retain the right to alter or reform it whenever the public good may require. Iowa Const. art. I, § 2.

The first step is making the machinery visible.

The next is allowing Iowans—not only the profession that built and administers it—to decide whether it still serves justice.

VI. Government Power and the Duty to Provide a Remedy

When "Rolling Back Rights" Conceals What Government Actually Did

Political language often conceals the moral and legal character of government action.

Reporters and officials may say that Iowa “rolled back,” “narrowed,” “revised,” or “removed” civil-rights protections. Legislatively, those phrases describe what happened to words inside the Iowa Code. But they can obscure what happened to the people who depended upon those words.

A “rollback” is not experienced as typography. It is experienced when a person loses a state-law remedy against discrimination in employment, housing, credit, education, or public accommodations. It is experienced when conduct that could previously be challenged becomes more difficult—or impossible—to remedy under state law.

Iowa's government may call that an amendment. The person placed outside the protection of the law may reasonably experience it as a deprivation.

Federal civil-rights law uses much less comfortable language. Title 18 identifies conspiracy against rights and willful deprivation of rights under color of law as federal crimes. Section 241 addresses agreements to injure, threaten, oppress, or intimidate people in the exercise of federally secured rights. Section 242 addresses willful deprivations of federal rights by people acting under color of law. [23]

Federal civil law separately provides potential remedies. Section 1983 creates a civil action for deprivations of federally secured rights under color of state law. Section 1985 addresses specified conspiracies interfering with civil rights, and subsection 1985(3) provides a potential right of action for an injured person when its elements are satisfied. Section 1986 addresses certain failures to prevent a wrong actionable under section 1985. [24]

A **right of action** means that the law authorizes an injured person to bring a civil case seeking a judicial remedy. It does not ensure that the person will win or eliminate the difficulty of identifying defendants, completing service, pleading every necessary element, overcoming immunity arguments, financing litigation, and preserving the case through appeal.

Why Are These Laws Not Being Enforced?

I am not raising these statutes as decorative historical language. I am asking why they are not being investigated and enforced when public officials knowingly use governmental authority against a politically targeted class whose rights have repeatedly been recognized by courts.

The history matters.

In *Good v. Iowa Department of Human Services*, the Iowa Supreme Court held that Iowa Medicaid's categorical exclusion of medically necessary gender-affirming surgery violated the Iowa Civil Rights Act. [25] After the legislature attempted to restore the exclusion through House File 766, Polk County District Court Judge William Kelly again ruled against the State's categorical denial. Contemporary reporting described his 2021 ruling as finding the exclusion discriminatory and unconstitutional.

The Reynolds administration expressly acknowledged the ruling and its legal significance. A spokesperson said the governor was disappointed, disagreed with the decision, and was reviewing it with the administration's legal team while exploring other options. [26]

Years later, after Iowa removed gender identity from the Iowa Civil Rights Act, Governor Reynolds directly connected the legislation to public payment for gender-affirming surgery, stating that the prior protection had forced taxpayers to pay for such care and that this was unacceptable to her and, in her characterization, to most Iowans. [27]

This was therefore not a situation in which public officials had never been alerted to the civil-rights and constitutional issues. The Iowa Supreme Court had ruled. A district court had ruled again. The administration had consulted its legal team. Transgender Iowans and civil-rights organizations had repeatedly described the resulting injuries.

The government proceeded anyway.

Ordinary citizens are repeatedly told that ignorance of the law is no excuse. That principle cannot operate only downward. Legislators, governors, judges, and government attorneys take constitutional oaths, wield extraordinary power, employ legal counsel, and possess resources unavailable to most citizens. Public authority should carry a greater responsibility to know the constitutional limits of that authority—not a lesser one.

I contend that the continuing governmental campaign against transgender Iowans warrants investigation under federal civil-rights law. [30] It did not consist of one isolated vote. It included years of public messaging, repeated attempts to overcome adverse rulings, legislative coordination, restrictions upon medically necessary care, the removal of an existing civil-rights classification, and the narrowing of remedies available to the targeted class.

Whether specific officials violated criminal statutes must be determined through investigation, evidence, lawful charging decisions, and adjudication. But the absence of an investigation does not establish that no violation occurred. Nor should the respectable terminology of legislation prevent scrutiny of whether governmental authority was intentionally used to deprive citizens of rights protected by superior law.

A vote is an exercise of public power. It is not an exemption from law.

What Iowa Says It Cannot Afford—and What Politics Can Raise

The financial justification also deserves public scrutiny.

My medically necessary surgery was expected to cost approximately \$30,000. Governor Reynolds publicly framed taxpayer payment for gender-affirming surgery as unacceptable.

