

commentary

from other pens...

Dems, labor share mutual goal — Bush

Centrist Democrats and organized labor have plenty of differences, especially on trade, but they're trying to work together when possible these days because they have a common interest — opposing President Bush. Both groups say many of the president's policies are out of touch with ordinary Americans.

Democrats with an eye on the White House in 2004, face a difficult task navigating between the two groups on economic issues, especially trade. Legislation returning to the president the power to negotiate trade agreements passed the Senate on Thursday after being narrowly passed by the House last week. Centrist Democrats generally supported the measure, while unions strongly opposed it.

One potential 2004 presidential candidate, Democratic House leader Dick Gephardt, opposed the measure because it didn't "enhance human rights, reaffirm worker rights and promote environmental protection." In the Senate, Majority Leader Tom Daschle, as well as Senators Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut and John Kerry of Massachusetts voted for the legislation. Sen. John Edwards of North Carolina, where the textile industry has been hurt by trade agreements, voted against it after protections for the industry he put in the Senate bill were stripped out.

John Sweeney, president of the AFL-CIO, said Thursday a politician's vote is more important than membership in a certain caucus within the party. "Look at the trade vote as an example. Those who voted against it are responding to the concerns of our members and those who voted for it voted against working families," Sweeney said.

Unions are worried about Bush's efforts to pass legislation that creates a Department of Homeland Security while altering civil service and union protections.

"It's the most important issue," Sweeney said. "The protection of collective bargaining and the respect of laws such as civil service and equal opportunity ... are very important to workers."

Many Senate Democrats, including Daschle, Lieberman and Kerry, have been very vocal in their opposition to Bush's efforts.

Bush insists he needs broad powers over personnel to fight the war on terror. He has threatened to veto legislation that doesn't meet that need.

"What galls all of us is the president and his homeland security chief take every opportunity to have their pictures taken with (unionized) New York City cops and firemen," said Martin Dunleavy of the American Federation of Government Employees. At the same time, they are pushing legislation that would weaken the protection of federal employees, he said.

Confrontations with the administration on issues like that tend to diminish lingering tensions between centrist Democrat lawmakers and labor.

Gephardt, a longtime champion of organized labor, told members of the centrist Democratic Leadership Council in New York City this week that the rivalry between moderate Democrats and unions was "a false choice."

Gephardt, who helped found the DLC in the mid-1980s, told reporters he's never understood why business and labor have to be at odds because "they're both trying to do the same thing" in making businesses profitable.

