

commentary

from other pens...

Conflicting pressures confound forecasts

After months of predicting that one party or the other was gaining advantage because of the slumping stock market or the Iraq war talk, many political veterans are starting to experience the same queasy feeling.

They're confused. "There's a compulsion for all of us to predict what will happen in the elections," House Democratic Leader Dick Gephardt said in an interview this week. "But right now, it's almost impossible. The economy is changing fast, foreign affairs are changing fast and local races change fast." Some Republicans see it the same way.

"Anybody who pretends to be able to accurately predict what's going to happen has to be prepared to eat crushed glass," said Tennessee Sen. Bill Frist, who is heading the Republicans' bid to retake the Senate. Political analysts have grown just as cautious.

Michael Franc of the Heritage Foundation offered the theory that early political predictions may have been premature "because the campaign season may not have begun for the voter."

People have been preoccupied with their own lives, problems with the economy, the campaign against terror and now the possibility of a war with Iraq. Election politics have taken a back seat all year.

"I can't remember when there were so many unanswered questions about what will move voters, what surprises could occur, what could change American public opinion," said Andrew Kohut, a veteran pollster and director of the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press.

"Now we have the aftermath of the terrorist attacks, the possibility of a new war with Iraq, the stock market blues — big-time, a jobless situation that is not getting any better and an almost completely thwarted domestic agenda," he said.

Some elections have had a clear-cut theme that was likely to influence the vote, whether it was the voter cynicism and distrust of 1976, the economic anxiety of 1982 and 1992 or the conservative rebellion of 1994.

In 1998, a late surge in the polls suggested Democrats might do better than expected in a midterm election dominated by talk of impeachment and Monica Lewinsky.

Then there was the presidential election in 2000. "Two years ago, we didn't know who won even after the election," said Kohut.

The country is approaching the 2002 midterm elections with Democrats holding a 50-49-1 edge in the Senate and needing to pick up seven seats to claim the House from Republicans. Vermont Sen. James Jeffords, the Senate's lone Independent, has for the time being tipped the balance to Democrats.

Democrats have history on their side because the party out of the White House usually gains ground in the midterm elections. And they believe the weakened economy remains their most potent issue.

Republicans boast of a very popular president and think the focus on foreign affairs and anti-terror efforts boosts their chances.

GOP national Chairman Marc Racicot says Republicans will do fine if the political focus returns to domestic issues because House Republicans have passed a number of bills on everything from homeland security to health care measures that are tied up in the Democrat-controlled Senate.

