



Other Viewpoints

Home is where they choose to stay

Rural western Kansans will always bemoan the loss of representation in state and federal legislatures as long as population decline continues to make that a reality. But when it comes to Congress, at least in the case of Rep. Tim Huelskamp and Sen. Jerry Moran, eastern relocations don't equate to any disregard for western Kansas interests.

As duly noted in a story last week in *The Hutchinson News*, Huelskamp and Moran have moved to new homes farther east in their respective geographical constituencies. But by all appearances, these were for practical and logistical reasons.

Shortly after entering Congress in 2011, Huelskamp and his family moved from the small town of Fowler to Hutchinson, 140 miles to the northeast. That's not a bad place to be in the district considering it is a top population center, is the location of one of his district offices and is closer to airport transportation for flights to Washington.

Proximity to an airport probably played a big role in Moran's move last year from his longtime home of Hays to Manhattan. Both Moran and Huelskamp are commuter members of Congress, which is to say they don't consider Washington as their primary address and their families remained in Kansas when they started serving in Congress.

Sen. Pat Roberts is another matter. He uses a Dodge City address for his Kansas voting residence, but Roberts and his wife have long lived in Virginia....

When Congress is not in session, Moran and Huelskamp almost always are back in Kansas. Moran especially is highly engaged in getting around his district – both when he served in the House and now statewide as a senator. But Huelskamp has continued the tradition of visiting every one of the now 69 counties in the 1st District at least once a year; he maintains an active schedule of “town halls.”

Some critics of the commuters suggest that when members of Congress immediately go home upon adjournment the old deal-making that once was more common in Washington suffers. Maybe so. But the alternative risk is becoming Washington fixtures who have lost touch with the realities on the ground back home.

It isn't as if Huelskamp has moved to Emporia or Moran to Johnson County. They're doing just fine where they've chosen to call home.

– *The Hutchinson News, via the Associated Press*

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roberts.senate.gov/public/
- U.S. Sen. Jerry Moran**, 354 Russell Senate Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20510 (202) 228-6966.
Fax (202) 225-5124 moran.senate.gov/public/
- U.S. Rep. Tim Huelskamp**, 126 Cannon House Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20515. (202) 225-2715 or Fax (202) 225-5124. Web site: huelskamp.house.gov
- State Sen. Ralph Ostmeyer**, State Capitol Building, 300 SW 10th St., Room 136-E., Topeka, Kan. 66612

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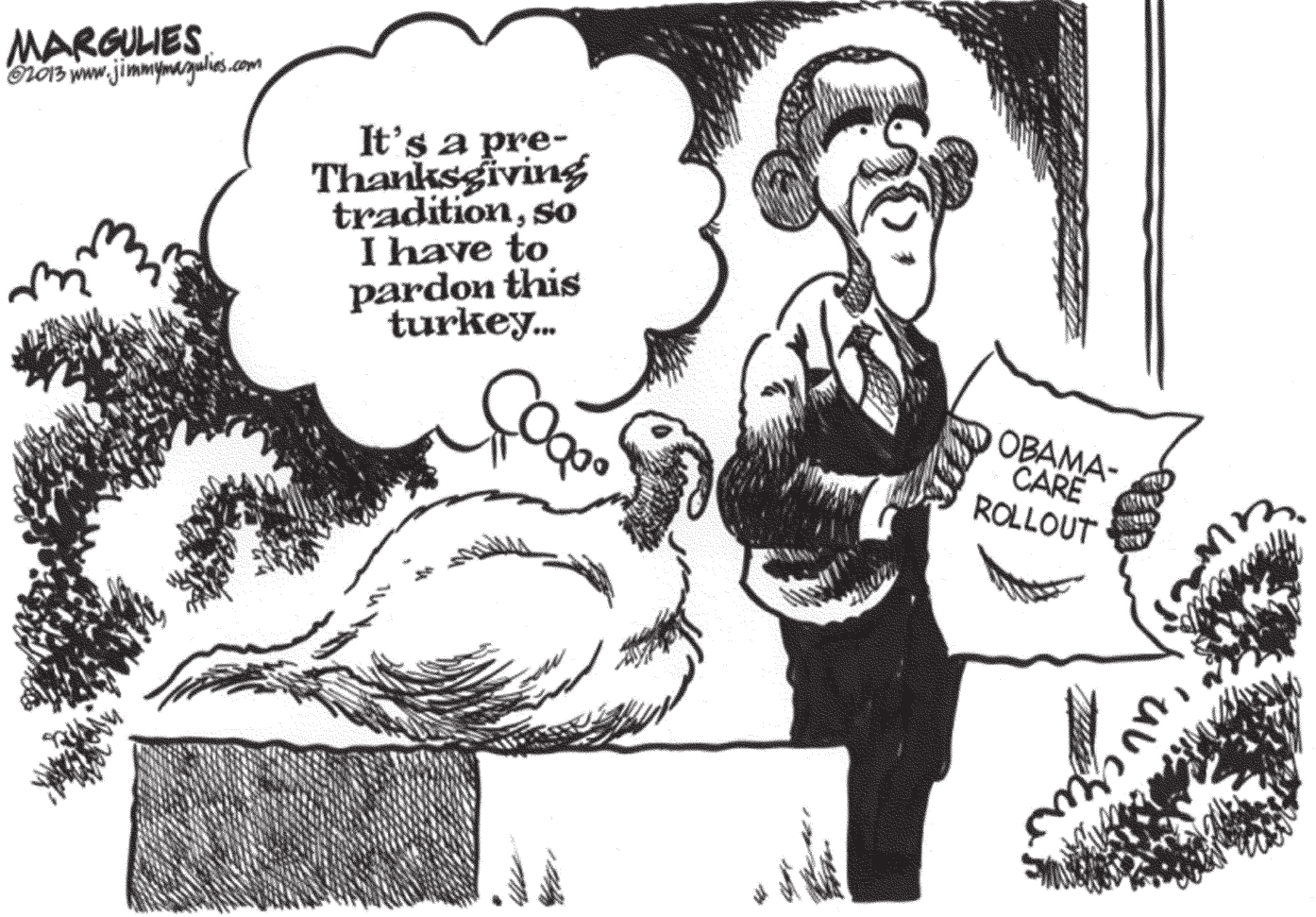
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'Bored' engine still a great dancer

