

from other pens...

Attempted humor gets our attention

"Bomb, bomb, bomb...bomb bomb Iran..."
Sen. John McCain, Republican presidential hopeful, got our attention when asked a question at a public gathering relating to Iran, and answered by paraphrasing the words of a popular Beach Boys song.

The media, of course, picked up on his attempt at humor and by the time they got done with it, those who analyze what media reports would have us believe that Sen. McCain committed some kind of crime.

He didn't. He just found a different way to deliver a response. It was Sen. McCain operating outside the box we generally see him operate in.

The Arizona senator is a supporter of the war in Iraq. He does not back away from that stand. And what's more, Sen. McCain said he would rather lose an election than lose a war. Profound, to say the least.

The senator's poll numbers — and all candidates pay close attention to poll numbers — aren't good. At the outset of the 2008 campaign many, many months ago, he was the odds-on favorite to capture the nomination. That assumed support just hasn't materialized. He now finds himself in an uphill struggle. Party analysts agree his unconditional support for President Bush's war plan is dragging him down.

While most of us thought Sen. McCain tossed his hat in the ring a long time ago, he didn't officially declare his candidacy until this week. His handlers hope the announcement translates into a bump in the polls.

Fred Thompson, former senator, and television actor, hasn't entered the field yet, but despite his uncertainty at the moment, he finds himself positioned very well in the polls. Again, those who study politics think Thompson will move rapidly up the roster should he officially jump in. And that will be another speed bump in Sen. McCain's path.

Maybe it just isn't to be for the former war hero, prisoner of war, proud veteran, outstanding United States senator. Time will tell.

—Tom Dreiling, *The Norton Telegram*

Mike Kagle THE DENVER POST 04/21/07 www.caglecartoons.com



JOHN MCCAIN, PRISONER OF WAR

Nicaraguan press struggling to stay free

Francisco Chamorro is not happy with the new government of Nicaragua.

The old Sandinista revolutionary, Daniel Ortega, finally is the elected president of his country, third-poorest in Latin America after only Haiti and Cuba.

Already, he's threatened to tax newsprint, which must be imported from the U.S. or Canada, and perhaps muzzle the struggling press.

Sr. Chamorro worries about the family newspaper he is running, *Nuevo Diario*, where he is assistant director, or editor. In his office, reached by open metal stairs in a building where paint is peeling, he serves visitors water and worries about his country.

"Nobody is doing better with Ortega in charge," he says in slightly accented English.

Venezuelan leader Hugo Chavez has promised Ortega \$340 million in oil money and a new refinery, though the country has no oil to refine.

"In the end, Chavez may win," he says.

Meantime in Nicaragua, along with talk of a newsprint tax to punish the press, there's fear that Ortega will threaten the broadcast licenses of the nation's television stations.

The country has no laws requiring public records to be open, as the U.S. does, Sr. Chamorro says. Protections for the free press are weak.

He says the five years with President Ortega in charge will be a challenge to a democracy that dates back just three elected presidents. Everyone in steamy Managua, the capital city, agrees.



steve haynes

• along the sappa

On his office is a larger-than-life poster of his uncle, Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, an icon of journalism in a country where being an editor is a tough business. Pedro Chamorro was assassinated in the last days of the Somoza dictatorship, in 1978, gunned down in near his office. He had been jailed for his writing, but the assassination made him a national martyr.

The same poster decorates the offices of Pedro Chamorro's own newspaper, *La Prensa*, across town. He is claimed by both branches of his family; *Nuevo Diario* is only about 25 years old, however.

What will happen to the paper? Francisco Chamorro shrugs. His oldest son is not interested in the business. The younger son is only 14.

He is worried enough about the present to attend, with his father, a meeting the next day with Arnoldo Aleman, the discredited ex-president who remains a political figure and party leader. Many editors and media owners are here.

Sr. Aleman says he wants to protect freedom of the press. He introduces visiting American editors, makes an impassioned speech.

The editors and station owners look suitably

worried, though a few notable luminaries have stayed away.

"Aleman is a crook," says one. "How can they meet with him?"

The ex-president is indeed a convicted felon, convicted of masterminding a scheme to loot the treasury of dirt-poor Nicaragua of \$100 million while in office. He remains under a form of house arrest, not in prison, but unable to leave Managua.