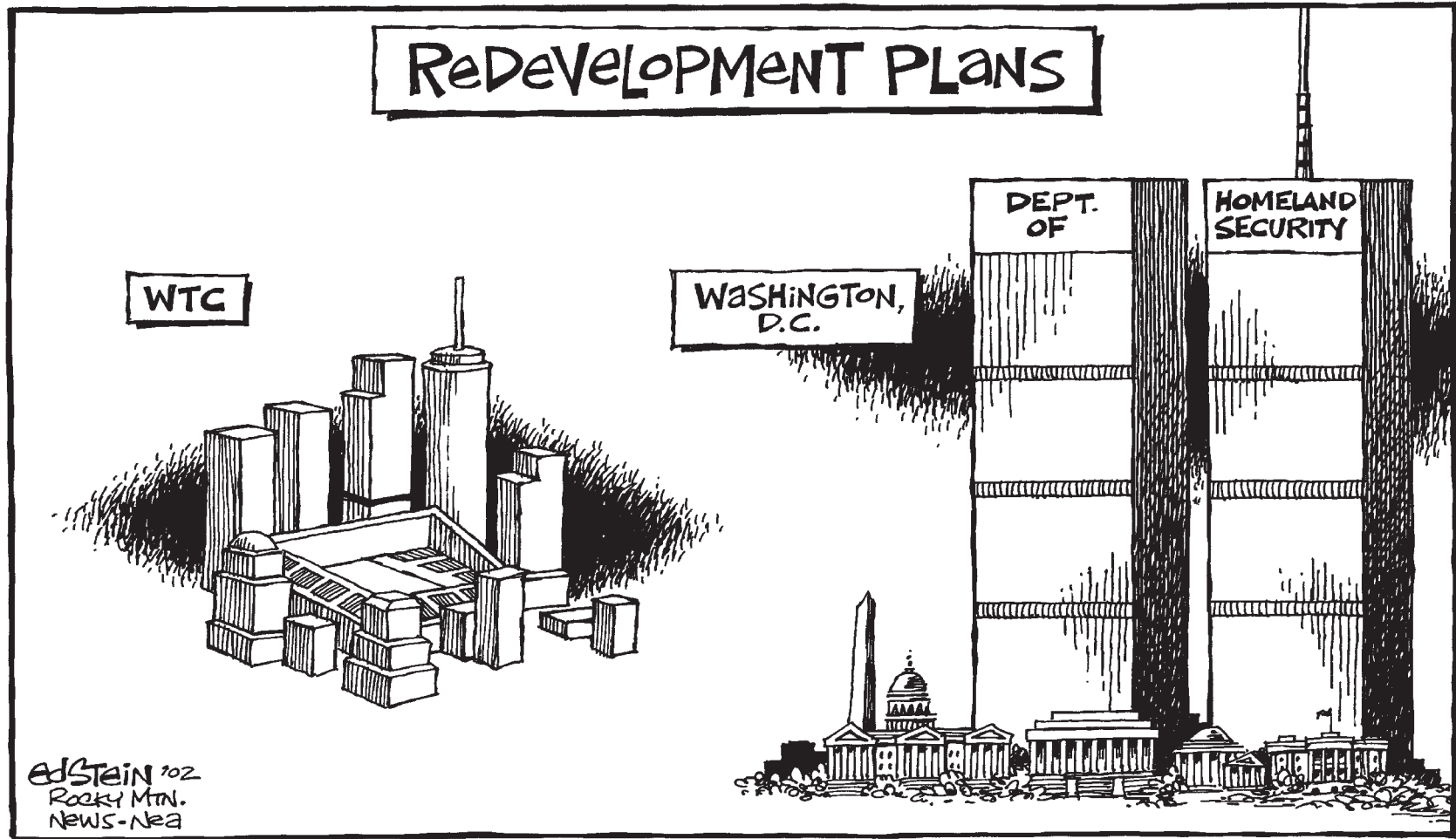
The DLC and labor unions have toned down some differences over the past two years and have met occasionally looking for common ground.

"We have a common interest in getting a Democrat back in the White House," says Al From, founder and chief executive of the DLC. Steve Rosenthal, political director of the AFL-CIO, agreed the two groups have been looking for ways to work together more effectively.

While the groups differ on trade and some economic issues, they agree on opposing the homeland security measure that reduces union clout. The rivalry still surfaces in some areas, though, especially in pushing certain type of Democratic candidates in party primaries.

Five potential presidential candidates spoke to the DLC meeting in New York, while potential candidate Al Gore said he had other commitments. Gore met with leaders of almost a dozen unions just two days later, on Thursday, in Washington. In politics, such timing is seldom accidental.

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



There's lots to see and do at the fair

Ever year since I've lived in Goodland I've gone to the fair.

At least I thought I did. Actually, I just went to the carnival, and one year to the demolition derby, but nothing else. I didn't think I would be interested in the rest of what was going on.

I'm not a farmer. I've never been around animals. Why would I want to go see a bunch of sheep and pigs?

This year I'll be there. I mean, I'll really be there. Every day.

I want to see the animal shows, and the tractor pull. I'm looking forward to the craft displays and Family Fun Night. The rodeos sound interesting, and there's no way I'm going to miss the Catch-It-Pig contest.

I had to miss the 4-H fashion show, but I caught the hand-held pet exhibits. And yes, I'll check out the carnival, too. The new Bullet looks like one mean ride.

