

Opinion

Rural America fighting

By Thomas D. Rowley

I readily admit to being a half-empty-glass kind of guy. All season long, for example, I just knew my beloved Texas Longhorns would fumble their quest for the national championship. Even now, I half expect the crown to be yanked away on some technicality-like the fact that our MVP quarterback was down when he made that touchdown-scoring lateral.

Ordinarily, such a gloomy outlook fits well with writing about rural America. After all, rural people and places have gotten the short end of the stick for so long that it's hard to be anything but pessimistic. And at first blush, Congress's cutting of rural programs last month is yet one more example.

In a nutshell, faced with the task of reducing spending in order to pay for tax cuts for the wealthy, wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and some (though surely not enough) help for the hurricane-ravaged Gulf Coast, Congress passed annual spending bills that resulted in the first net reduction of domestic discretionary spending since the Reagan era. And now it has passed a budget reconciliation bill that cuts an additional \$40 billion over the next five years.

The impacts on rural America from these measures lend themselves to my usual rural perspective. The reconciliation bill cuts several programs that invest in rural community and economic development; guts the Conservation Reserve Program that protects natural resources; and reduces programs that promote renewable energy. Likewise, the appropriations bill for the Departments of Labor and Health and Human Services goes a long way toward dismantling the safety net that provides health care to underserved folks in rural and other areas. It cuts programs that pay for rural emergency services, train the next generation of rural health care providers and place medical personnel in areas that otherwise would have few if any.

Worse, the amount of money saved on the backs of rural America is a mere pittance in the grand fiscal scheme of things, but a pittance that makes a world of difference in small, resource-strapped rural communities.

OK so maybe the glass isn't half empty; maybe it's bone dry. But it's a new year and I'm trying my best to be upbeat. So here's the half-full side of the story. Bad as all that is, it could have been-and very nearly was-a lot worse.

Without getting into details, Congress-in conference committee-initially voted for a Labor and Health and Human Services spending bill with even more draconian cuts to rural health. This would have cut two-thirds from a desperately needed program that helps rural providers reach out to underserved folks and eliminated funds for the Office of Rural Health Policy (ORHP) and rural health research-a move that would have silenced the rural voice and analysis in federal health policy decisions in this country.

According to CEO of the National Rural Health Association Alan Morgan, "Without ORHP, many of the programs would have gone to agencies that don't know rural. You can't overstate the importance of an inside voice for rural."

Determined to reverse those cuts, NRHA urged its 10,000 members to phone, fax, and email and buttonhole their representatives to tell them that, "a vote for the bill was a vote against rural America." As one Washington insider told me, "Rural finally started playing hardball." And it worked. Citing the damage to rural health, six Republican representatives braved party lines and voted no. For the first time in 10 years, the conference committee report was rejected. Funding for the outreach program, ORHP and research was restored. (Disclosure: As a freelancer, I've written books and reports for NRHA but had nothing to do with this campaign.)

As Morgan told me, "This is a multi-billion dollar bill that was stopped over rural health care. Hundreds of other organizations wanted increases and the only one that got funding restored was rural."

"That's pretty freaking amazing," said the insider. Yes, rural America took another budgetary body blow (health included, which only got back \$64 million of the \$200 million cut, albeit a very important \$64 million). Yes, those cuts will only continue. But rural America stood up and Congress finally noticed. A small but symbolic victory was gained. And I figure that's worth a toast-even with a half-full glass.

Thomas D. Rowley, is a Rural Policy Research Institute (RUPRI) Fellow. The Rural Policy Research Institute provides objective analysis and facilitates public dialogue concerning the impacts of public policy on rural people and places. www.rupri.org.

Comments to any opinions expressed on this page are encouraged. Mail them to the Colby Free Press, 155 W. 5th St., Colby, Kan., 67701. Or e-mail jvannostrand@nwkansas.com or pdecker@nwkansas.com.