Among the missing are Carlos Briceño, owner of Channel 8, Managua's most popular television station, and relatives of Pedro Chamorro. While worried about the Ortega administration's threats to press freedom, he expresses disdain for the still-popular Aleman.

For his growing television empire, he says he fears the next five years will be a challenge, requiring a "delicate balancing act."

Everyone knows this is a different Daniel Ortega from the one who ran Nicaragua as a Sandinista strongman in the 1980s. Then, people say, those who opposed him just disappeared. Today, he has to live within the constitution, they hope. He says he is working with investors and with others. He's become a Catholic and banned abortion.

All of them, Sr. Briceño, Sr. Chamorro, President Aleman, continue to make plans for the future, whatever that holds. Many hope it will include a better economy for everyone in this desperately poor nation, though having the Sandinistas back does not create confidence. Only time will tell which it is.

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nwkansas.com

N.T. Betz, Director of Internet Services

(ntbetz@nwkans.com)

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

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I will be 45 this week and it's official: I have turned into my father.

The world makes less sense to me every day. My fellow man puzzles me more every day.

I cite exhibit A: crappy stone walls. I know a woman who paid \$10,000 to have a small stone retaining wall built along her driveway.

Now I used to be a stonemason — I rebuilt close to 200 such walls during my high school and college years — and I was shocked to learn that hers was a new wall. It was buckling and full of gaps. Not one stone was properly cut or faced.

It's the latest craze, she told me — walls that have an old, authentic look. This is because people suddenly want the outside of their homes to look as "distressed" as the inside.

"Distressed furniture" is the latest trend in interior design. People are buying brand-new tables and dressers, bringing them into their garages, kicking and scratching them, then covering them in a lumpy, flaky paint.

I called my sister, an interior designer, to learn more about this peculiar trend. She said people want the antique look, but because real antiques are hard to come by, the next best thing is to buy something new and make it look scuffed and tired and worn.

This causes my father to rise up in me as I say, "What the ..."

But nothing is more puzzling than our next item of distress: distressed jeans. That's right, there is actually a product the fashionistas refer to as "distressed jeans." These are jeans with tears and gaping holes that, according to The New York Times, sell for upwards of \$600 a pair.

Even in Pittsburgh, land of common-sense people, a lousy pair of trendy jeans runs upwards of \$200. I talked with the owner of an upscale jeans store and she told me the jeans with holes in them aren't as popular as the ones with paint splattered all over them.

"Jeans splattered with paint?"

"Yes, they're all the rage."

"But they have paint on them!"

"Yes!"

Just as I was ready to concede that the Ameri-



tom purcell

• commentary

can experiment is spent and all will soon be lost, she told me about another jeans trend: dirt-washed jeans. That's right, the jean manufacturer washes them in dirt. They have pebbles and clumps of clay in the pockets. And Americans, many of them educated and from good homes, willingly exchange their hard-earned dough for them.

The dirt-washed jeans are almost as popular as the grease-smearing jeans, she continued (and I'm not making this up). The jean manufacturers actually smear grease all over the jeans, so that people who buy them can be as fashionable as the guy in the pit at the Jiffy Lube.

I asked the jeans-shop owner to help me understand why people are buying such products. She said that manufacturers are always trying

Distressed — American sensibility

to be hip. When something hits — when the trendy crowd just has to have it — the manufacturer can charge huge markups.

Well, I understand that, I told her. But why? Why are people dumb enough to buy these things? Why are Americans spending so much money for items that sensible Americans used to donate to Goodwill or toss in the garbage?

She had no answer. Let me take a stab at it.

As we work exhausting hours in gray cubicles doing bland service work — as we move into cookie-cutter houses in the thick of suburban sprawl — and as fewer of us know any sense of craftsmanship or what it is like to sweat or work with our hands, we long for anything authentic — even if it's fake.

But what do I know. At 45, I have effectively become my father. Puzzled as I am by the latest trends, my thoughts have shifted to more practical matters.

Such as finding a couple of suckers willing to pay me 200 bucks for my greasy, paint-stained jeans.

Tom Purcell is a nationally syndicated humor columnist. For comments to Tom, please email him at Purcell@caglecartoons.com.