Meanwhile, political campaigns raise and expend millions of dollars shaping public opinion, defining political enemies, purchasing advertising, and influencing which citizens receive the concern or hostility of government. But the disparity exposes a question of scale and public priorities.

During the 2022 election cycle, Kim Reynolds for Iowa reportedly raised more than \$6 million. The campaign entered the final weeks of the election with approximately \$2.5 million still available after spending more than \$5 million during the preceding reporting period. [28]

These campaign funds could not legally have been transferred into Medicaid or used to pay my medical expenses. The comparison concerns political scale and priorities: millions of dollars could circulate through a political operation while approximately \$30,000 in medically necessary care was characterized as an unacceptable burden.

Money circulates abundantly around the injured person while the injured person is told that her care costs too much.

In *Wilson v. State of Iowa and Kim Reynolds for Iowa*, I alleged that Kim Reynolds for Iowa obtained political and financial benefit from campaign messaging that portrayed transgender people as a threat or legitimate target of governmental action. I asserted unjust enrichment against the campaign committee. [29] That claim was dismissed on threshold legal grounds before the factual allegations underlying it were resolved through discovery or a public jury trial.

Dismissal is not the same as a jury finding that the underlying events did not occur.

A Government of Laws—Not a Government of Excuses

John Adams described republican government as “a government of laws and not of men.” Chief Justice John Marshall later connected that principle directly to the availability of a remedy, explaining in *Marbury v. Madison* that government ceases to deserve that description when the laws provide no remedy for the violation of a legal right. [31]

If public officials claim they did not understand the civil-rights implications of their actions, that answer reinforces the structural failure documented throughout this article. Iowa places people in positions of enormous governmental power without ensuring that either those officials or the citizens electing them possess a practical understanding of constitutional rights, civil-rights enforcement, governmental liability, and the legal restraints upon majority rule.

Yet the injured citizen is subjected to the opposite expectation. She must discover the correct statutes, identify every proper defendant, finance service of process, plead every element, overcome immunity doctrines, preserve every issue, and proceed with the competence of an attorney—often without representation.

A government of laws cannot impose professional-level legal knowledge upon the powerless while treating legal ignorance as an informal defense for the powerful.

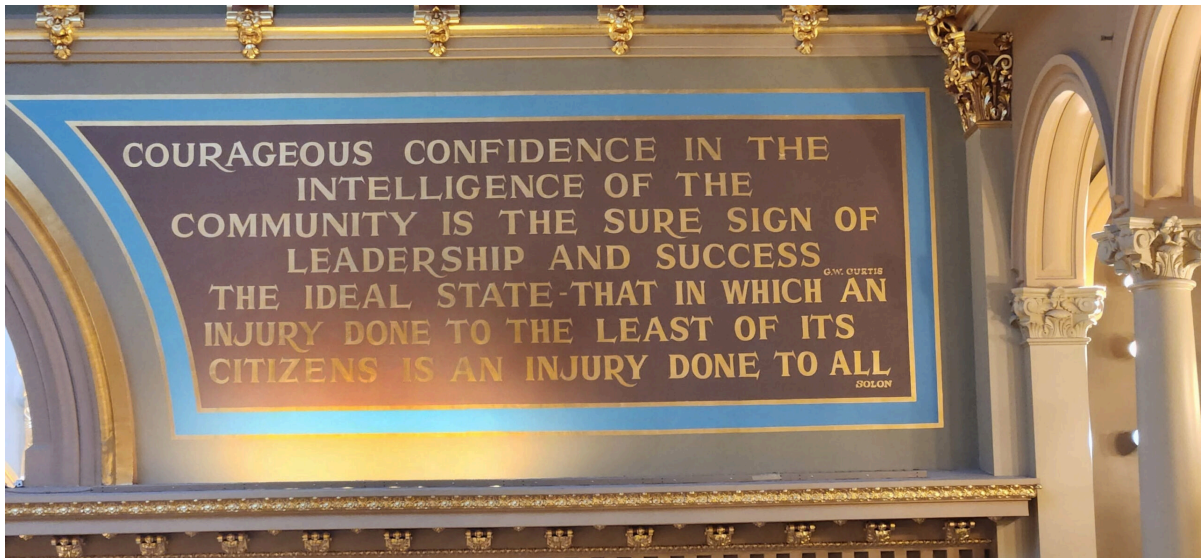
The law must operate upward as well as downward.

A right does not become less real because government found a procedural means to remove its remedy. A deprivation does not cease to be a deprivation because it was accomplished by amending a codebook. And public officials do not cease to be governed by law merely because they possess the power to write it.

An Injury to the Least Is an Injury to All

Inside Iowa’s Capitol, above the place where our laws are made, previous generations left us this message:

“The ideal state—that in which an injury done to the least of its citizens is an injury done to all.”