It's a little like dancing, but with a 160-ton date.

The cab is big enough, and since she's an oil-fired engine, there's only a tank behind it, not the usual open coal bin. There's no need to open the fire door and throw coal in every few minutes, so the fireman mostly sits and adjusts the fire and the water level.

A visitor or an extra crewman can take one of two padded seats on the front of the tank and just sit, watching the crew and enjoying the ride.

Of course, your feet go on the engine deck in front while the tender where you're sitting bounces and hops down the track, swaying in opposite directions. So it's a little like dancing, only your "date" is behind you and there's nothing to hold on to. It's an interesting way to ride.

Fortunately, on the little Abilene and Smoky Valley line, we're only going 10 mph, which is all the 10 1/2 miles of track on the volunteer-run tourist line will allow.

Not that our mount, former Santa Fe 3415, a heavy Pacific type built for mainline passenger service nearly a century ago – in 1917 – wouldn't be up to the challenge. While she was built for 70 mph service, after the speedup prompted by introduction of the Super Chief in 1936, the Santa Fe needed faster engines. It rebuilt most of the 49 members of the 3400 class with new, larger drivers (79 inches versus 73) and other features, capable of hauling



Steve Haynes

• Along the Sappa

the Chief or the Fast Mail at 100 mph across the hills of Missouri or, especially, the Kansas plains.

But within a decade, the 3415 and her sisters fell victim to the economics of diesel power. By 1956, when she was dolled up and donated to the City of Abilene for display in a park, most of the rest had gone to scrap.

But make no mistake, if someone let her out on the main line, she could get up and run.

Today, she just creeps along through the weeds and wheat fields east of town.

Or as our engineer put it, "I could see the headlines: 'Fast passenger engine dies of boredom on tourist line.'"

We are backing up on the return when the air brakes set. The air pump is making a funny noise, and the crew shuts it down. The problem: a three-inch drain plug has fallen out of the bottom cylinder.

"I'll start walking," a crewman says. Attempts to move meantime are futile, but it takes only 15-20 minutes for him to find the plug and bring it back, the air comes up, and

we can go home.

Slow or slowest – we did creep up to 13 mph before the boss reined her in – I found the ride fascinating. It's been a dream for me since the engine was rebuilt five years ago to watch this fascinating and beautiful creature move under steam.

When Cynthia found out she could get rid of me for a couple of hours during Abilene's Heritage Days for just \$25, she was glad to pay the extra for the cab ride. She could go shopping.

