

# OPINION

DAILY JOURNAL

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"The Daily Journal is dedicated to community service, to defense of individual rights and to providing those checks upon government which no constitution can ensure."

SCOTT ALEXANDER  
founding editor, 1963

## AT ISSUE

Groundhog Day is the annual midwinter celebration for people tired of the cold and eager for the warmth of spring.

## OUR POINT

We rely on the squeals of a mammal roused from his sleep to offer his views of upcoming weather.

## Today's your day, Phil. Is spring around corner?

The Daily Journal

Today is Groundhog Day. People will gather at Gobbler's Knob, a wooded knoll just outside Punxsutawney, Pa., a hamlet about 65 miles northeast of Pittsburgh.

A groundhog named Punxsutawney Phil will be taken from his electrically heated burrow shortly after sunrise. In "groundhogese" he will tell a representative of the Groundhog Club whether he can see his shadow. The representative will translate for the rest of us.

If Phil sees his shadow, then he's frightened back into his burrow, and we're in for six more weeks of winter. If he doesn't see his shadow, then we can look forward to an early spring.

Phil's record, locals say, is perfect. Of course, meteorologists have recorded that the sun has shone on the town on 90 percent of the seconds of February during the past century.

In 1995, he didn't see his shadow in the morning and was a guest on the "Oprah Winfrey Show" that afternoon. That should have been enough to frighten Phil back into his burrow by itself.

Interestingly, though, the shadow folklore has a basis in fact. During winter nights, when skies are clear, the ground gives up its heat more quickly. This makes folks feel colder.

When there is a blanket of clouds, the earth retains its warmth. Warmer ground means farmers and gardeners can get to work more quickly.

The idea of even celebrating a holiday at this time comes from Candlemas, a church feast commemorating the purification of the Virgin Mary. Candles for sacred use are blessed on this day.

The more-winter-or-early-spring legend grew out of an old Scottish couplet: "If Candlemas Day is bright and clear, there'll be two winters in the year."

That Scottish heritage is coupled with a German tradition:

"For as the sun shines on Candlemas Day, so far will the snow swirl until May.

"For as the snow blows on Candlemas Day, so far will the sun shine before May."

In addition, the Germans watched a badger to see whether it saw its shadow. Phil the groundhog started making his predictions in Pennsylvania in 1887, but they were held in secret until 1966. Now he's a media darling, at least for this one day a year.

So shortly after many of you will read this, Phil will emerge and offer his yearly prediction.

But for Hoosiers, the real question is: With an unusually warm January, will we even have six weeks of winter this year?

## Focus: Deficit

### Realistic estimates show red ink mounting

Scrrips Howard News Service

President Bush likely would prefer not to dwell on the fact, but new congressional estimates show that one of his administration's legacies will be a running federal budget deficit.

The president took office with a budget surplus and a forecast of a cumulative 10-year surplus of \$5.6 trillion. That is now in the past.

The Congressional Budget Office predicts a deficit of \$337 billion when this fiscal year ends Sept. 30. And these same estimates see the deficits dropping to \$241 billion in 2009, the last budget-year Bush will be responsible for, and \$114 billion by 2011. Using the same assumptions, the Concord Coalition, an independent watchdog group, says the budget could be in balance the year after.

But these assumptions are unrealistically conservative. They assume the president's tax cuts expire; there is no change in the expanding alternative minimum tax; that the costs of Iraq and Katrina have wound down; and that there are no new federal spending initiatives.

And the forecast calls for Congress getting improbably tough on spending. Say the budget scolds at the coalition: "(It) assumes policymakers will hold discretionary programs, including defense, to just 2 percent growth annually, as opposed to 8 percent last year and a 5.2 percent annual average rate from 1994 through 2004."

Barring that, the budget office says we'll be running \$300 billion-plus deficits through the end of the decade, ratcheting up the national debt and the cost of paying interest on it. And, taking into account tax cuts, Iraq and Katrina, the office says this year's deficit is likely to reach or exceed \$400 billion, and the White House agrees. The all-time record one-year deficit was \$413 billion in fiscal 2005.

Bush and the GOP Congress have begun talking a tough game on budget deficits, but that will require really hard choices on tax cuts and spending. Both will have to be reduced and in ways that may not be politically popular.

Concludes the CBO, "A substantial reduction in the growth of spending and perhaps a sizable increase in taxes as a share of the economy will be necessary for fiscal stability to be at all likely in the coming decades."

The longer those choices are put off, the tougher they'll be when they absolutely must be made.



PHIL



## Memorizing great writing can lead to love of literature

"Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears!"

I can still see the wide smile on my former student's face as he greeted me with those famous words of Marc Antony. The salutation was testimony that he still remembered an assignment he had been given in my class. Shakespeare's "Julius Caesar" was part of our reading program each year, and a traditional task involved the memorization of a chunk of the Bard's work.

