

Other Viewpoints

Key issues hanging as lawmakers break

Kansans can only hope that state legislators come to their senses in the next three weeks and return to Topeka ready to deal with the many key issues they left unresolved when they left the Capitol last Friday.

Perhaps the most egregious piece of business left unfinished was passage of a supplemental budget bill. This is not the budget for the coming fiscal year; it is an appropriation to help address budget shortfalls for the current year. Passage of the bill on Friday should have been routine. A House-Senate conference committee had agreed on the terms, but when it came time to vote, members of the Kansas House rejected the measure based on how the supplemental funds for public schools should be financed.

There was no disagreement about the amount of the \$24.5 million appropriation, but the governor and the Senate wanted the money to come from the state general fund while the House wanted to take the money from state highway funds. Because of that relatively minor issue, legislators failed to pass the appropriations bill and will have to take it up again when they return to Topeka on April 25.

In the meantime, various state entities will have to figure out how to keep operating without the supplemental funds they needed. In addition to school districts, the appropriations bill also included money to offset shortfalls in docket fees to fund state court operations and income to operate state parks. Chief Justice Lawton Nuss has indicated that without the funding, court employees may be furloughed and courts closed for up to five days. The opening of state parks also may be delayed. The supplemental appropriations also would have addressed caseload increases for nursing homes and Medicaid along with other important services – all of which now are on hold for at least three weeks.

In addition, the Legislature's delay in approving redistricting maps for the Kansas House and Senate and the U.S. House is pushing the state dangerously close to the June 1 filing deadline for legislative and congressional candidates. Those candidates can't file for office or start their campaigns until they know for sure that they live in the district they hope to represent. One of the Senate's last acts before leaving Topeka Friday was to vote down a congressional redistricting map that cut Topeka in two in order to keep Manhattan in the 2nd District.

The Kansas Legislature's spring recess is supposed to come after most of the business of the session is done. The intent is for legislators to return in three weeks mostly to tie up loose ends and consider overriding any vetoes issued by the governor during the break. In recent years, it has become routine for the budget and several other key issues to be left until the "veto session," but, this year, legislators have been unable to agree on just about anything – even the supplemental funding for the current year's budget.

During the next three weeks, Kansans may have an opportunity to speak with some of their state representatives. If they do, they should let them know it's time to step up to the responsibilities that go with the job they were elected to do.

— *The Lawrence Journal-World, via the Associated Press*

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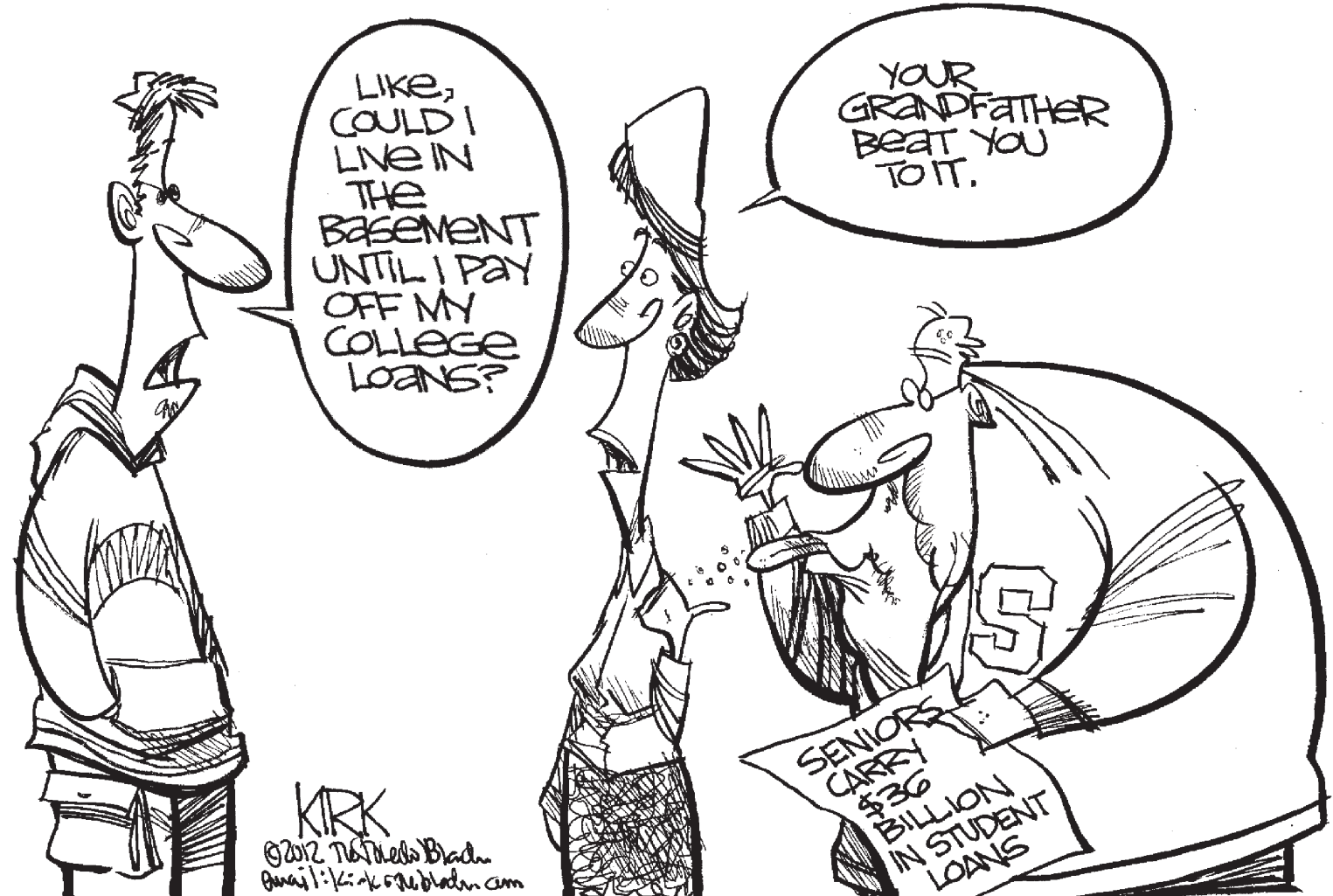
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What can we learn from a tragedy?