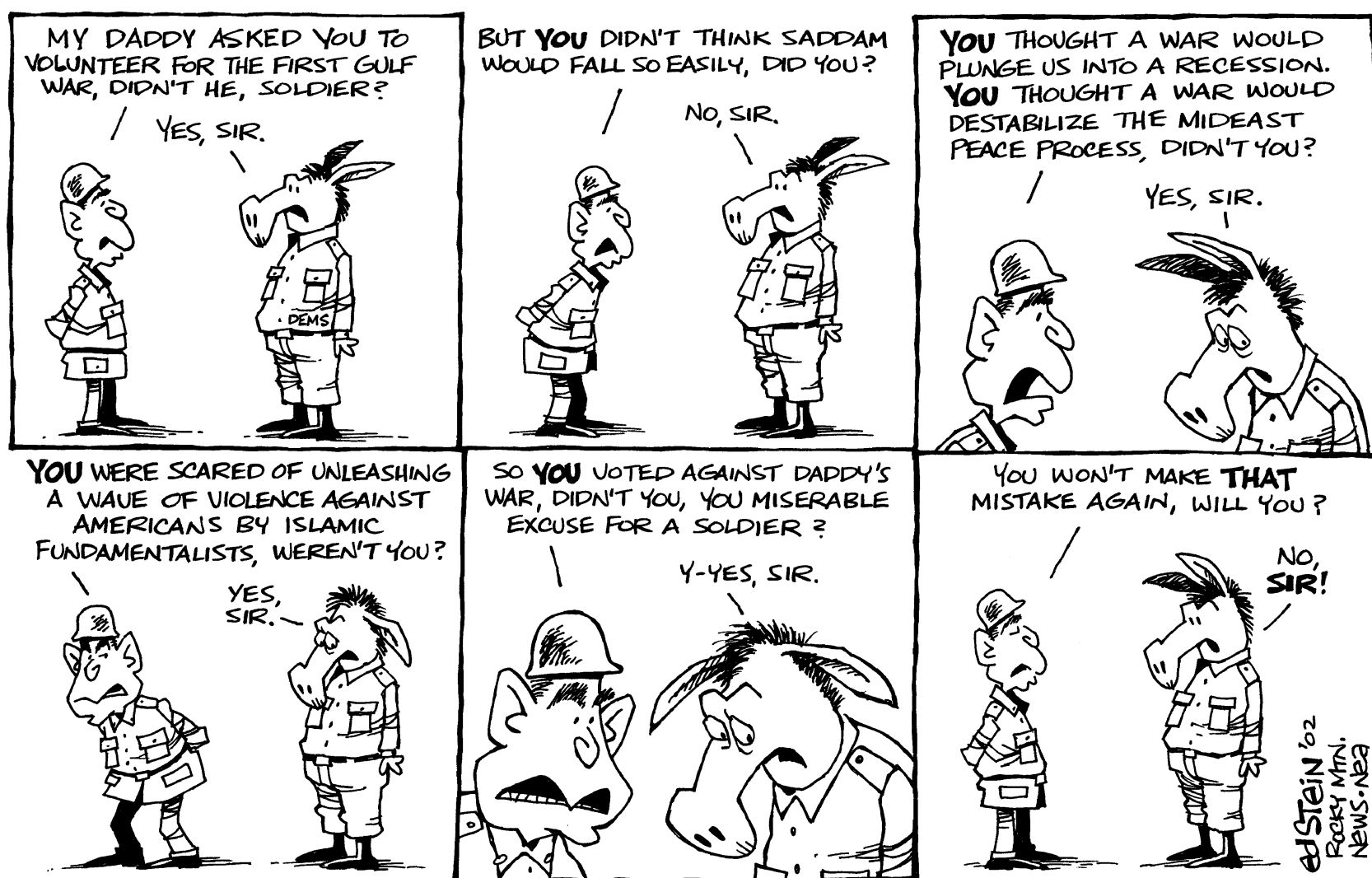
The GOP's Frist says Democrats in the Senate are "obstructing" measures that people want to feel more secure. Democrats counter they are providing checks and balances on inadequate Republican proposals.

And Democrats question whether the talk of war with Iraq is clearly a political plus for Republicans.

The Democrats' fortunes could depend on how much voters perceive the economy as a top issue. "For the moment, they've been losing that battle," said political scientist Robert Shapiro of Columbia University.

Most of the news coverage is about Iraq and the war against terrorism, which has drowned out Democratic efforts to talk about the economy. "People are apprehensive about the war," Gephardt said. "But they're angry about the economy."

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



It's the people who make a wedding special

A white dress, flowers, music, even rings, aren't the things that make a wedding special. It's the people involved who make the difference.

A whole bunch of people came together on Saturday, Sept. 21, to give Mitch and I a wedding we'll always consider perfect.

We got married in Denver at the beautiful, elegant Brown Palace Hotel. After the ceremony, we celebrated in the Brown Palace's ballroom, which was recently remodeled.

The Brown was the ideal place to hold a wedding because its facilities and staff are the epitome of class. But, honestly, I could have gotten married anywhere as long as my friends and family (and Mitch) were there.

Amy, one of my college buddies, came all the way from Alaska to be a bride's maid. In the midst of the wedding commotion, we found time to catch up, and although I haven't seen Amy in two years it was just like no time had passed.

I think Amy traveled the farthest, but other guests came from Connecticut, eastern Kansas and Massachusetts.

