

from our viewpoint...

The importance of being involved

With the election just a few days away, this is a good time to think about what we have in this country, and why it's important to stay involved in the democratic process. It's fashionable at election time to criticize our government, our process, the state of our society.

Candidates, whoever they are, whatever they believe, cry for change. That's how they get attention.

Many times, they are right.

Our system could stand a good overhaul. Our government has its faults. Our nation is far from perfect.

For more than 230 years, we've been searching for the American ideal. We haven't reached that state of perfection yet.

But this is a nation founded on principles and ideas that transcend their imperfect implementation.

America is more than the sum of its flaws. It is, first of all, the best and brightest place to live and think and be free in the history of man. And while that's not a modest claim, it's not that hard to back up.

Other nations may have better health care or better schools or a better bureaucracy. It's easy to find those that excel at one thing or another, and sometimes, these can be a shining example for us to measure up to.

But no other nation cherishes quite so much the traditions of free speech, free thought, religious liberty, equality, diversity and economic freedom embodied in the words of Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, James Mason and a few other forward thinkers of that era in the 18th century.

The ideals that formed the American nation, enshrined in the Constitution and especially in the Bill of Rights, set us apart. Nowhere else would all religions and sects be tolerated. Nowhere else would the idea of the "Melting Pot" mean that anyone who came could become "an American."

It's true, we've seldom lived up to these ideals.

The founders tolerated slavery, subjugated women and minorities, looked the other way at many sins. That does not taint their ideals.

Over the centuries, we've welcomed immigrants and then treated them poorly, from the Irish and the Italians and Poles to the current crop of Hispanics. We gave slaves their freedom, then levied a poll tax and built separate and unequal schools.

The unique thing about America is we keep reinventing our democracy. We change and grow, admit our mistakes and move on.

We'll never reach perfection, but what nation has?

Where, if you sought a better place, would you go?

Where would it be possible to demand change — and get it — as it is here?

And now, your country is calling you to help. Your vote is needed next week.

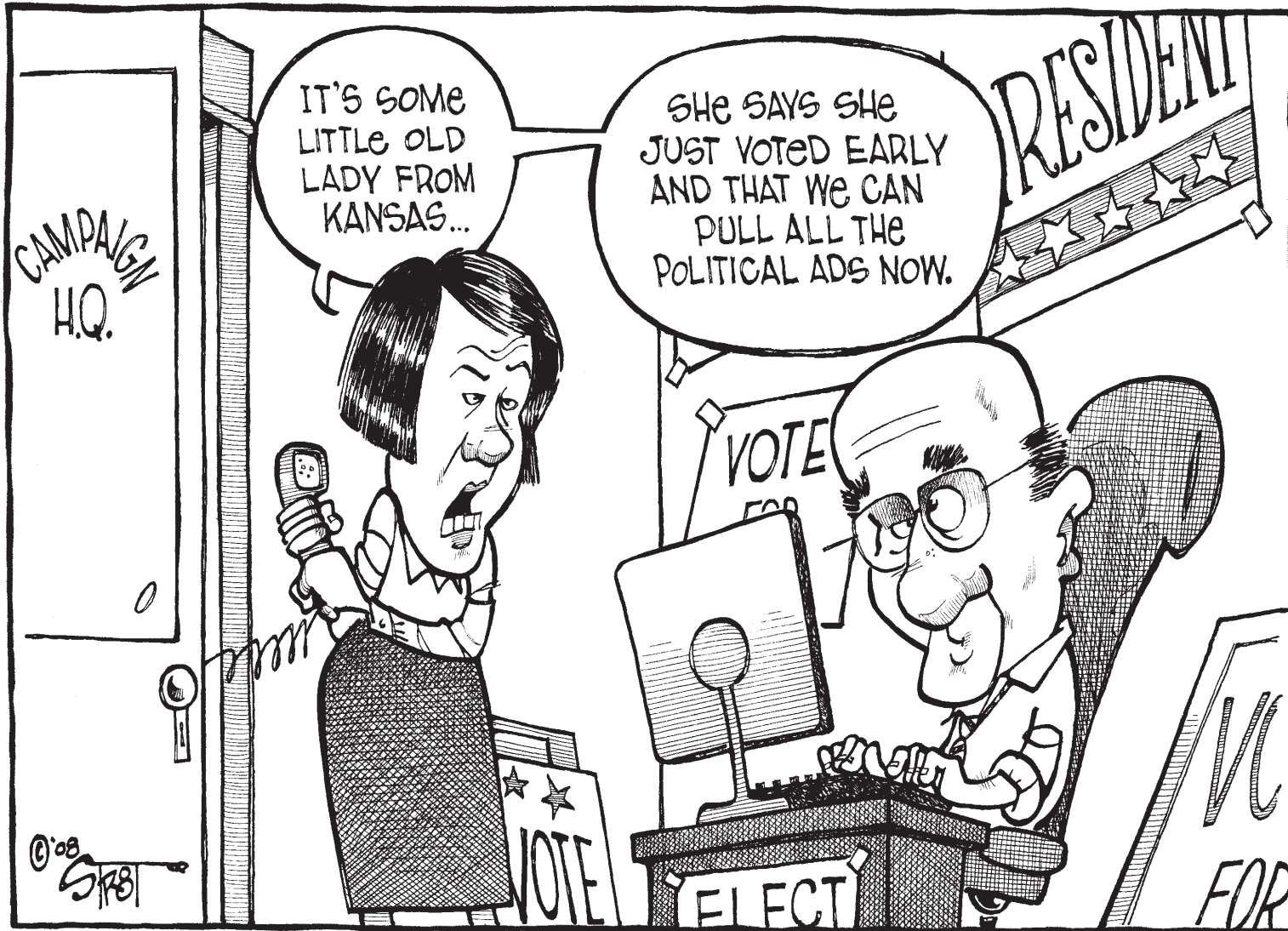
The presidential race is important as any we've seen. In state and county elections, voters face decisions that will affect many lives for many years.