Sixteen innocent people, including nine children, brutally murdered. When crimes this sadistic occur, people are usually less than sympathetic towards the alleged killer.

But this case is different; this time the accused is a soldier. Despite being accused of massacring 16 civilians in Afghanistan's Kandahar Province, Sgt. Ronald Bales has elicited sympathy from some Americans, according to an article by the Associated Press.

"I kind of sympathize for him, being sent over there four times," said Beau Britt, who lives across the street from Bales' home in Lake Tapps, Wash. "I can understand he's probably quite wracked mentally, so I just hope that things are justified in court. I hope it goes OK."

Paul Wohlberg, Bales' neighbor, responded in much the same way.

"I just can't believe Bob's the guy who did this," he said. "A good guy got put in the wrong place at the wrong time."

A good guy? Can you think of any other scenario where people would be willing to give the benefit of the doubt to an alleged mass murderer? I can't.

Yet, I confess that I have also been unable to muster the appropriate amount of rage that these hideous acts merit. Maybe it's because it's easy to see how constant exposure to unspeakable violence could destroy a person's



Andy Heintz

• Wildcat Ramblings

capacity to discern right from wrong. It's not hard to believe that a 10-year war veteran, mentally drained from four tours of combat with a conscience that had been dulled by the horrors of war, just snapped.

But there is another possibility that isn't so comforting. It could be that inside Bales lay a long-dormant evilness that the trauma of war finally brought out. We rightfully lionize our troops for their sacrifices, but we have trouble accepting the possibility that a tiny minority of our men and women in uniform might be capable of committing the most hideous acts. But we need to reconcile with the fact that no institution, including the U.S. military, can guarantee that everyone who puts on the uniform is inherently good at heart.

While trying to understand my reaction, a thought occurred to me: what if a similar situation had occurred, but this time American soldiers were the victims and the alleged killer was an Afghani Muslim?

Hypothetically, let's say this man had seen a number of people in his native village killed by NATO air strikes. Then one day an air strike killed several of his family, including his youngest daughter.

His neighbors say he had always been a peaceful, law-abiding family man, but seeing his daughter blown to bits right in front of his eyes had changed him. Tormented by flashbacks of her last moments on earth, he decided to seek revenge on the people he blamed for his daughters' death. So one day he walked into a U.S. military base with a bomb strapped to him, killing the man and 16 soldiers.

How would we react to such a despicable act? Would we honestly examine his grievances, without justifying his actions or, would we blame it on radical Islam, or the "primitive backwardness" of the Afghan people? I'm sorry to say that many would choose the latter.

Bales alleged actions were hideous, but there is nothing wrong with trying to find out what led him to commit such an atrocity. Causation and justification are two different animals. However, if we are going to do this, we need to apply the same standards to everyone.

