

from our viewpoint...

Inspections impinge on citizen's rights

A growing controversy centers on government agents asserting a right to inspect the contents of computers, cellular phones, music players and other electronic devices people — even Americans — bring into the country.

The Department of Homeland Security claims Customs and Border Protection agents can open and inspect anything that comes into the country, whether it's a box of pickles or a computer.

While the agency says it doesn't employ racial profiling, one American born in Pakistan claims his computer has been searched five times now. Most people are never stopped or questioned.

Customs officials says they don't need probable cause or a warrant to inspect travelers' computers. Few citizens are searched, however.

It's as if Americans check their constitutional rights when they leave the country. Police would need a warrant to search a computer in your home or even in your car, but Customs claims it's not the same at the border.

"You forgo your right to privacy when you are seeking admission into the country," said Russ Knocke, a spokesman for the department. "This is the kind of scrutiny the American public expects."

CNN quotes Knocke as saying Customs agents could inspect documents in a briefcase as well.

But privacy advocates see things differently.

Two groups, the Electronic Frontier Foundation and the Asian Law Caucus, filed a suit in federal district court in San Francisco demanding to see how Customs agents determine whose computers to search. It accuses the agency of conducting "lengthy questioning and intrusive searches." The groups claim some devices have been seized and never returned.

"Plaintiffs seek agency records in order to determine what policies and procedures exist governing questioning and searches of individuals at the nation's ports of entry," the suit says.

People don't expect their computers and phones to be open to inspection, though.

"Your laptop computer may contain your financial records, your e-mail with your friends and your family and your co-workers, records of the Web sites you visit, confidential business information," said Marcia Hoffman, an attorney for the foundation. "Our position is there should be some suspicion of wrongdoing before the government can search your sensitive personal information at the border."

Border Protection agents, with a glance and a question, have a way of making people returning home to America feel like criminals. They're trained to look for signs of illegal activity and guilty behavior. They ask questions and look for a reaction.

In recent years, Customs agents have been and questioned fewer and fewer people, apparently relying on profiling to pick their targets rather than chance. Legal, nonracial profiling.

Americans of foreign descent and visitors complain the searches and questioning agents do conduct can be unreasonable.

