

from our viewpoint...

Greensburg cleanup raises new problems

The Bush White House and Kansas Gov. Kathleen Sebelius have backed off to neutral corners after a bit of a dustup about the cleanup efforts in Greensburg.

Gov. Sebelius said last Monday that equipment shortages hampered the Kansas National Guard response to a devastating tornado because equipment — trucks, humvees, radios and the like — had been left in Iraq.

Bush's press secretary, Tony Snow, shot back that there were plenty of Kansas National Guardsmen to respond to the emergency, and that the only help requested by the state had been some radios.

Gov. Sebelius softened her stance later in the week, saying the Guard had enough equipment to respond to the tornado situation, but saying she felt it was a situation that needs to be addressed.

Snow tempered his remarks as well, saying Kansas had requested a number of items besides the radios, and all had been supplied.

Gov. Sebelius's complaint about the lack of equipment is nothing new. She's been talking about it for a couple of years, and the White House has been hearing from governors all over the country as the Iraq and Afghanistan wars drag on.

Guardsmen and their equipment are shipped overseas. The men come back, but the equipment is left behind. Often it is not worth shipping home. Some of it will be shipped back and refurbished or replaced, but that takes time. Troops on the ground get preference for replacements.

The specter of the failed response after Hurricane Katrina was probably on the minds of both the governor and the White House. Neither side wants to appear to be hampering the cleanup and rebuilding efforts as happened in New Orleans, where the long-term task of rebuilding goes on slowly with no end in sight.

Americans and people everywhere are responding to the devastation of Greensburg, showing that when a town is hurting, thousands of people are willing to help.

After Katrina, thousands donated household goods, money and time to begin the rebuilding, especially after it was evident the federal and state governments had failed to step up.

Every disaster brings its own problems. Greensburg's near-total destruction has created special situations. Lots of people willing to help find it hard to understand when they are being told to stay away and just send money.

We saw some of the "help" problems when a tornado hit Holly, Colo., in March. That storm destroyed over 70 homes and damaged another 50 or so, but the infrastructure of the business community, the school system, banks, doctor's clinic, city police and electrical system were not destroyed as they have been in Greensburg.

In Holly, the American Red Cross opened a shelter for those who had lost their homes, and hardly anyone showed up to use it, and it closed within a couple of days. In Greensburg, though, no homes were left intact. Those who lost homes are staying in shelters in nearby towns.

Greensburg faces the problem of cleaning up all the destroyed homes, businesses, schools, hospital, nursing home and the city buildings, including police, fire, water, sewer and electrical.

In the short term, sending money is the best thing people can do, but that should not stop efforts to help the victims and ease their lives in the shelters.

Greensburg will rise again. With time, planning and money from the federal and state governments and all the people and organizations making contributions, the new Greensburg can be a shining example of the American can do spirit. — Tom Betz



The eternity of two minutes

Twenty minutes can go by in a flash while two minutes can seem like an eternity. Last Friday night, May 4, Greensburg was struck by the most destructive tornado in the United States in more than eight years.

With 20 minutes' warning of the approaching storm, the people of Greensburg did everything possible to gather their loved ones, to protect their homes and to seek shelter. Twenty minutes is an awfully short amount of time to try to save your life.

Over the next two minutes, the tornado, a mile and a half wide, with winds blowing at an estimated 207 miles an hour, leveled this community.

I walked through Greensburg the next day and found only one home that I thought would be habitable. All the others are gone, reduced to piles of rubble. The downtown business district is gone. City Hall is gone. The high school is gone. The grade school is gone. The hospital is gone. The library is gone. Also gone are nine lives taken from us too soon.

The losses from the tornado in Greensburg are significant, but so are the heroic efforts.

Since the morning after the tornado, I have seen the people of Greensburg rise up to face



jerry moran
• in Congress

this tragedy head on. Their lives have been devoted toward making certain that neighbors are OK, seeking recovery of their loved ones and their property and trying to make certain that everyone is found and that life is preserved.

In Kansas, we help our neighbors. The nearby community of Haviland has been providing shelter to families made homeless by the tornado.

At the grocery store, I watched as customers placed groceries on the counter. The grocery store owner asked, "Where are you from?" When the answer was Greensburg, the shopkeeper responded, "No charge."

I spent some time with the national reporters covering this story and my guess is that Greensburg is a little like a foreign country to many of them.

They often asked me, looking across the debris and rubble: "Congressman, do you really believe this community has a future? Will this town be rebuilt?"

Because of the spirit of the people in Greensburg, the answer is emphatically yes. One reporter documented the day after the tornado that the people of Greensburg were most upset not about the damage, but that they could not get back into town fast enough to start rebuilding.

The people of Kansas and of Greensburg will make every effort to see that their community continues on and that their children and grandchildren can have a future there.

So, as the folks of Greensburg try to pick up their lives, rebuild their homes, re-establish businesses and recreate a community, they will make Greensburg home again.

This small Kansas town has a future not just because the people are there to rebuild, but because the people of our state and our country will pitch in and help give Greensburg residents what they so desperately need — a place to call home.

We always try to get to know our cabbie

As we got into the cab, headed for Turner Field to see the Braves play the Dodgers, Jerry asked the driver where he was from.

We do that a lot. Cabbies in American cities no longer come from Brooklyn or Staten Island or Watts. They come from Iran, Sudan, Egypt, Turkey, Ethiopia, and a couple dozen countries in between.

It's sort of an international guessing game we play; look at the driver, get him to talk and try to guess. Then just ask where he's from. It's guaranteed to start an interesting conversation.

It turned out our driver, call him John, was from Ethiopia.

"How do you like our country," Jerry asked. "It's wonderful," he said.

"Well," Jerry said, "we think it's the most wonderful country in the world, but it has a lot of problems."

"Ah," the driver said, "but it's so much better than the other countries."

"My brother lives in Germany. He can never be a German."

He talked for a while about how European countries treat their "guest workers," millions of Asian and African immigrants who live and work without hope of every being accepted into French or German society.

That's the genius of America, the great Melting Pot we all studied in grade school. Immigrants who come here put up with a lot. They take the worst jobs, work long hours, save and scrim.

But some day, they know they can become citizens. Then they will be Americans. They will join the mainstream.

And John?



steve haynes
• along the sappa

"Now I am an American," he said with a grin. Who knows how many millions of people have uttered that phrase?

In some circles, I know, it's popular to run this country down. You know the refrain.

"People everywhere hate us. They want to kill us, blow us up. They think we're awful."

Which explains why millions of people from

nearly every country in the world try to move here every year. Why people will pay thousands of dollars and risk their lives to sneak across the border. Why hundreds of thousands take the citizenship exam every year.

Because, for all its flaws, this probably is the best place in the world to live, raise children and create a new life.

Don't let anyone tell you otherwise. John isn't buying it.

"Is he a citizen?" Jerry asks as we pull up to the ballpark.

"Yes," he beams and nods. "I am now."

Welcome to the club, John. Welcome to the club.



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