

commentary

from other pens...

How do we balance the cost-benefit formula?

Did the highway department deal Goodland a bad hand when it shut down K-27 for the summer? Or was it simply prudent to save a bunch of money by closing the road while it was rebuilt.

No one can say with certainty, which is a little scary when you are talking seven-figure amounts. Maybe it's time the state changed that and started making decisions based on economic facts rather than guesswork.

Highway engineers estimate the state saved as much as \$1.5 million by closing the road. That allowed the Department of Transportation to keep costs down by keeping through traffic out of the construction zone, and just as important, to buy a lot less land.

Goodland businesses claim they may have lost \$1 million to \$2 million in business driven away by the closure, a 100-mile detour and the condition of unmarked alternative routes on unpaved county roads. Those figures are estimates, guesses really, and noone knows how much was lost.

There has been a lot of complaining over the last three to four years, in fact, as the department has rebuilt I-70 east and west of town and K-27 through town and to the north. Still to come is a complete rebuild of K-27 to the south, giving Sherman County a nearly-new road system.

That's transportation access many Kansas communities would give their eye teeth for, let's face it. And for the most part, all we've done is complain about what roads were closed when. No one (at least that we know of) has thanked the state for spending nearly \$45 million in our county — and giving us all these wonderful roads.

But if businesses really have lost more than \$1 million this year alone, shouldn't the state care?

Two to three years ago, when highway engineers first talked about the K-27 project, no one seemed to notice their plans. Certainly not the businesses who later did all the complaining. County commissioners turned down a chance to get the Edson-Bird City road paved up to the county line. They said it would cost the county too much for grading and future maintenance. Many communities would jump at that kind of gift.

But businesses didn't complain then about the decision. It was only this year, after the state contract was awarded, businesses began to complain. The story was pretty much the same during previous K-27 and I-70 projects. Complaints arose only after work began. While state engineers had been pretty clear about their plans, businesses paid little attention until it was almost too late to change anything.

But all that is past. Goodland won't be getting many more new highways around town. Other communities will face these issues, though, and we think it's time the state changed the way it plans and executes high-impact projects.

- The transportation department should study the impact of a major road closing, hiring one of the universities to make an *independent* appraisal of just what it can cost businesses. The Goodland situation would make a good case study.

- The department needs to come to town well before a project and, in a well-advertised public meeting, lay out its plans, alternatives and the costs. Then it needs to listen to the business community about closing and other impacts, not just talk with city or county officials.

In fact, we're told the department has changed it's policies and will hold more pre-construction meetings in the future. It's about time.

- Costs to businesses, landowners and others besides the state must be factored into any road-building decisions. If a decision saves the state \$1 million and costs private parties \$2 million, is that a good deal?

- Co-ordination among state, city, county and business officials needs to become a real priority in planning projects. Things like having nearly all the access to downtown Goodland blocked off for weeks at a time just shouldn't happen. While there is plenty of blame to go around with that deal, the bottom line is it should never have been a problem.

- And finally, Goodland and Sherman County need to send the state a hearty "thank-you" for the roads we've got. The state is building us a darned fine road system, and we should appreciate it.

We do, but we'd appreciate it more if some of the collateral damage had been mitigated. — *Steve Haynes*

