

commentary

from our viewpoint...

Governor race provides a real choice for voters

Though the candidates are scurrying toward the center as fast as they can, Kansans will have a real choice when they vote for governor this fall.

On the left is Kathleen Sebelius, as well financed and ready for the fray as any Democrat can be in this state. Daughter of a governor, daughter-in-law of a much-beloved congressman, she has proven herself as a candidate again and again.

Ms. Sebelius claims she's a "fiscal conservative," but she pointedly hasn't taken the no-more-taxes pledge, and she's pushed her support for social programs.

And maybe she's not all that liberal for a Democrat, but she knows she has the support of that wing of the party. Who else do they have to vote for?

So Kathy Sebelius has been moving toward the middle and talking about her strong support for public schools. She's built a strong record as state insurance commissioner, and she thinks she's earned the right to step up.

On the right, we have Tim Shallenburger, a Baxter Springs banker who is just finishing his first term as state treasurer.

Shallenburger has been a darling of the GOP's conservative wing since he was speaker of the House, but lately he's making himself out to be a moderate. But he has taken, and repeated, the no-tax pledge. And he means it.

Shallenburger says the state needs to rethink the way it finances schools, the biggest chunk of the budget, and outline a "basic" education it will fund for all students.

To start things off, he says he'll cut the budget at the governor's office by 10 percent and make it work. He says there's still waste to cut in state government.

Both candidates have proven themselves in the minor leagues. Now they've been called up for the fall campaign.

And while they're both moving to the center so fast that a collision is likely, there really are differences. Sebelius is pro-choice on abortion, while Shallenburger is anti. Sebelius won't say she won't raise taxes, while Shallenburger vows he won't. Sebelius most likely will grow state government while Shallenburger would fight to shrink it.

Sebelius is for better government, while Shallenburger is for less government. And while Sebelius is thought to be the front-runner after waltzing unopposed through the Democratic primary, it's still a long time until November.

Kansans have a way of looking past a candidate's money. They vote how they vote, and it's hard to tell how this one will turn out.

The Topeka press crowd never thought Shallenburger had a chance against the Republican moderates in the primary. Now that he's won, they're still not sure what to make of him.

The reporters are part of the system in Topeka, and like most people there, the idea of spending cuts makes them nervous.

But if there is one thing Kansans agree on, it's the idea that they don't want to pay any more taxes. The polls make that, at least, clear.

And if people really believe that, then this might be a race. It'll be interesting. — Steve Haynes

