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commentary

from other pens...

Sputtering economy takes center stage

The struggling economy has become the central issue in governor's races across the country and is complicating tough re-election battles in states like Alabama, Massachusetts, Wisconsin and California.

While new reports say the national economy may rebound in coming months that may not come soon enough to bail out some state budgets this election year.

"It's much harder to run in tough economic times," said Vermont Gov. Howard Dean, a Democrat who helps recruit candidates for his party. "People are worried about their jobs, it's hard to do anything. A national recession is pretty tough for a state governor to overcome."

In Wisconsin and Massachusetts, two Republican former lieutenant governors have their hands full after moving up to the top jobs when governors in those states were appointed to new posts.

Wisconsin Gov. Scott McCallum is fending off a crowded field of opponents and the state's severe financial problems at the same time. Massachusetts Gov. Jane Swift has been forced to cut programs from aid to hospitals to expanded kindergarten programs and will face a tough election challenge in a traditionally Democratic-leaning state. Democrats are watching to see if financial troubles in Florida could cause problems for Republican Gov. Jeb Bush, though it's not clear that would give Democrats an opening.

For the Democrats, Alabama Gov. Don Siegelman is about even in the polls against potential Republican challengers at the same time his state's revenues have been dropping, plants closing and people losing jobs. California Gov. Gray Davis dealt with the state's energy shortages, only to see his state hit by economic woes.

"The economy is a central concern that's out there in most of our states," said Colorado Gov. Bill Owens, vice chair of the Republican Governors' Association. "The impact on governors races will be variable, depending on the governor. In some cases, the electorate will be willing to understand that it's part of a national slowdown."

"The key is being able to come in and close budget deficits the best you can," said Clinton Key, executive director of the Republican Governors' Association. "The decisions you make are critical to your ability to get re-elected. Voters look for fairness."

To a lesser degree, economic problems can spill over to a non-incumbent following a governor from the same party. In Virginia, economic woes of Republican Gov. Jim Gilmore helped derail the 2001 gubernatorial campaign of another Republican, Mark Earley.

"It's not a Republican versus Democratic thing," said political analyst Stuart Rothenberg. "Governors ... got the credit when the national economy helped states. Governors are going to get the blame now that state economies are clearly struggling."

Republican governors outnumber Democrats 27 to 21, with Maine Gov. Angus King an independent and Minnesota Gov. Jesse Ventura, a member of the Independence Party.

Twenty-three of the 36 seats are currently held by Republicans with a dozen incumbents up for re-election and another 11 GOP seats open.

Economic analysts have suggested the recession may be wrapping up and the economy may rebound. But that may not come early enough to change budget decisions being made right now, said B.J. Thornberry, executive director of the Democratic Governors' Association.

"I don't know if we'll understand the impact until these budget decisions are made," she said. "They'll be made on current revenue estimates."

Challengers have it easier because "they don't have to put a budget together," said Robert Behn, director of the Governors Center at Duke University. But he said the public can understand a state's budget problems when properly explained.

"If you're not a complete klutz at explaining the realities of the budget, you can explain that people have to live within their means," Behn said. "The public understands this better than we give them credit for."

EDITOR'S NOTE — Will Lester covers politics and polling for *The Associated Press*.



Big Brother revisited



chris matthews

• commentary

Wasn't this "Ministry of Truth" and "War is Peace" stuff supposed to arrive 20 years ago? George Orwell predicted a government stamping lies as truth and fighting a war so endless as to assume the monotony of peace. Writing against the early Cold War backdrop, he predicted this grim world to arrive in 1984.

Well, worse late than never. The Orwellian fears of post-World War II are taking form in early 21st-century Washington.

The prophesied "Ministry of Truth" is the Pentagon's new Office of Strategic Influence.

"The Pentagon is developing plans to provide news items, possibly even false ones, to foreign media organizations as part of a new effort to influence public sentiment and policymakers in both friendly and unfriendly countries, military officials said," The New York Times reported this week.

Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld says the Pentagon is merely doing in 2002 what countries did in past wars: fool the enemy. The World War II allies protected the Normandy Invasion using a feint toward Calais instead of its actual location, the Cotentin peninsula. If that fooled the Germans, it also saved lots of American, British and Canadian lives. We've got to be just as sneaky, Rumsfeld argues, in fighting the terrorists and terror-backing countries today.

Is this the extent of the lies the Pentagon will tell? Tactical stuff about operations that puts the bin Laden crowd off the trail? If so, who could complain? But if the new Pentagon operation goes further and pumps out big, "strategic" lies, a mission its name clearly implies, we are crossing a line that used to separate the good guys — us — from the bad guys like Josef Goebbels.

If this new Office of Strategic Influence plans to broadcast lies "with a global reach," to use an anti-terrorist standard of measure, lets kill this thing before it gets going. How can we possibly win the hearts and minds of the Islamic and Arab world with an American propaganda mill already labeled as such by the American media?

That other feature of "1984," the notion of endless war, is more troubling.

President Bush makes the case daily for a new kind of open-ended conflict.

First, it was Al Qaeda we were after. Then, it was the government in Afghanistan that protected Al Qaeda.

Next, it was the groups associated with Al Qaeda. Then, it was the list of governments that allow such

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First, it was Al Qaeda we were after. Then, it was the government in Afghanistan that protected Al Qaeda.

Next, it was the groups associated with Al Qaeda. Then, it was the list of governments that allow such

groups to reside in their country. Then, it was the "Axis of Evil" that makes weapons and may or may not be working with terrorist groups.

Where do we stop? How many countries are we talking about here?

Remember how we looked longingly for Lyndon Johnson's "light at the end of the tunnel" in Vietnam? The current president from Texas is talking about going into a lot more tunnels and never even mentions the notion of any light at the end of them.

The "Ministry of Truth" is a gruesome enough prospect. But, what about the dull and throbbing reality that, as long as we are on this earth, the United States military will be fighting someone somewhere?

To borrow a favorite Orwellian phrase we are now bent on being "down and out" in Baghdad, Tehran and Pyongyang and each and every one of the world's other "evil" capitals for the rest of our lives. We ain't ever coming home.

Note: Winston Smith, the hero of "1984," works at the Ministry of Truth. His job is to "rewrite and alter" newspaper stories to conform to government purposes. Sounds like the excellent work somebody's got in mind for the Pentagon.

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.

We've turned high school athletics upside down

In the most recent edition of the Kansas High School Athletic Association Journal, a guest editorial by the Executive Director of The Michigan High School Athletic Association caught my eye. I shared this article with some of my colleagues and their reaction has been like mine. We believe it says a lot of what we have been saying among ourselves about the business we are in, high school athletics. It says a lot of what needs to be said. It speaks to each and every one of us. I'd like to share that with you.

Upside Down & Inside Out

By John Roberts, Executive Director, Michigan High School Athletic Assoc.

It was probably never perfectly so, but there was a time when we could say that the world of sport epitomized fairness. Certainly the sports world was as slow as the rest of society to treat the different races and genders even-handedly; but more than elsewhere, it was in sports where merit mattered. If you were good enough, you played; if not, you didn't.

In recent years, however, I've found myself looking at sports differently, now seeing that it epitomizes some of what is most unfair.

On the one hand I look at so many professional athletes with more money than they can ever spend, while on the other hand I see abject poverty in the cities cheering for those athletes.

On the one hand I see millionaires in the world of sports who lack brains, grace or both, while on the other hand I see teachers and pastors living hand to mouth.

The world's value system has been turned upside down. It's always bothered me. It bothers me even more that the world I love and serve — sports — is the most visible example of this perverted scheme.

We live at a time when much of life, is turned upside down and inside out; and neither education nor educational athletics has been unaffected.

