



Other Viewpoints

Long slog ahead to kill income tax

Kansas Gov. Sam Brownback's third State of the State address is memorable for a blustery challenge to the state of Texas, and an indication that the governor might back the very bad idea of electing statewide judges.

The budget unveiled after his speech, however, suggests that Brownback's bravado regarding elimination of the state's income tax is more bark than bite, at least for the short term.

In his speech Tuesday night, the Republican governor announced his desire to phase in more income tax reductions and eventually eliminate the tax altogether.

"Look out Texas, here comes Kansas!" he declared.

But the Lone Star State, which has no income tax, won't be going head-to-head with Kansas right away. Brownback's budget, stretched out over the next two years, contains no specific tax cuts. Rather, it holds spending mostly flat and proposes two controversial measures to make up for revenues lost when the governor and Legislature sharply and unwisely cut income tax rates last year.

Brownback invited a squabble with lawmakers, including many in his own party, by proposing to make permanent part of a one-cent sales tax that was supposed to go off the books in July. Continuation of that tax would fall most heavily on low-income Kansans, while the income tax reductions that recently went into effect mostly benefit more wealthy residents.

In a more sensible prescription, Brownback wants to eliminate the home mortgage interest and real estate deductions. But that too will provoke resistance from legislators.

Brownback's budget also presumes the state will defy, or at least postpone, a lower court's ruling that Kansas' funding of elementary and secondary education is unconstitutionally low. Though not surprising, that assumption has ominous implications for schools, children and the future of an independent judiciary.

In his speech, Brownback called on the Legislature to pass a statute clarifying what constitutes "suitable provision for finance of the educational interests of the state," as called for in the state constitution, rather than leaving that up to the courts.

The Legislature should be more clear about setting standards for funding schools. But lawmakers and the governor should also bear in mind that a suitable education is a constitutional right, which is why school boards turn to courts for redress.

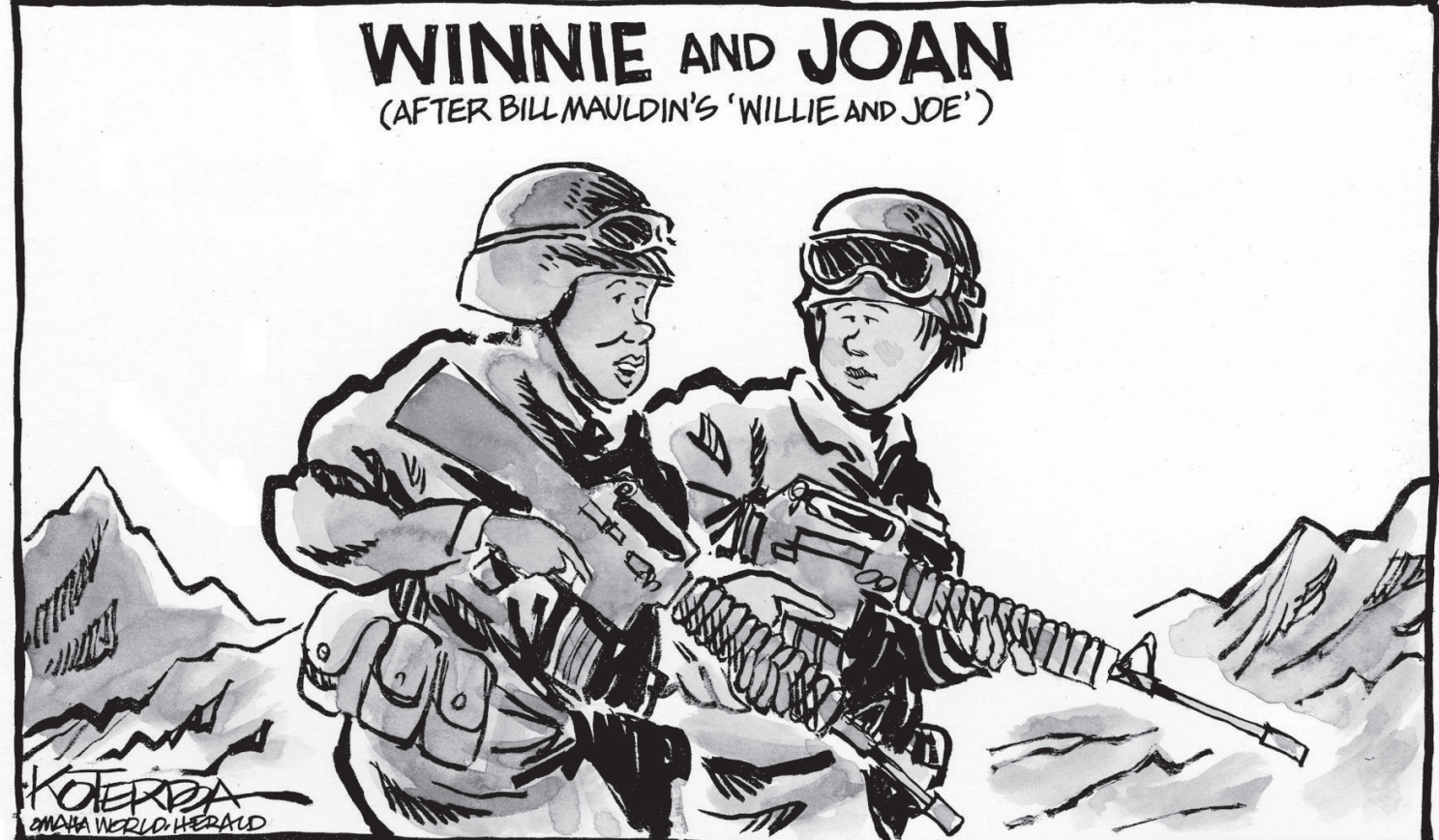
Brownback suggested in his speech that the state's appeals and Supreme Court judges should be elected directly by the people, or selected by the governor. That would bypass the current process whereby judicial candidates are screened by a nominating commission for final selection by the governor.