Andy Heintz, a K-State journalism graduate, loves K-State athletics and fishing, sports and opinion writing.

End of session leaves much undone

Last Friday, the Kansas Legislature adjourned, giving legislators a three-week break. On Wednesday, April 25, we will return to start the veto session.

Traditionally, the only business left would be whether the Legislature would override any of Gov. Brownback's vetoes. This year the Senate has failed to act on the substantive issues of redistricting maps and the mega budget bill.

The House and Senate agreed on many issues in the omnibus budget bill, but 36 items were put off until the veto session. Because Appropriations Chair Mark Rhoades discovered late in the day Friday the agreement reached on Thursday was not reflected in the final version of the mega conference report, the House chose not to agree on the report, thus postponing the omnibus budget until the veto session.

The House had agreed to fund \$24.6 million for education out of the state highway fund. However, the Senate and the governor wanted to draw it from the general fund, so this will be negotiated when we return.

Redistricting Map. In early February, the House passed a redistricting map for the House and Congressional districts. To date, the Senate has failed to pass its own map and has been holding the bipartisan House map hostage.

This week the House passed out our second House map and a Congressional map, known as Bob Dole 1, with bipartisan support and sent it to the Senate. The Senate voted to kill the maps sent by the House. A number of moderate Republicans continually vote with the minority party making the vote 20 to 20.

The maps being worked in the Senate are not fair or equitable. Time constraints require the House and Senate maps must pass the governor's desk and a mandatory review by the Kansas Supreme Court before the state filing deadline and federally imposed deadline to ensure overseas military ballots are mailed on time. The Senate's disregard for these dead-



Rick Billinger

• This week in Topeka

lines has compelled the House redistricting committee to consider drawing Senate maps when they return. Traditionally, the House and Senate do not mess with each other's maps; this year may be an exception. Speaker Mike O'Neal has proposed that the House draw the Senate map, which has some senators upset.

Budget and March Revenues. The Kansas Department of Revenue reported tax-only revenues were \$40 million above estimates, March receipts pushed year-to-date receipts \$72 million above November estimates.

Corporate and personal income taxes and sales tax were both above estimates. Sales taxes were \$167.3 million, \$2.2 million above the \$165 million estimate. Liquor and beer taxes were up 13.5 percent for beer and 11.5 percent for liquor in March. Since July 1, receipts are \$4.117 billion, \$72 million above estimates of \$4.045 billion. That's \$289.5 million above last year's \$3.828 billion.

However, we are not out of the woods yet. We have many challenges before us, including the Kansas Public Employees Retirement System, which has an unfunded liability of over \$8 billion. The State of Kansas spends \$575,000 every day on interest. For many years we have spent beyond our means and now we must be fiscally responsible.

HCR 5006. Gov. Brownback and the Senate and House leadership all agreed that the citizens of Kansas should have the opportunity to vote on an amendment to the Kansas constitution which would clarify the distinct roles of

the judicial and legislative branches. Although constitutional amendment HCR 5006 originally received 91 votes, the final vote Friday failed to reach the 84 votes required to pass a constitutional amendment.

H Sub SB62 Conscience Protection. The House debated and passed legislation that broadens conscience objections for medical facilities and health professionals in Kansas who are opposed to abortion. The bill further confirms state job protection law for physicians who refuse to participate in an abortion and for pharmacists and other providers who cite a personal belief for refusing to prescribe or dispense contraceptives.

H Sub SB142 Religious Freedom Act. The Kansas Preservation of Religious Freedom Act will safeguard existing legal protections with respect to the free exercise of religion under Kansas law. This bill does not pre-empt local anti-discrimination laws as some have claimed, but does recognize a legal defense in cases where such laws seek individuals to violate religious beliefs.

HB 2561 Star Bonds. This program was used as an incentive to attract potential developers to Kansas. Kansas Speedway and Legends shopping center have both used it to develop their properties in the Kansas City area. Local retail sales taxes generated by sales in the area are used to pay off the bonds. The program was voted on and passed out of the House, extending the program until 2017.

Thank you for allowing me to represent the 121st District in Topeka. If you would like to contact me for any reason or with your concerns please call (785) 899-4700 or e-mail me at rick.billinger@house.ks.gov.

Rick Billinger is the state representative from the 121st District. He currently serves on the Commerce and Economic Development, Education Funding, Insurance and Local Government committees.

Mallard Fillmore

• Bruce Tinsley

