

commentary

from other pens...

State shouldn't use tight budget as excuse

The Lawrence Journal-World on the state budget:

Legislators shouldn't use a tight budget year as an excuse to change the state's requirement to end the year with money in the treasury. ...

Faced with what may be one of the tightest budget years in recent memory, some legislators are starting to float the idea of dipping into the state's "ending balance" to meet immediate needs.

Such a move is poor policy and would be a one-year fix that would create new budget problems a year or two down the road.

By law, the state must end its fiscal year on June 30 with an ending treasury balance equal to 7.5 percent of its budget expenditures. ... The money is the state's financial cushion to help it deal with unexpected financial circumstances.

... Tax cuts are in place and spending has been approved, but the economic climate has shifted. It didn't take long for some legislators to recommend a permanent change in the amount of money that must remain in the state treasury at the end of the fiscal year.

Reducing the 7.5 percent ending balance requirement to 6.5 percent, for instance, would give the state \$46 million more to spend in the next fiscal year. ...

... Anyone who watches legislative politics knows that the most desperate fiscal problem facing lawmakers in the coming year involves their unwillingness to make tough financial decisions in an election year. ...

Legislators need to face up to the financial situation they have created. Maybe they thought the economy would boom forever and they would never have to make tough financial choices again. Well, that didn't happen. It's time to face reality.

The Hays Daily News on U.S. foreign policy:

While some anti-war sentiments are being murmured since the bombing campaign started against Afghanistan, we think most Americans are going to support an aggressive strategy against the terrorist and rogue governments that sponsor terrorism.

Justifying military action does not seem difficult given the severity of the breach of American security ... and the continued threat of terrorist attacks in the U.S. ...

But what does deserve contemplation is how America behaves in the global community. ...

Some of the U.S. benevolence is either late in coming or appears self-serving. We refer specifically to the U.S. paying up on its back dues to the United Nations and on the airlift of humanitarian aid to Afghan civilians. ...

Members of Congress ... have realized that the U.S. cannot be so arrogant in the context of the U.N. and expect support from the world community. ...

Meanwhile, along with our bombs we are dropping food and medical supplies to show the Afghan people that we are, in the words of President Bush, "their friend."

Some friend. Where were we before we wanted to topple their government?

... None of this is to say that the U.S. is not benevolent worldwide. ...

The problem is our foreign policy. It is inconsistent. It often has seemed random when we decided to deliver aid or get involved militarily abroad.

While the Bush administration is asking for \$320 million in humanitarian aid for Afghan civilians, it better start doing an inventory of help needed in other Third World countries.



We no longer need to spook ourselves

Back in the day, when we were prosperous and at peace, the monster under the bed changed from week to week, like supermarket specials.

Cell phones cause brain tumors!
Beware of e. coli in fast-food burgers!
Too much vitamin C ruins your liver!
Tuna can poison you with mercury!
Day care will stunt your child! And maybe put him at risk to molesters!

Diesel fumes cause miscarriages! Tap water causes leukemia!

Be careful of flesh-eating bacteria (though we don't know of anyone who has, in actual fact, been infected)!

Carbonless copy paper can cause disfigurement and even death!

Caffeine, sugar, white flour, milk, television, video games, fake nails, red meat, red dye, nonorganic produce, electrical lines, hair spray, plastic containers, UV rays, diet teas, fat of all kinds — the dangers, people, are everywhere! Details at 11!

We had so little to be truly frightened of that we went to remarkable lengths to scare ourselves. Suburban teen-agers who grew up during the longest economic boom in history identified with rap music that spoke of poverty and hopelessness and violent gangsters. Other teens took to wearing long black coats and dark makeup and toe-to-scalp body piercings, embracing a menacing gothic culture that succeeded wonderfully in scaring the living daylights out of their parents.

We manufactured, packaged and marketed fear.



joan ryan

• commentary

Movies such as "Nightmare on Elm Street" and "Halloween" have so many sequels that I've lost track. Thrillers with Bruce and Arnold packed the theaters. Fear was a tingly shot of adrenaline between handfuls of popcorn. We were a nation of drama queens and kings.

I had these thoughts as I watched a TV movie with my son the other night. An evil warlock's spell transformed everyone at a Halloween party into the monsters they were pretending to be. Their masks became real. The thrill of scaring each other turned into true terror.

This morning when I checked my e-mail, I found an ad for the antibiotic Cipro, used to treat anthrax, 10 tablets for \$44.90 plus shipping and handling.