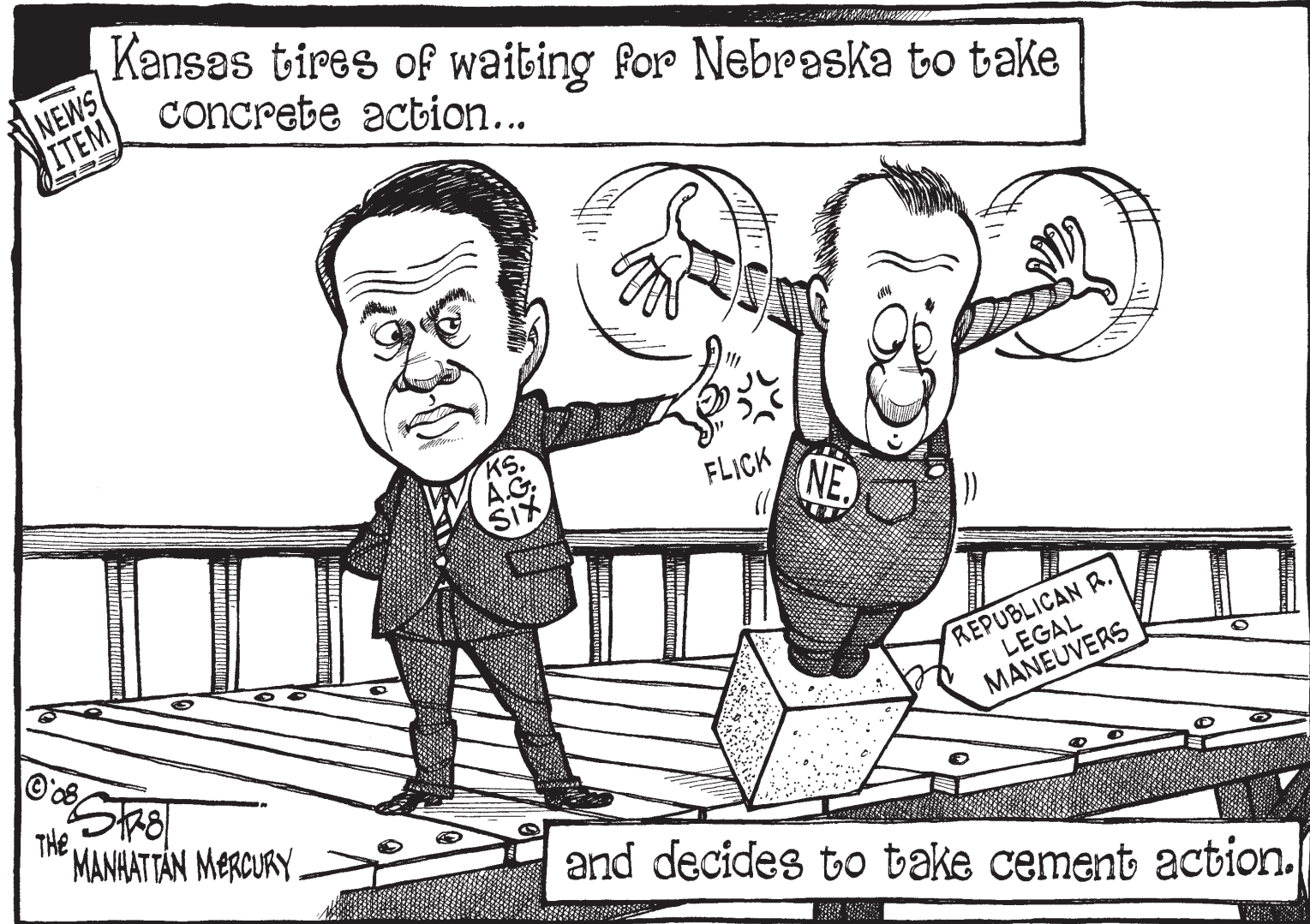
As a nation, we need to ask ourselves whether we want to welcome visitors or drive them away.

Should Americans, regardless of where they were born, be subject to this kind of search?

Do we really check our rights at the border when we go out of the country, or does the constitution cover us even during a Customs inspection?

What it all comes down to is, what kind of a country do we want to be? Free and open, or a police state?

We're rapidly moving from one to another in the name of Homeland Security. — Steve Haynes



Newspaper people try to meet off season

Publishers are notoriously cheap.

If you don't believe me, ask any of my staff.

That's why Steve and I found ourselves in Milwaukee and Boston in February. The same logic will send us to Denver this month and Mississippi in June.

Most press conventions are held in great places during off season. Believe me, February is definitely the off season in Boston. It snowed almost the entire time we were there. It wasn't a storm, just constant flurries that turned the great view from our hotel room (we were on the 21st floor) into a sea of sparkling lights in a fog bank.

Still, as I looked out over the cityscape last week, I wasn't worried about the snow. I wasn't going outside anyway. I was happy that my trip to Milwaukee had been the week before.

We had driven, in a rented car, from the Wisconsin Newspaper Association annual convention in Wisconsin Dells into Milwaukee in the same sort of light snow as was falling in Boston. The temperature was in the high 20s and the Wisconsin highway crews were busy plowing and spreading salt and sand.

The highway was slushy but not slick, but



cynthia haynes

• open season

we found time to stop at a cheese shop, since it seemed a shame to leave Wisconsin without some of the local flavor. Also, there were cheese shops on every corner, about like expensive coffee shops are in Seattle.

Now, as I looked out over Boston on Friday, I smiled. The trip to Wisconsin had been nice. Last week, however, the Weather Channel on television was giving the Boston temperature as 23 and Milwaukee's as -37.

I figured we might be in an off season, but we'd beaten Old Man Winter on this one.

Besides, our hotel, the Marriott at Copley Place, has raised, covered walkways to several shopping areas. Without ever putting on a coat or going outside, Steve and I were able to cover several miles of shops, restaurants and hotels.

This made for great window shopping. How-

ever, since the area is, to say the least, upscale, I wasn't tempted to even go into the stores. I'm just not the type to shop for jewelry at Tiffany or Christian Dior; clothes at Armani, Salvatore Ferragamo and St. Croix; or shoes at Jimmy Choo, Gucci and Louis Vuitton.