Some of my relatives from Boston, who I haven't seen in more than 15 years, flew in for the wedding. I was honored that they made the trip for me. They said they wouldn't have missed it for the world.

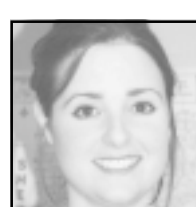
Other high school and college friends I haven't seen in years showed up, including one friend who said he couldn't make it.

But, I must admit, the most important guests were the people I see all of the time.

My three brothers, two of whom share my birthday, and my stepbrother and sister stood up with us. The fact I wanted my brothers to stand on my side of the aisle actually caused some commotion about 10 days before the wedding.

One of the reasons Mitch and I decided to get married in Denver is because my stepmother is an Episcopal priest there and she's always said she wants to marry her children and stepchildren.

My stepmother and I have opposite personalities — I rebel against her controlling nature — and I felt a little shaky throughout the planning process,



rachel hixson

● unraveling

waiting for the inevitable conflict.

I started to think it wasn't going to happen, because I was happy to submit to some of her minor requests and she was adamant that my wedding should be exactly as I want it.

Then it came.

I thought I had been clear from the beginning that I wanted my brothers to stand on my side of the aisle. My stepmom thought I was making my wedding a "three-ring circus" and she's never been one to disagree delicately.

To make a long story short, we decided to move the wedding from the church to the Brown, where we were already holding the reception. My stepmother came and everything turned out good, except this Thanksgiving might be a little tense — but isn't it usually?

Father Charles Schneider, acting rector of Goodland's St. Paul's Episcopal Church, who helped us with pre-marriage counseling, stepped in, driving all the way from Salina to marry us.

Since we weren't getting married at a church, Father Charles needed an assistant to help with communion. Luckily my boss, Steve Haynes, is a licensed something-or-other in the church and was happy to help.

It was a little odd seeing my boss dressed in a robe and standing right next to him as I was getting married, but at the same time it felt like that's how it was supposed to be.

I've probably seen him more in the past three years than my own father, and he's given me some good advice and even loaned me money when I was in dire straits! Thanks Steve.

Of course, my real father gave me away. I was a little worried about one of us getting too emotional at that moment, but we were both too happy to cry.

I actually wasn't nervous at all before or during the wedding — well, a little before — because I know that Mitch and I were meant to be together. We just get along so well.

I joked before the wedding that even if our marriage doesn't work out, Mitch will make an awesome ex-husband. I can't see us ever being mean to each other — I know, I know, give it a few years.

I appreciate my family much more after the wedding.

Shopping isn't my dad's favorite thing to do, but he went with me to pick out a wedding dress and actually had some pretty good input. He said he could tell just by looking at the expression on my face which dress I really wanted.

My three brothers played a big role in the wedding, before and during.

When I started worrying about little details, I would call one of them and I'd have it figured out after I got off the phone — or at least I'd feel better about it.

My triplet brothers, Joel and Alex, both gave thoughtful, heartfelt toasts during the rehearsal dinner and wedding. And Nate, my older brother, performed at the wedding.

He is a rapper and his stage name is "BluCalla." He and his partner "Phrantic," make up "Dynamix." I'm not sure how the older people felt about his performance, but the dance floor was packed with the younger crowd.

I appreciate my new family, too. Mitch's parents are genuinely nice, caring people and I've said more than once that I'm almost as glad to get them as in-laws as I am to get Mitch as my husband.

The rest of Mitch's family is just as nice — now I know where he gets it — and they've always made me feel like part of the family.

They're also very generous.

Mitch and I have a room full of presents. Even two weeks after the wedding, we haven't had time to open them all.

I know it sounds corny, but the best gift I got on my wedding day was Mitch.

I'll have to send God a thank-you note.

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Legislators turning up rhetorical heat on candidates

Voters won't choose the next governor for a month, and the major party candidates have not yet assembled all of the details about how they'll deal with the state's financial problems.