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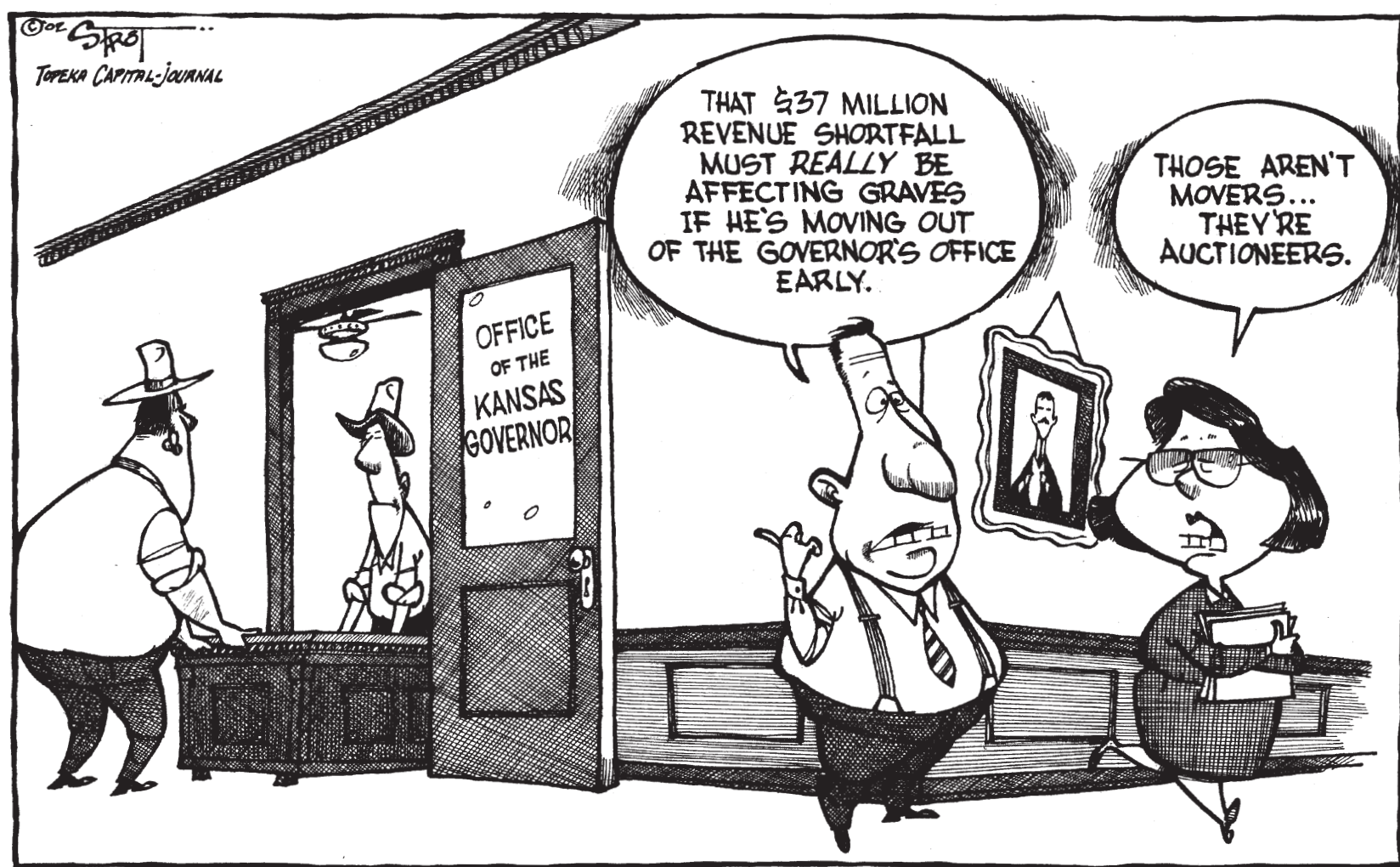
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This is more work than you can imagine

I don't know about you, but writing a weekly column is more work than you would imagine.

The hardest part is making yourself sit down and do it!

Ideas are fairly easy to come by — if you are a people watcher, a nature observer, a great idea person, etc.

But subject matter is harder for those of us who are loners. We have to be careful not to get too introspective; no one wants to read a column about your deepest inner thoughts.

So here it is time for another column, and my mind is blank. I guess that's what's known as writer's block.

Looking out my office window, I see a beautiful, windless day (a rarity in Kansas) which is calling me to be out in the sun.

However, my sensible side (is it right-brain or left-brain?) is arguing, "Now you know that it's



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going to be way too warm to stay out there!" I could sit on the porch swing and read.

The swing sits in the shade, but all there is to look at is a struggling lawn, a worn-out privacy fence, and a tree that needs trimming. Not a great inspirational view.

My mind continues to argue: "You could move the swing outside the fence, so you'd have more to see." But that would create another set of problems.

A privacy fence is to give you privacy, right? Moving outside of it exposes you to neighbors and cars that drive by, or dogs roaming the neigh-

borhood. And giving the appearance of having nothing better to do wouldn't be too great. Besides my legs fall asleep after awhile when I sit on that wooden swing, so I know I wouldn't be out there long enough to warrant the effort to open the patio door to get there, let alone move the swing and get all sweaty.

Isn't rationalization wonderful? It is just mental gymnastics to justify what you want to do in the first place.

I'd rather sit inside where it's cool, read a good book, sip on a cup of tea and be at peace with myself and God.

So what am I doing at this computer — writing another one of those boring columns — which no one will want to read anyway? Duty, I guess. But today duty seems a lot like work, and I haven't completely recovered from all the work I didn't do yesterday on Labor Day!

Put politics aside for Iraq debate

Many Democrats suspect that President Bush has cynically structured the Iraq debate to help Republicans in November, but they should remember: Bush is betting his presidency — and U.S. world leadership — on a good outcome of his Iraq policy.

