

commentary

from other pens...

Two centuries on view from the White House

The view from the press room door of the White House vaults over the spearheads of the iron fence to take in a 180-degree sweep of trees, grass, scrambling squirrels — and two centuries of American history.

History tends to get layered in these precincts and there's a story nearly everywhere.

For example, to get to the view a reporter steps out of the press briefing room installed during the Nixon administration inside the swimming pool built for Franklin D. Roosevelt in the colonnade constructed by Thomas Jefferson when the White House was new.

It's the James S. Brady Press Briefing Room, named for the genial and indomitable press secretary wounded in the 1981 attempt to assassinate President Reagan.

If it has recently rained, there is generally a puddle in the middle of the drive. If the day is calm the puddle's surface reflects the west wall of the White House and the central sunburst window of the second-floor family quarters.

That wall was rebuilt after the British burned the house in 1814. After more than 30 coats of paint were stripped away a decade ago, a team of masons carefully restored the sandstone walls, block by block.

Step away from the puddle, walk into the drive and look left. The view takes in the creased, pressed and polished Marine guard standing sentry at the door of the West Wing. Theodore Roosevelt added this building as office space a century ago. More recently, television discovered the West Wing as a place of presidential drama.

Farther left, rising in rows of gray-granite pillars and pilasters, looming on dark nights like a Victorian aircraft carrier, is the vast bulk of the Eisenhower Executive Office Building.

Some call it an admirable architectural survival from the age of President Grant. Harry Truman called it a monstrosity and nominated it for the wrecking ball.

Enduring into the age of George W. Bush, it was recently named for Dwight D. Eisenhower who labored in its caverns as an obscure Army staff officer before his rise to five stars and the presidency.

Down the drive, past the beech tree planted by first lady Pat Nixon, is the White House television encampment.

When the news is slow, the unused cameras are protected from the elements by green canvas wrappings, giving the place a slightly ghostly air on dark, foggy and newsless nights.

The cameras are trained on the North Portico of the White House, the signature view of countless standup reports on network news. The portico was added to the House after the British fire.

The iron fence separates the grounds from a block-long stretch of Pennsylvania Avenue. Closed to traffic after a shooting incident in 1995, it's now the White House equivalent of a pedestrian mall.

Across the street and to the left is Blair House, the presidential guest quarters. Truman survived an assassination attempt here in 1950 while the White House interior was being reconstructed.

Andrew Jackson rocks and his horse rears in the center of Lafayette Square, waving his general's hat at advancing tourists. Some have called it preposterous.

Back at the press room door, newcomers arrive and old-timers depart, presidents walk unseen to the Oval Office and the gardeners' rivalry with the squirrels continues.

So does the hope and prayer expressed by John Adams on Nov. 2, 1800, the day after his first night in the new house:

"I pray Heaven to bestow the best of blessings on this House and all that shall hereafter inhabit it. May none but honest and wise men ever rule under this roof."

EDITOR'S NOTE — With this column Lawrence L. Knutson concludes a 37-year Associated Press career, reporting on the White House, Congress, presidential elections and two centuries of Washington's history.



Caught between exhaustion and love

Michael Tyre is 11 years old and weighs 60 pounds.

He smiles when the dog barks, when he hears his mother's voice, when his little sister runs her hand along his cheek.

Michael can't speak or walk, the result of brain damage and cerebral palsy from an acutely premature birth. He can't swallow. His meals are liquefied and delivered through a feeding tube inserted into his abdomen. He breathes through another tube attached to his trachea. He takes four medications a day through his stomach and another three through a nebulizer. His diaper must be changed, his oxygen tanks refilled, his tracheostomy tubes sterilized.

His care is an around-the-clock job. So Medi-Cal long ago approved coverage for Michael's parents to employ licensed nurses 16 hours a day, seven days a week.

This option would be great, if Myra and John Tyre could find licensed nurses to fill the shifts. They can't. And if the Tyres hire a caretaker who isn't a registered nurse or licensed vocational nurse, Medi-Cal won't pay. It is a Catch-22 that traps parents like the Tyres between two awful options: Live in a perpetual state of exhaustion from caring for their severely disabled children while balancing jobs and raising other children, or put their disabled children in an institution.

