

commentary

from other pens...

What do we want in a new farm bill?

As Congress struggles with a new farm bill, here's hoping they come up with something that works.

It's not likely, though. The legacy of a century of farm programs is bankruptcy, distrust and failure. The truth is, the most prosperous farm communities today are those unregulated, unsubsidized and unhampered.

In farm country, we are addicted to the farm bill. Our economy can't survive without it. But what do we really want from the government?

Not more Freedom to Farm, apologies to Sen. Pat Roberts. It sounded like a great idea, but in the end, it just did not work. Maybe the time was wrong.

Yet no farmer really wants to continue existing forever on government handouts. It goes against their independent grain, the proud traditions of rural America.

Over a century, what have farm programs accomplished?

More than anything, probably to keep the average farmer on the land for five, six, maybe even a dozen years longer. But from the turn of the century on, that often has meant not prosperity, but hanging on.

While the government has spent billions to keep people on the land, it has spent billions more through land-grant colleges and research programs to drive them off.

Not even the government, it seems, knows what it wants from farm programs. Especially the government.

No amount of money has changed the basic trends of the last century, which since the days of settlement have included rising efficiency and a shrinking farm population each and every year.

We tend to be nostalgic for the era when there was a family on nearly every quarter and a school in every corner of every township. But while those days produced some fine people to stock urban America, it often wasn't much of a life out on the farm.

Today, you can drive for miles in the country without seeing a house. Most farmers are edging nearer to retirement, and the number of young couples coming in to replace the current generation is few indeed.

What will they need from the farm bill?

We cannot close down the money machine, as Pat Roberts once thought, without ruining our banks, our farms and our businesses. But we need to think about how to make the transition to a more stable farm economy, where those who survive on the land can make a living in dignity and independence.

They will need freedom from government restrictions and protection from predatory corporations which seek to dominate the farm trade. The knowledge and tools to work the land well and profitably. Good crop insurance and a strong export market.

And especially, the strength to go forward in a business that has become increasingly complex and increasingly volatile.

There is no magic wand, no miracle pill. The government can't do much for us, and some will say it has done quite enough.

But there are families here with the strength, the perseverance, the courage and the knowledge that brought their forebears out to this wild, open and difficult land. They will make it happen.

Meantime, let's talk about what we want to see in that farm bill. — Steve Haynes.

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The Goodland Daily News

(USPS No. 222-460. ISSN 0893-0562)

Member: Kansas Press Association
The Associated Press

Inland Press Association Colorado Press Association

National Newspaper Association

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Published daily except Saturday and Sunday and the day observed for New Year's Day, Memorial Day, Fourth of July, Labor Day, Thanksgiving Day and Christmas Day, at 1205 Main St., Goodland, Kan. 67735.

Periodicals postage paid at Goodland, Kan. 67735; entered at the Goodland, Kan., Post Office under the Act of Congress of March 8, 1878.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to The Goodland Daily News, 1205 Main St., Goodland, Kan. 67735.

TELEPHONE: (785) 899-2338. Editorial e-mail: daily@nwkansas.com. Advertising questions can be sent to: gdnadv@nwkansas.com

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SUBSCRIPTIONS: In Sherman County and adjacent counties: three months, \$22; six months, \$38; 12 months, \$72. By mail in Kansas, Colorado: three months, \$28; six months, \$50; 12 months, \$95. (All tax included.) Out of area, weekly mailing of five issues: three months, \$25; six months, \$40; 12 months, \$75.

