

Opinion



**Free Press
Viewpoint**

At the trough

By Steve Haynes

The great expansion of federal spending in the name of "Homeland Security" is nothing short of scary.

Cities and counties today get money for things they used to just assume were part of their jobs, and while money's always nice to have, you'd think some of these things never got done before.

The much-maligned Federal Emergency Management Agency has been pouring money into Kansas, as with other states, for everything from weather damage to emergency gear.

There's money for planning for "bioterrorism," whatever that means, to fire trucks and hard hats for emergency crews. Most years, there's so much money to be had, the county has to go out and look for something to spend it on.

Heaven help us if some of the money has to be sent back to the feds.

Some of these things would be done whether the feds were giving us money or not. If the old fire truck wears out, we'll probably find money to replace it. If there's a federal grant, then it might be done a little sooner.

Other things, like generators for small-town emergency shelters, well those towns got by without them for a century. They might make it for another 100 years. People don't usually stay in shelters too long here, or without power, for that matter.

It's not that these things aren't all nice to have. Everyone knows that federal money is "free money," money that commissioners and council members don't have to raise taxes to get.

It is taxpayers' money, of course, and not to be wasted, but everyone agrees, if we don't spend it, the feds will just give it to some other town or county. They never give it back to the taxpayers, that's for sure.

So for decades now, the battle cry of local government has been to "get a grant." If you can get a grant, you don't have to pay for it.

But free money isn't always free. For one thing, "free" equipment has to be replaced. Often there's no grant for that. It's like the old police grants where the federal money paid to hire and train a new officer to hunt for drugs or drunk drivers. When the grant ran out, the city or county was expected to — gasp — pay the guy's salary.

Or take the "free" vehicle a county picked up a few years back. It was seized by the sheriff after a drug arrest. No one ever claimed it. The incumbent ambulance chief asked if he could use it as a "chase" car.

Well, it was free, wasn't it?

Until the car started to wear out. By then, it had become an essential part of the ambulance service. The county spent thousands to buy another.

That's where free will get you.

So with the Federal Emergency Management Agency pumping money into the state every time a storm hits, whether it's millions to rebuild Greensburg, or a few thousand to reimburse counties for plowing the roads, public officials line up at the trough.

Never mind that FEMA couldn't even find New Orleans when the chips were down. Today, they're our friends.

It's hard to believe that just a few years ago, the cities and counties and maybe even the state would have paid for these things themselves — or maybe we'd have gone without.

You have to wonder where this road is leading us, but we suspect it is no place good. Even free money has strings attached. And eventually, we'll know what those are. Loss of freedom. Local decision-making power. Priorities set by "mandate," whatever that means.

Local governments run just to get federal dollars. But they'll be "free." — Steve Haynes, president of Nor'West Newspapers