The Tyres aren't sending Michael anywhere; they understand their son's grimaces, squeals and twitches as if interpreting a secret code. No institution could care for him with the love and intuitiveness they can.

But they also can't continue as they have. A nurse comes to the Tyres' home from 3 p.m. to 9 p.m. Monday through Thursday — a total of 24 hours a week. He attends school from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. The rest of the day belongs to Myra and John.

The couple goes out alone three nights a year:



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On Myra's birthday, John's birthday and their anniversary. They trade off attending the swim meets and soccer games of their other two children, a 17-year-old boy and 9-year-old girl.

They sleep restlessly at night, attuned to the monitor on their bed stand that picks up any change in Michael's breathing across the hall. "The state says we can institutionalize him, but he'll die," Myra Tyre explains. "He is so fragile, and we know him so well. At the first sign of a cold, we're at the doctors. At the first signs of discomfort, we figure out what's wrong."

The government recognizes that parents like the Tyres need a break. So they will pay for Michael to stay a few days at a "respite-care" facility.

But guess what? Those facilities also have been hit by the nursing shortages, too, so rarely is a bed available for kids like Michael. The Children's Recovery Center in Campbell, about an hour from San Francisco, is licensed for 22 children, but for the past three years it hasn't been able to care for more than 15 at a time — not enough nurses to staff the shifts. There is always a waiting list.

On Christmas Day a few years ago, a mother and father in Pennsylvania made national headlines when they left their severely disabled 10-year-old son at a local hospital. They later said they couldn't care for him anymore. It was too much. They were roundly criticized as bad parents.

Myra Tyre and other parents of severely disabled children know the couple was driven to desperation precisely because they had tried to be good parents. They had poured them-

selves into the care of their child and finally had nothing left to give.

"It's every day of every week of every month of every year," one mother told me. "It is beyond exhausting. Every family I know has open shifts or no nurses at all. I do everything I can to keep nurses. I cook them dinner. I make sure there's a parking space in front of the house. I make this a happy place to work."

In 2000, the federal Department of Health and Human Services figured that California was 12,000 nurses short of demand. By 2020, the department calculates that California will have 121,000 unfilled nursing positions.

The shortage is so serious across the nation that last summer President Bush signed a bill called the Nurse Reinvestment Act, which authorized substantial financial-aid packages to lure students into nursing.

Given the nursing situation, Myra Tyre sees no alternative but to hire non-licensed nurses to help care for her son. She would like Medi-Cal's policy changed so that state funds would cover these caregivers. But health-care professionals are wary. It's a false choice between no care and inadequate care, they say.

What Medi-Cal needs to do is pay the nurses better. Instead, with California's budget deficit, Medi-Cal reimbursements are being cut, making nursing jobs even less attractive and sinking families like the Tyres deeper into their Catch-22 trap.

"Mikey, what are you smiling about?" Myra Tyre says as she walks into his room. Michael's mouth is open wide in a full-face grin. Myra smooths her son's hair. She is tired. You can hear it in her voice. She and her husband just want to be good parents. But at the end of each exhausting day, they're not always sure what that means.

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

Republicans battling as annual festival nears

The state GOP's annual Kansas Days festivities give political activists a chance to schmooze, party and celebrate all things Republican.

But as this year's events approach, some Republicans aren't feeling much love for some of their GOP brethren, and two events last week demonstrate the infighting between moderate and conservative members of the party is as intense as ever.

First, the State Board of Education took two days to elect a new chairwoman, its members wrangling over how to share power and suspicious of each other's motives.

Second, the all-Republican Senate panel that appoints members to committees stripped conservative Tim Huelskamp of his coveted seat on the budget-writing Ways and Means Committee two days after he tried to place an ally in leadership.

Those developments contrast with the "big tent" rhetoric that often pours out during Kansas Days.

"The big tent theory works for those who control access to the tent," said Huelskamp, R-Fowler, after losing his committee seat.