We pay college football and basketball coaches more than college physics and physical education professors. That's upside down. Then we support the exorbitant salaries of the football and basketball coaches with television revenue from advertisers whose products result in more dropouts and deaths to college age youth than any other cause. That's inside out.

We pay one member of the Detroit Lions more in a year than we spend annually for the entire athletic program of the Detroit Public Schools. That's not uncommon, even understandable in a free enterprise system; but it's upside down.

We lower the standards of sportsmanship in direct proportion to the age and income of the athletes involved, The older the athlete, and the more



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we pay that athlete, the more immature the athlete is allowed to behave. Imperfect as it may be, the conduct of players, coaches and spectators at high school athletic events is far superior to that at college and professional events. That's good, from my perspective; but it's still upside down.

Try to find the physical education/intramurals/ interscholastic athletics pyramid in our schools. If it can be found at all, it's upside down. We find communities much more inclined to give the elite athletes more and everyone else less.

In school athletics, we fire good teachers with poor win/loss records, while retaining poor teachers who have good win/loss records. That's inside out.

When there are financial problems, we cut junior high school programs before high school sports, JV programs before varsity sports, and non-revenue programs before revenue producing sports; all of which is upside down. And we get so twisted inside out to fund what's left of our program that we must use rationale to justify our actions that once we were so sure was wrong that it didn't even require discussion.

Where is the Greatest Threat?

As disheartening as the lack of purpose and principle at the state and national levels has been, it is not the greatest threat to the future of educational athletics.

In the early 1990s we thought the greatest threat was posed at the national level with national tournaments, national television and commercialization and exploitation in so many ways, shapes and forms. So Michigan schools responded with tighter limits on interstate travel, prohibitions on live television and prohibitions on outside compensation to coaches.

But now we see — made wiser by the passage of years — that the greatest threat to educational athletics wasn't and isn't at the national level, but comes from the local, grass roots level.

I refer to the attitudes and actions of people in our local communities who have forgotten or who have never known the pure purpose of educational athletics. Who see interscholastic athletics for their own glory more than students' education. Who see interscholastic athletics as a means for scholarships to college more than scholarship in high school.

Who not only want their team to win, but to win big. Who not only want their child to play, but to

play all the time. Who see everything in life as a right they are owed, and who see everything that goes wrong as someone else's fault.

We have been contacted by a parent who was upset that his son did not win our Scholar-Athlete Award, and demanded to know what criteria was used, who the judges were, and the names and addresses and phone numbers of the finalists. We were worried this father would call and harass the finalists for receiving what the father thought his son should get. Like he had a right to it. Like we owed it to his son.

When I say the greatest threat is not national but local and grass roots, I refer to people I saw at an all-day, all ages wrestling meet. Ten-year-olds with tattoos. Babes in arms carried to wrestling mats to compete and then be lifted from the mats to go back to the bleachers. Children who refused to wrestle. Many who cried before, during and after they wrestled.

I refer also to parents who bring to school sports an intractable zeal to have school sports run like community sports. With early and intense specialization; cutting and select teams for elementary school age children; state, regional and national championships for junior high youth; large trophies and long trips.

Unless we change those attitudes and actions, school sports are in danger. For if school sports (educational athletics) are not different from community sports programs, then there's no reason for schools to give their name or their money to them. Schools will drop their sponsorship of sports if school sports don't provide something unique from community sports programs.

We must delight in being different, for it is in these differences that the place of school sports is preserved in the world of sports and, more importantly, in the world of education, preserved as a tool for schools to reach and motivate students and to provide them practical experiences in teamwork and hard work, discipline and dedication, leadership and sportsmanship, loyalty and school spirit, sacrifice and self-control.

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N.T. Betz, Director of Internet Services (nbetz@nwkansas.com)
Evan Barnum, Systems Admin. (support@nwkansas.com)

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