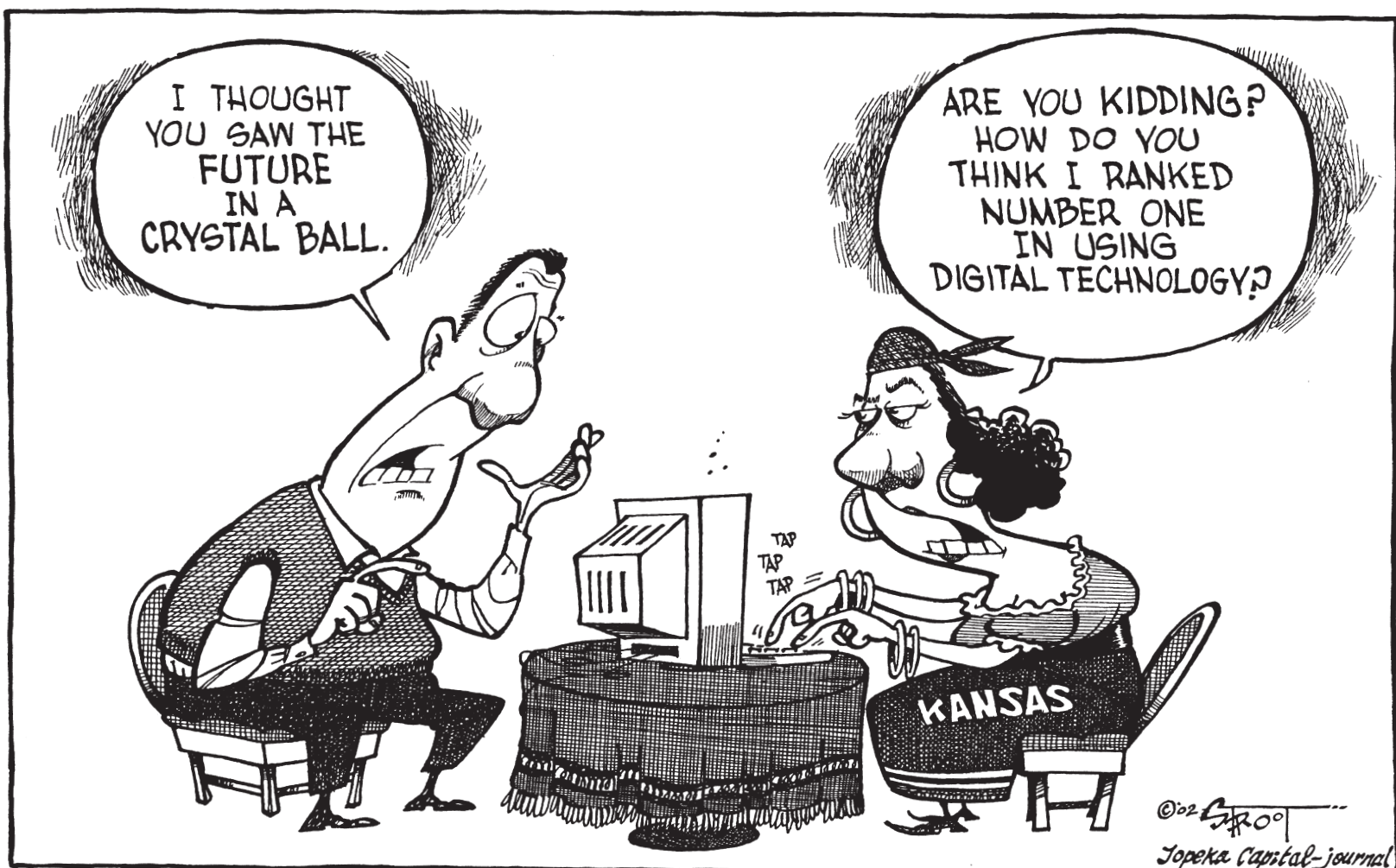
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STAR
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Checks, balances and government secrecy

President Bush was looking his regular-guy best outside his Crawford, Texas, ranch last month, with his tanned face and Marlboro Man clothes. He was leanin' against a lectern talkin' to reporters, droppin' enough "g's" to sow an acre of gerunds.

He was ticked off that someone in the government had leaked a draft of his "preliminary" ideas about structuring the secret military tribunals. He speculated that somebody leaked the information "to show off to his family or her family."

He shook his head in apparent confusion and exasperation. "I don't know why people do that," he said.

Uh, hel-looo. It's about the only way left to get information from an administration that imagines itself a federal chapter of the Skull and Bones — the elitist secret society of Yale University.

In the San Francisco Chronicle on a recent Sunday, editorial writer Ruth Rosen revealed yet another example of the Bush administration's almost pathological zeal for secrecy:

Attorney General John Ashcroft issued a memo on Oct. 12 urging federal agencies to reject Freedom of Information Act requests unless the legal arguments were irrefutable or if rejection of the request would jeopardize another agency's ability to protect important records.

This is a direct reversal of Clinton Attorney Gen-



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eral Janet Reno's 1993 memo that encouraged agencies to resolve discretionary requests on the side of openness.