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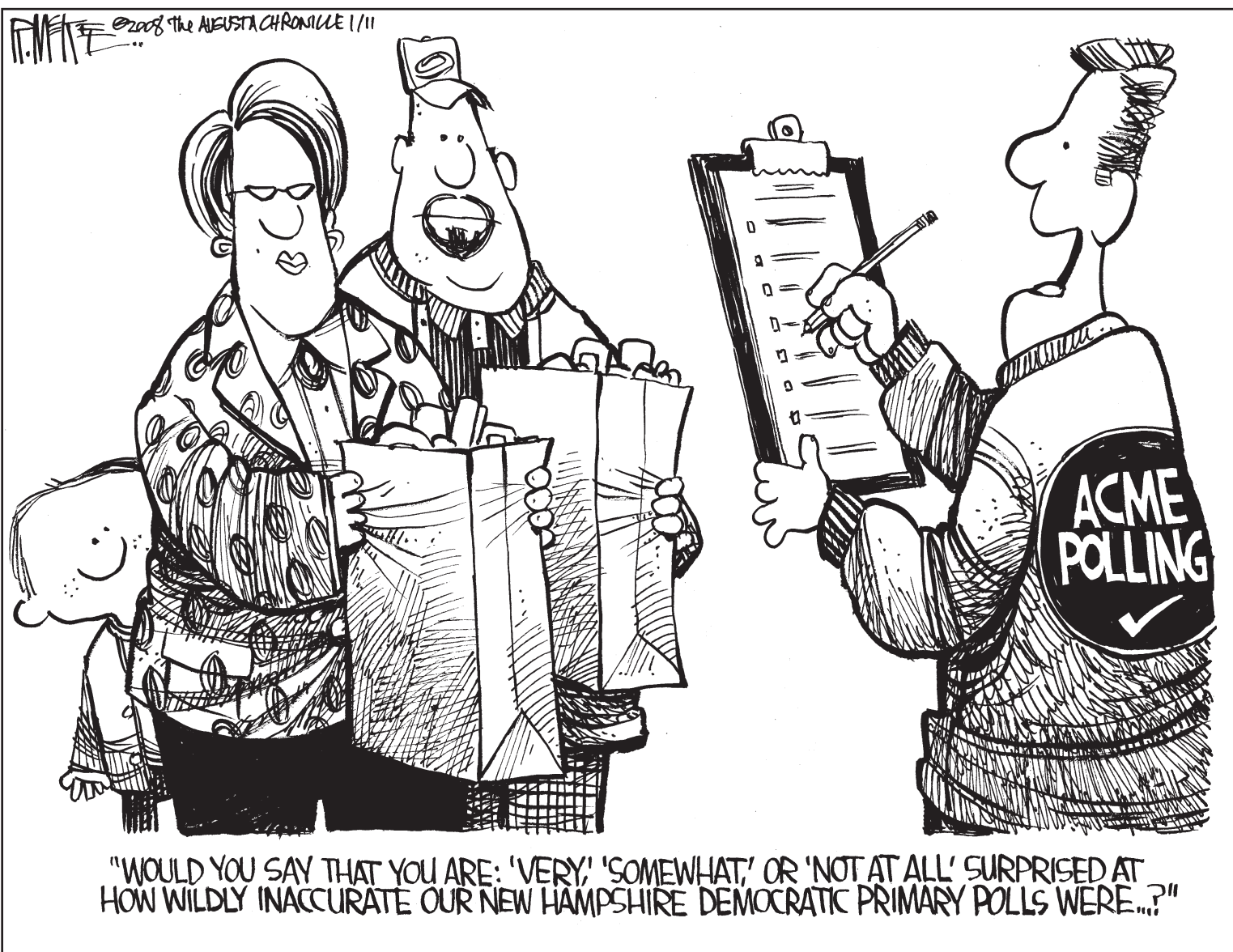
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Republicans



Kevin Johnson

• Tales from a Colorado import

I took a rip at the Democratic candidates last week, so in the name of "fair and balanced" journalism, I feel it would only be fair and balanced of me to take a rip at the Republican candidates this week, and then I promise to go back to writing vaguely humorous nonsense and only slightly offensive gibberish for a while. But for now, ladies and gentlemen, a look at the 2008 Republican hopefuls...

With "Change" spilling from the mouths of Democrats like fresh saliva it is no wonder that Change Fever is now spewed like noxious word vomit from the mouths of every Republican. However, calling any of the Republican candidates a "candidate of change" is like calling Mark Mangino a health nut.

For example, their reactions to Primary results have been eerily similar, though slightly varied: John McCain, winner of New Hampshire's Republican Primary, gave his victory speech and then promptly left the stage and stole a celebratory lollipop out of the clutches of a crying infant. Mitt Romney had a box of lollipops flown in from his lollipop factory in Massachusetts, built for just such an occasion, after Tuesday's win in Michigan. Rudy Giuliani has instructed a gaggle of his jackbooted thugs to shake down grade school kids until he has enough candy to feel powerful again, after repeatedly being "no show" in every contest thus far in 2008, which has left many inside Giuliani's own campaign to wonder, "why bother?"

The point is that the majority of these candidates are indistinguishable from one another, which has led to such polarizing finishes for Republican candidates over the last few weeks. This is the only reason that explains why McCain can finish with 13 percent of the vote in Iowa and then turn around finish with 37 percent in New Hampshire. Neither issues nor change seem to matter much in the 2008 race for the Republican nomination, it has simply been a state-by-state popularity contest with all the candidates spouting the same, though slightly varied, jibber-jabber. Giuliani talks about 9-11 like Romney talks about the

Olympics, like McCain talks about his time as a POW in Vietnam. There is little difference between the candidates on policy or between the front-running candidates and the current administration.