It's a minor miracle that the 3415 is alive and running at all. She sat in the park for more than half a century before a volunteer team pulled her out, built a shop and started to overhaul her.

What they found was a surprise, our fireman says: She'd been rebuilt by the Santa Fe shops only a few months before the railroad decided to retire her. Her boiler was sound, and most parts needed only minor repairs. While the project was expensive, since boiler work had to be done by certified contractors, not volunteers, it was doable. Now the railroad's board would like to find money to rebuild its line over to Enterprise for faster, safer runs.

That still wouldn't be anything like hauling the Fast Mail down the Santa Fe's "racetrack" between Newton and La Junta, Colo., but she might not get bored so easily.

Steve Haynes is president of Nor'West Newspapers. When he has the time, he'd rather be reading a good book or casting a fly.

Time to fish or cut bait on tax reform

For talk of tax reform to be meaningful, members of Congress must have the courage to specify publicly which cuts to eliminate, or at least trim.

As Congress moves forward on budget negotiations, the word out of Washington is to expect nothing major: no grand bargain, just more stopgap, short-term fixes. Yet there's one ray of hope. The House and Senate chairs of the tax-writing committees, one a Republican, the other a Democrat, are preparing a comprehensive tax reform plan. They see the budget negotiations as their opportunity to enact much-needed changes to our bloated, off-kilter tax laws.

The last time lawmakers managed to find a way to simplify and reshape the tax code was almost three decades ago, in 1986, when Ronald Reagan was still president. Since then there have been over 15,000 adjustments and amendments, leaving a mess that just about everyone agrees must be cleaned up. Odds are against Congress managing the task, but its handling of the debate on tax reform tells us a lot about how members approach difficult issues.

That's because this latest effort to rewrite the tax code is saddled by a deep-seated problem that spans both parties and all ideologies: political timidity. Tax avoidance is a highly sophisticated and lucrative business in this country, and politicians address it at their peril.

This became clear during the summer, when the senators leading the tax-reform charge on their side of Capitol Hill, Democrat Max Baucus of Montana and Republican Orrin Hatch of Utah, laid out their initiative. They wanted senators to take a "blank slate" approach to the issue: no current deduction, exemption or credit would continue unless a strong case could be made for it. Then they invited their

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• Lee Hamilton
Center on Congress

colleagues to identify what they'd keep and what they'd reject.

That was a fine start, until Baucus and Hatch took an extraordinary step. They guaranteed senators 50 years of anonymity for their suggestions, thus allowing each senator to continue attacking the tax code mess without taking any specific public positions on how to improve it.

In other words, here's a public issue of enormous consequence, affecting every taxpayer in the land, and they were afraid to talk about it meaningfully in public. Sure, you hear plenty from politicians about tax reform, but it's all generalities. They talk about a simpler code or a fairer code or a flatter code, but in truth, almost every member of Congress talks in gross generalities about the monstrosity that is the tax code and comes out fervently for reform, without actually taking a stand on the tough issues.

Tax reform is meaningless without specifics. Continuing to exclude employer contributions for health care, for instance, will cost taxpayers some \$760 billion over the next five years, according to Congress's Joint Committee on Taxation – but getting rid of it will surely anger employers and employees. We could recoup \$379 billion over the next five years by cutting the mortgage interest deduction, but how many homeowners do you know

who would go along with the idea?

The political power of the interests that benefit from reduced tax rates on dividends and long-term capital gains, which will cost the Treasury \$616 billion between now and 2017, is immense. So, in its own way, is that of supporters of the deduction for charitable contributions (\$239 billion).

In all, tax breaks cost the Treasury some \$1.1 trillion a year – which puts them well ahead of most other forms of federal spending.

Yet each has its own constituency – often a vocal, well-funded, well-organized one. Politicians who call for "tax reform" without going into specifics butter their bread on both sides – they ride the public outcry against the tax code in general, while avoiding the outcry from people hurt by the changes that tax reform would inevitably bring. After all, a "loophole" to one group is usually a "lifeline" to another. So nothing happens.

Everyone knows that tax reform will involve limiting tax breaks. It should be possible to avoid the political difficulties by capping the total without eliminating specific breaks. But even this will require political backbone. Until Congress shows us that its members possess the courage to detail publicly what's needed, talk of tax reform will be just that: talk.

Lee Hamilton is Director of the Center on Congress at Indiana University. He was a member of the U.S. House of Representatives for 34 years. Find the center at congress.indiana.edu.

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Mallard Fillmore

• Bruce Tinsley

