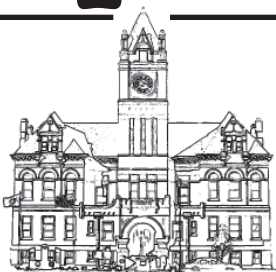


Opinion



Another Viewpoint

Helping the poor

By William A. Collins

Minuteman Media

Poverty, Remains a curse; Government, Just makes it worse. When Jesus alerted us that we would forever have personal responsibility for the poor, He probably hadn't foreseen Sweden. The Swedes seem to have pretty much licked the problem. Neither did He mean, presumably, that government policy ought to promote the growth of poverty so as to create even more wretched people.

But unfortunately, that's just what both our federal and state governments do. Take taxes. In Connecticut, middle-income workers expend about 10 percent of their salaries on various tax levies.

The poor pay even more, 10.9 percent. The rich, by contrast, only fork over 4.7 percent.

Other public policies follow a similarly skewed path. Even our bitterly contested minimum wage laws don't impose a high enough pay scale for anyone to live on. Neither do they cover the armies of workers engaged in farming or domestic service.

Those luckless folk are on their own. Likewise for housing. The biggest federal subsidy goes not to the poor, but to the upper-middle class. It's a tax deduction for their mortgage interest (the larger the mortgage the bigger the subsidy). If you're poorer, instead of a no-questions-asked tax deduction, you may or may not qualify for a federally guaranteed home loan.

And if you're a renter, your odds for help are dimmer yet. No subsidies, and we haven't built significant subsidized housing since WWII. Yes, there are still antique public units around in some places, and Section 8 certificates are available in others, but nowhere near enough to go around. Losers in this game are also on their own. Nor do our various governments look kindly on organized labor. Many states prohibit unions outright and the federal government makes organizing one a truly harrowing process. It's true that America doesn't countenance murdering labor leaders here as we do in, say, Colombia or El Salvador, but firing them is still common.

The poor continue to get poorer, not due either to sloth or stupidity, but due to government policy.

Over the last 20 years the income of the bottom fifth of Nutmeggers actually fell by 17 percent. Don't even ask how much the income of the top fifth went up.

It's obscene. And now with this current spurt in fuel cost and the resultant increase in food prices, the stress on American families has further intensified.

The poor naturally get the worst of it. Suffering here is palpable and in the Third World, it is fatal. It's hard to imagine that this course of events is what Jesus had in mind. Is the job of humanity to separate further humans into the few rich and the many poor? It would be hard to build a religion or a social movement around a principle like that.

Maybe the coming election will change our course, though it's doubtful. The Democrats have been nearly as corporate-friendly as the Republicans. Probably only a big congressional sweep could alter our landscape of greed, but it may be that America is finally ready.

Columnist William A. Collins is a former state representative and a former mayor of Norwalk, Connecticut. For questions or to comment on the above editorial, contact: www.minutemanmedia.org

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COLBY FREE PRESS
 155 W. Fifth (USPS 120-920) (785) 462-3963
 Colby, Kan. 67701

State award-winning newspaper, General Excellence, Design & Layout Excellence, Column Writing, Editorial Writing, Sports Columns, News, Photography.
 Official newspaper of Thomas County, Colby, Brewster and Rexford.