It seemed as if the only hope for the "change" desired in the Republican Party might be Mike Huckabee, who essentially came out of nowhere to win the Republican Caucus in Iowa. The difference between Huckabee and the other candidates, besides his "populist", minimal government, "true conservatism" message, lies in the fact that he doesn't have the bankroll his deep-pocketed competitors have and, because of this, he essentially has nothing to lose. Huckabee isn't funded by any agenda other than his own, which means he is less likely to be swayed if he receives the nomination. Whether you agree with his message or not, Huckabee is a fresh face on a scene that is looking more and more like the same processed mugs we have seen since Regan and may be the only hope for actual "change" on the Right.

But as the campaign winds on, Huckabee, seeing that his bid for a presidential nomination isn't entirely out of the question, has become more and more willing to bend over backwards and renege on himself in order to fall in line with the same time tested methods that seems to always merit a presidential nomination for the G.O.P. He now takes swings at his opponents like an old prizefighter and claims that he will send those who oppose the United States to "the gates of hell", spewing vengeful religious rhetoric like a member of the current administration.

When Huckabee broke into the scene he was hailed as the "nice guy" candidate, and

was viewed as being soft by the media because he refused to personally attack Mittens Romney as Romney repeatedly berated Huckabee personally during debates and through TV commercials. Huckabee has since broken the silence and during recent Republican debates hasn't hesitated to go after his opponents with the ferocity of a rabid pit bull in heat, capitalizing on the mud slinging that has become an all too familiar facet of any federal election.

And it isn't even like I can blame Huckabee all that much, he is simply playing the game by the dirty rules that this particular game has been played by for over 200 years. But the thing is, at least as I was lead to believe, Huckabee heralded himself as being a candidate that was above all of that. And I suppose hopes that Huckabee will get a sudden dose of his own morality are probably too much to ask. When power is suddenly in reach, we become akin to sharks in bloody waters: frenzied, thrashing around and baring our fangs at anyone and anything who might stand in our way. I still like Huckabee the best out of the Republican nominations, but am slightly disappointed in him, though not surprised. Instead of separating himself from the pack he has assimilated and become one of them; maybe not the alpha male like a Romney or a McCain but he is vying for the spot, and can no longer be counted on to take the highroad. Huckabee has made it clear over the past two weeks that he will not hesitate to sink his teeth into any open wound gushing, or simply leaking, blood like all the other sharks swimming in the water.

Next Week: The Cookie Carlton Story: A sad and strange saga of a Bear Wrestling Champion... A made for TV movie in print about heartbreak and redemption that will tug at the soul of even the most cynical... an epic ode to a Thomas County legend in four parts...

Kevin Johnson is a reporter for the Free Press.

Kansas needs new energy vision

The Wichita Eagle

The Kansas Legislature is gearing up for a potentially nasty and unproductive session on energy, with some lawmakers vowing to overturn the Sebelius administration's denial of the Holcomb coal-plant expansion.

Before they get too up in arms, though, they might want to check with their constituents.

A recent statewide poll found that by a 2-1 majority, Kansas voters support the Kansas Department of Health and Environment's rejection of the project because of its estimated 11 million tons of annual greenhouse gas emissions.

In fact, 42 percent "strongly agree" with the decision, compared with just 18 percent who said they "strongly disagree," according to the survey.

The supporters include a majority of both Democrats and Republicans and 51 percent of residents of western Kansas.

Moreover, 75 percent of Kansas voters said they want more aggressive development of wind power in the state — which the coal plant might have pushed out of the market. Some lawmakers rushed to dismiss the survey, saying it was commissioned by an environmental group (true, Salina's Land Institute) and conducted by a national Democratic polling firm that Gov. Kathleen Sebelius has used (true again)...

But there's nothing to indicate the poll was leading or biased. The wording was neutral and fair.

Sebelius last week made another move most Kansans will support in launching the Wind Power Working Group, a task force of

wind stakeholders, from utility executives to environmentalists to ranchers, that will chart how best to harness the state's enormous wind potential. ...

There are valid concerns from business about regulatory uncertainty in the wake of Holcomb — although there's scant evidence it's hurting the state's business climate, which the Kansas Chamber of Commerce has claimed.

For their part, Sebelius and KDHE need to clarify where they are heading with greenhouse gas regulation and how businesses might be affected.

But instead of indulging in unproductive payback on Holcomb, lawmakers could better serve their constituents by sitting down with Sebelius and reasoning together on a new energy vision for Kansas.

Mallard Fillmore

• Bruce Tinsley