A promise written inside Iowa's Capitol. Above the rotunda, a quotation attributed to Solon declares: "The ideal state—that in which an injury done to the least of its citizens is an injury done to all." The inscription challenges every generation of Iowans to decide whether those words are merely decorative—or whether they still define the moral purpose of our state. Photograph by Sondra Wilson.

Those words are attributed to Solon. But they belong now to Iowa. They have watched legislators, governors, judges, advocates, schoolchildren, visitors, and generations of citizens pass beneath them.

We did not place them there. We inherited them.

The question is whether we still mean them.

Transgender Iowans are a small minority. That makes it easy for a political majority to decide that our medical care costs too much, our existence creates inconvenience, our civil-rights protections obstruct another political goal, or our suffering is an acceptable price for electoral advantage.

But the measure of a state is not how generously it treats the powerful, the popular, or the people whose lives the majority already understands. The measure is whether injury to the least protected person is recognized as an injury to the whole community.

My medically necessary surgery was expected to cost approximately \$30,000. In the world of state budgets, litigation, election spending, and institutional administration, that is not an extraordinary amount. To the person whose body, health, and future depend upon it, it can mean everything.

We routinely move enormous sums through political campaigns and public institutions while telling some of Iowa's poorest and most frequently harassed citizens that their essential care is an unreasonable burden. Money passes over their heads while they absorb the consequences of political messages spoken by people with the greatest power and public reach.

Governor Reynolds described Senate File 418 as protecting women and girls and as necessary to preserve other policies distinguishing people by sex. That is her stated justification. But the law also removed gender identity from Iowa's civil-rights code, ending state protections upon which transgender Iowans had relied for nearly two decades. Both realities should be stated plainly so Iowans can judge them.

I ask my fellow Iowans to consider this not as an accusation shouted from outside our community, but as a moment of moral clarity spoken from within it—by one of those citizens the inscription calls “the least.”

I am speaking while injured. I am asking the majority to look directly at what its government has done and decide whether the promise written inside our Capitol applies to me too.

Jesus illustrated the same test through the Good Samaritan. The wounded traveler was not rescued by the religious authorities who saw him. The priest and the Levite passed by on the other side. The person who stopped was the outsider—the one willing to see an injured human being rather than a category, conflict, inconvenience, or doctrinal excuse.

The Samaritan did not first ask whether helping the injured person would be politically popular. He did not demand that the wounded man prove his social worth. He saw suffering, drew near, treated the wounds, carried the burden, and paid for the care.

That is the moral choice before Iowa.

We may preserve beautiful words above the Capitol rotunda while passing beneath them unchanged. We may describe the removal of civil rights as a “rollback,” the denial of medical care as a budgetary choice, and the abandonment of an injured minority as ordinary politics.

Or we may decide that the promise inherited from earlier Iowans still binds us:

An injury done to the least of Iowa's citizens is an injury done to all.

I am not asking Iowa to abandon faith, law, fiscal responsibility, women, families, or judicial independence.

I am asking whether Iowa's faith, laws, public resources, and institutions are large enough to include the wounded person lying beside the road.

VII. From Judicial Failure to Ballot-Access Appeal

When Judicial Failure Interfered With Democratic Reform

I did not develop these reforms from a distance. I developed them while attempting to navigate the very system they are intended to repair.

I ran for Governor because Iowa does not have to accept inaccessible courts, unaffordable legal representation, professionally insulated procedures, sweeping immunity doctrines, and a public education system that sends young people into adulthood without the practical legal knowledge needed to protect themselves.

But bringing those reforms before Iowa voters required qualifying for the ballot. As an independent candidate, I was required to collect thousands of signatures during a narrow statutory period.

During that same period, *Wilson v. Reliable Street Inc., et al.* imposed repeated hearings, filing deadlines, discovery obligations, exhibit preparation, and legal research. I was representing myself.

The litigation had arisen from my effort to challenge false accusations and misleadingly presented materials placed into an Iowa civil-rights record—materials I could not responsibly leave unresolved while running for statewide office.

When those mandatory litigation burdens collided with Iowa's ballot-access deadline, I asked the court for limited equitable relief. I did not ask to avoid the signature requirement. I asked for additional time to collect the same number of signatures required by law.

The court denied that request and characterized the litigation burden as "self-created" because I had initiated the underlying case.

That reasoning exposes the democratic stakes of everything documented on this page. A citizen may be forced to enter an inaccessible legal system to protect her rights and reputation. The system may then consume the time and resources required for political participation. And when she seeks limited relief from that collision, the burden may be treated as nothing more than the consequence of her own decision to seek justice.