The current system produces good judges and shouldn't be changed. But the notion of direct elections is especially dangerous. Confidence in the courts would plummet if any special interest were able to influence judicial selection by bankrolling candidates.

A bright spot in the budget was Brownback's willingness to hold funding for higher education relatively steady, with a \$45 million boost in bonding authority and general fund spending for a new education building at the University of Kansas Medical Center.

Overall, though, Brownback's budget makes clear the long slog the state must endure to climb out of the hole created by the reckless income tax cuts.

- The Kansas City Star, via the Associated Press



"I still don't see why the Pentagon's announcement is such a big deal...it's not like we haven't seen combat before."

Executive decisions part of presidency

Executive decisions. What is an executive decision? Who makes executive decisions?

If you have the privilege of choosing which shirt or pair of socks you are going to wear today, you will make an executive decision. That's fundamental and simple, isn't it?

Who gave you the privilege of making that decision? Most likely your mother was the first person to let you make a decision. The truth is, everyone has some level of executive privilege to make decisions.

Age, race, gender and wealth have been issues throughout recorded history. And, I predict, they will continue to be issues.

Now, let's get more serious about the perceived problem of our president making executive decisions. Is he the first to do so?

Our forefathers established a democratic republic form of government with executive, legislative and judicial branches. The Constitution details how those branches work to protect the people. There has always been disagreement about their limits and responsibilities. Partisan politics has been with us from the beginning.

President Harry Truman issued the executive order that sent atomic bombs to Japan. Who authorized our military involvement in Korea? Who authorized our involvement in Vietnam? Korea and Vietnam became more involved and costly as time went on. Congress never bothered to declare war; they left the constitutional authority vested in the executive branch to begin or end those involvements.

Sure, we had extensive discussion and passionate argument about the parameters of that constitutional authority. We survived both situations without civil war. We are still arguing



Ken Poland

• Ken's World

about why and how we got involved, whether the executive — supreme commander — was aggressive enough or too aggressive.

A high percentage of our population today was not born or too young to have any firsthand knowledge of the politics of those events. Trust me, today's media are not reliable sources of historical data, or even present data. Money and political agendas have a way of distorting facts. Winners write history, and that account usually prevails for several generations, right or wrong.

More recent controversial executive decisions are those made by Presidents Bush 1 and Bush 2. Bush 1 made an executive decision to stop the aggression of Iraq on their neighbor. He may have conferred with political allies in Congress, but the decision and order were his. He gave the order to withdraw the troops, in spite of the "war hawks" objections.

Bush 2 made an executive decision to invade Iraq in search of weapons that were never found. Oh yes, he had the tacit approval of Congress, based on fallacious evidence. He made executive decisions to fund that endeavor without explicit authorizations or limits from Congress.

