

commentary

from other pens...

Who's sorry now? The mixed results

Trent Lott joins a long line of politicians who tried to apologize their way out of tight spots, with mixed results.

Sometimes, it turns out, saying you're sorry isn't enough. President Clinton's nationally televised mea culpas for his affair with Monica Lewinsky helped him withstand impeachment. And Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., managed to turn his role in the Keating Five influence-peddling scandal into a platform for campaign finance reform.

But Bob Packwood's public regret for "stupid and boorish" behavior toward women didn't save his Senate seat. John Sununu lost his job as chief of staff to the first President Bush despite his tepid remorse for "the appearance of impropriety" in his use of government jets and limousines.

Words that sounded nostalgic for segregation cost Lott his post as the Senate's Republican leader despite multiple attempts to explain them away. Making matters worse for themselves, politicians as a group are notoriously bad at shouldering blame and voicing remorse.

Few can muster a straightforward apology along the lines of "I'm sorry. I was wrong. I will never do it again."

Instead, it comes out more like "mistakes were made."

"There's a tendency to try to use rhetoric to weasel out of the situation," said University of Pennsylvania professor Kathleen Hall Jamieson, who studies political communication.

Confronted with a report blaming him for the swapping of arms for hostages in Iran, President Reagan found a fuzzy way to retract his long-standing insistence that no such deals were made.

"My heart and my best intentions still tell me that is true," Reagan told the nation in 1987. "But the facts and the evidence tell me it is not."

About his violation of House rules on the use of tax-exempt funds, former House Speaker Newt Gingrich offered: "To whatever degree, in any way I brought controversy or inappropriate attention to the House, I apologize."

"The car that I was driving went off a narrow bridge," Sen. Edward Kennedy, D-Mass., said in 1969 in his roundabout explanation of the death of his passenger, Mary Jo Kopechne, at Chappaquiddick.

Then-Rep. Wilbur Mills blamed a drinking problem as he tried to say why an exotic dancer named Fanne Foxe jumped from his limousine into Washington's Tidal Basin in October 1974.

"I now believe that the fatigue and pressure built up by years of dedicated work for my constituents and for the whole nation had an impact on me far beyond what I suspected," Mills said.

"We don't want to hear a bunch of excuses," said Bill Benoit, a communications professor at the University of Missouri-Columbia. "We just want to hear 'I'm sorry.' Then we want to hear 'I'm going to fix it.'"

Even a sincere apology can't guarantee forgiveness, despite the Washington myth that just the right words can slide a smooth politician out of any predicament.

"Apologies have their limits," said Eric Dezenhall, a Washington damage-control consultant. "And some things are unspinnable."

A wrongdoer who is well-liked and makes a convincing case the misdeed was an aberration has the best chance of survival, he said. But, "if the public views the sin as part of a larger problem, you're in trouble."