Why didn't anyone tell me there was so much interesting stuff going on?

As the fair drew nearer, a lot of people found themselves with extra work, including those of us at the newspaper. All of us went out and met with organizers, talked to kids entering their animals,



doug stephens

- wisdom from babes

and interviewed long-time supporters of the fair. We put out a special fair insert Thursday, which meant more extra work and a late night at the office. It was worth it. I never knew there was so much to the event.

I didn't realize how much work went into it. I had no idea there was so much to do. I didn't know how many people got involved, and how much time they put into their projects. And I had no clue I would get so excited about going this year.

Growing up in Phoenix, we didn't get out to the state fair much, and when we did, we pretty much stuck to the rides. One year my mom dragged us to look at a photography exhibit, which was nice, but it wasn't something to capture the attention of a young boy.

This fair looks like it could keep anyone's attention. The fair board members I've talked to said there will be something for everyone at the fair-

grounds, and they should know what they're talking about.

Hope to see you there.

Fast food lawsuit

A gentleman in New York named Caesar Barber has sued four national fast-food chains for "misleading" him about the nutritional value of their food.

The first time I heard this I thought it was a joke, sort of a parody of those who sue tobacco companies. The guy says he's been eating fast food four or five times a week for almost 50 years, and blames it for his diabetes, high blood pressure and many heart attacks.

Well, duh! He's asking for money to help pay for his medical expenses, and wants restaurants to offer a wider variety of food, including vegetarian menus.

The 5-foot-10-inch, 272-pound janitor's attorney, Samuel Hirsch, says the lawsuit is the first of its kind. I don't doubt it. Everyone else in the world knows that eating greasy hamburgers for 50 years is going to kill you dead, dead, dead.

I think the guy has been watching too many news shows about people winning insanely high verdicts from large companies. Maybe instead of going after McDonald's, KFC and the rest, he should sue the television networks for damage to his intelligence.

Economy turning more people into homeless

It's hard to walk the streets of Denver, or any other American city, without getting panhandled.

It's not something we see much of in Oberlin. You read about bums riding the rails in the Depression era, and touching a small-town family to trade lunch for a day's work. That was a different time.

Today, there aren't many trains in small towns, and the police have gotten a lot better at keeping riders off the rails. We get an occasional hitchhiker or wandering transient, but mostly, the sheriff just gives them a ride to the next county. They may get a room or a place to stay, but they move on.

If you've been in the city lately, though, it's likely you've been touched. And it isn't just your imagination that there are more homeless individuals (can't call them bums anymore) out on the streets today.

The food bank in Denver reports a 20 percent increase in requests this year over last. Times are tough and people are hurting.

But why are there so many people on the street? Why are they so bold that they can just stand on a corner and stop cars, asking for a handout?

Some of them are just down on their luck, as most of them say. Others are the ones who just can't function in society for one reason or another. Thirty years ago, a lot of them would have been in state mental institutions. Others might have spent a lot of time in jail.

In the last few decades, though, courts have made



steve haynes

- along the sappa

it tougher to lock people up just because they don't conform to our idea of a model citizen. Today, you can't lock somebody away in a state hospital because he can't (or won't) hold a job or take a bath or stop drinking. Only those who are so crazy they are a threat to themselves or others can be held in a mental institution, and most of the state hospitals are closed.

Thanks to the Supreme Court, police no longer can arrest people for vagrancy. It's no longer a crime not to have a job or a place to live. And sleeping on the street or in a vacant lot isn't illegal unless the landowner complains. (And today, the railroad is liable to complain.)

So there are a lot of people out on the street, many of them more or less permanent dropouts from the job-and-paycheck segment of society. Some of them are homeless due to a poor economy or bad luck, but many were on the bricks even when employment was at record lows. They simply can't lead a "normal" life, but who's to say they are worse off today than a generation ago, when their prede-

cessors were locked up in hospital wards?

Rescue missions and food banks do what they can. But the reality is, it isn't much.