I saw our mail clerks wearing latex gloves to sort the mail. A letter with anthrax arrived at the office of Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle, expanding a puzzling web of targets that includes NBC anchor Tom Brokaw, the offices of the National Enquirer and a Microsoft office in Reno.

At our airports, troops from the National Guard, in camouflage fatigues, are patrolling with automatic rifles.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

is figuring out how far it can stretch its smallpox-vaccine supply, should terrorists unleash the virus on us.

The national security adviser says Osama bin Laden might be sending secret messages to his operatives through televised statements.

The president, warning about the likelihood of another terrorist attack, has deputized all Americans to be lookouts.

A spell has been cast on our decades-long Halloween party.

Demons no longer disappear with the flip of a mask or the click of a remote control.

The challenge once was to keep us from giving in to manufactured fear. Now it is to keep ourselves from giving in to real fear — while recognizing that we are, in fact, in danger.

Some are coping by stockpiling gas masks, water, nonperishable food, antibiotics and guns in their homes, as if we are about to be invaded or nuked. Others talk crazily of moving, at least temporarily, to Canada. Perhaps, though, irrationality is the surest sign of sanity.

In this Halloween season, I find a curious relief in the cardboard ghosts and goblins in the neighborhood windows and the black-crepe witches.

I understand what a luxury we enjoyed all these years, when fear arrived behind flimsy masks of celluloid and newsprint, before we knew about evil crawling out from a cave.

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

Going, going, gone red green



red green

• north of forty

My wife really enjoys going to auctions. One of the things I've noticed, while I'm trying to get the bidding card away from her so I can sit on it, is that men bid for items in an entirely different way than women do. Now, these particular auctions are not the high-stakes variety. These are more like indoor yard sales. So the merchandise being offered is mostly discarded junk. There is a general disinterest among the husbands, but the wives are always looking for some ugly thing to beautify their home. When the women bid, they are bidding on something that caught their eye during the preview, and they have a maximum price in mind. When the bidding exceeds that number, they stop bidding.

When the men bid, it's a whole different ball game. During the preview, they were sitting down having coffee. They have no concept of, or interest in, the item on which they're bidding, but have been instructed by their wives to bid on it but not to exceed a certain number. Unfortunately, as with so many facets of their lives, men have trouble stopping. Once a man bids on an item and another man bids against him, it's a cockfight. And the more worthless the item, the more aggressive the bidding. They're each trying to convince the whole room that they have more money to burn than the other guy. They're at a junk auction in a rundown community center in the middle of nowhere eating day-old doughnuts and drinking coffee out of a Styrofoam cup and have chosen that venue as the place to demonstrate their affluence.

SEEKING NO OTHER

One of the changes that I've seen in my lifetime so far is the new focus on men's appearance. Men are getting in shape and having cosmetic surgery and dying their hair, especially after the transplant.

I know it's hard on some of the wives to see these men looking so much better than their husbands, but I think they should go beyond the surface. When a woman looks at her husband and sees the bald head and the baggy eyes and the pear shape, she should interpret that as a compliment. This man is so content being married to her that he has no desire to make himself attractive to other women. Yes, ladies, a man letting himself go is the ultimate sign of unconditional love.

REAL TIME

In the digital computer world, they talk about "real time," such as how files can be transferred or pictures can be rendered in "real time." When I hear this phrase coming from an 18-year-old computer sales manager, I can't help but think he needs more information. So here's a short list of what "real time" actually is:

- The time you spend on a cement bench waiting for your wife to come out of the mall.
- The time between the start of the examination and the point where the doctor takes off the rubber glove.
- The time between your fourth coffee and the next restroom.
- The time between your pulling off the highway and the police officer's handing you the ticket.
- The time between your behavioral indiscretion and your wife's speaking to you again.



— The time until morning when you're sleeping in the garage.

THE RATIO OF LIFE

I don't want you to think I've been looking closely, but I have noticed that there is an evolution in the shape of a man's mid-section as he ages. It has to do with the relationship between his waist and his butt. The one expands while the other contracts. At 25, he may have a 32-inch waist and a 34-inch butt. By 40 he probably has a 36-inch waist and a 32-inch butt. By 60, it's likely a 40:30 thing. As his waist gets bigger and his butt gets smaller, his center of gravity goes higher and higher until the inevitable happens — he keels over.

QUOTE OF THE DAY: "Pretend you're 10 percent happier than you really are. No less than 10 percent and please, please, please, no more." — 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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