In fact, I was afraid they might charge me for just looking, and as I said before, publishers are notoriously cheap.

We rounded off our visit to Boston and the New England Press Association with a visit to the New England Aquarium, where we were eyeball to eyeball with sharks, rays and tropical fish. I got to pet a starfish while Steve counted lobsters.

Although we had taken a taxi to get to our hotel from the airport, we took the subway to get to the aquarium and on to the airport for the return trip. The taxi costs \$35 but the trip back was \$8, and it was an adventure. It would have been \$4 if we had just gone straight to the airport, so the side trip to the aquarium costs us a whole \$4. Plus \$39 for entry fees, and \$35 for lunch at Legal Seafoods.

Hey! Maybe some publishers aren't so cheap after all.

It's taxing without Rudy

Rudy's gone and now I'm really depressed.

It's winter, you see, a rough time for the self-employed. It's rough because our 1099s -- official records of how much our clients paid us the prior year -- arrive in the mail.

My 1099s always add up to more than I thought they would -- my taxes will be higher than I expected, and that depresses me.

And because I'll have to organize hundreds of receipts that I keep in a giant box -- a task that will take countless hours -- I get even more depressed.

But Rudy was going to save me from some of those woes. Like all the Republican candidates, Rudy was going to extend Bush's tax cuts. He was going to lower the capital-gains tax from 15 to 10 percent and the corporate-tax from 35 to 25 percent.

His ideas would have unleashed investment and economic growth, as lower taxes always do.

But the best part of the Rudy plan had a direct impact on ME: It would have given me the option to keep filing returns under our current nightmarish tax code or voluntarily switch to Rudy's simplified tax plan.

Rudy's voluntary plan had three tax brackets of 10, 15 and 30 percent. It provided basic deductions (health insurance, mortgage interest, charitable contributions, state and local income taxes and a \$3,500 personal exemption). It was so simple, it required only one piece of paper. An English major could complete it.

But Rudy is gone and his simplified tax plan is gone with him.

It's true all the Republican candidates have tax-reform ideas. According to the Tax Foundation, Ron Paul wants to abolish the IRS and slash spending.

Mike Huckabee wants to abolish the IRS, too, and replace the income tax with a national sales tax -- an idea sensible enough that it will never happen as long as we have a Congress.

But Paul and Huckabee have about as much chance of winning the Republican nomination as Teddy Kennedy.

That leaves us with Romney and McCain. Romney would cut the corporate tax rate and eliminate all taxes on interest, dividends and capital gains for folks with incomes below \$200,000. He says he'll simplify the tax code, but doesn't explain how.

Ditto for McCain. He says he'll keep Bush's tax cuts in place and simplify tax filing, too, but hasn't said how.



tom purcell

• commentary

But at least Romney and McCain give lip service to simplification. Hillary and Obama don't even do that. They'd likely make things worse.

Hillary promises to raise taxes right out of the gate -- she'll repeal Bush's tax cuts on folks making over \$250,000. She has lots of other ideas, but none that will simplify our taxes.

Obama will repeal Bush's tax cuts, too -- on the top 1 percent of income earners. He offers one idea to making filing easier and it's a doozie. He'll have the IRS use your employer-provided financial information to "pre-populate" your tax-return form for you. It should take you only five minutes to complete the rest of your return, he promises.

Don't worry about the IRS making a mis-

take -- that you owe them a couple million, for instance. I'm sure you'll be able to clear up the matter with only a minimal amount of jail time.

That's why I've been depressed since Rudy dropped out of the presidential race.

If only he'd had a better strategy in the primaries, maybe he could have made it to the White House. I had visions of him cleaning up our burdensome tax code the way he did Times Square.

It's all pointless now.

Sure, I know Rudy's tax plan wasn't as simple as it appeared -- I know I'd still have to organize my business receipts and deductions, which is still going to take me hours. But at least he was moving in the right direction.

Now he's gone. Now I'm worried that a Democrat will win the presidency and make my filing woes even worse.

Thanks for nothing, Rudy.

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