

Opinion

A Kansas Viewpoint

Kansas State is trying to find fuel

From The Topeka Capital-Journal
 There is evidence that Americans are responding to \$3 a gallon gasoline by driving less and switching to more fuel-efficient vehicles.
 But that saving is offset by the increasing demand for petroleum in countries such as China and India, where more people are making enough money to buy cars. That trend is expected to keep pushing the cost of gasoline upward above \$3.

So, short of taking drastic measures to force Americans to use less fuel, the answer is to find other fuels that aren't based on petroleum. And our own Kansas State University just might be on the track to finding such a fuel source.

A group of researchers led by Bikram Gill has been awarded a \$700,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to find materials other than corn that could be used to produce the petroleum alternative ethanol.

The concept behind the KSU study is the vast amount of energy that is released into the atmosphere as prairie pastures are burned off each spring — energy that might be used to power modern civilization.

Gill warns that being able to make use of the grass residue and woody brush as ethanol isn't likely to happen any time soon. There are some chemical and financial obstacles to overcome.

The chemical challenge is that the cellulose in plants is more difficult to break down into usable chemicals than are the basic sugars in corn. ... The financial challenge contains several parts. Any system for breaking down plant cellulose for ethanol will be useless if the process is too expensive — at least until some day in the future when petroleum prices rise high enough to justify that high cost.

Another financial challenge will be in retaining or regaining the benefit to pasture owners that comes from the burnoffs. But it's important that the research on alternatives begins now and we're proud to know that Kansas State is involved.

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@nwkansan.com or pdecker@nwkansan.com. Opinions do not necessarily reflect the *Free Press*.

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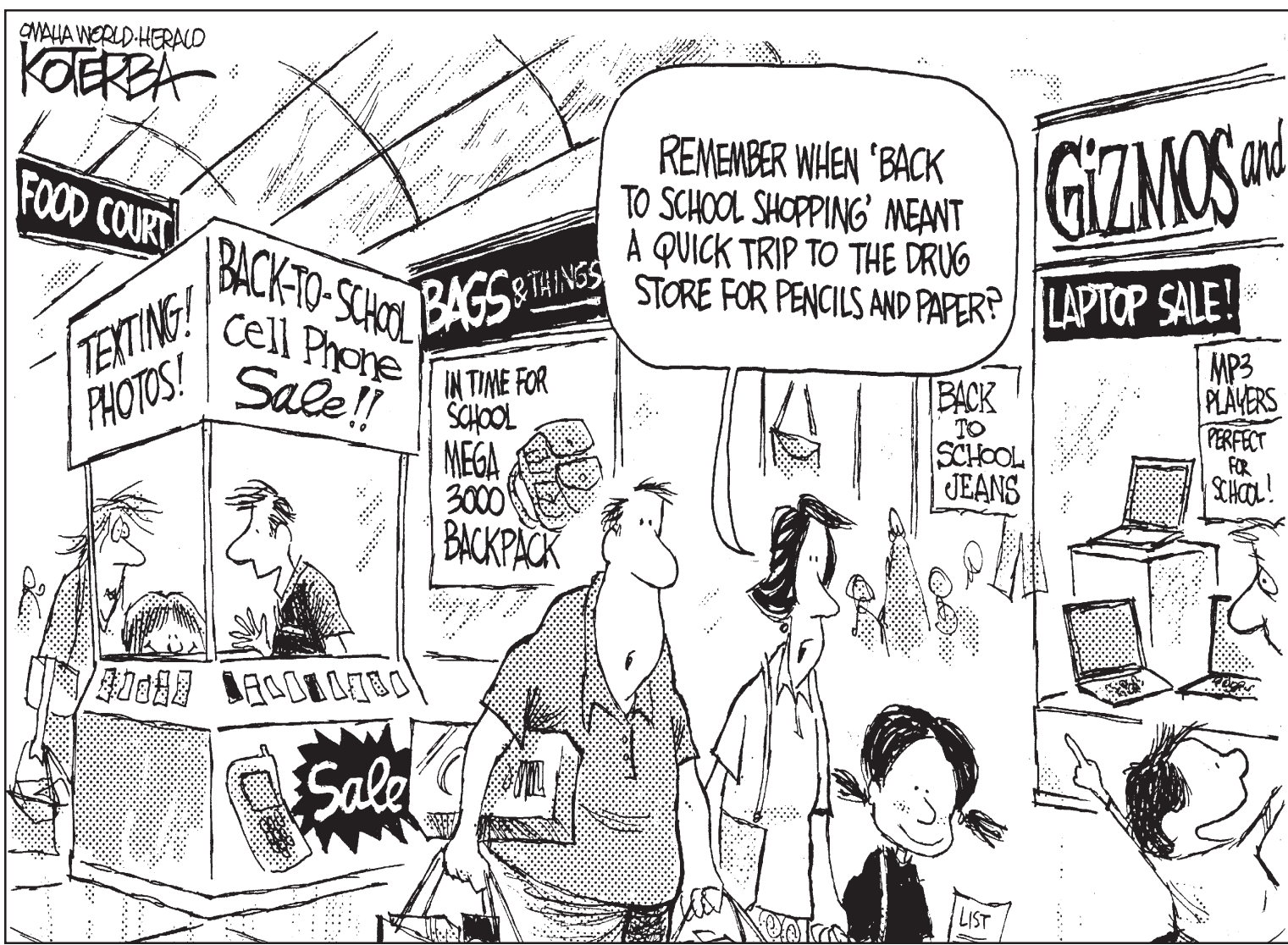
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The cost of living

The campaign trail made its way to northwest Kansas this week with visits to Colby by Senators Pat Roberts and Sam Brownback.