On the street, there tend to be two distinct groups. There are older men, grizzled and broken, who've obviously been at this for a while. Among them is a sprinkling of women and younger men, and this group is predominantly white, though there are blacks and all other races in the mix.

Then there are the lost youths, runaways and street kids who spend their time out on the pavement. They tend to have an edge to them.

Some try to stare straight ahead and pretend the street people don't exist. Cynthia says it's wrong for those of us who have more to pass by someone in need, no matter what the reason. I like to think I'm a good Christian, so I try to respond.

But what do you do when you've given all your change to one panhandler, and there are two more on the block who need change for a "cup of coffee"? I hate to whip out my wallet.

Then there are the punk kids, the ones with chains and piercings and spiked, multicolored hair, torn clothes and lots of tattoos, sitting on the curb and sharing a cigarette.

The other night, one asked us for a contribution to the "National Cannabis Relief Society."

"And I promise you, I will get high," he said.

We stared ahead and walked on, laughing as we went. At least he was honest about it.

Brits use animal waste to generate power

America's dependence on foreign oil is a national security problem.

The solution to this dependence is easy. Either we produce more oil ourselves by increasing our domestic production or we begin tapping new areas such as the Arctic Wildlife Refuge in Alaska.

As our government continues to drag its feet, our friends the Brits are getting with it. They have begun experimenting with a new source of energy that we have an abundance of — dung. I know Topeka and Washington, D.C. are full of it.

The United Kingdom's first ever dung-fired power station started operating in early May, taking the excrement of nearly 5,000 cows, chickens, and hogs and lighting up homes around the north coast of Devon.

This is the first of a network of possibly 100 "green" energy plants in the U.K. The plant will take cow, chicken and hog dung from 28 local farms and use it to generate up to two megawatts of electricity for the British national grid, as well as hot water for local schools, hospitals and even a swimming pool. The \$11.2 million plant is powered by roughly 150,000 tons of animal slurry (dung) and food processing waste, producing methane gas which is drawn off to run generators.

It is a 50-50 joint venture between Farmatic of Germany and a firm to be owned by local farm-



mitch hixson

- soundgarden

ers, will feed 2,000 kilowatts of power into the national Grid, enough to light up about 600 homes.

Well, what about the smell? The plant's Managing Director Charles Clarke said the local community's early worries about smell had given way to support for the pioneering eco-venture.

"We've been pioneering slurry (dung) in for six weeks now, and there's been no problem," he said.

The slurry is fermented for about 20 days, which generates the methane gas. Once the methane has been extracted in digesters, the waste sludge is treated to remove deadly spores such as tuberculosis and foot-and-mouth. The remaining virtually odor free liquid is returned to the farmers and used as a fertilizer. This cuts the amount of bagged fertilizer the farmer has to buy.

Farmatic UK managing director Jurgen Fink, a Danish citizen, said the firm hoped to start "as many as possible" similar plants around the country.

"There is big interest across Britain, and we have been approached by groups of farmers and food

processors who are interested in setting up similar facilities," he said.

Dung-fueled power stations are already popular in Germany and Denmark, which both have about 20 large-scale plants in operation.

Fink said the new U.K. plant had begun collecting slurry, and was in the biological processing phase to produce the gas. He added: "I would say that within a few weeks we should be able to have the right quality gas and start to produce electricity."

The process has been held up because of red tape from the U.K. environment agency that wants to classify each tanker of fertilizer returned to a farmer as waste and require a license for each delivery, even though the original slurry is already classed as fertilizer. One of the major environmental plusses of the plant is that it solves the problem of controlling farm waste that is a potential pollutant of the water supply. Clarke said, "These types of power stations operate in Germany and Denmark without a problem so we are hoping we can iron out any problems."

A spokeswoman for the environment agency said, "Because this is the first station of its kind in the U.K., the issue of licensing has taken longer to resolve but we hope to give the go-ahead shortly. We are very much in favor of it."

Washington and Topeka take note. The citizens of Kansas may have some use for you yet.

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