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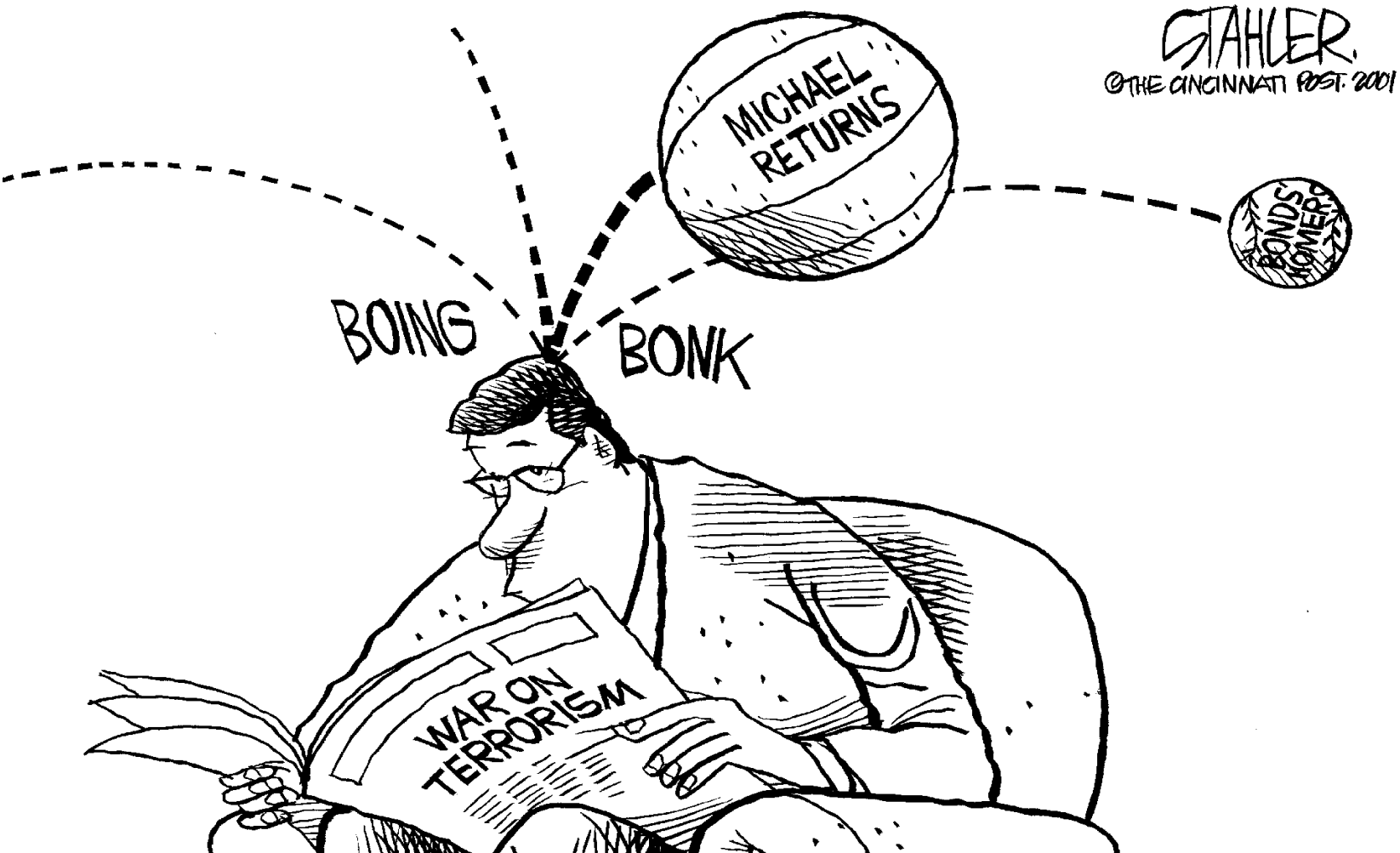
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Our strength is in a united country

President Bush's approval rating is 90 percent. No other president since the Gallup poll began six decades ago has ever hit 90 percent. The man attracting these ratings is the same one who, in the week of the terrorist attacks, graced the cover of Newsweek as "The Accidental President," a reference to a new book about the Supreme Court's role in boosting Bush into the presidency.

Clearly, many of the people who opposed his election are rallying around him now. Had I been polled, I would have thrown my support behind him, too, despite my antipathy toward him in the past.

I believe, as many Americans apparently do, we ought to show the world a united front. We are sending the message that our president's resolve is ours as well. We can fight among ourselves. We can call each other names. But in times of crisis, we're Hoss and Adam and Little Joe. You pick a fight with our president, you pick a fight with all of us.

Yet this united front has a disconcerting side, especially for those of us who tend to think out loud. There are some things we're not supposed to say right now, some questions we're not supposed to raise.

If we suggest we ought to understand why the terrorists hate us so, we're accused of sympathizing with them. Or worse — we're accused of sug-



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• commentary

gesting that their acts were justified.

If we question the wisdom of all-out war, we are weak and naive.

If we look to examine the U.S. role in the Middle East, we are blaming the victim.

I find myself choosing my words and framing my questions carefully in conversation with anyone beyond my closest friends, lest I be misunderstood and thought to be unpatriotic.

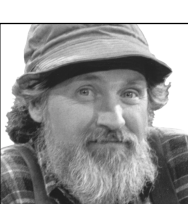
I have discovered I have less than perfect pitch in these matters, perhaps because for the first time in my life, my country has been so severely wounded by outsiders. I'm afraid I don't have sharp instincts on what is appropriate and what isn't appropriate to say out loud.