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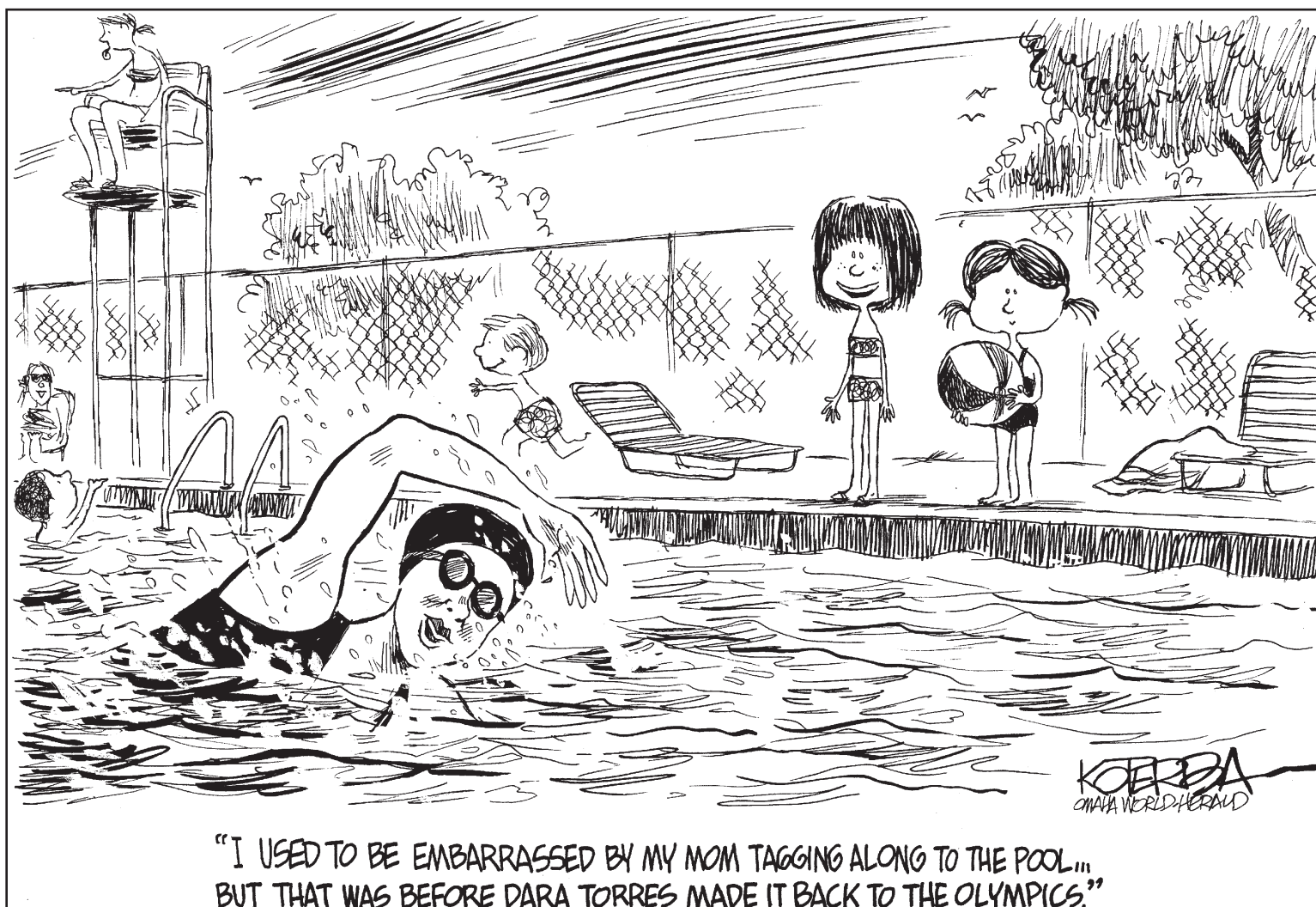
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THE COLBY FREE PRESS (USPS 120-920) is published every Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, except the day observed for Memorial Day, Independence Day, Labor Day, Thanksgiving Day, Christmas Day and New Year's Day, by Haynes Publishing Co., 155 W. Fifth, Colby, Kan., 67701.

PERIODICALS POSTAGE is paid at Colby, Kan. 67701, and at additional mailing offices. **POSTMASTER:** Send address changes to The Colby Free Press, 155 W. Fifth, Colby, Kan., 67701.

