

OPINION

DAILY JOURNAL

JEFFREY W. OWEN
PUBLISHER
E-mail address:
jowen@thejournalnet.com

SCARLETT SYSE
EDITOR
E-mail address:
syse@thejournalnet.com

"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

Opinion roundup

EDITOR'S NOTE — Today the Daily Journal presents a sampling of editorials from around the state, nation and world:

State needs to bridge seniors' medication gap

The Times-Mail, Bedford

There isn't much to suggest state leaders are very sympathetic to Hoosiers who are falling victim to the new Medicare Part B drug benefit glitches that the federal government hasn't yet been able to resolve.

More than 20 states have reached into their own pockets to help cover drug costs until the federal government works out the glitches in the new system. It doesn't appear to have been a high risk for those states. The federal Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services has agreed to reimburse those states for the money they spend.

Indiana leaders have apparently opted to sit back and wait until the federal government clears up the kind of confusion that evolved from seniors having 42 prescription plans from which to choose. That wait would be acceptable if the seniors had a reliable place to go for answers to their questions about whether the plans they opted for truly are serving them. Those answers, unfortunately and often, aren't available.

How many people going without needed medications will it take before the administration decides not minimize such individuals?

Time to require seat-belt use in SUVs

Journal and Courier, Lafayette

Each year, the Indiana General Assembly ventures a toe into a ridiculous loophole in the state's seat-belt regulations, only to pull it back at a convenient moment.

State law requires adults riding in the front seat of cars to wear seat belts. But drivers of pickup trucks and any other vehicle with a truck license plate, including many supposedly family-friendly SUVs, are exempt.

Why? Because state codes are still working off regulations written when pickups truly were work vehicles on the farm, not the everyday transportation of choice of some many city-dwelling Hoosiers. And the regulations certainly couldn't have predicted the trend of suburban moms carting kids to school and to dance class in vehicles that qualify for truck plates.

A General Assembly that found it reasonable to make drivers of Ford Contours buckle up and to put children in the second grade in booster seats can muster the courage to bring pickups and SUVs under the same rules. This loophole should be closed.

Serious discussion of troops' roles needed

The Buffalo (N.Y.) News

Critical assessments that the Iraq war may stretch the Army into a "thin green line" merit grave concern. The staffing demands of this war are huge, and even if the nation's ground forces remain strong now, the Army's failure to meet recruitment goals last year is worrisome for a superpower that undoubtedly will be tested repeatedly.

A year ago, the Pentagon's chief of Reserve forces voiced worries similar to those contained in a new report, prepared under Pentagon contract by the retired Army officer who now heads the nonprofit Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments. Both center on the demands of repeated, rotating combat tours during the long effort to combat insurgency in Iraq and to maintain stability in Afghanistan.

Nearly half of the American soldiers who served in Iraq are in Reserve or National Guard units, highly trained under a very successful program to keep Reserve forces ready to step into front-line roles beside regular Army troops. There are 550,000 Army Reserve and National Guard troops in the nation's overall Army, and 512,000 regular Army soldiers.

Keeping the current 136,000 troops in Iraq may not seem a burden for a force of more than 1 million, but the length of this war has meant repeated deployments for combat brigades. Last year's recruiting and re-enlistment failures were the first missed quotas since 1999. They obviously reflect awareness of the dangers in Iraq and the country's mood about this war and the personal and family hardships of repeated tours of duty.

Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld states the obvious: that this made the Army more experienced. He's just whistling past an American graveyard if he thinks that grinding out this war will make his forces better able to meet other threats and fight other fights at the same time.

The report worries that the United States can't keep enough troops in Iraq long enough to break the back of the insurgency. Popular sentiment for a full Iraqi takeover of the security role may solve that problem even faster than the currently planned draw-down to below 100,000 by year's end. But there also ought to be much more serious discussion of force restructuring and possibly of expanding the regular Army and other branches to meet an expanded role without so severely taxing Reserve forces.

U.S. faces 'democracy dilemma' over Hamas

Financial Times, London

In last year's State of the Union address, President Bush committed the United States to "stand with the allies of freedom to support democratic movements in the Middle East and beyond, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world." He pointedly told America's Arab friends in Egypt and Saudi Arabia he was making a "generational commitment" to democracy, analogous to the Cold War, and that they should shape up.

But in the year since America's liberty bell pealed through Arab lands, it has mostly been Islamic revivalists rather than Abu Jeffersons who have won such elections as there have been. The cleanest and the clearest was the Palestinian contest that disgorged Hamas, the militant Islamist movement, with a thumping majority. Mr. Bush may not wish to dwell on the subject in his State of the Union speech, but U.S. policy nonetheless faces a real dilemma. It cannot duck it.



Maintaining hybrid-car credit will help in war on terrorism

It's taken far too long, but President Bush deserves credit for putting our money and his mouth behind one of America's most hawkish national security weapons.

In his State of the Union speech and in his 2006 budget, the president has strongly supported the procurement of sophisticated high-tech hardware that is crucial to our homeland security — but was never in the arsenal blueprint of Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld or the joint chiefs.

