

commentary

from our viewpoint...

New garage example of bad public policy

With the economy in the tank and state revenues on a downhill slide, the powers that be in Topeka still want to spend millions on unnecessary, perhaps unwise, improvements around the Capitol.

In a striking example of bad public policy, the Legislature slipped a \$15 million underground parking garage into a last-minute budget bill. The proposal had never been debated in either house of the Legislature, never had a committee hearing, never had a public comment.

And despite rules which supposedly prohibit conference committees from including items which have not passed at least one house in their reports, the garage boondoggle slipped through.

The conference committee added the 560-car garage to a \$135 million, eight-year renovation project for the Statehouse.

Even Sen. David Kerr, the president of the Senate, thinks that was wrong. He wants another vote, even though he supports the garage. However, backers say it's a done deal. They want to issue another \$15 million in bonds to pay for it, but they say the garage will be built. If the extra bonds aren't authorized, something else will not get done.

Plans are to begin work on the garage this month despite the lack of authority to issue more bonds and despite the rule-bending vote.

Why state leaders are so hell-bent on the underground parking is a mystery. While they say it will enhance security by replacing close-in parking spaces around the Statehouse which have been closed off, the fact is an underground garage would be an inviting target for a bomb.

Guards would be required to search vehicles entering the garage, creating a security nightmare. Why not just let people park in remote lots a block or more away, as they do today, and walk to their offices?

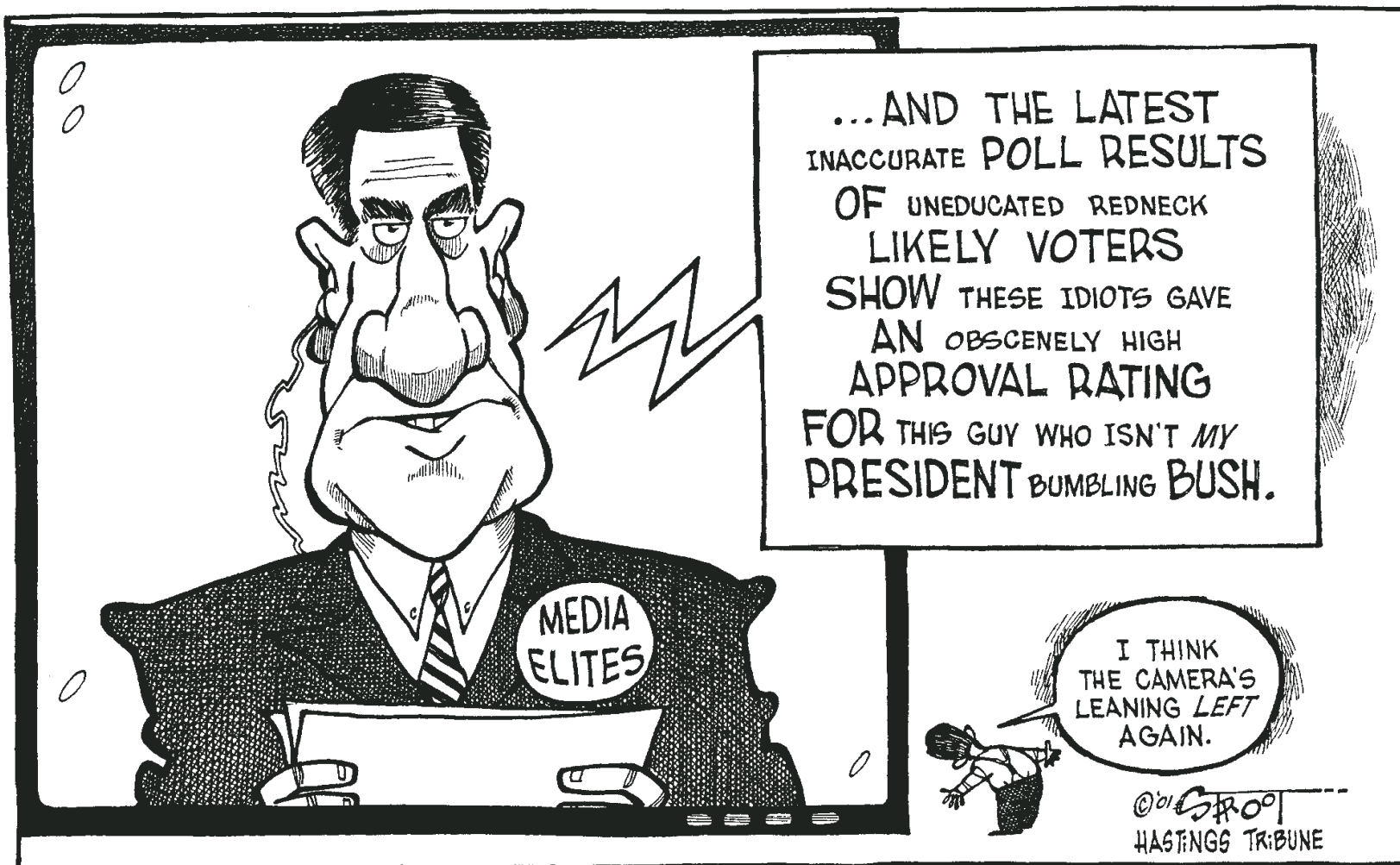
Well, in Topeka that's not popular. Walking in the heat or snow is not popular at all; the Department of Transportation is spending more than \$10 million on underground tunnels to connect state office buildings and parking so legislators and bureaucrats won't have to work up a sweat or get their nice shoes icy.