BRACKINS RICHMOND TIMES-DISPATCH 2/16



A LINE IN THE SAND

Principal deserves a pat on the back

I'm proud of one of Hoxie's own.

Hoxie High School Principal Gary Johnson took the bull by the horn and sponsored a random breath testing program at last Saturday's winter Snoball dance. Johnson said Wednesday of the estimated 127 students who attended the dance, 43 were tested, none of which tested positive for alcohol.

Johnson said since the inception of the program a couple months ago - its first in a north-west Kansas high school - he's had very few naysayers come about it.

After the city decided to wait on participating, Johnson went ahead and purchased a \$500 breath testing machine and became a one-man force to curb underage drinking at dances. He said having support of his staff and school board made his job much easier.

Hats off to Principal Gary Johnson!

A mercury spill closed a classroom in one wing of Decatur County High School last Friday.

Yep, right there on the front page was a photo of guys decked out in disposable suits who are members of the Red Willow Western Fire Department hazardous materials crew from McCook, Neb.

The mercury spill, as it was reported, was caused by a large glass thermometer breaking and spilling its contents all over the floor in tiny silver beads.

Not only was the haz mat team called in, so was the Environmental Protection Agency to run air tests to determine whether it was safe for students to return to the building.

Wow, all this fuss over mercury. Times sure have changed.

I remember back about 40 years when my mom couldn't understand why our family was breaking so many thermometers. It was because my older sister and I found out how cool it was to roll



Jan Katz Ackerman

• From Where I stand

a bead of mercury around in the palm of our hand.

Yep, we two girls were breaking open the thermometers, saving the contents in an old medicine bottle and bringing it out during times of boredom.

Shame on us it seems. It's a wonder the EPA didn't raid our house.

At one point, we'd secured a ball of mercury about 1-inch in diameter. When we weren't rolling it around in our hands, we'd take a kitchen knife and cut it in pieces and play marbles with it.

Oh yes, we were sneaky about it, hiding the medicine bottle where mom couldn't notice it. I don't think she ever learned the cause of the missing and broken thermometers.

Hum, maybe that's why my sister has succumbed to some quite unusual health problems. Maybe the EPA's on to something. You think?

Monday we take a day to remember and pay honor to the men who have served as President of the United States.

To date, our nation has had 43 presidents. And, to date, there have been 58 guys who wanted to be President of the United States. These men are by no means forgotten, as they are honored in their own right, right here in Kansas at the They Also Ran Museum in Norton.

The museum is located on the mezzanine of

the First State Bank and was started in 1965 by the bank's former owner and president, W.W. Rouse. A history buff, Rouse had just finished reading Irving Stone's book, "They Also Ran" and he wanted to do something for the candidates who lost.

Wood frames display portraits from the Library of Congress of each man who has taken a stab and failed to become our President.

Thomas Jefferson, the Sage of Monticello, holds the honor of being the first Also Ran. Defeated by John Adams in 1796, the gallery is complete through John Forbes Kerry who lost to George W. Bush in 2004.

Open during regular bank hours, the time I toured the gallery I was given a small book which outlines a brief history of each presidential candidate.

What I found interesting about the book was that not only the names, along with birth and death dates in applicable instances, were listed, but so too were the nicknames of each man. Jefferson's (1743-1826) mentioned above is only one of many nicknames listed.

For instance, there's Aaron Burr's (1756-1836) nickname... "Vengeance is Mine." After his defeat by Jefferson, Burr became vice-president. While second in command, Burr made enemies with Alexander Hamilton after declaring for Governor of New York. De-nounced by Hamilton, Burr vengefully challenged him to a duel, at the time a legitimate way of settling disputes. Hamilton was killed, ruining Burr's political career.

Also a "second in command," it sounds like Vice President Dick Cheney's political career is in question too after last weekend's hunting mishap. I'll bet Cheney ends up with his own place in history after this mess.