If you choose not to vote, others will make your decisions for you. But that's not what America is about. We all have our duty.

If you want change, or you don't, you have to go to the polls on Tuesday and mark your ballot.

That's how each of us plays our part in this great tradition of striving for a more perfect American. It really works.

See you at the polls. — *Steve Haynes*



It's all about the candy, kids

An ugly recession could have one upside. It could save Halloween for kids.

Maybe I better explain.

According to the National Confectioners Association, a new Halloween trend is catching on: "better-for-you" treats.

Such treats are portion-controlled, low-calorie, low-fat, sugar-free and packed with extra nutrients, vitamins and fiber.

And if our coddled kids need anything, it is more roughage.

Better yet, suggests the Toronto Star, why bother with treats? Why not hand out stickers or erasers instead?

When I was a kid in the '70s, any adult dumb enough to do that would wake to find his windows soaped and streams of toilet paper dangling from his trees.

Let me remind adults how Halloween is supposed to be for kids:

Costumes aren't important. Don't dress your kid in expensive, store-bought junk. Forbid your daughter from dressing like a trollop (another unfortunate trend).

We made our own costumes: a mummy (toilet paper), a ghost (old sheet) or a Depression-era hobo (how everybody will dress once the notions of Harry Reid and Nancy Pelosi become law).

All kids care about on Halloween is the candy.

When I was 10, 11 and 12, my mission was to acquire as much of it as possible. Tommy Guillen and I raced through our neighborhood filling our pillowcases as quickly as possible.

Then we'd sprint through the older neighborhoods, where modest ranch homes lined the streets like dominoes. We hit a 150 or more homes within an hour.



tom purcell

• commentary

Then we'd race down Horning Road, a main artery, to the newer neighborhoods on the other side of the railroad tracks. The houses were spread farther apart, but we pressed on.

By 9 p.m., our pillowcases were full. We'd begin our long journey back home, eager to sort out our booty.

I'd dump my pillowcase onto my bedroom floor — a glorious sight. Our parents never bought us candy — few families had extra dough for such things — and I was overcome by my good fortune.

There sat a potpourri of the finest name-brand candies in the history of kid-dom: Mal-low Cup, Hershey's Milk Chocolate, Nestle Crunch, Milk Duds, Good & Plenty, Almond Joy, \$100,000 Bar, Milky Way and Reese's Peanut Butter Cup ...

Sure, there'd be some junk mixed in: a Peppermint Patty (grownup candy) or a couple of Necco Wafers. What a dumb crunchy treat that was. I saved mine and gave them to my sisters for Christmas.

But at least all our candy was full-size — none of this portion-controlled stuff. It was made of real sugar and fat, too. This is why we called them treats.

Unlike today, parents didn't mess with our candy. They didn't make us ration our take. They didn't make us carry around bottled water to swish out our mouths for fear of tooth decay,

as some experts advise (and I'm not making that up).

No, we'd worked hard to earn our stash. We were free to manage it as we pleased. I managed to eat the bulk of mine within a couple of weeks.

