

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

The Indiana General Assembly, which convened this week, will be discussing many issues that affect Hoosiers.

OUR POINT

It is important for people to speak up and to let legislators know their views on important matters.

Successful government comes from involvement

The Daily Journal

The long, budget-writing session of the Indiana General Assembly has begun.

From now until adjournment April 29, legislators will work on a wide array of matters. The only task they have to complete is approving a budget for the next two years.

But that won't stop them from considering other issues.

Among the most prominent issues are full-day kindergarten, moving statewide school testing to the spring and building a toll-road bypass around the east and southern sides of Indianapolis.

These matters will affect Hoosiers in a variety of ways. For example, even people without children are affected by school issues because of the property-tax implications. Full-day kindergarten likely will mean more classrooms and teachers, which in turn could mean higher taxes.

The proposed toll road would run from Interstate 69 near Pendleton, then south and west through Johnson County and end at Interstate 70 west of Indianapolis International Airport.

No route has been designated, and no economic or environmental assessments have been done.

But the impact on Johnson County would be substantial if it were built.

It's an issue on which county residents should let their legislators know how they feel.

Do you want the road built? Tell them and say why. Is it for economic reasons, convenience of travel or what?

Do you oppose it? Again, say so and say why. Preservation of farmland? Expansion of economic zones into agricultural areas?

Are there issues not being addressed that you feel are important? Again, speak up.

Area legislators have scheduled several public meetings during the next couple of weeks to talk to and listen to area residents. Take advantage of those opportunities. Legislators have said they are eager to hear what people have to say.

If you can't attend the forums, all members of the General Assembly have e-mail addresses. So you can write them that way or send a traditional letter through the mail.

Don't know who represents you? The Communities section of thejournalnet.com has profiles of area legislators and links to their Web sites. The status of many bills can be assessed there, as well.

The Indiana General Assembly is the public's best voice in state government.

But to be effective, it requires that people be partners with the legislators.

So speak up.

Focus: Privacy

Dear John — and President Bush, too

Scrrips Howard News Service

The White House denies it, but personal privacy has taken another big hit at the hands of the Bush administration.

The president has decreed that his agents do not need a search warrant to open and read first-class mail. Traditionally, and by law, the government has had to go before a judge to justify a request to open a private letter.

But in one of the president's notorious signing statements — and he has issued more than 750 of them, more than all other presidents combined, according to the American Bar Association — the president said he could order warrantless searches of the mail in "exigent" circumstances.

"Exigent" is a spongy word, meaning urgent. And who gets to decide when circumstances are urgent? The Decider himself.

In signing statements that the president appends to bills Congress has passed, Bush reserved the right to interpret the legislation as he sees fit or even ignore it altogether. He has earlier asserted the right to eavesdrop electronically without warrants.

The president discerned this authority in the new Postal Accountability and Enhancement Act, although the authors of the act and the Postal Service don't see it that way.

Says the measure's sponsor, Sen. Susan Collins, R-Maine, the new law "does nothing to alter the protections of privacy and civil liberties provided by the Constitution and other federal laws."

Bush press secretary Tony Snow insisted, "This is not a change in law; this is not new." If that were so, the president wouldn't need a signing statement, would he?

YOUR TWO CENTS

Local legislators are planning meetings in the coming days. Here's where to give them an earful:

Thursday

When: 6:30 to 8 p.m. Thursday
Where: Greenwood City Building, 2 N. Madison Ave.

Who: State Sen. Patricia Miller and State Rep. Woody Burton

Saturday

When: 10:30 a.m. to noon Saturday
Where: Whiteland Town Hall, 549 Main St.

Who: State Sen. Greg Walker and State Rep. Woody Burton

Jan. 20

When: 10:30 a.m. to 12 p.m. Jan. 20
Where: Franklin library, 401 State St.

Who: State Reps. Milo Smith and Woody Burton

Couch-potato brain resists resolution to get a workout

The first of January is a time of resolve, a time for changes.

And so, because recent news stories have acquainted me with the concept of "brain calisthenics" and having noticed just how flabby my cerebellum was getting, I resolved to get my brain into shape.

My brain was lounging on the couch, occupied with some daytime TV talk show. It was hard to get its attention, but I managed to coax it into the car, and we headed down to the local gym for a good workout.

When we entered, we noticed they were offering a free trial membership.

"What luck," we thought.

Bambi, a young lady in tights who obviously worked out quite a bit, came up and offered to show us the facilities.

"Sure," I agreed as my brain drifted off, distracted by the colorful posters.

I grabbed my brain and pulled it away while Bambi talked.

"Brain calisthenics is huge right now. It's the latest trend for baby boomers who are concerned about aging," she said. "AARP, for example, provides tips on brain aging while the Alzheimer's Association offers 'Maintain Your Brain' workshops.

"And insurance companies are getting in on the act. MetLife commissioned a booklet, 'Love your Brain,' for distribution, and Humana makes available brain fitness software to their older customers for use at their 'brain fitness camps.'"

"So all of this brain health stuff is backed up by science?" I asked.



Norman Knight

"Well, the research is unclear at this point, but most scientists who are studying brain calisthenics agree that it does no harm," Bambi answered.

"One researcher said that while brain-training exercises show results in the lab, that doesn't necessarily transfer to real-life situations. And much evidence suggests that it is actually cardiovascular exercise that helps the brain by improving blood circulation. Still, the research is intriguing."

"How erudite," I thought.

Then I caught a glimpse of her firm and fit hippocampus and knew she practiced what she preached.

As I looked around the gym, I realized that lots of people had made the same New Year's resolution.