Having followed both men's careers over the years, I've watched Roberts, since he got out of Dodge, city that is, in 1980 when elected to Congress succeeding Norton County's son Keith Sebelius.

Roberts on Monday didn't like being asked why the federal government wasn't more responsible about setting aside tax dollars to pay for wars such as the one in Iraq.

He said an emergency supplemental amendment is paying for the war. Don't kid yourself, in layman's language a supplemental amendment means higher taxes.

Roberts defended making people pay back money under the Bankruptcy Abuse Prevention and Consumer Protection Act of 2005, calling the two topic apples and oranges.

Referring to the topics as "sour apples" and oranges is a far cry from reality on Roberts' part. Sure, some of the 2,078,415 bankruptcies filed in 2005 were done by people wanting to avoid debt repayment.

But I'd bet a year's pay most people filing for bankruptcy did so as their last straw.

Divorce or medical bills from catastrophic illness such as cancer or heart disease or not having insurance at all, by being a poor steward of God's blessings and a long list of other factors force people to the bankruptcy courts.

Last year's bankruptcy reform won't help people it will further hurt many of those who filed.

I'd beg the federal government to do some research to find out how many people commit suicide because of the helplessness they feel because of debt.

Legislators, including Roberts, would look at people in a different light if widows and widow-



Jan Katz Ackerman

• From Where I stand

ers would step forward and tell their stories.

As for the war, the cost in human lives is something no one can put a dollar amount to. But according to a study done by the Bush Administration, the war in Iraq could cost American taxpayers far more than \$2 trillion. A Marine Corps spokeswoman, Lt. Col. Roseann Lynch, told the international news organization Reuters the war costs the United States \$4.5 billion dollars a month.

And Columbia University economist Joseph E. Stiglitz and Harvard lecturer Linda Bilmes said U.S. taxpayers will be burdened for the cost of the war long after the troops come home.

But the war costs pale to the U.S. national debt which as of this writing on Tuesday was at \$8,507,940,283,002. That figure increases an average of \$1.76 billion per day. Spread over the nation's estimated population of 299,352,018 means each and every American is in debt \$28,421.

I know Roberts believes he's doing the best he can for American taxpayers, but our government forcing people further into debt is hogwash.

While I support the war against terrorism, the time has come when we all have to stop and see this war for what it is — a holy war.

Like Roberts said, the terrorists think of Americans as merely dust and of no value. But stopping there is stopping far short of the mark.

It was unions that built the middle class

By Richard A. Levins

As Labor Day approaches, it's time for an honest assessment of where working people are. Wages, even for college graduates, are falling behind inflation. The number of families in poverty is growing. The middle-class debt load is off the charts and the personal savings rate is below zero. The costs of a college education, of health insurance, of energy for heating and driving, and of pharmaceuticals grow out of reach for more Americans with each passing day.

What economists call the "income distribution" is, from a middle class perspective, as bad as it has been since the Great Depression. During the Roaring '20s, the split between rich and poor grew exceptionally large, leaving relatively few in the middle class. In the decades following the Depression, things began to change for the better as income and wealth became more evenly distributed. But now we are back to where we were as the nation stood on the brink of its greatest economic catastrophe ever. The very rich are richer than ever, but the rest of us are falling behind at an increasingly rapid pace.

The history of labor unions in America helps tell the story of why we are losing the middle class. Private-sector unionization was legislated during the Depression. Union membership grew into the mid-20th century, then began a slow decline that continues today. Remember the in-

come distribution numbers: a weak middle class in the Depression, a strong middle class in the decades following, and a weakening middle class now. The way these numbers generally track those for union activity is no coincidence.

Unions equalize power in the market place between those who work and those who own something. Those who work are the stuff of which the middle class is made. Those who own fill the ranks of the very wealthy. When the balance of power is with labor unions, the gains from production stay with the middle class. When the balance shifts as it has today, the very wealthy take an ever-larger share from economic activity.

As the very wealthy become even more so, they do not spend money in the way middle-class people do. After all, how many houses and cars, no matter how fine, can one have? Once people have more money than they can possibly spend on goods and services, they no longer use it in ways that stimulate the economy. Instead, they use the power their money brings to get more tax breaks, less regulation, more support for globalization, and policies that favor capital over labor. The middle class continues to weaken.

In spite of all this, we are told not to worry, because the United States is becoming what some politicians call an "ownership society."

Instead of supporting unions that bring decent wages to working people, we are advised to buy shares in the corporations that profit when wages are falling. Meanwhile, we ignore the most important aspect of our economy — that we are a great market for goods and services.

The trouble with all strategies that trade good jobs for cheap toasters is that they eventually erode that very market for the goods and services. A handful of hyper-wealthy individuals, along with millions of people living on the economic edge, are not the sound, stable market needed for growth. Only the middle class, with buying power widely distributed, can provide that. And that is what we are losing today.

This Labor Day, let's remember that rebalancing power in the economy is essential if the middle class is to thrive. Doing this, however, will require more than our government alone reasonably can be expected to deliver. We must act together in the marketplace as well. The way to do that is the way we have always done it — to join and support the unions that built the middle class in the first place.

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Mallard Fillmore

• Bruce Tinsley