Shakespeare wasn't the only author we committed to memory. During the year students usually tackled some lines from Mark Twain. Childhood visits to his uncle's farm inspired words worth remembering:

"I can remember the bare wooden stairway, and the turn to the left above the landing, and the rafters and the slanting roof over my bed, and the squares of moonlight on the floor, and the white cold world of snow outside, seen through the curtainless window."

We also recited poetry from memory, including what some have called the most memorized poem of all time, Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." Many readers will recognize the first stanza: "Whose woods these are, I think I know, his house is in the village, though. He will not see me stopping here to watch his woods fill up with snow."

A century ago, memorization was the mainstay of education. Students in one-room schools were required to recite passages from their McGuffey Readers. Long before that era, young William Shakespeare and his schoolmates



James H. Johnson

did practically nothing else in their Stratford school except memorize great pieces of literature, and in Latin no less.

These days, what is termed "rote memorization" is out of fashion in school. It seems inconsistent with the trend toward student creativity, free-thinking and personal self-expression. Educators are rightly concerned with individual learning styles. But there's something to be said for the mental gymnastics involved with memorization of selected pieces of good literature. The exercise requires concentration, discipline and practice. It is not an assignment that can be dashed off while riding the bus or achieved by filling in the blanks.

Today's youngsters are immersed in a world of electronic media. Their eyes are glued to video screens. Their ears are plugged into MP3 players. Surrounded by pictures and music, they are oblivious to the quiet pleasure found in good writing. Perhaps that's why many of them don't have much interest in reading. They have not learned to appreciate what might be called linguistic beauty. That's where a memorization assignment could be a very good thing.

As author Michael Wood has said, "Learning by rote offers many rewards, not least a sense of poetry, rhythm, and refinement — a heightened feel for language."

Many adults can probably still reach back into their memory banks and retrieve snippets of treasures from their school days. Perhaps it's "Listen my children and you shall hear of the midnight ride of Paul Revere" or "Once upon a midnight dreary," or "We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union."

Students still do a little memorizing. As we approach the birthday of Abraham Lincoln, some teachers will encourage students to learn one of the greatest speeches of all time. Its 271 words have echoed for more than 140 years.

You know the one. It begins with "Four score and seven years ago, our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal."

There is power in well-crafted prose and poetry. Beauty, too. When students memorize something, they learn it "by heart." They take ownership of great words, and Shakespeare and Twain and Lincoln go with them as they journey into the world.

I guess that makes a little rote memorization a pretty valuable assignment once in a while.

Board of contributors columnist James H. Johnson is a retired teacher who lives in Greenwood. Send comments to letters@thejournalnet.com.

## Real congressional reform requires voter integrity, end to pork barrel

"It could probably be shown by facts and figures that there is no distinctly native criminal class except Congress." — Mark Twain in "Following the Equator."

Mark Twain was joking, right? Sure, except that there are some facts and figures that do seem to hint at something along those lines, such as the convictions of a half dozen House members throughout the past two decades and allegations of either crimes or serious ethical violations made against another dozen, not counting anything to do with sex.

Several of the accused were almost certainly innocent of any wrongdoing as defined by law or ethics code, but if you want to count the numbers who betray their consciences and the American people for purposes of re-election and personal advancement, the numbers are bound to get embarrassing, and here is what's unlikely to change things much: so-called lobbying reform.

Cracking down on lobbyists is the demand of Democrats, and the echo of some Republicans, as the Jack Abramoff scandal unfolds. While we still don't know the full extent of it, the odor that's come the public's way so far suggests mounds of garbage, most of it on the Republican side of the aisle, and much of it in the lap of Tom Delay. The Texas Republican, now under indictment, is giving up his position of House majority leader.

Abramoff himself has pleaded guilty to three felony counts, which should signal the reformers that law itself does not stop outrageous behavior.

"I see my opportunities and I took 'em," said Tammany political boss George Washington Plunkitt early in the 20th century,



Jay Ambrose

and that pretty well seems to sum up Abramoff's lobbying ventures. It also seems to sum up at least some Republicans, who, finding their party in power, seemed intent on imitating the worst practices of the Democrats when they held power, and then going them one better.

The reforms now being talked about are by and large repetitions of previous reforms that have not worked remarkably well because lobbyists and members of Congress were willing to risk being caught or because the rules didn't include meaningful enforcement mechanisms or sufficiently tough penalties. Some proposals deal with trivialities, such as allowing a lobbyist to pay for your lunch.

There's also a danger of something not so trivial happening, getting in the way of the First Amendment right to petition government for a redress of grievances.