The result was larger than one missed deadline. Iowa voters were denied the opportunity to decide whether they wanted the justice reforms described throughout this website—or the broader governing platform of which those reforms were a part.

The practical consequence extends beyond my exclusion as a candidate. These ideas—including public legal education, scrutiny of immunity doctrines, accountability for governmental rights violations, and protection against the use of religious majorities to remove minority rights—may now be absent from Iowa's gubernatorial debates. Voters may hear only the more comfortable range of positions presented by the two major-party candidates unless the Iowa Supreme Court grants relief in *Wilson v. Pate*.

I am not alleging that every person involved formed an express agreement to censor these ideas. But Iowans know the familiar expression: **if it looks like a duck and quacks like a duck...**

Whatever label is placed upon the result, its democratic effect is the same: a candidate developed a distinct reform platform, mandatory court proceedings consumed the period available to qualify for the ballot, limited relief was denied, and the resulting debates may proceed without those reforms or the candidate advancing them.

Formal censorship is not the only way a political perspective can disappear from public consideration. Institutions can produce the same practical exclusion through burdens, deadlines, inaccessible procedures, and the denial of any meaningful remedy when those forces collide.

That is why this appeal concerns more than my individual candidacy. It concerns whether Iowa voters will receive the full range of ideas that a serious independent candidate attempted to place before them.

They were denied a full opportunity to consider the [Civilian Restoration Corps](#), which would create tens of thousands of jobs rebuilding Iowa's infrastructure and restoring its communities; the [New Iowa Healthcare Compact](#), which would establish dependable access to essential healthcare; and [Upskilling Iowa](#), an education plan that would bring innovative classes and practical programs into Iowa's schools to strengthen the knowledge, skills, character, and well-being of future generations.

The opportunity to restore that democratic choice is not gone. That lost opportunity lies at the heart of *Wilson v. Pate*.

Read the Article: *Wilson v. Pate* — When Court-Imposed Litigation Burdens Interfered With Ballot Access

This article explains why I sought a limited extension of Iowa's ballot-access deadline, why I contend the underlying litigation burden was not meaningfully "self-created," and why I am asking the Iowa Supreme Court to recognize that interference with a candidate's ability to reach the ballot can become interference with the voters' right to choose.

Click the image below to read the full article.



The Question Now Belongs to Iowa

Wilson v. Pate is the point at which the failures documented throughout this series crossed from the courthouse into the electoral process.

The question is no longer only whether one self-represented litigant received a fair opportunity to present her case. It is whether a judicial system can impose extraordinary burdens upon a candidate, deny relief when those burdens interfere with ballot access, and thereby prevent voters from considering a reform platform directed at that very system.

Iowa's courts are public institutions. Iowa's election system belongs to the people. Neither should operate in a manner that makes meaningful participation depend upon wealth, professional status, institutional backing, or the ability to survive years of procedural complexity without assistance.

These failures are not abstract to me. They have operated through disputed accusations, government records, mandatory deadlines, and years of attempting to obtain accountability from