For example, I wasn't offended, as many apparently were, by Bill Maher's statements on his "Politically Incorrect" television show last week. He questioned the courage of America's recent high-tech wars and, agreeing with one of his guests, said, "Staying in the airplane when it hits the building,

From the stories I've read about men isolated on a desert island or lost in the wilderness, it seems that they often will build something to leave behind. Something that gives meaning to their lives. OK, now once in a while these statues made of bananas, or buildings made to look like a dog, have some artistic value. Usually they end up being the ugliest thing in the jungle. But that doesn't matter. These men are alone and feel abandoned and are making these monuments to help them survive by giving themselves a sense of accomplishment and some degree of significance. All men have these same drives. Including the man in your house. It is therefore very important that you do everything you can to make him feel significant. Otherwise you'll end up with a gazebo made from hockey sticks or driveway ornaments carved out of tractor tires. If you won't do it for his benefit, or even for your own, I'm begging you to please do it for the good of the neighborhood.

LOOKING GOOD CAN BE BAD

We're supposed to have a classless society where people are all equal. One of the many ways that doesn't quite happen is in the area of job status. Generally the white-collar office workers are seen to be higher up the financial and evolutionary ladder than their blue-collar counterparts. I think we're all missing a very important aspect here. When you're a high-powered executive, chairing meetings and making decisions all day, you need to look good — in control, perfectly groomed and extremely successful. You must buy expensive clothes and get manicures and have your hair dyed every time the company thinks about down-sizing. On the other hand, the guy on the street, working the jackhammer, is not expected to look good. As



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long as he's there, and the jackhammer is running, he's pretty much fulfilling all of his job requirements. He also has a lot more freedom in the fashion and grooming department. He can wear anything that satisfies the safety and morality laws. He doesn't need monthly haircuts or even weekly shaves. If he works alone, he doesn't even need to shower. In some ways, the worse he looks, the better he seems suited for his job. And as both of these men get older, the executive finds it harder and harder to look good, which puts his employment in jeopardy, whereas the road construction guy looks more and more like he's the perfect man for the job.

YOU MUST LOOK BUSY

We all have occasions when there's something going on in our house that we're expected to help out with, and we just don't feel like it. The only way out of these difficult situations is to look busy. But do it right. Wives and children are extremely skeptical:

— Bring legal-sized documents home from work and spread them all over the dining room table. Make sure they're not in English, to avoid difficult questions.

— Have a friend phone you four or five times an hour and always answer on the first ring. You can do the same for him next Saturday.

say what you want about it, it's not cowardly."

Sears and Federal Express pulled out as sponsors of the show, and a smattering of ABC affiliates, including the station in Washington, D.C., dropped the show indefinitely.

Obviously, they have every right to do what they like, but it seems to me when we can't tolerate unpopular points of view on a show blatantly called "Politically Incorrect," maybe we're beginning to mistake contrariness for disloyalty. So much of how a statement is received has to do with timing. We're grieving right now. We're angry.

We don't want to hear anything negative about our country or our leaders. Therefore, we're reluctant to raise the tough, uncomfortable questions.

Yet if we are going to send our sons and daughters off to war, I would like to understand who we're fighting, what we hope to accomplish and how we plan to accomplish it. I would like to hear as many points of view as I can find.

We want to present ourselves to the world as a united populace. But we should also want to present ourselves as an informed populace, one whose indomitable strength is derived not from blind loyalty to our president but from a true understanding, and belief in, our mission.

Joan Ryan is a columnist for the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Send comments to her e-mail at joanryan@sfgate.com.

The need to feel important

— Yell out occasional messages to the rest of the family; things like "Have any of you been using my credit card?" or "Well this is just great!"

— Set your printer to print off all of your documents while you play Solitaire.

— Go outside and lie down under the car as if you're checking something. Make sure you have the keys first.

— Take off your shirt and ask your wife for a bottle of aspirin.

— Sprint to the bathroom. Count to three and then sprint back to your work area, yelling to everyone that you're fine.

PEDDLING FACTS

We all know that one of the ways we can save the environment is to ride a bicycle to the office, instead of taking our cars. I tried it last Tuesday. I arrived nine hours late with bad hair and a false-alarm heart attack.

QUOTE OF THE DAY: "Sometimes people with really firm handshakes are just trying not to fall over." — Red Green

Red Green is the star of "The Red Green Show," a television series seen in the U.S. on PBS and in Canada on the CBC Network, and the author of "The Red Green Book" and "Red Green Talks Cars: A Love Story."

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