Yet a contentious debate about the budget — and a long, difficult 2003 Legislature marked by conflict between its leaders and the governor — already seems likely.

Legislators who most often deal with the budget criticize both Democrat Kathleen Sebelius and Republican Tim Shallenburger, saying the two gubernatorial candidates' rhetoric on taxes and spending is unrealistic.

"The sooner they look at these numbers and accept reality — we're not talking perceptions here, but reality — the better off we'll be," House Appropriations Committee Chairman Kenny Wilk, R-Lansing, said last week.

Meanwhile, Sebelius and Shallenburger argue legislators need to change how they think about the budget and state government because the times demand it.

"I don't think they grasp it, but I don't blame them for not grasping it, because their world is different," Shallenburger said.

The latest cause for legislators' angst was a report last week from their staff, which outlined a worst-case budget scenario. The staff report projected a \$103 million budget deficit on June 30 and an \$809 million shortfall for the following 12 months, with current spending of \$4.4 billion.

But legislators reviewing the numbers said the situation may be even worse, suggesting the projected shortfall could be more than \$900 million.

And what really irritates them are the statements they're hearing from Sebelius and Shallenburger.

Shallenburger has promised not to increase taxes, and while Sebelius has not taken a no-tax pledge, she's also turned down every opportunity she's had to declare that higher taxes are an option. Shallenburger has backed away from a previous



john hanna

● ap news analysis

statement — he said it has been taken out of context — that public schools could stand a budget cut of up to 3 percent. He has said he doesn't intend to cut education spending.

Sebelius has gone even further, suggesting that the state needs to increase teacher salaries and praising as a "good model" a May report that suggested the state needed to spend another \$390 million a year to provide a suitable education.

Both also committed publicly last week to preserving the state's 10-year, \$13.6 billion transportation program, started in 1999.

Meanwhile, tax collections continue to lag behind expectations — by about \$48 million from July 1 through Sept. 30.

Shallenburger pledges to make government more efficient. Sebelius has promised a top-to-bottom review to find savings.

Legislative leaders are skeptical. They see as much as \$5 billion in spending commitments set by Kansas and federal law for the state's 2004 fiscal year, which begins July 1, 2003, and as little as \$4.1 billion in revenues to pay for them.

The gap is larger than the entire budget for the higher education system, or all spending on social services for the poor and elderly.

To legislative leaders, it's a bit beyond a search for efficiencies or a top-to-bottom review of government.

"This hole is so large, it will take massive cuts, elimination of whole departments, or a revenue enhancement," said Senate President Dave Kerr, R-Hutchinson.

But the legislative numbers make some assumptions.

First, they don't recognize that some commitments can be abandoned, such as extra money for higher education or cash reserves equal to 7.5 percent of spending.

Nor do the numbers anticipate, as Sebelius does, that the state could expand legalized gambling, be more aggressive in collecting delinquent taxes and intensify its efforts to draw down federal funds.

In addition, the figures don't account for any fight against fraud in social service programs, something both candidates support.

Finally, both Sebelius and Shallenburger aren't promising to work from the status quo, something that has undergirded legislative work on the budget for years. "It's going to take something these legislators have never seen, most of them," said Sebelius spokeswoman Nicole Corcoran-Basso.

The emerging conflict also has a political dimension.

Most of the legislative leaders who say the candidates are being unrealistic are moderate Republicans aligned with Graves. Kerr lost the GOP primary to Shallenburger.

Shallenburger really is not their candidate, having championed policies too conservative for them. They're also too prominent within Republican circles — and risk too much — by backing Sebelius openly.

In addition, neither Sebelius, as insurance commissioner, nor Shallenburger, as state treasurer, have been prominent in budget debates in recent years. Kerr, Wilk, and others often have found themselves mired in fiscal minutiae.

As a result, this year's gubernatorial campaign is creating an atmosphere roiling with political strife for next year.

Political Writer John Hanna has covered state government and politics for the Associated Press since 1987.