All this when the state barely has enough cash to meet its commitments to schools and social services and is talking cutbacks next year.

Instead of just taking another vote, we think the Legislature ought to scrap both projects. The Capitol renovation is important; we need to preserve and improve our Statehouse. But the underground garage and tunnels are expensive frills we can do without.

And last-minute laws are always bad business.

Let's stop the Topeka digs and put the money where it is needed. — Steve Haynes



Hillary strikes out

It wasn't just that NBC's Tim Russert was throwing softballs last Sunday to Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton, D-NY, on "Meet the Press." Indeed, as The New York Times noted, Russert's questions "were not all softballs." This is true. Some of his questions were big, shiny beach balls that Clinton could lob back and never see followed-up on again.

Russert began by quoting a statement by Mrs. Clinton regarding the Clinton administration's efforts against terrorism: "We did what needed to be done and could be done," Mrs. Clinton said recently, adding Clintonesquely, "but it was not near enough of what should have been done." Logically enough, Russert asked, "What more should have been done?"

Two hundred and three words later, Clinton may have stopped talking but she still hadn't answered the question. She was too busy elaborating on having done "what needed to be done and could be done" to entertain notions of "what should have been done." The bottom line: "I know that fighting terrorism and going after bin Laden was a top priority of the Clinton administration," she said.

Here was a whopper. Even the most die-hard Clintonista won't say that in the dark. As Russert did point out, USA Today, hardly a vast right-wing conspirator, recently noted the Clinton administration's reluctance to focus on the terrorist threat in an article titled "Why Clinton Failed to Stop Bin Laden," reporting: "Even Clinton's defenders acknowledge that, for much of his tenure, fighting terrorism wasn't his highest priority."



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Certainly, fighting terrorism wasn't the all-out war that fighting Kenneth Starr was — or even Linda Tripp.

Which was no secret. From as far away as Russia, Russian President Vladimir Putin noticed American disinterest. Bill Clinton "was in a very difficult position," he told ABC's Barbara Walters last month, alluding to the Lewinsky affair. "But even at that time, we certainly were counting on a more active cooperation in combating international terrorism." Former administration insiders say much the same thing. "Clearly, not enough was done," former deputy attorney general Jamie Gorelick told the Boston Globe in late September. "We should have caught this." Even former Clinton National Security Council aide Nancy Soderberg, still insisting that the Lewinsky matter never distracted her former boss, admitted, "In hindsight, it [the effort against terrorism] wasn't enough, and anyone involved in the policy would have to admit that."

Come to think of it, anyone not involved in the policy would have to admit it. Mrs. Clinton happens to fit both categories. One moment the junior

senator from New York was expounding on "secret presidential directives," the next minute she was feigning ignorance of the particulars. "Well," she began (as is her custom) in response to whether recent critiques of the Clinton anti-terrorism record were fair, "I don't think it's fair. I don't think that's an accurate rendering of what did happen. But, you know, I don't know all the details." Please.

Russert passed on to one final terrorism question. After the first bombing of the World Trade Center in 1993, he wondered, should the United States have declared war on terrorism?

"A lot was done," Mrs. Clinton replied, grasping at straws — rather, citing a trip she said her husband made to the United Nations and "several" international summits on the subject. "But, you know, if you go back and look at the context, there was not the support in this country for the steps that were needed."

Eureka. Mrs. Clinton, despite herself, finally said a mouthful. She's absolutely right that public opinion was not behind a war on terrorism in the middle to late 1990s. But that doesn't mean a war on terrorism shouldn't have been envisioned, planned and fought. But such an effort — even on a smaller scale than the current war — would have required the kind of leadership that molds public opinion, not follows it. Unhappily for the nation, that's not the kind of leadership we got.