It is the hybrid car — no longer just the Toyota Prius, but a growing and improving array of fuel-efficient vehicles now on the roads and on the drawing boards. For a half-dozen years, faithful readers of this column have read that these new gasoline-and-electric-powered vehicles are a vital weapon in America's battle with itself to achieve independence from imported oil. That's how long it has been since hybrid cars were first at hand.

Now, this year, hybrid vehicles also get Uncle Sam's helping hand, in the form of a fistful of tax credit dollars, \$3,000-plus for taxpayers who want to buy one. But as we'll discuss in a minute, it is a bizarre application that falls short of the noble goal of using tax policy to promote other positive policies, in this case national security policy goals of weaning the United States off Middle East oil, a policy that has warped U.S. foreign policy for



Martin Schram

generations and now, in the age of militant Islamic terrorism, threatens our nation's safety today and for years to come.

"I agree with Americans who understand being hooked on foreign oil as an economic problem and a national security problem," Bush told CBS News' Bob Schieffer last Sunday, previewing this week's State of the Union address on "Face the Nation."

The president went on to champion the so-called flex-fuel cars that can run on either gasoline or ethanol, which is derived not from crude oil but from corn, in a process that has so far proved costly to manufacture. "I want to see different kinds of cars on our road that don't (depend) upon crude oil from overseas," Bush said. "But we have got a serious problem, and now is the time to fix it."

The 2005 comprehensive energy bill provided a sliding scale of tax credits for various hybrid gas-electric technologies: the greater the fuel efficiency, the greater the credit earned. (The old hybrid tax deduction gave taxpayers only a

fraction of the deduction figure, equal to the individual's tax rate. A tax credit of \$3,000 means a taxpayer pays a full \$3,000 less in taxes.) But here's the only-in-Washington fine print of that energy bill: As soon as the tax credit is most successful — when people are buying gas-saving cars and America is becoming independent of Arab oil — that's when the tax credit will end. As soon as a car company sells 60,000 in hybrid vehicles, the tax credit phases out to zero in one year.

The reason is not about homeland security or energy independence, but politics and lobbyists. The politicians and budget bean-counters felt they couldn't afford to keep the taxpayer credits, even though incentive tax credits to oil companies for drilling gush uncapped. Second, Toyota had a big lead in hybrids and lobbyists for other myopic car companies wanted to limit the gain for Toyota's customers until even America's Big Three can catch up. That's a tax-incentive idiocy only a Washington politician could love. What we need is a hybrid tax credit that works — and keeps on working for us — until we have freed ourselves from the tyranny of Arab oil. It can be the cheapest, most cost-effective national security policy we'll ever have.

Martin Schram writes political analysis for Scripps Howard News Service. Send comments to letters@thejournalnet.com.

President's loss of credibility at core of problems with anxious Americans

By RON FOURNIER
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON

The state of the union is fretful. President Bush acknowledged the public's agitated state Tuesday night when he gave voice to growing concerns about the course of the nation he has led for five years. His credibility no longer the asset it once was, the president begged Americans' indulgence for another chance to fix things.

There is no shortage: the Iraq war, global terrorism, a nuclear Iran, a stingy global economy, skyrocketing health-care costs, troubled U.S. schools, rising fuel costs, looming budget deficits and government corruption. All received presidential attention Tuesday night.

In his fifth State of the Union address, Bush sought to balance his usual optimistic message with an odd-fitting acknowledgment that many Americans are suffering beneath a crush of change.

"Fellow citizens, we have been called to leadership in a period of consequence. We have entered a great ideological conflict we did nothing to invite," Bush said. "We see great changes in science and commerce that will influence all our lives. And sometimes it can seem that history is turning a wide arc, toward an unknown shore."

Unknown and uneasy. At a private home tucked in a quiet neighborhood in Costa Mesa, Calif., about two dozen people from all walks of life gathered to watch Bush's speech while eating tacos and potato chips. One of them, social worker Julie Carlson, said she felt "negative" about the overall state of the nation, particularly the health-care system.

"There seems to be every week something that comes up, something I don't agree with or something that disheartens me," said Carlson, 29.

The problem for Bush is that few

of these troubles are new. He's had five years to ease people's pain.

Nearly 46 million Americans have no health insurance, up nearly a million in the past year. Health-care costs are increasing three or four times the rate of inflation.

One of the first successes of Bush's presidency was the 2002 No Child Left Behind law, but parents still wonder about the quality of education in their schools. For the first time in generations, American children could face poorer prospects than their parents and grandparents did.

Calling for less dependence on foreign oil is a State of the Union evergreen. Bush has done so in every address.

The president who promised to be a uniter, not a divider, has presided over the hyper-polarization of Washington.

Osama bin Laden has not been caught. Weapons of mass destruction were not found in Iraq.

Victory in that war seems elusive, with more than 2,240 American troops killed, and counting.

The divide over Iraq spilled into the House chamber, where parents of fallen soldiers attended in support of Bush and peace protester Cindy Sheehan was arrested just before the address.

