

The John Merrill Show is on again. Somebody change the channel.

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Alabama Secretary of State John Merrill announces that he is running for U.S. Senate during a news conference at the State Capitol Building in Montgomery, Ala., on Tuesday June 25 , 2019. (Mickey Welsh/Montgomery Advertiser via AP) AP

By [Kyle Whitmire | kwhitmire@al.com](#)

This is an opinion column

Every time I talk to Alabama Secretary of State John Merrill, I can't help thinking someone tried to clone former Alabama Gov. Bob Riley but somehow the experiment went horribly wrong.

Riley was Alabama's Ronald Reagan, and not just because they had the same hair. Power suited him, and whenever he walked into a crowded room he always seemed the happiest to be there. He loved to ride motorcycles and nearly killed himself on one in the north Alaskan wilderness. He told corny jokes and flattered everyone with Clay County charm. No matter if you hated him, you had to concede, Riley was cool.

John Merrill is not cool.

Merrill has traces of all Riley's qualities. He's tall. He has the drawl. He oozes "aw shucks." And for a few minutes after meeting him, you might think they're the same. He talks to any civic group that

invites him to talk. He shares a cell phone number (but not his personal number) every time he speaks.

But then something goes awry, like when running for Senate last year, he turned into a TV critic bemoaning what's become of programming since the "Andy Griffith Show" went off the air.

"People are too interested in homosexual activities. They're too interested in the wife swap TV shows and the shows that are not morally uplifting," [he said then](#). "That's the problem."

Bob Riley was the "Andy Griffith Show." John Merrill is "Mayberry RFD." You might want to like the spinoff as much as the original, but it's never going to happen. There's something missing. Something wrong.

Just follow him on Twitter and you'll see why.

As Secretary of State, overseeing Alabama elections is one of Merrill's jobs. This week, an environmental lobbyist named Stephen

Stetson asked Merrill how people might vote by absentee if they can't make copies of their voter ID. Under Alabama law, to vote by absentee, you must include a photocopy and have two witnesses or a notary public sign your ballot — things that might not be easy for shut-ins in normal times, much less when the law says you can't leave your house.

"People that have a hard time figuring out the answer to that question probably need to vote in person," [Merrill said](#).

Merrill's response came the same day Wisconsin announced it was seeing its first cases of coronavirus traceable to elections there two weeks ago. Merrill might not be smart, but he's smart enough to know people are getting sick from voting in person.

When I come to your house and show
you how to use your printer I can also
teach you how to tie your shoes and to
tie your tie. I could also go with you to
Walmart or Kinko's and make sure
that you know how to get a copy of
your ID made while you're buying
cigarettes or alcohol

— John Merrill (@JohnHMerrill) [April
21, 2020](#)

Eddie Burkhalter, who writes for the Alabama Political Reporter, shared Merrill's tweet with nothing in the way of commentary

except to say it is what it is. But Merrill lashed out at him, too, suggesting anyone who has trouble right now making a copy of their driver's license is some kind of idiot or drunk.

"When I come to your house and show you how to use your printer I can also teach you how to tie your shoes and tie your tie, Merrill said. "I could also go with you to Walmart or Kinko's and make sure that you know how to get a copy of your ID made while you're buying cigarettes or alcohol."

First of all, Kinko's changed its branding to FedEx Office 10 years ago, but I guess that's to be expected from someone living in the past.

Second, not every community in Alabama has one. In a lot of towns in Alabama, like the one I grew up in, the publically available copying machine is at the local library, and who knows how many of those are even open right now.

But the logistics of absentee voting in a pandemic are only the latest of Merrill's problems.

Last month I asked Merrill how Alabama might handle holding a primary runoff election in the middle of a pandemic — a question he refused to answer because he insisted I was being some sort of crazy alarmist just trying to scare people.

“I’m going to tell you why we’re not going to talk about that,” [Merrill said](#). “Because we don’t need for people to be concerned about something that may not ever happen. The story that you’re thinking about writing is not even important.”

We’ve all seen how that one turned out.

Merrill is on record saying that voting shouldn’t be easy, and he’s called modernized election practices like voting by mail and automatic registration “a sorry, lazy way out.” In a 2016, documentary, Merrill invoked every civil rights leader he could think of, from Rosa Parks to John Lewis, when arguing against it.

“I’m not going to embarrass them by allowing somebody that’s too sorry to get up off of their rear to go register to vote,” Merrill said.



And this sin is worst of all, much worse than the pointless fights on social media. This sanctimony might be easier to swallow if Lewis weren't on record supporting all of the voter empowerment measures Merrill opposes, especially automatic registration. I mean, Lewis is dying of pancreatic cancer, but he's not dead yet. If Merrill cared, he could go ask him.

Instead, Merrill substitutes his own feelings and his thoughts for theirs, which for a white man in Alabama saying what a black man wants, is pretty much par for the course.

"Just because you turned 18 doesn't give you the right to do anything," Merrill argued, despite what it says in the U.S. Constitution.

Merrill has ambitions beyond being Alabama Secretary of State, as he showed with his failed Senate run last year. Unlike the Alabama governor he imitates, he doesn't know when to keep his mouth shut and just smile.

Instead, his career has turned into the same re-run, playing in an

endless loop, filling dead air on daytime TV. It's not even the Andy Griffith Show. It's something darker. Something worse.

Maybe one day, we'll finally turn it off.