Your turn

Committed to social justice, human rights

Cathy Gordon, Director of the Max Pickerill Lecture Series Colby Community College

Shortly before the holidays I was informed that Jim Wallis, author of the bestselling book, "God's Politics" would not be coming to Colby as a speaker in the Max Pickerill Lecture Series.

Needless to say I tried everything I could think of to convince him to change his mind but after Hurricane Katrina he decided to take a new course. I was very disappointed, as I am sure are many of you, and I apologize from the bottom of my heart. It took some time to find a replacement speaker for Wallis but I believe we have been able to secure a speaker who is just as committed to social justice and human rights. Dr. William Schulz is the Executive Director of Amnesty International, a Nobel Prize-winning activist organization with over 1.8 million mem-

bers worldwide.

In the organization's own word's, "Amnesty International undertakes research and action focused on preventing and ending grave abuses of the rights to physical and mental integrity, freedom of conscience and expression, and freedom from discrimination, within the context of its work to promote all human rights."

An ordained Unitarian Universalist minister, Dr. Schulz has headed Amnesty International since 1994 leading Amnesty mission tours to Liberia, Northern Ireland, and most recently Darfur, Sudan, to help redress the humanitarian crisis in that region.

He has appeared frequently on radio and television, including "60 Minutes," "20/20," "The Today Show," "Good Morning, America," "All Things Considered," "Talk of the Nation," "ABC World News," "Larry King Live," "Nightline," "Politically Incorrect," and on the

BBC, CNN, MSNBC, CNBC, FOX News and Bloomberg News.

He has published and is quoted widely in newspapers and magazines, including the "New York Times," "The Washington Post," "Christian Science Monitor," "New York Review of Books," "The Nation," "The National Interest and Parade" and is the author of several books, including "In Our Own Best Interests: How Defending Human Rights Benefits Us All" (Beacon Press, 2002) and "Tainted Legacy: 9/11 and the Ruin of Human Rights" (Nation Books, 2003).

On Monday, March 6, at 7 p.m. in the Cultural Arts Center, Dr. Schulz will present the lecture, "Terror, Torment, and Tyranny: The State of Human Rights Today."

If you have any questions regarding the lecture please contact me at Colby Community College, 462-3984 ext 310.

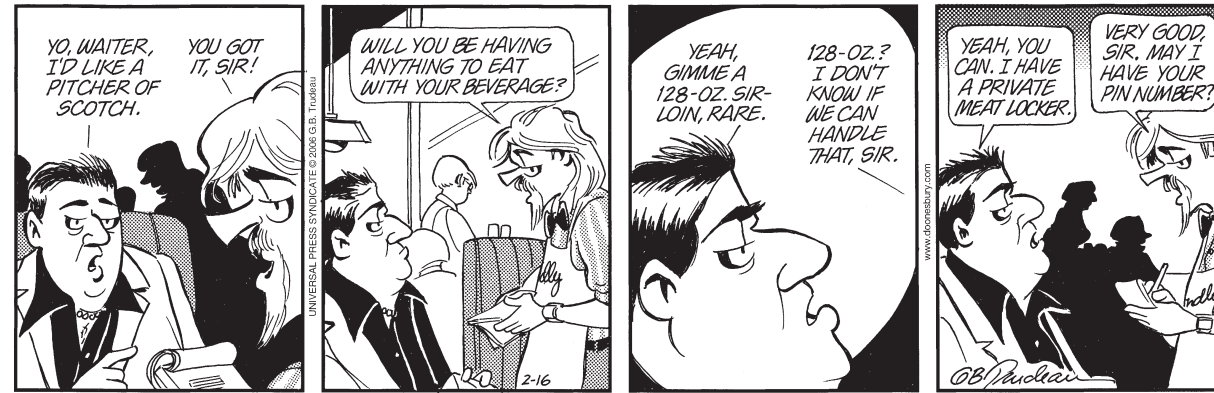
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