The Ashcroft memo slipped out virtually unnoticed, following a pattern that is quickly defining the Bush administration as an Imperialist Presidency, the weathered Tony Lamas and homey aphorisms notwithstanding. Bush's maneuvers on secrecy and civil liberties show a hostility to the ideal that people in a democratic society need to know what its elected officials are doing — and what they have done. If we cannot hold government accountable, we have no chance at all of keeping its exercise of power in check.

Since the Sept. 11 attacks, Bush has not made even a pretense of generating consensus for his decisions. He didn't seek approval from — or even consult — Congress when he curtailed attorney-client privilege for suspected terrorists.

Or when he ordered the detention of thousands

of "witnesses" of Arab descent without due process.

Bush also unilaterally granted himself the power to try terrorist suspects in secret military tribunals rather than in open court. And, with no announcement, he signed Executive Order 13233, allowing him to override the 1978 Presidential Records Act, which requires a president's papers to be made publicly available 12 years after he leaves office.

So citizens now must file FOIA requests to view 68,000 pages of Ronald Reagan's correspondence, which should have been released in January. Oh, right. Ashcroft shut that door, too.

"I don't think the Ashcroft memo was caused by the events of Sept. 11," said Rebecca Daugherty of the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press in Washington, D.C. "It was in the works already. Even more than a desire to close off information, there was a desire to get rid of any advances made by Janet Reno."

I asked Daugherty who else I should talk to about the importance of protecting the Freedom of Information Act. Professors of journalism? Advocacy groups? Civil liberties lawyers?

"Any American citizen," she replied.

I hope she's right.

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

Dozer appeal



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I know that most advertisers use sex appeal to sell their products, but there may be something even stronger for attracting the long-term attention of men. I'm talking about any kind of heavy machinery. Men are fascinated by anything that shakes, spins, rumbles or moves. And the bigger it is, the more they like it. I think it relates to how men see their own responsibilities. Historically, men get the heavier jobs in life — building the homestead, getting rocks out of the cornfield, putting in a pool. So when a man sees a machine that does things, his instant hope is that it will somehow reduce his workload. And that leads him to believe that he has managed to defy Mother Nature's plans for him.

My neighbor rented a small backhoe last year to help with the yard work. He was one happy guy sitting there at those controls. He got the yard work done in record time and was enjoying himself so much he started digging holes and moving trees and leveling the garage. He did two or three weeks' damage in less than a day. He did indeed fool Mother Nature. Unfortunately, he wasn't so fortunate with his wife.

NO LAZY DAYS OF WINTER

It's been very cold here the last week or so, and it occurred to me that winter is a pretty good cure for laziness. There are things you can get away with in the summer that just don't work in the winter. You need to provide yourself with shelter of some kind. And clothing is a must. Lots of it. And even with the clothing, you'll need a heat source, which means you'll need fuel, which means you'll need money, which means you'll need a job. Now I sup-

pose you could cut down a few trees and burn the wood, but I've tried that, and believe me, it's easier to have a job. So if you've got somebody in your family who spends their days lying around not doing anything, I suggest you send them to a cold place for a few months. In the past, you may have told them to go to a certain hot place, but you had it all wrong. They need to be up north in the deep freeze. Hellfire and brimstone aren't nearly so motivating as chattering teeth and a frozen butt.

THE PLEASURE OF YOUR COMPANY

Having a successful party is all about who you invite. You need to have the right types of people in the right proportion to guarantee that everything goes smoothly. Here's a guest list that works for me:

—A guy who always laughs, to keep everyone's spirits up.

—A guy who never laughs, to deal with the cops.

—A meek little guy who does whatever you tell him.

—A big tough guy who reminds others of their limits.

—A big eater who gets everyone to the buffet by going first.

—A bunch of dieters so there's enough food.

—A couple of single guys to keep everyone entertained.

—A couple of wives to keep everyone honest.

THE TRUCE SHALL SET YOU FREE

My wife and I have been married for a while now, and I'd have to say that our marriage is better than ever. Partly because we've stood the test of time. Partly because neither of us has regrets in this particular area. But mainly because after you've been married to the same person for a long time, you arrive at a kind of truce. There's no point in fighting any more over behavioral patterns. You've said and done everything and it didn't work, and ultimately none of it was a deal breaker, so you just both wave the white flag and have a happier life together. Maybe the problems in the Middle East would go away if the two warring factions married each other. Just a thought.

QUOTE OF THE DAY: "Think hard for an hour each day. Any less and you'll do something stupid. Any more, and you'll lose all your friends." — 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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