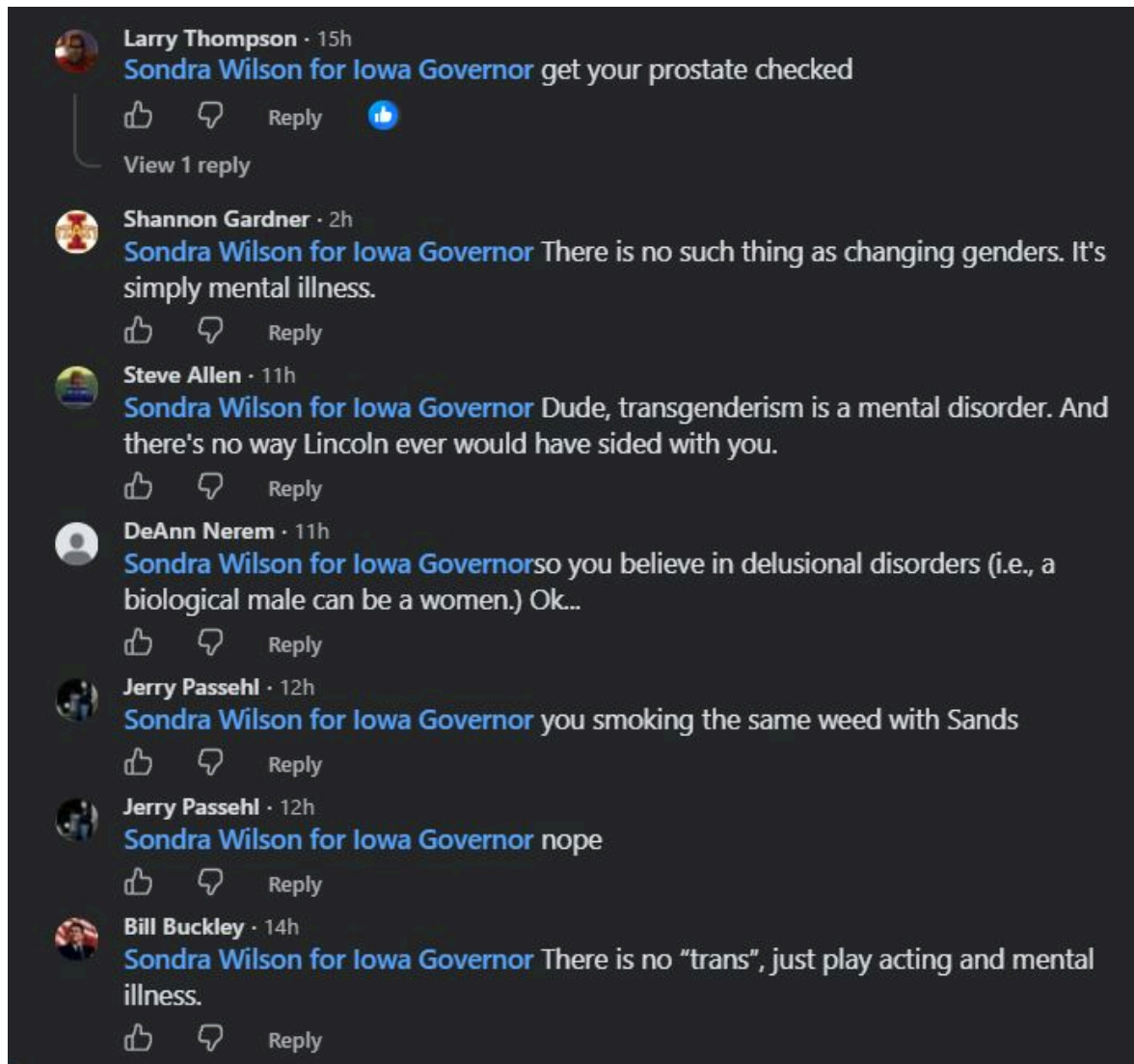
the same systems that created or preserved the harm. That is why the institutional questions discussed above cannot be separated from the record I am asking the public to examine.

Do Not Take My Word for It—Examine the Record

I understand that some readers—especially those who skim only the opening—may instinctively defer to the defendants or assume that the courts handled this case fairly. I am from Iowa, and I understand that cultural tendency. That is one reason I am publishing the complete procedural record: readers can examine the filings themselves and decide whether my criticism of Iowa's judiciary is supported by the evidence.

These problems are not merely theoretical. They affect Iowans whose stories never reach the news and those who cannot afford an attorney after they have been harmed.

I also know that prejudice against me as a transgender woman will cause some readers to ridicule me rather than examine the record honestly. The comments below, posted within twenty-four hours of my writing this section, offer only a snapshot of hostility I have faced for decades—hostility that has noticeably intensified as transgender people have increasingly been treated as political targets rather than as individuals.



Above: A snapshot of the hostility I routinely encounter online. These comments were posted within twenty-four hours of my writing this section of the article.

Is This an Isolated Case—or Part of an Unresolved History?

I cannot yet know how many Iowans have experienced comparable institutional harm. Many cases never become public. Some are buried in administrative files, plea records, sealed proceedings, fragmented dockets, or procedural rulings so complex that few people outside the legal system will ever understand what occurred.

I also cannot ignore the possibility that what is happening now reflects a quieter continuation of a history Iowa has largely forgotten: a history in which people considered socially undesirable, sexually nonconforming, mentally ill, disabled, impoverished, or otherwise outside accepted norms could be confined, discredited, prosecuted, institutionalized, or written out of the public story.

My companion series, *Iowa's Unresolved Trauma*, examines that history alongside my own backstory—from Iowa's eugenics era and the treatment of LGBT+ and intersex people to the

arrests, prosecutions, institutional records, homelessness, and trauma that shaped the years before this litigation.

I am publishing this record now because I do not intend to become another historical case discovered decades after my death, when accountability is no longer possible and the people responsible can no longer be questioned. The public should not have to wait for an archive, historian, or future generation to reconstruct what happened after the harm has become irreversible.

I ask readers to reserve judgment about both me and the courts until they have examined the record. Ask yourself: If Sondra were not transgender, would I be comfortable with a case being handled this way? Is "liberty and justice for all" a promise worth keeping even when doing so challenges my personal, political, or religious beliefs?

I do not intend to leave my home state. I am grateful to live in a country where I can speak publicly, petition the courts, and place the record before my fellow citizens. That freedom is also why courts and other public institutions must remain open to scrutiny when they fall short.