Kansas Day festivities begin Friday, with North Carolina Sen. Elizabeth Dole scheduled to speak at the main banquet Saturday night. The timing of the annual celebration — close to the Jan. 29 anniversary of the state's admission to the Union in 1861 — emphasizes the long dominance of the Republican Party in Kansas politics.

The tone can become less than festive and activists face scoldings at caucus meetings if Democrats have scored victories. That's what happened in 1991, after Democrat Joan Finney was elected governor and her party claimed a majority in the House.

This year, Republicans have a lot of election victories to celebrate, having won four of six statewide offices, kept three of four U.S. House seats and maintained large majorities in both legislative chambers.



john hanna

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But their one big loss smarts: the election of Democratic Gov. Kathleen Sebelius. Because Republicans enjoy a significant edge in voter registration, she needed GOP support to win.

"It should be interesting to see if some of those people who endorsed Sebelius show up and what kind of reception they get," said House Speaker Doug Mays, R-Topeka. "They won't get a good reception from me."

Many GOP defectors were moderates who believed Republican nominee Tim Shallenburger didn't have a strong enough commitment to public schools.

Shallenburger is a conservative. Last year, many of his allies resisted GOP Gov. Bill Graves' efforts to increase taxes to prevent cuts in education and other programs.

"The Republican Party is still engaged in finger-pointing over who lost the election," said Sen. Derek Schmidt, R-Independence.

Huelskamp supported Shallenburger over Senate President Dave Kerr, R-Hutchinson, in the GOP gubernatorial primary. He recently nominated fellow conservative Stan Clark, of Oakley, for Senate vice president over a moderate Graves ally, Sen. John Vratil, of Leawood.

Kerr said Huelskamp wasn't a constructive member of the Ways and Means Committee. Huelskamp replied, "We disagree on major issues of the day."

A similar split bedevils the Board of Education, where the GOP holds eight of 10 seats.

Five conservatives face three moderates, who have formed a coalition with the board's two Democrats. In years past, the two factions, with varying degrees of strength, have battled over curriculum, teacher certification and the

place of evolution in science testing standards.

The chairmanship is more than a symbolic post, because the holder sets the agenda for board meetings for two years.

The Democratic-moderate coalition wanted Janet Waugh, a Kansas City Democrat, as chairwoman. Conservatives initially resisted.

When conservatives agreed to give their antagonists what they wanted — leadership under Waugh — plus the vice chairmanship, Waugh and two of the three moderates were so leery that they voted no.

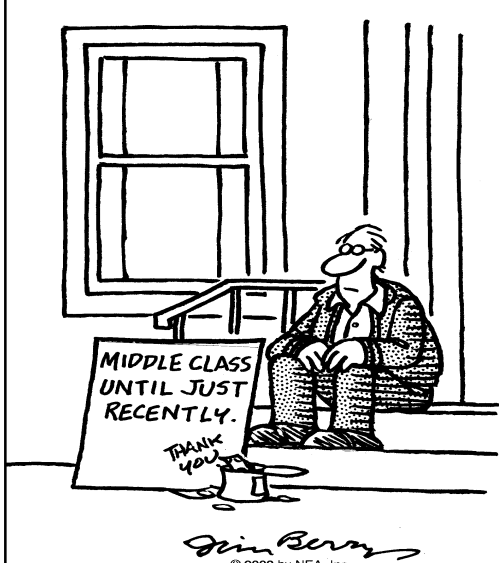
One, Sue Gamble, of Shawnee, suggested conservatives were acquiescing only so they could "blackmail" her faction later with charges of ignoring conservatives' views.

Those kind of feelings fuel the feuding within the Republican Party, even as its annual lovefest approaches.

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

berry's world

EDITOR'S NOTE: Jim Berry is on vacation. Please use this classic cartoon, which was originally printed in 1995.



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nwkansas.com

N.T. Betz, Director of Internet Services

(nbetz@nwkansas.com)

Evan Barnum, Systems Admin. (support@nwkansas.com)

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