This being so, members of Congress of both parties — and Bush — should put politics aside and approach coming decisions as perhaps the most crucial they will ever make as elected officials.

Bush needs to rekindle the bipartisan spirit that prevailed immediately after the Sept. 11 attacks, share as much information as possible with Congress and take advice from Congressional leaders.

And Congressional Democrats need to assume that Bush is acting in good faith by asking for a vote on Iraq before the election — and they should give him one unless there is a compelling reason not to.

On the other hand, if it's genuinely necessary to take longer reaching a decision, Bush should agree to the vote during a post-election lame-duck session.

As Senate Majority Leader Thomas Daschle (D-S.D.) said last week, "There are skeptics out there who wonder about the politicization of this issue."

Are there ever. Daschle professed not to be one of them, but plenty of other Democrats — some close to Daschle — accuse Bush of timing his Iraq request to deflect attention from economic issues that might benefit Democrats, focus attention on national security issues that aid Republicans and provide himself with a likely big Congressional victory shortly before the election.

"It's very crass, but very smart," one Democratic staffer said. "I wouldn't be surprised to see Bush make a speech to a joint session of Congress in October, ask Congress to stay in town for a vote and begin ordering troop deployments just after we go home to campaign."

Daschle said in a press briefing Thursday that the timing of a Senate vote on Iraq could depend not only on Congress' getting answers to serious questions about Iraq policy, but also on Bush's



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ability to attract international support.

This suggests that Daschle could be looking for ways to delay the vote until after the election — that is, he intends to politicize it, too.

That shouldn't happen for two reasons: Iraq is too important for either side to play politics with it. And it's not at all clear that Democrats can't win in November by handling the Iraq issue as a matter of conscience — and still emphasizing their differences with Bush on domestic issues.

Indeed, last week House Minority Leader Richard Gephardt (D-Mo.) advised his Caucus to do just that — and pointed out that in 1990, Republicans lost 12 House seats during Bush's father's troop buildup for the Persian Gulf War.

Whether or not Bush timed an Iraq vote for political effect, there's encouraging evidence that he has been listening to critics who urged him to make a better public case for his policy, ask Congress for a vote and seek international support.

Administration officials began sharing secret intelligence on Iraqi weaponry with Congress last week. Bush is consulting allies and will make a major speech this week to the United Nations.

If he's wise, he'll go beyond that and, heeding advice from Democrats such as Daschle and former United Nations Ambassador Richard Holbrooke, seek a U.N. Security Council resolution backing his policy.

According to Holbrooke and President Clinton's former deputy national security adviser, James Steinberg, Bush should seek what amounts to a U.N. ultimatum to Saddam Hussein: submit to immediate and thorough weapons inspections — "anytime, anyplace" — or face military action.

Steinberg, now at the Brookings Institution, said in an interview that he's confident that, with skillful diplomacy, Bush could win such a vote, substantially strengthening his hand both at home and abroad.

And, as Holbrooke has argued — along with former Secretary of State James Baker — even if China or Russia cast a veto, Bush would pick up international goodwill and some allies by making the effort.

Daschle indicated last Thursday that his support for military action against Iraq might be contingent on a Security Council resolution like the one Bush's father secured before the 1991 Persian Gulf War.

But Democrats should not allow China or Russia to stand in the way of U.S. action, assuming that Bush can make a convincing case that "regime change" in Iraq is in America's vital interest.

Without putting his military strategy up for debate, Bush also should at least consider the views of experts — such as the Brookings Institution's Michael O'Hanlon — who argue that assembling a large force of 250,000 or more troops would be more likely to intimidate Iraqi forces into surrender than a small force of 50,000, as called for by many hawks.

Some of Bush's supporters in the media have started to disparage Democrats for raising "obstacles" in the path of Bush's war policy by asking questions.

But what's at issue here is whether this country should wage its first pre-emptive war and what the consequences will be. It's so serious that it requires everyone involved to act in the nation's highest interest.

Morton Kondracke is executive editor of Roll Call, the newspaper of Capitol Hill.

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