Explore the Companion Series: *Iowa's Unresolved Trauma*

This companion series connects Iowa's forgotten institutional history with my own backstory and explains why confronting unresolved harm is necessary to build a just and accountable government. It includes *Before the Culture War*, *Intersex in Iowa*, and a detailed account of *Wilson v. State of Iowa and Kim Reynolds for Iowa (2024)*.

Click the image below to read the full article.



Public Scrutiny Creates Accountability for Everyone

I cannot know how any court would rule if no one were watching. I do know that public visibility creates accountability. It allows readers to compare later descriptions of the case with the actual filings, discourages quiet distortion of a fragmented record, and gives me some protection against serious allegations being detached from their context.

Publishing the record also requires accountability from me. Readers can examine my claims, compare them with the actual filings, and decide for themselves whether my criticism is supported by the record.

This Case Is Moving Toward Appeal

The district-court proceedings have reached a critical stage, and I am preparing to seek appellate review. I am currently seeking qualified counsel, financial assistance that will allow me to continue working on the case, and attorneys, civil-rights organizations, or public-interest advocates who may be interested in reviewing the record or participating through an amicus brief.

Part Four: *Dangerous Precedent* will contain the current appellate posture, significant developments, and specific requests for legal or public-interest assistance.

From This Record to Reform

The justice reforms in my gubernatorial platform did not arise from abstract theory. They developed through years of navigating Iowa's courts and administrative agencies firsthand.

They respond to the barriers documented throughout this series: incomprehensible procedure, unaffordable representation, delayed access to government records, inadequate support for self-represented litigants, opaque complaint systems, sweeping immunity doctrines, and cases decided without the disputed conduct ever being examined on the merits.

Justice reform is not a secondary policy issue. Courts determine whether every other right can be understood, asserted, investigated, and enforced. A right without an accessible remedy exists mainly on paper.

Iowa's justice system can be rebuilt. The question is whether the people will be given a meaningful role in deciding how.

Read My Proposed Justice Reforms

With Gratitude

Special thanks to the [Alexander Clark Foundation](#) for their assistance in locating and preserving the historic filings from *Clark v. Board of Directors* (1868). Their dedication to Iowa's civil-rights

legacy continues to illuminate the path toward equality today.

I also wish to extend heartfelt appreciation to the developers, researchers, and teams behind the modern tools that supported the reconstruction of this record and the writing of this series:

- **ChatGPT (OpenAI)** — <https://openai.com>
- **Microsoft Copilot** — <https://copilot.microsoft.com>
- **Google Gemini** — <https://gemini.google.com>
- **Anthropic Claude** — <https://www.anthropic.com/claude>

Their tools helped organize thousands of pages of filings, historical documents, and procedural records into a format the public can meaningfully examine.

Thank you to the legal scholars, archivists, educators, and historians across Iowa whose publicly available research, commentary, and historical materials supported this work. I am equally grateful to the developers and maintainers of **open-access legal resources**, including the volunteers who sustain **Wikipedia**, and the creators of public legal-information platforms whose tools made this research possible.

To advocacy organizations whose work strengthens civil rights in Iowa: • **One Iowa** — <https://oneiowa.org> • **ACLU of Iowa** — <https://www.aclu-ia.org>

Your efforts to protect constitutional liberties and human dignity have helped countless Iowans navigate systems not built with them in mind.

To my medical providers, counselors, and care teams, thank you for your professionalism, compassion, and support through years of litigation pressure, discrimination, and medical uncertainty.

To protestors, activists, and community members, thank you for standing for equality, fairness, and human rights in Iowa and across the nation.

To my professors, advisors, and past teachers at Nevada High School, Des Moines Area Community College, and DMACC, thank you for the knowledge, patience, and understanding you offered — and for the deadline extensions that allowed me to balance full-time coursework with the demands of this litigation. Your guidance shaped both my education and my resilience.

To my supporters, friends, and family, your encouragement made survival possible during circumstances that often felt insurmountable. You stood with me when the system did not.

To public officials—past and present—who have sworn oaths to uphold the Iowa and United States Constitutions. Even in difficult political climates, your commitment to maintaining institutions where a transgender woman can assert her rights, challenge injustice, and participate in democratic life is profoundly meaningful. Whatever disagreements exist in our era, the continued existence of constitutional pathways for redress is itself a testament to your service.

To veterans and active-duty service members, whose sacrifices have preserved a nation where constitutional rights can be invoked, defended, and expanded. Your service makes possible the freedoms that allow cases like this to be brought at all.