Though I burned off every calorie. For the next few months, I sprinted home from school every day (so I could find where my sisters hid their candy and eat that, too).

Of course, that was before adults fretted over every little thing — before parents meddled in every aspect of their kid's existence.

Back then candy was OK in moderation. Halloween was only once a year, so what was the harm in a little overindulgence?

But in recent times, adults have had the means — an abundance of wealth and free time — to over-think and overreact about everything.

We've become experts on the caloric content of portion-controlled Halloween treats, but we don't know the first thing about how wealth is created — or how wrong-headed ideas and politicians can destroy it.

Now that our markets have crashed and a major recession looms, there will hopefully be one silver lining: the crash will force common sense to return.

I fear it will take us a while to remember how wealth is created, though — I fear we'll suffer plenty until we finally deploy the right ideas.

But, then again, as adults are consumed with real adult worries for once, kids will finally be free to enjoy Halloween.

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Handicapping the race in Pennsylvania

Gov. Rendell first blurted the ugly truth about Western Pennsylvania back in February.

"You've got conservative whites here," he said, no doubt thinking of the rolling hills and hollows of Western Pennsylvania, "and I think there are some whites who are probably not ready to vote for an African-American candidate."

State Rep. David Levdansky from a district south of Pittsburgh echoed that line of thought to the New York Times at the same time.

"For all our wanting to believe that race is less of an issue than ever before, the reality of racism still exists."

And then, three weeks before the election and months after Barack Obama got caught criticizing small-town Pennsylvanians for clinging so bitterly to their guns and religion, Congressman John Murtha resurrected the shameful issue again.

"There is no question that Western Pennsylvania is a racist area," Murtha told a liberal Pittsburgh newspaper last week. "Obama's got a problem with the race issue in Western Pennsylvania," he told the Tribune-Review the same day, adding that on Nov. 4 the color of Obama's skin could cost him 4 percentage points against John McCain.

Murtha quickly apologized for his gaffe. But as we all know, in politics "a gaffe" is usually when someone blurts out a common truth no one wants to ever hear spoken out loud.

In case you haven't noticed, the above gaffers are Democrats. And though they'd never admit it, they are clearly worried Obama might lose the state's 21 electoral votes not because of racism among Republicans or independents but within the ranks of their own party — namely, the famous white, socially conservative, working-class, union-loving "Reagan Democrats" of Western Pa.

Western Pennsylvanians know themselves well. We know many of our natives — dis-



bill steigerwald

• newsmakers

proportionately Caucasian, well-seasoned, patriotic and incredibly bereft of new immigrants — are a bit challenged when it comes to practicing tolerance, whether it's racial, ethnic, religious, cultural, culinary, lifestyle, hairstyle or whatever.

But are we uniquely or disproportionately racist? Are we part of some uncharted "Bigot Belt" that stretches from Western Pa. across to the old KKK states of West Virginia, Ohio and Indiana and on down into southern Illinois and Missouri?

Is this Bigot Belt the modern manifestation of the white, Protestant working-class and rural Democrats who in 1928 and 1960 would not vote for Al Smith and John Kennedy because they were Roman Catholics?

Not really, says American University historian Allan J. Lichtman, whose credentials include "Prejudice and Old Politics: The Presidential Election of 1928" and "White Protestant Nation: The Rise of the American Conservative Movement."

Lichtman has studied voting records to see the effects of both religion and race. In 1960, he said, JFK lost Ohio and took Pennsylvania and West Virginia but won only a third of white Protestant voters.

"That's a pretty telling stat," Lichtman said, "and that certainly dragged down Kennedy's percentage of the popular vote, which was basically a tie. I believe without the religious factor, he would have been several percentage points higher, and quite possibly without the racial factor, Obama would be several points higher."

As for a Bigot Belt that includes Western Pa., Lichtman said, "I'm not sure it exists." It's a "great idea," he said with a friendly laugh, "and it's very sexy. But it's not unique to the area you're talking about. I think these kinds of (bigoted) sentiments exist everywhere. They're present in the South as well, and probably present in North Dakota and South Dakota — even Upstate New York."

Lichtman acknowledged that Obama's race will play a role in the voting. But he believes the "Bradley effect" — the theory racism is hidden from pollsters but revealed on Election Day — has been debunked by research and predicts the polls will turn out to be accurate on Nov. 4.

So, according to Professor Lichtman, Western Pa. isn't so special after all. Like everywhere else, it's got a percentage of bigots who wouldn't vote for a black man if he really were the Messiah. We won't find out for sure how many of them are Democrats until the votes are counted.

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