The place was crowded with brains exercising as if their cells depended on it.

The Sudoku machines had a waiting line. In one corner a concentration game was in progress.

In another part of the room there was a spelling bee. I urged my brain to join in the fun.

He halfheartedly sat on one of the crossword benches and filled

in a few squares before he got up and walked back over to us.

"Hey, Einstein, wipe off the bench," some very muscular cranium yelled at him.

Bambi looked at the hulking lug and sniffed, "You want to work all parts of your brain," she said. "Your compassion areas need exercise as much as your logical and creative ones. That brain obviously is concentrating on only a small part."

Then she turned back to us.

"So, are you interested in signing up for a membership?"

"Well, I ..."

"It's a great deal. You'll feel better about yourself and, bottom line: well-toned brains are hot," Bambi argued.

"A brain that can enumerate pi to several decimal places or recite ancient Greek love poetry is like a chick magnet."

"That's not really why we're here," I said as I noticed my brain was busy watching the bubbles rise in the water fountain bottle.

"Uh, can I get back to you on the membership?" I said. "My brain seems kind of distracted today."

Bambi continued the high-pressure sales pitch, telling us about the special holiday deal for new members as she followed us out the door and to our car.

"Let's go home," my brain said as we drove off. "It's almost time for 'Oprah.'"

Norman Knight, a teacher at Clark Pleasant Middle School, writes this weekly column for the Daily Journal. Send comments to letters@thejournalnet.com.

WRITE A LETTER

The Daily Journal invites readers to submit letters, opinion columns and e-mail comments for the opinion page.

GUIDELINES

- Letters published in the Daily Journal must contain the writer's name and city or town.
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THE QUESTION

Do you think Indiana should continue to observe daylight-saving time?

PICK AN ANSWER

- Yes
- No

HOW TO VOTE

Vote and offer comments on the Daily Journal's Internet edition, www.thejournalnet.com. This is an unscientific poll. Readers are also welcome to mail or fax comments.

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President's new plan for Iraq seems familiar

By TOM RAUM
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON

President Bush's new plan for Iraq sounds a lot like his old one. Send in more troops, set goals for the Iraqi government and assure Americans it's better to wage war there than here.

And now the U.S. military is back in Somalia, too, once again attacking suspected terrorist targets.

Bush's challenge in Iraq: show what's different now.

The plan the president will outline to the nation tonight is the latest repackaging of a program that's been wrapped and rewrapped many times.

The White House recognizes that a majority of Americans disapprove of Bush's handling of Iraq and that Democrats are eager to assert their new leadership on Capitol Hill by challenging his proposal to send in more troops.

But Bush advisers also believe that Americans do not necessarily support an immediate withdrawal and might be willing to give the president the benefit of the doubt if he presents a feasible, detailed plan that points the way to an eventual U.S. drawdown.

It's different this time, Bush supporters say of his new strategy, always words to beware.

For one thing, administration officials contend that the Iraqi government, while still fragile, has matured and will do much more of its part this time.

They note that Bush has

reshuffled his military and diplomatic team in Iraq and has a new defense secretary, Robert Gates, to carry out the revised plan.

Bush has told lawmakers he plans to send about 20,000 more troops to Iraq. There are roughly 140,000 there now. The White House also is working on its largest-ever appeal for more war funds — a record \$100 billion, at least — to be submitted along with Bush's Feb. 5 budget.

"He does understand that it's important to bring the public back to this war and restore public confidence in support for the mission," spokesman Tony Snow said Tuesday.

Still, there's clearly a been-there, done-that feel to Bush's new plan.

It's an old story: The United States before has temporarily raised troop levels, taken steps to encourage democracy, spent money on education and public works and set benchmarks for the Iraqi government.

In the fall of 2005, the president gave a series of speeches around the country on the way forward in Iraq.

To mark the campaign, the White House issued a glossy 35-page document titled "Our National Strategy for Victory in Iraq," spelling out a series of military, political and economic initiatives.

"This last summer there was a troop increase that really did no good in my opinion whatsoever," says Rep. Ike Skelton, D-Mo., the new chairman of the House Armed Services Committee.

That was after Bush went to

Baghdad and announced a joint effort with Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki to beef up security in Baghdad — and after an earlier joint effort failed to stem the tide of sectarian violence. The newer one failed too.

Skelton suggests too much attention is being paid to the latest plan's rollout.

"Whatever the president does, it is still up to the Iraqis to make or break it themselves. So let's not put any more spotlight on this decision any more than those in the past, which sadly have not been good ones," he says.

As Bush outlines his new Iraq strategy, he may well mention the new U.S. airstrikes in Somalia that targeted Islamic extremists.

He can cite the war on terrorism's multiple fronts. It fits in with his fight-them-abroad-not-at-home thesis. Administration allies suggest the United States withdrawal from Somalia in 1993 helped strengthen the al-Qaida terror network.

"Just as the Soviet defeat in Afghanistan emboldened and enlarged al-Qaida, just as our withdrawal from Somalia encouraged them to go find more targets, our defeat in Iraq would expand the numbers of terrorists and embolden them to seek new strategic targets," said Rep. Mac Thornberry of Texas, a Republican member of the House Armed Services Committee.

Analysts and lawmakers have mixed views on whether Bush can do anything to turn the tide in Iraq. Some say it's possible, but that the odds are low after nearly four years of war.

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ROCKY MOUNTAIN
NEWS-NEWS

Tom Raum has covered national and international affairs for The Associated Press since 1973. Send comments to letters@thejournalnet.com.