And finally, to Jesus, whose teachings on compassion, forgiveness, courage, and discernment — *“wise as serpents and harmless as doves”* — carried me through the darkest periods of this

journey. The simple command to treat others as you would want to be treated remains the moral foundation beneath every effort toward justice.

To my pastors, past and present, and to the churches that kept His story alive, thank you for passing down a message of hope, mercy, and steadfast love through generations. Your faithfulness helped sustain me when the world felt unbearably heavy.

And to the musicians and artists whose work inspired me to persevere, to imagine a better future, and to keep fighting for humanity and for the natural world we share — your creativity helped me hold onto the belief that beauty, justice, and compassion are still possible.

Endnotes

[1]: Legal Services Corporation, *The Justice Gap: The Unmet Civil Legal Needs of Low-Income Americans* 7–8 (2022), <https://justicegap.lsc.gov/> (reporting that low-income Americans received no or insufficient legal help for 92 percent of the civil legal problems that substantially affected them).

[2]: Clio, *How Much Should I Charge as a Lawyer in Iowa?*, <https://www.clio.com/resources/legal-trends/compare-lawyer-rates/ia/> (last visited July 30, 2026) (reporting that the average Iowa lawyer’s hourly rate was \$252 in 2025).

[3]: U.S. Census Bureau, *Earnings in the Past 12 Months: Iowa*, 2024 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates, tbl. S2001, <https://data.census.gov/table/ACSST1Y2024.S2001?g=040XX00US19> (reporting median annual earnings of \$57,545 for full-time, year-round Iowa workers with earnings).

[4]: Author’s calculations. Dividing \$57,545 by 2,080 annual work hours produces an hourly equivalent of approximately \$27.67. Dividing the reported \$252 average attorney rate by \$27.67 produces approximately 9.11 hours of median-worker earnings.

[5]: Abraham Lincoln, *Notes for Speeches at Columbus and Cincinnati*, September 16–17, 1859, Abraham Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress. The surviving notes contain the statement that the people are the rightful masters of Congresses and courts, not to overthrow the Constitution, but those who pervert it. The quotation has also been reproduced in a Library of Congress print bearing substantially the same language.

[6]: American Bar Association, *When You Need a Lawyer: Lawyer Requirements*, https://www.americanbar.org/groups/public_education/resources/law_issues_for_consumers/lawyer_requirements/ (explaining that prospective attorneys ordinarily must possess a bachelor’s degree or its equivalent, complete three years at an accredited law school, pass a state bar examination, and satisfy a character-and-fitness review).

[7]: University of Iowa College of Law, *Financial Aid: J.D. 2025–26 Tuition and Mandatory Fees*, <https://law.uiowa.edu/current-students/financial-aid> (reporting annual tuition and mandatory fees totaling \$33,489 for Iowa residents and \$54,736 for nonresidents and separately identifying books, housing and food, transportation, and personal expenses).

[8]: Author’s calculations. Multiplying the University of Iowa College of Law’s published 2025–2026 tuition and mandatory-fee totals by three produces an estimated three-year total of \$100,467 for an

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[9]: Wild Willpower, *Iowa Court Rules and Public Legal-Education Materials*, public Google Drive folder, https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1ZpEnOZYImPQ0mLg0YajiQehfYyndGlnY?usp=drive_link (last visited July 31, 2026). The folder reflects the author's effort to organize Iowa's procedural rules into a more accessible, publicly available research structure.

[10]: Iowa Judicial Branch, *Iowa Rules of Civil Procedure*, Iowa Court Rules ch. 1. The totals stated in the article reflect the author's count of separately numbered rules and subordinate provisions as organized in Wild Willpower's public research folders.

[11]: Iowa Judicial Branch, *Iowa Rules of Evidence*, Iowa Court Rules ch. 5. The total stated in the article reflects the author's count using the same organizational method.

[12]: Iowa Judicial Branch, *Iowa Rules of Criminal Procedure*, Iowa Court Rules ch. 2. The total stated in the article reflects the author's count using the same organizational method.

[13]: Iowa Judicial Branch, *Iowa Rules of Appellate Procedure*, Iowa Court Rules ch. 6. The total stated in the article reflects the author's count using the same organizational method.

[14]: Alexander Hamilton, *The Farmer Refuted* (Feb. 23, 1775), in *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-01-02-0057> ("The sacred rights of mankind are not to be rummaged for, among old parchments, or musty records. They are written, as with a sun beam, in the whole volume of human nature, by the hand of the divinity itself; and can never be erased or obscured by mortal power.").

[15]: James Madison, *The Federalist No. 47* (1788) ("The accumulation of all powers, legislative, executive, and judiciary, in the same hands, whether of one, a few, or many, and whether hereditary, self-appointed, or elective, may justly be pronounced the very definition of tyranny."). The quotation is reproduced in the Constitution Annotated's discussion of the separation of powers.