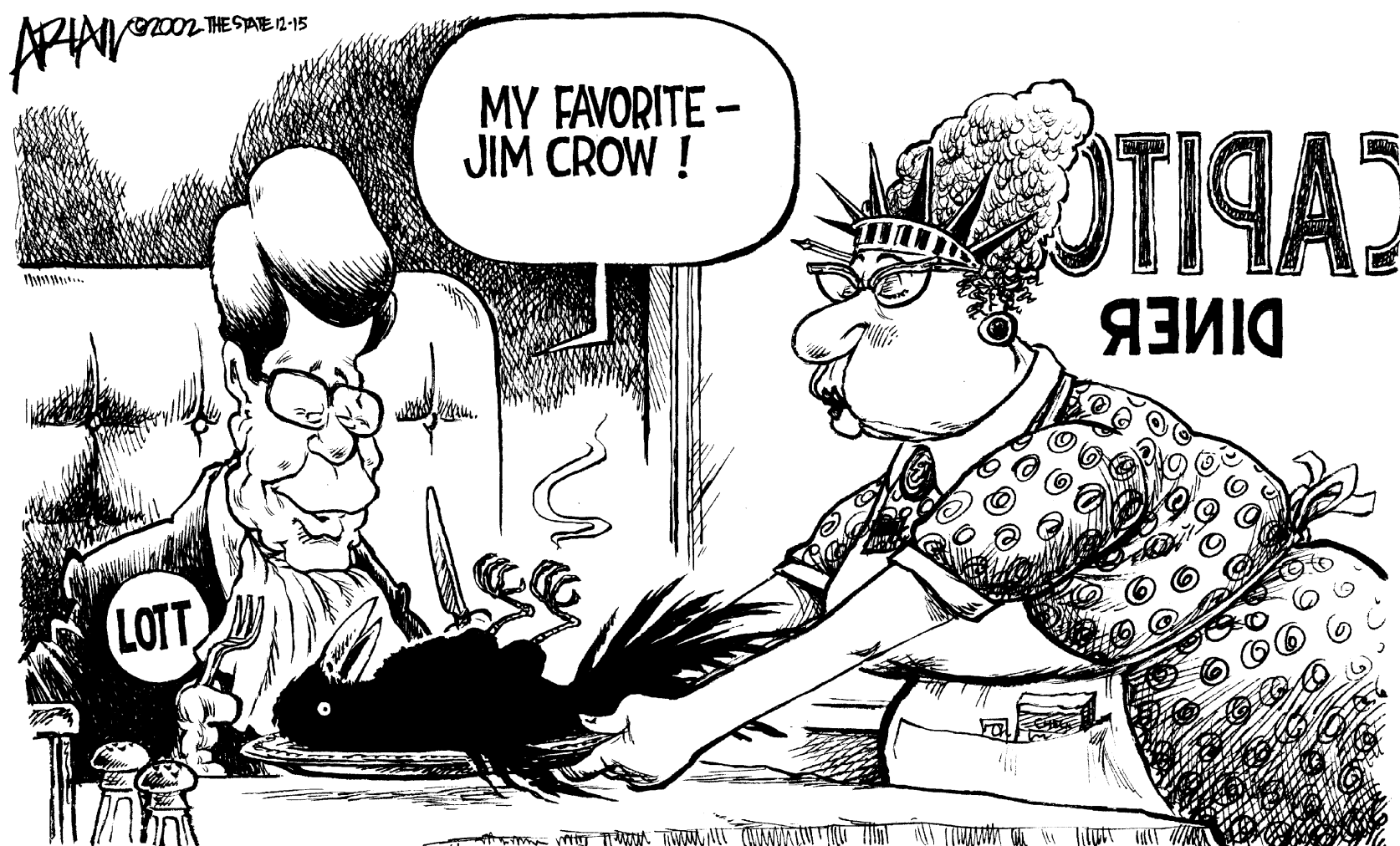
Lott's remarks praising Sen. Strom Thurmond's 1948 pro-segregation presidential campaign would have been more easily forgiven if Lott had a strong civil rights voting record, Dezenhall said.

Some politicians remain unapologetic. Years after resigning in disgrace, President Nixon made clear he wouldn't apologize for Watergate, saying: "If they want me to get down and grovel on the floor, no. Never."

The senator at the heart of Lott's remarks, Thurmond of South Carolina, long ago condemned segregation and endorsed racial equality. Yet, in a 1998 interview marking the 50th anniversary of his presidential campaign, Thurmond told the Charlotte Observer he wasn't sorry about his past.

"I don't have anything to apologize for," he said. "I don't have any regrets."

EDITOR'S NOTE — Connie Cass has covered events in Washington for The Associated Press for nearly 10 years.



All eyes on our military tribunals

No system of justice can ever be perfect, a truth illustrated recently by the Central Park jogger case. Five young men were convicted of raping the jogger in the sensational New York case more than a decade ago. Now DNA evidence corroborates the recent confession of another man that he alone assaulted the woman.