Congress didn't make provisions for funding the Bush 2 decision, so President Bush

exercised his executive privilege to authorize unfunded warrants — deficit spending — to finance it. I'm not an authority on the so-called Bush tax cuts. But whether Congress officially wrote all the details and authorizations or not, his executive branch was responsible for writing the regulations and executing the tax cuts.

Executive orders are a fact of life, so quit whining.

The majority electorate voted for Barack Obama. Whether our president is Baptist, Methodist, Catholic, Mormon or Muslim, if he is duly elected, he will make executive decisions. Had Mitt Romney won the election he would be issuing executive orders. He had an extensive list of orders he promised to issue on his first day. Some would have been in direct defiance of previous congressional actions.

President Obama did not give Congress a raise by executive order. Congress voted themselves an automatic raise.

The Treasury Department is a part of the executive branch and disperses the money. Giving the congressmen their raise this year was, in fact, the intention of the bill passed several years ago.

And incidentally, I don't think a ragtag militia of civilians bearing an assortment of weapons and varying levels of skill or judgment in using them is going to guarantee the success of our democratic republic. Informal ragtag organizations don't qualify as "well-regulated."

Ken Poland describes himself as a semi-retired farmer living north of Gem, a Christian, affiliated with American Baptist Churches, and a radical believer in separation of church and state. Contact him at rcwinc@cheerful.com.

Tuition for empty seat hurts real student

"Look to the left. Look to the right. One of you will not be here at the end of the semester." Or so the rumor goes about the hard old science professor on the first day of class.

A more realistic first day of college class in Kansas could be: "Look to the left. Look to the right. Oh, there is no one sitting in one of those seats. But there should be! They're on the class roster. But they aren't here."

These are the students who enroll in college but don't come to classes often — sometimes not at all. But their enrollment still drains some state support. And because Kansas has limited resources, these students who attend class rarely — or not at all — are taking away money that would better support the genuine, hard-working college students of our state.

Today, for every dollar a student pays in tuition at a public university, the state puts in 92 cents to support instructional costs. Research universities claim state support is much lower because they add in all the grant money that underwrites their graduate programs, but here we are talking just about the costs of teaching.

In the 1980s, barely 40 percent of Kansas high school graduates went to college and the state paid about \$2 for every dollar in student tuition. Today, nearly three-fourths of Kansas high school graduates go to tertiary institutions. And if you nearly double the students going to school, then state support per student will be roughly cut in half.

There are many reasons that tuition at public universities has skyrocketed over the last two decades, but that empty seat in classrooms is an important part of that problem.



John Richard Schrock

• Education Frontlines

This should not have happened. Until the 1990s, Kansas was a state with "open admissions" — if you graduated from a Kansas high school, you could be admitted to a Kansas public university. That ended when "Qualified Admissions" specified both a minimal high school curriculum and minimal ACT test scores for students entering colleges beginning in 2001.

But there was a "window" for admitting students who did not meet these minimal standards. Some state schools admit few. Others let in as many as possible.

But the floodgates really opened when Kansas switched — from funding universities based on student numbers staying within a "corridor" — to letting schools keep their tuition and grow at will. That set state schools chasing after every warm body with a heartbeat and a credit card — and we suspect they might waive the heartbeat.

Being tuition-based contributes to recruiting students who are less than college-able. (To be fair, I will admit that the University of Kansas has attempted to be more selective.)

Meanwhile, many high schools in richer Kansas suburbs emblazon their hallways with

slogans like, "Where every student is college-bound." This divorced-from-reality cheerleading puts a guilt-trip on any youngster who does not aspire to college. Add to that the No Child Left Behind teaching-to-the-test that has generated massive grade inflation. Students are now getting B's for C work. This leads to disillusionment when a student discovers he or she is not a B student in college.

That empty seat in the college classroom may very well represent a student who doesn't want to be in college. Some of those students might prefer to be an auto mechanic, construction worker or plumber. Kansas has shortages in many of these fields. And some of these professions pay more than a college graduate will earn.

The ACT has determined that only 25 percent of those who take that test in Kansas are "college ready." But as long as our legislators and educational leadership continue to worship "growth, growth, growth," our state dollars for universities will be stretched thinner and thinner. And good college students will pay more and more because of classmates who are not college-able.

If Kansas schools become more selective, they can be smaller and better. And student tuition could go down.

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