

# commentary

from other pens...

## Bush agenda cluttered with many conflicts

Seldom has so much uncertainty been in the air, both domestically and internationally, presenting President Bush and the incoming GOP-led Congress with an abundance of unresolved crises.

An Iraq war decision looms. North Korea has embarked on an uncertain course of nuclear confrontation. Threats of terrorist attacks are a worry at home and abroad. A month-old general strike in Venezuela is rattling oil markets. Unfinished business remains in Afghanistan and the Middle East.

As Bush prepares to make public a tax cut and stimulus program this week, investors remain spooked by the stock markets' three-year dive, consumer confidence is shaky and corporate earnings uneven. Government surpluses are gone and deficits ballooning. State governments are strapped.

"Basically, we've got a mountain on our backs right now," said David Wyss, chief economist for Standard & Poor's in New York. "This is all a huge weight on our economy."

When Congress reconvenes this week, under GOP control in both chambers, the Senate will have a new majority leader: Bill Frist of Tennessee, recently chosen to replace embattled Trent Lott, R-Miss.

Likewise, the Bush administration has a new, untested — and unconfirmed — economic team. Just last month, Bush named John Snow, a railroad executive, as treasury secretary, and investment banker Stephen Friedman as director of the White House National Economic Council, ousting Paul O'Neill and Lawrence Lindsey, respectively, from those posts.

Bush also named William Donaldson, another investment banker, to succeed Harvey Pitt as chairman of the Securities and Exchange Commission. Pitt resigned under pressure amid a series of corporate accounting scandals.

Friedman's post does not require Senate confirmation, but the Treasury and SEC jobs do.

Bush's approval ratings continue to be high — hovering in the 60s. Much of that is based on his national security performance and on personal attributes.

Right now, White House attention is most focused on Iraq, the continued war on terrorism, and homeland security as Bush begins the second two years of his term.

"I'm going to continue doing the job the American people expect, which is to safeguard America and Americans," Bush told reporters late last week near the end of a two-week holiday break at his Texas ranch.

But the president also is expected to emphasize his domestic priorities as he builds his case for re-election.

Bush is pressing for quick congressional action to restore expired emergency unemployment benefits. He will push for health care changes, easing prescription drug costs for the elderly, limiting "frivolous" lawsuits, and making it easier for religious groups to get federal money for charitable programs.

Not since 1973-74 — with an Arab oil embargo, U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam, and the Watergate scandal — have "so many challenges faced a president," GOP pollster Frank Luntz said.

"We've also got a spiritual crisis in the Catholic Church, a brewing economic crisis and a stock market meltdown," Luntz said. Despite a stock market rally at the outset of this year, Luntz said: "Two words describe the political electorate today: insecure and anxious."

Luntz said Bush is politically well-positioned to weather the crises and press a domestic agenda. "But if there's war with Iraq, voters don't want 'compassionate conservatism,' they want focused leadership," Luntz said.

**EDITOR'S NOTE** — *Tom Raum has covered Washington for The Associated Press since 1973, including five presidencies.*

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## Supporting education means enabling equality

A letter arrived from the foundation of our local K-8 public school, as it does every year. It asks each family to donate its "fair share" to close the gap between the government funding and the actual cost of operating the school. The requested donation has climbed each year; now it's \$2,500 per student, an amount that once could cover the entire tuition for a year at parochial school.

The donation comes on top of money raised through gift-wrap sales, scrip, a weeklong book fair, sales of entertainment discount books and an elaborate auction.

This is what public education looks like in more and more towns in California and across America. Public has come to mean parents — parents footing the bill for art and music, foreign-language teachers, librarians, classroom aides, building renovations, playgrounds, computers, field trips. Parent groups across the country paid for \$2 billion worth of products and services for public schools last year, according to the national Parent Teacher Organization.

With a sagging economy and rising state deficits, schools will be leaning on parents more than ever to cover deep budget cuts. And parents will continue to come through for the sake of their kids.

They shouldn't.

At least, that's what I want to say. But I'll pony up, like many parents, because the clock



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is ticking on my son's education and he can't afford to wait for our politicians to come through. As we write our checks and order our scrip, we ought to consider the long-term consequences of serving as enablers of a government that refuses to spend enough money to ensure that "no child is left behind."

Education was always supposed to be the great equalizer. If everyone had access to a quality education, then everyone had a chance to succeed, no matter what one's background or income level. We know, of course, this hasn't been the case.