This devastating mistake happened despite carefully designed procedures that accord defendants full access to legal counsel, evidence and witnesses, and guarantee an impartial judge, a jury of peers and an appeals process.

Imagine how many injustices we'd see without such safeguards. Imagine the perception of injustice without such safeguards; a system that appears biased sows distrust in government as completely as one that truly is.

That's why we shouldn't let the Bush administration's final rules for military tribunals slip past us unnoticed. The Department of Defense is expected in the next three weeks to issue a handbook of "crimes and elements" that prosecutors will use to bring charges against some of the nearly 600 captives at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba and 100 in Afghanistan.

I am not arguing that military tribunals are an inappropriate forum for holding our enemies accountable. They have been used by the United



joan ryan

• commentary

States since the late 1700s. But so far, the Bush administration's handling of the prisoners has not inspired confidence around the world, or at home, that due process, and thus fairness, are a priority.

None of the prisoners have been charged with a crime or allowed counsel. There have been no hearings to determine if any of the men have been incarcerated by mistake; 1,196 such hearings took place during the Persian Gulf War. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld had said no hearings were necessary this time because there had been no mistakes. But six prisoners have been quietly released after interviews revealed they had no connection to the Taliban or Al Qaeda.

Yet Rumsfeld guarantees fair trials in a military court in which the jury members are American military officers who are ultimately answerable to the president and the secretary of defense — the very people bringing the charges against them.

Only a two-thirds majority of the jury is needed for conviction. No appeals are allowed. Sources of evidence can be withheld from defendants in the name of national security.

I don't stay up nights fretting about Al Qaeda and Taliban prisoners. I have greater concern for the families of terrorist victims and for the Afghan women who were persecuted for years.

But due process inspires trust. It shows that even in times of crisis and war, the U.S. government is guided by reason and law, not fear and vengeance. It illustrates that law-abiding societies, unlike terrorists, respect human rights even for those it despises most. It fosters confidence that the United States is uncompromisingly fair and principled, a perception that is crucial to gaining international support for our campaign against terrorism and, if we invade Iraq, cooperation during post-war occupation and rebuilding.

There has never been a more important time to remind the world that America's greatness is in its laws and principles, not its weaponry and wealth.

How we proceed with the military tribunals will speak volumes.

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

Lawsuits another example of why cutting is hard

TOPEKA — Faced with a looming budget deficit, Gov. Bill Graves ordered cuts in state spending and the withholding of funds to local governments.

But cities and counties have gone to the Kansas Supreme Court to get their money released, and advocates for the disabled are promising to sue to block cuts in social services.

The lawsuits are more examples of why the state has so much trouble cutting its spending when faced with an obvious crisis and little desire on the part of citizens for tax increases.

"In bad years like this one, lawsuits become more of the rule, more of the norm," said Rep. Rocky Nichols of Topeka, the ranking Democrat on the House Appropriations Committee. "The more you cut essential services and programs, the more it's going to motivate constituencies to take action."

The reason Graves acted in November are not hard to understand, though the choices he made may puzzle or frustrate the people affected by his decisions.

A Sept. 11-damaged economy, already slowing before the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, led to layoffs, particularly in aviation. Kansans have less income and are buying less, causing state revenues to slump.

Volatile financial markets wiped out the investment earnings that caused state tax collections to bulge in the late 1990s, and changes in federal tax laws, designed to stimulate the economy, have cut into states' revenues as well.

Some legislators and political scientists also blame cuts in Kansas taxes enacted during the late



john hanna

• ap news analysis

1990s; others, usually conservatives, blame profligate spending during the same period. It's likely a combination of both — the usual spend-down-to-the-last-dime shortsightedness plaguing much of American politics for decades — made the budget problems worse.

Whatever the causes, Graves faced a \$312 million deficit in the state general fund on June 30. The \$4.1 billion general fund is what legislators worry about in a budget that approaches \$10.8 billion; it's where the state deposits most of its tax revenues.