[16]: Thomas Jefferson to William Charles Jarvis, Sept. 28, 1820, *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, reproduced by the Thomas Jefferson Foundation. In the same letter, Jefferson warned against treating judges as the ultimate arbiters of every constitutional question and emphasized the people as the safest repository of ultimate governmental power.

[17] U.S. Const. amend. I ("Congress shall make no law ... abridging ... the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."), reproduced in Constitution Annotated, Library of Congress.

[18] The Declaration of Independence para. 30 (U.S. 1776) ("In every stage of these Oppressions We have Petitioned for Redress in the most humble terms: Our repeated Petitions have been answered only by repeated injury."), reproduced by the National Archives.

[19] Iowa Department of Education, *Students First Education Savings Accounts*, explaining eligibility, qualified expenses, and the expansion of eligibility to Iowa resident K–12 students attending accredited nonpublic schools beginning with the 2025–2026 school year.

[20] Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, Oct. 12, 1813, *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson: Retirement Series*, Founders Online, National Archives (describing material he considered genuinely

attributable to Jesus as “as easily distinguishable as diamonds in a dunghill” and discussing his extraction of Jesus’s moral teachings); Thomas Jefferson, *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth* (c. 1820), Thomas Jefferson Papers, Library of Congress. Jefferson elsewhere characterized the teachings he attributed to Jesus as “the most sublime and benevolent code of morals which has ever been offered to man.”

[21] *Respondeat superior*, Black’s Law Dictionary (10th ed.) (defining the doctrine as holding an employer or principal liable for wrongful acts committed by an employee or agent within the scope of employment or agency); see also Plaintiff’s Request to Submit Amended Motion to Reconsider, filed Sept. 7, 2024, D0047, pp. 1–2.

[22] Plaintiff’s Omnibus Resistance and Motions, filed Aug. 5, 2024, D0032, pp. 1–2.

[23] 18 U.S.C. § 241, *Conspiracy Against Rights*; 18 U.S.C. § 242, *Deprivation of Rights Under Color of Law*, Office of the Law Revision Counsel, U.S. House of Representatives.

[24] 42 U.S.C. § 1983, *Civil Action for Deprivation of Rights*; 42 U.S.C. § 1985, *Conspiracy to Interfere with Civil Rights*; 42 U.S.C. § 1986, *Action for Neglect to Prevent*, Office of the Law Revision Counsel, U.S. House of Representatives.

[25] *Good v. Iowa Department of Human Services*, 924 N.W.2d 853, 862–63 (Iowa 2019).

[26] *Vasquez v. Iowa Department of Human Services*, Polk County No. CVCV061729, ruling by District Court Judge William P. Kelly (Nov. 19, 2021); Clark Kauffman, “Reynolds ‘Disappointed’ in Ruling on Transgender Medicaid Coverage,” *Iowa Capital Dispatch*, Nov. 22, 2021; Katarina Sostaric, “Judge Says Iowa Can’t Ban Medicaid Coverage of Transition-Related Surgery,” *Iowa Public Radio*, Nov. 22, 2021.

[27] Governor Kim Reynolds, statement upon signing Senate File 418 (Feb. 28, 2025) (stating that gender-identity protection in the Iowa Civil Rights Act had “forced Iowa taxpayers to pay for gender reassignment surgeries” and that this was unacceptable to her and, in her view, to most Iowans).

[28] Robin Opsahl, *Reynolds’ Campaign Collects an Additional \$1.2 Million in Contributions*, *Iowa Capital Dispatch* (May 19, 2022) (reporting that the Reynolds campaign had raised more than \$6 million); Robin Opsahl, *Reynolds’ Campaign Has \$2.5 Million Headed into November; DeJear’s Has \$366K*, *Iowa Capital Dispatch* (Oct. 20, 2022) (reporting approximately \$2.5 million available and more than \$5 million spent during the reporting quarter).

[29] Plaintiff’s Amended Petition, *Wilson v. State of Iowa and Kim Reynolds for Iowa*, No. LACL157953, D0030, ¶¶ 73–75, pp. 54–56, filed July 23, 2024.

[30] Petition and Motion for Leave to Amend, *Wilson v. Trump et al.*, No. 4:25-cv-00116-SHL-WPK, pp. 9–13, filed Mar. 31, 2025.

[31] Mass. Const. pt. I, art. XXX (“a government of laws and not of men”); *Marbury v. Madison*, 5 U.S. (1 Cranch) 137, 163 (1803) (“The government of the United States has been emphatically termed a government of laws, and not of men,” and explaining that government ceases to deserve that title if the laws furnish no remedy for violation of a vested legal right).

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