An achievement gap between black and white students has been documented since the 1960s. One can reasonably blame family life. One can also reasonably blame the inequity among schools. Wealthier white communities generally have had public schools with more amenities, better-qualified teachers and richer experiences than poorer black communities.

Now that schools are more dependent than ever on the fund-raising capabilities of parents,

the scales tip even more heavily in favor of the affluent.

The quality of education should not depend on where a child lives or how adeptly his parents can sell cookie dough or stage a gala fundraiser. When some schools have access to outside resources and others don't, we widen the gap between rich and poor districts. We solidify a caste system of education that was struck down as illegal with Brown vs. the Board of Education nearly 50 years ago.

Few would argue that we're not being good citizens by contributing to our local schools. But in showing our goodwill, we're creating a voracious monster. The more we pick up the tab for shortfalls in our children's education, the more reliant the government becomes on this outside revenue — and the less likely it will ever meet its responsibility to provide a solid education to every child.

As governors, superintendents and principals slash their budgets, educational equality — that most fundamental of American values — seems more elusive than ever. As the bumper sticker says, "It will be a great day when our schools get all the money they need, and the Air Force has to hold a bake sale to buy a bomber."

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

## Sebelius undaunted by GOP's majorities

TOPEKA — Among Kathleen Sebelius' priorities are schmoozing, private chats and meet-and-greet sessions.

Sebelius is a Democratic governor-elect in a state with large Republican legislative majorities, something that will require her to build coalitions with GOP lawmakers to get her initiatives approved. In a recent interview, she said building relationships with legislators in both parties is crucial.

Sebelius is confident she is ready for the challenge and said she has the right blend of experience as insurance commissioner and a former Kansas House member. She's had a quarter century of dealings with the Legislature.

"I've always been a kind of legislative groupie," Sebelius said. "I've been around this process for years in Topeka, and this is where the action will be for 90 days, and I intend to be there and a large part of it."

Sebelius, 54, will be inaugurated as the state's 44th governor on Jan. 13, in the midst of the state's worst financial crisis since perhaps the Great Depression.

Outgoing Gov. Bill Graves, a Republican, ordered cuts in current spending and aid to cities and counties to help prevent the \$312 million budget deficit projected for June 30. The gap between spending commitments for the \$4.1 billion state general fund and its expected revenues could reach more than \$1 billion over the next 18 months.

Sebelius will come into office having made campaign promises that Republican legislative



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leaders see as unrealistic, chief among them a pledge not to cut aid to public schools.

When the Legislature convenes for its 90 scheduled days in session, the GOP will have majorities of 80-45 in the House and 30-10 in the Senate.

But Sebelius believes she starts her four-year term in a good position.

"I've known a lot of the key players for a long time, personally and professionally," she said. "The Legislature is about relationships. It's about getting to know people, putting groups together. It's about some level of trust, and you can't do that, I think, from a distance."

Sebelius, the daughter of former Ohio Gov. John Gilligan, also a Democrat, came to Kansas in the 1970s.

She was executive director of the Kansas Trial Lawyers Association for eight years. In 1986, she won a seat in the Kansas House, representing a district that included Potwin, her Topeka neighborhood of brick streets and Victorian homes.

In 1990, Democrats won a 63-62 House majority — only their third in the past century — and Sebelius served both as a committee chairwoman and majority caucus chairwoman. In 1994, she unseated Insurance Commissioner Ron Todd, a Republican.

She said her legislative experience allows her to understand how lawmakers operate — and why their session deadlines need to be respected, for example.

"There are all kinds of little issues that make for bad feelings for years to come," she said. "I'm going to try to be as sensitive to timetable issues, to open communications."

Sebelius said her election shows voters value public schools highly and don't want state aid cut, even though keeping that promise makes solving

budget problems tougher. Aid to public schools consumes 52 percent of general fund revenues.

She also said Republicans will hurt themselves politically if Kansans think they aren't doing much to help.

"I think Kansans want some things to happen," she said. "The House and the Senate are all up for election in two years, and what I heard from people across this state is that they want people to listen to them. They want this government to be responsive and move forward."

She added: "Kansans elected me and elected them and are sending us both here to do a job."

But first, Sebelius conceded, she must build good working relationships with legislators. That means, she said, getting to know new lawmakers, regular discussions with legislative leaders and inviting lawmakers to Cedar Crest, the governor's residence.

She said: "If I can pick up the phone, if I know these people personally, if I'm out and about, if I have open hours in the office and invite people in to chat about things, if I go into their home territory and take them with me, that does go a long way to building a dialogue that will be very helpful."

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

### berry's world



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