Graves ordered \$78 million in cuts to the current budget, sparing aid to public schools. He also withheld more than \$94 million earmarked for highway projects and \$48 million in aid to cities and counties.

"We need to make sure we get the right mix," said Senate Ways and Means Committee Chairman Steve Morris, R-Hugoton. "Nobody likes cuts. We need to make sure we're fair to everyone."

But social service advocates don't believe disabled Kansans are being treated fairly.

Interhab, which represents community groups providing services to the developmentally disabled, already is suing the state over what it views as historical underfinancing of programs.

Executive Director Tom Laing is confident Interhab will seek an order in Shawnee County District Court to block the \$26.6 million in cuts from the Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services' budget. Expressing equal confidence about a lawsuit were officials at the Topeka Independent Living Resource Center.

They're likely to raise questions about Graves' power under Kansas law to make the cuts he did. They also are likely to question whether the state is violating rights for participants in programs to appeal they say are provided by federal law.

But those are arcane issues for judges. Essentially, social service advocates are arguing that even in times of budget crisis, the state owes its needy citizens heightened protection because of their vulnerabilities.

"If there's an avenue to protect the people's interests, we will," Laing said. Cities and counties are raising issues about Graves' authority, but also questions of fairness. They've already set their budgets for 2003 and can't change

them, or their tax levies. Their only option is to pass any reductions along.

Graves leaves office Jan. 13, and Gov.-elect Kathleen Sebelius is likely to face the lawsuits as she tries to fashion a budget for the state's next fiscal year. She has acknowledged that the picture is grim.

"We're meeting eight hours a day, day after day," she said. "Those choices are not attractive. The revenue coming in doesn't cover the service demands that we have in this state. I don't think there's any question of that."

In the past, advocacy groups have tried to pressure legislators into protecting areas of the budget. Such pressure aborted an early attempt at budget cutting during this year's legislative session, and social service advocates are now drafting a package of proposed tax increases.

But many legislators don't want to increase taxes, and one of Sebelius' major campaign themes was that the state needed to do more with less money.

The court system offers a venue in which legislators' desires to avoid tax increases that would anger their constituents, or Sebelius' promises not to raise taxes, are irrelevant.

And if the courts choose to intervene, they will limit the options Sebelius and legislators have in pulling the state out of its budget problems.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Correspondent John Hanna has covered state government and politics since 1987.

berry's world

NOW DON'T YOU FORGET TO WEAR YOUR MASK ON THE NIGHT BEFORE CHRISTMAS. NEW CHANGE IN THE CLEAN AIR RULES, YOU KNOW!



www.comics.com © 2002 by NEA, Inc.

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
e-mail: daily@nwkansas.com

Steve Haynes, President
Tom Betz, Editor/Editorial Page
Managing Editor
Pat Schiefen, Copy Editor
Sports Editor

Sharon Corcoran, Society Editor
Eric Yonkey, Bill Wagoner, Advertising Sales
Skilar Boland, Adv. Production Sheila Smith, Office Manager

Nor'west Press

Jim Bowker, General Manager

Richard Westfahl Ron VanLoenen Judy McKnight
Betty Morris Mary Jo Tapparo Lana Westfahl
Teneile Lovelace John Lapka

nwkansas.com

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

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

The Goodland Daily News assumes no liability for mistakes or omissions in advertising or failure to publish beyond the actual cost of the ad.

SUBSCRIPTIONS: In Sherman County and adjacent counties: three months, \$25; six months, \$42; 12 months, \$79. Out of area, weekly mailing of five issues: three months, \$30; six months, \$45; 12 months, \$80. By mail daily in Kansas, Colorado: 12 months, \$115. (All tax included.)

Incorporating:
The Sherman County Herald
Founded by Thomas McCants
1935-1989

THE ST★R
Founded by Eric and Roxie Yonkey
1994-2001

Nor'West Newspapers
Haynes Publishing Company

ALGORE... REINVENTED



STAHLER © THE CINCINNATI POST