Lobbyists, who share that right, are no more reprehensible in what most of them do than any other group of professionals. Mainly they are defending their clients from a constitutionally dubious, relentless governmental interventionism that is potentially ruinous in effect, if not in intention.

The lobbyists also provide a service that members of Congress seldom mention. They educate the ignorant. If Congress would quit sticking its thumb in every pie, the worst of the lobbyists would

no longer have much motivation to find a means of bribery.

So there you have one reform — a congressional reform, not a lobbyist reform — that definitely would be consequential. Another would be to cut out the pork "earmarks" inserted in appropriations bills, sometimes as a thank-you to a campaign contributor, but far more often as a way of politicians ingratiating themselves to voters back home with projects paid for by taxpayers nationally. A column by Robert Novak points out the earmarks have been increasing steadily from 10 in the 1982 highway bill to 6,300 in the 2005 highway bill.

What is finally needed more than anything is integrity and constituents who will vote the rascals out when integrity is missing.

No matter what the rules or the laws say, dishonest members of Congress will break them if they think they can get away with it, and the advantages of incumbency are such that they often can get away with it come Election Day. Delivering pork is one such advantage. Another is a campaign finance system rigged against challengers. The public finance system some recommend would further diminish our democracy by limiting free speech and making it still more difficult for challengers to win elections.

Avoid that "reform," scrap current infringements on speaking out in campaigns, end the hidden earmark scam, scale back a federal government now reaching much too far, vote against dishonesty in any of its forms and we will eventually take the bite out of the Twain joke.

Jay Ambrose is a columnist living in Colorado. Send comments to letters@thejournalnet.com.

## YOUR VIEWS

### Franklin's principal overlooked many kids

To the editor:

Amen. That's the only legitimate response to Sharon Shepard's recent letter. "Former principal did little to keep kids from leaving" (Daily Journal, Jan. 21), defending the demolition of Leighton Turner as principal of Franklin Community High School.

The one meeting I had with Mr. Turner and then-principal Walt Vanderbush concerning a very mild infraction of their rule turned into a hostile confrontation on their part. I am a well-educated, informed parent, and they were both openly rude and talked down to me like I was some uneducated low-life hilljack.

I was appalled and soon found out that unless you were a star athlete, from a family with a prominent name and money, or a personal friend of theirs, they simply didn't care to work with you or your child.

Prevent dropouts? Encourage the average, well-behaved student to reach higher goals? Please.

Those are just the kids repeatedly overlooked by those two. Despite all that, and because of their own inner strengths, most of those kids have grown into productive, responsible citizens with demanding careers and families of their own and with no help and guidance from that pair of administrators.

Now, I do know that we've all had concerns about the Franklin Community school board and their quest for spending money, but at least on this one issue they finally did something right.

I thanked God the day Walt Vanderbush left Franklin high school, and I thank God today that my nieces, nephews and grandchildren will not have Leighton Turner as a principal. The only thing better would be if Mr. Turner left the school corporation altogether.

Thank you, Sharon, for saying what hundreds of other parents and former students were thinking but were afraid to say. My one true regret is that I did not speak out openly and publicly many years ago.

Abby Kirby  
Franklin

### I-69 extension likely to be built west of SR 37

To the editor:

This is regarding your Interstate 69 editorial, "Area streets to pay price if I-69 built as toll road," during the weekend (Daily Journal, Jan. 21/22).

We did 34 years in GMC. My first five to 10 years were spent roaming across the then fledgling interstate system. My job was to arrange support for the road contractors, making sure their equipment would keep running. The first thing you learn about an interstate route is not to guarantee where it will be until the cement is poured.

I'm for toll roads: big ones, little ones, whatever. Let private money build and maintain them. They really know how to do it.

Right now I'd bet that the south leg of I-69 will be somewhere west of State Road 37. If there is a traffic burden in White River Township, it will be on the Bluff/Morgantown corridor, not State Road 135. The other bet is Southport to Mann and then Mann going south.

If you want State Road 135 fixed, it's going to take lots of talking. This past year the state found bucks to help out on the north side of Indy with that mall complex. The state is broke. Now if the Bluff/Morgantown route becomes the lucky winner, then the state is out of it. That's county property. I'll say it again: I don't care how the county council thinks about money coming from the state for road work. It ain't going to happen in the next 10 years. Johnson County needs a road tax, like last week.

Locals avoiding the toll road: that's nuts. State Road 37 was never, will never be a safe highway. If someone elects to avoid using the toll road because of a fee then they should seriously consider walking or riding a bus.

Ed Woods  
Greenwood

## WRITE A LETTER

GUIDELINES

- Letters published in the Daily Journal must contain the writer's name and city or town.
- Letters sent to the Daily Journal must be signed and must include a daytime telephone number for verification to be considered for publication.

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