The solutions Bush offered were relatively small-bore and wrapped in familiar language: tax cuts, health savings accounts, alternative energy research and investments in education to help keep America competitive with emerging democracies; and a stay-the-course approach to fighting terrorism.

Ten months before congressional elections, Bush accused foreign policy critics of "defeatism." He also took a jab at critics in his own party on immigration.

Bush's goal in the address was to acknowledge the public's concerns, and if not solve their every problem, assure them he will try to do better.

"He's learned that the election

is over, and now he's free to acknowledge that course change doesn't necessarily mean a mistake," said Republican consultant Rich Galen.

Bush spoke of the global economy and suggested that competitors like China and India are making gains on the United States. "This creates an uncertainty, which makes it easier to feed people's fears."

He said violent crime, abortions and teenage pregnancies are down in an era that has seen Americans take more responsibility — "a revolution of conscience" he called it. "Yet many Americans, especially parents, still have deep concerns about the direction of our culture, and the health of our basic institutions," he said.

The mood of the nation is unsettled. Nearly seven of 10 Americans believe the country is headed in the wrong direction. Bush's job approval ratings are among the lowest of his presidency.

At the core of his political problems is his loss of credibility. Most voters believed he was a strong and principled leader in 2004, leading many to support him despite their opposition to the Iraq war and a sluggish economy.

They are no longer giving him the benefit of the doubt.

The proportion of Americans who credit the president with being honest and straightforward has fallen, as has the percentage who credit him for strong leadership qualities.

Democrats hope those numbers don't change after Bush's address. "It's an attempt to make himself healthy before the midterms," said Democratic strategist Dane Strother. Americans may be anxious, he said, "but they're not dumb."

Ron Fournier has covered the White House and politics for The Associated Press since 1992. Gillian Flaccus in Costa Mesa, Calif., contributed to this story. Send comments to letters@thejournalnet.com.

YOUR VIEWS

Pay for insurance CEOs angers patients, doctors

To the editor:

Doctors observe more than physical suffering. Every day we witness the burden carried by the near-poor in America. We see people who work long hours to support their families but are devastated by one serious hospitalization. We know people unable to pay rising health-care premiums or deductibles who were forced into the ranks of the uninsured.

We also can name patients who forego the basics, like food and heat, to pay their health-care premiums. These people prioritize their bills believing the dollars they spend for health insurance are used to cover the costs of medical care for themselves or others like them.

Imagine how they feel each time they read a health insurer spent its money on yet another executive bonus. Most recently, WellPoint issued a check for \$5.6 million to its new East Region CEO.

Indiana physicians also feel outraged, but particularly this time since the WellPoint millions went to an executive who is a physician.

Hoosiers should know that the more than 8,000 doctors of the Indiana State Medical Association deplore the exorbitant bonuses and profits of health insurers. We are saddened to think those dollars could be used to relieve suffering and hardship in Indiana and across the nation.

Association physicians invite insurance executives to join us in our medical offices for a day or a few hours. Come meet Hoosiers who carry the burden of high premiums and deductibles or learn what it is like to be uninsured. Perhaps the experience would spark change in the continued allocation of hard-earned insurance dollars to unconscionable perks and bonuses.

Dr. Kevin R. Burke
Indianapolis

Repeal insurance plan, raise beer, wine tax

To the editor:

If the cigarette tax is so effective, why not increase the beer and wine tax? I do not believe there has been an increase in years.

Also, why not repeal the legislation that gives state retired lawmakers nearly \$10,000 assistance on their health insurance?

Jerry Reingardt
Trafalgar

WRT center utilized by government, public

To the editor:

In reply to Mr. Ed Woods' recent comments about the White River Township Government Building in his letter "Down-to-earth official deserves free drink" (Daily Journal, Jan. 26), I would like to reply as follows:

In the past few years there has been a concentrated effort to move White River Township forward into the 21st century on a positive note. Construction of the government building has been a step in that direction.

The township trustee was conducting business out of the breeze-way of a house, and the assessor needed to double the space for her office and map rooms.

Now the trustee's office is computerized, open five days a week and can conduct business properly. The assessor has twice as much space for the same rent she was paying, and the rent now goes back into the township.

The community rooms have been used almost 100 times since June, proving that more meeting space was needed in the township. And maybe I am a little overprotective of children, but having a sheriff's substation next to the main campus of Center Grove schools seems like a plus to me.

Part of the property is wooded, rolling and has a stream meandering through it. The schools are using this area for a nature ecology lab. And a school cross country track may pass through the property soon. Other uses are being discussed for the unfinished part of the lower level of the building and unused part of the property.

The trustee and board members are trying to provide necessary services while holding taxes down. The building and property were obtained without raising taxes, and hopefully only a very small increase or none will be needed in future years.

And if it makes you feel any better, Mr. Woods, the trustee, advisory board and full-time employees are receiving no raises for 2006.

I believe this is a great place to live, raise children and enjoy a quality of life. That is why I have resided here 35 years and have no intention of leaving. We welcome your comments and suggestions and hope we can all work together to keep making the township an even better place to live.

Forrest Chambers
White River Township
Advisory Board