Diana West is a columnist and editorial writer for The Washington Times. She can be contacted via dwest@washingtontimes.com.

where to write

- U.S. Sen. Pat Roberts, 302 Hart Senate Office Building, Washington D.C. 20510. (202) 224-4774
- U.S. Sen. Sam Brownback, 303 Hart Senate Office Building, Washington D.C. 20510. (202) 224-6521
- U.S. Rep. Jerry Moran, 1217 Longworth House Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20510. (202) 225-2715
- State Rep. Jim Morrison, State Capitol Building Rm. 174-W, Topeka, KS 66612. (785) 296-7676
- State Sen. Stan Clark, State Capitol Building Rm. 128-S, Topeka, KS 66612. (785) 296-7399
- Kansas Attorney General Carla J. Stovall, 301 S.W. 10th, Lower Level, Topeka, KS 66612-1597 (785) 296-3751 Fax (785) 291-3699 TTY: (785) 291-3767

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e-mail: daily@nwkansas.com



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Evan Barnum, Systems Admin. (support@nwkansas.com)

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New York after the fall

NEW YORK — If this greatest city is saddened three months after the fall of the World Trade Center, then it is also different. I can think of five things that have changed for the better.

1. People now value service more than celebrity. A new Gallup Poll shows that we Americans now accord the highest moral prestige to two professions: firefighters and nurses. It took the world's worst terrorist attack to remind us of what we knew when we were 5 years old. Boys wanted to be firemen and girls wanted to be nurses because of the basic human instinct to help people and be brave for them.

The front page of the paper has replaced the gossip page as the stimulant of our imaginations. Instead of praising the "beautiful people," we celebrate the gritty guys who trudged so dutifully up those stairs on Sept. 11 when the rest of us were running down them.

That's the heart of it. This Christmas, we are once again those 5-year-olds who wanted to grow up to be firefighters and nurses, who wanted to save people, to be courageous in the face of danger. We have peeled off the years of money-chasing and status-seeking back to what really turned us on when our bodies were small, but our souls were large.

2. People value authenticity more than slickness. I have no earthly idea how Bill Clinton might have handled this crisis. What I do know is that not once in the last 90 days have I read that dreaded word "charisma" or seen a politician praised for his polish or smoothness, or been called "slick."

Rudy Giuliani, the mayor of this city, was a star of those immediate weeks for the simple reason that he showed up, told us the truth, and did his job. He told us what he knew as soon as he knew it, not



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when it suited him. There was no "rolling disclosure," no politician out there telling us what he wanted us to know when he wanted us to know it.

Secretary of State Don Rumsfeld is another honest briefer. Behind those quizmaster's glasses is a guy fully capable of doing his job and completely confident in letting us know it. I suppose it helps to be back in the same job, Secretary of Defense, that he had in Gerald Ford's administration.

3. People value executives over legislators. "Peanuts" creator Charles Schultz once showed us the difference between being a grown-up and being a kid. The kid sits in the back of the car and complains, "I'm hungry. She's teasing me. I'm car sick. When are we going to get there?"

The grown-up is the one who pays for the car and the gas, gets the map, figures out how to get there, and drives.

The U.S. Senate — "the World's Greatest Deliberative Body" — is in the back seat. Jobs such as Mayor of New York, president, and even secretary of Transportation are the drivers. That's why people look to the mayor in time of crisis and not to the senators, who have their own complaining to do.

4. People value community more than ethnic intramurals. There's better eye contact out in the streets than there used to be. People are talking to the people they meet in the elevator, the bar, the

coffee line. "Hello" has replaced the averted glance. "Community": That's the word for what we're feeling. The Falwells and the Jacksons are quiet today because nobody wants to play the old intramurals of class, ethnic and racial rivalry.

5. Patriotism is more important than politics. It was always there. We didn't learn "God Bless America" for the occasion. We were brought up on it.

What we'd forgotten was that the 20 percent of American life that we argue about — tax rates, trade policy, social programs — is outweighed by the 80 percent that unites us — democracy, freedom, human rights, the right to pursue happiness.

Jan. 1 is coming on strong. I say we resolve in 2002 to stick to these newfound values a little while longer. When people ask me whether I'm right, left or center, I'm simply going to say, "I'm an American."

Chris Matthews, author of "Now, Let Me Tell You What I Really Think" (Free Press, 2001) and "Hardball" (Touchstone Books, 1999), is a nationally syndicated columnist for the San Francisco Chronicle and the host of "Hardball" on CNBC and MSNBC cable channels.

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