THE BUSINESS OFFICE at 155 W. Fifth is open from 8 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Monday to Friday, closed Saturday and Sunday. MEMBER OF THE ASSOCIATED PRESS, which is exclusively entitled to the use for publication of all news credited to it or not otherwise herein. Member Kansas Press Association, Inland Press Association and National Newspaper Association.

SUBSCRIPTION RATES: In Colby by carrier: 4 months \$40, 8 months \$56, 12 months \$74. By mail within Colby and the nine-county region of Thomas, Sheridan, Decatur, Rawlins, Cheyenne, Sherman, Wallace, Logan and Gove counties: 4 months \$53, 8 months \$65, 12 months \$82. Other Kansas counties: 4 months \$60, 8 months \$70, 12 months \$85. All other states, \$85, 12 months.



Human rights and the Olympics

Like the athletes set to compete at the Beijing Olympics this summer, volunteers for the upcoming games have been in training — smile training.

Carefully groomed hostesses practice their posture, posing and the “eight-tooth smile” by standing with books on their heads, sheets of paper between their knees, and chopsticks clenched in their teeth. China has been polishing the city like this in anticipation of the 2008 games for years. The government has spent millions on elaborate new buildings, cut traffic to decrease air pollution, and hand-selected citizens to interface with spectators. But not everyone is smiling.

Just days before the Olympics opening ceremonies, Shi Tao, a Chinese journalist and poet, will celebrate his 40th birthday in jail. He is currently serving a 10-year sentence for doing something that most of us do daily—sending an e-mail. In April 2004, Shi Tao sent an e-mail to a U.S.-based pro-democracy Web site. The e-mail, sent through his Yahoo account, summarized a government order directing Chinese media to downplay the 15th anniversary of the 1989 crackdown on pro-democracy activists in Tiananmen Square.

Four months later, police arrested Shi Tao, charging him with “illegally providing state secrets to foreign entities.” China’s vaguely worded legal definition of what constitutes a “state secret” gives authorities broad discretion to detain people who peacefully exercise their right to free expression. So, in April 2005, Shi Tao was convicted, based on account-holder

information provided by Yahoo, and sentenced to 10 years in prison. Shi Tao’s case is not an aberration. At least 50 people are currently imprisoned in China for peacefully exercising their right to freedom of expression by receiving and imparting information via the Internet. These detentions are possible because of China’s extensive Internet surveillance and censorship project. The project has been used consistently to flout the right to freedom of expression, a constitutionally protected right in China.

Known as the “Great Firewall of China,” the system allows the government to block access to sites, filter content, and delete links and Web pages that are considered “dangerous” or “subversive.” All Internet communications pass through government-controlled routers that scan for banned words such as “democracy,” “freedom” and “human rights.” The filtering of the Internet is practiced to silence activists and journalists with dissenting opinions and experts believe that China operates the most extensive, technologically sophisticated, and broad-reaching filtering system in the world. One wonders how China can continue to brand the upcoming Beijing Games as the “High Tech Olympics” with a straight face.

When vying for the nomination to host the Summer 2008 Games, China vowed to reform its human rights record in order to align with the Olympic ideal of preserving human dignity. That commitment includes protecting the right to freedom of expression.

But as the Olympics draw nearer, the vio-

lations surrounding Internet censorship and human rights only seem to be increasing and crackdowns on journalists have become commonplace. But the finger cannot be pointed at China alone. Several U.S.-based companies, including Yahoo, Google and Microsoft, assisted the Chinese government in these repressive tactics. Yahoo, as illustrated by Shi Tao’s case, has supplied China with user information and all three of these companies have engaged in filtering and blocking content, proving that the protection of human rights, like the Olympics, requires international cooperation.

In highlighting the issue of Internet censorship during the lead-up to the Games, Amnesty International is making several recommendations to promote a positive Chinese Olympic Legacy. First, Chinese officials should ensure that no one is arrested and/or tried for legitimate peaceful use of the Internet. Second, President George W. Bush, who plans to attend the Olympics, should demand the release of those detained for use of the Internet before the start of the Games on Aug. 8. Additionally, information technology companies must publicly commit to protecting freedom of expression. A positive Olympic legacy for China will mean concrete action to end human rights abuses, not simply hiding problems with a pretty face.

T. Kumar is the Asia Advocacy Director for Amnesty International USA. Founded in 1961, Amnesty International is a Nobel Prize winning grassroots activist organization with over one million members worldwide.

No time to backtrack

By John Schlageck

Kansas Farm Bureau

Now is not the time to backtrack on one of the few positives of this nation’s horribly inadequate energy policy. In case you haven’t heard, some lawmakers have set their sites on this nation’s plans to use more renewable fuels.

Here’s what I’m talking about. More than 50 House Republicans joined forces to ask the Environmental Protection Agency to reduce the renewable fuels standard, which requires the nation to use a specific amount of ethanol.

If this country of ours is ever to going to curb its appetite for foreign oil or to move toward the next generation of ethanol and move beyond corn, it must continue moving ahead and not move back.

These lawmakers are blaming ethanol for higher food prices. That’s another mistake.

Those rushing to criticize biofuels as the main culprit for the food crisis gripping the world today always seem to overlook the benefits. Excessive rhetoric has gone so far as to blame biofuels as a “crime against humanity.”

It’s no secret such highly emotional claims make great headlines and sound bites, but they fail to communicate the complex set of factors driving world food prices.

Record prices for oil, natural gas and other energy sources are making it impossible for farmers in Kansas, the United States and around the world to produce food at the same low prices with which we as consumers have for so long taken for granted.

In Europe, diesel fuel used to run the ma-

chinery needed to raise crops, has doubled in price during the last year. In this country, not only has diesel doubled, but so too have all the other inputs like fertilizer (based on fossil fuel) which has risen nearly 400 percent since 1999.

Today, the United States imports 65 percent of its petroleum needs. By 2030, the Energy Information Administration projects the United States will import 70 percent of its petroleum.

Two-thirds of the world’s known oil reserves are located in the volatile Middle East. The United States spends more than \$137 billion a year on military operations securing the safe delivery of oil from the Persian Gulf, according to the president of the National Defense Council Foundation.

It’s also estimated the United States has spent more than \$130 billion during a 32-year period in government subsidies to the oil industry.

The Government Accounting Office says this does not take into account the billions spent since the turn of the century or the money spent to protect our military troops in the Middle East.

Record fuel prices have also made it much more difficult for food aid organizations to deliver much needed assistance. The largest U.S. food aid organization spent 65 percent of its annual budget on transportation costs alone, according to a U.S. Government Accountability Office analysis. The fact that much of this humanitarian food aid is shipped around the world requires an enormous amount of fuel. Biofuel production uses only 3 percent of

the world’s coarse grain supply. On average the world consumes approximately 86 million barrels of oil per day. That figure is predicted to rise to 116 million barrels by 2030, according to the International Energy Association. World oil supplies are expected to stay well above \$100 a barrel in the future with some predicting \$200 per barrel.

After more than three decades of cheap oil, this country and others around the globe have finally come to the conclusion they must curb their thirst for oil and develop other sources of fuel. Biofuels production is the only non-fossil fuel that is helping reduce oil demand today.

If it weren’t for the increasing production of world biofuels producers, oil consumption would expand by 1 million barrels per day, according to a recent International Energy Association report.

Without a doubt biofuel production is not only lowering oil demand, but is also helping mitigate the devastating impacts of volatile oil and gasoline markets.

On a global scale, biofuels are today the single largest contributor to world oil supply growth, according to a senior commodity analyst at Merrill Lynch.

Through the existing ability of agriculture and developing technologies that will improve efficiencies and productivity of farmers and biofuel producers, the food needs of the world can be met and the long journey toward energy security can begin.

Editor’s note: John Schlageck is a leading commentator on agriculture and rural Kansas.

Mallard Fillmore

- Bruce Tinsley

