

from our viewpoint...

War in Afghanistan should be top issue

The death of a Kansas soldier in Afghanistan on Thursday should serve as a stark reminder for everyone that we still have one war left to finish.

Yes, Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden is dead. We are out of Iraq. The Taliban and Al Qaeda are shells of their former selves and half the Arab countries that have sponsored terrorism are too busy fighting internally to worry about us, but our soldiers are still dying on foreign fields. Army Staff Sgt. Zachary Hargrove of Wichita was just one these casualties.

Since the invasion in 2001, more than 1,900 Americans and more than 1,000 allied troops have been killed. On Monday, three U.S. soldiers were killed by an explosion in the Ghazni province. On Sunday, a NATO soldier was shot by a man in an Afghani military uniform.

Yet, here at home it is all too easy to forget there is still a war going on.

This isn't World War II, where million-man armies are slugging it out on European fields and Pacific beaches. This isn't a war where we have rationed food and scrap metal drives. There are no coast-to-coast war bond drives, no heroes paraded around to raise money, no news reels shown before every movie. This is not an entire generation of young men leaving home to fight.

This seems to be a war that slips from the public mind until a fresh wave of horror happens or some misstep brings international outrage. But for most, the war that is thousands of miles away affects them very little. And that's surprising, given how many people know someone who has served, have spoken to a veteran, or are a veteran themselves.

How many days go by where the war in Afghanistan doesn't make the front page of the major newspapers or the nightly news shows? How many days is it drowned out by something someone said about Mitt Romney or the latest person to get kicked off Dancing with the Stars?

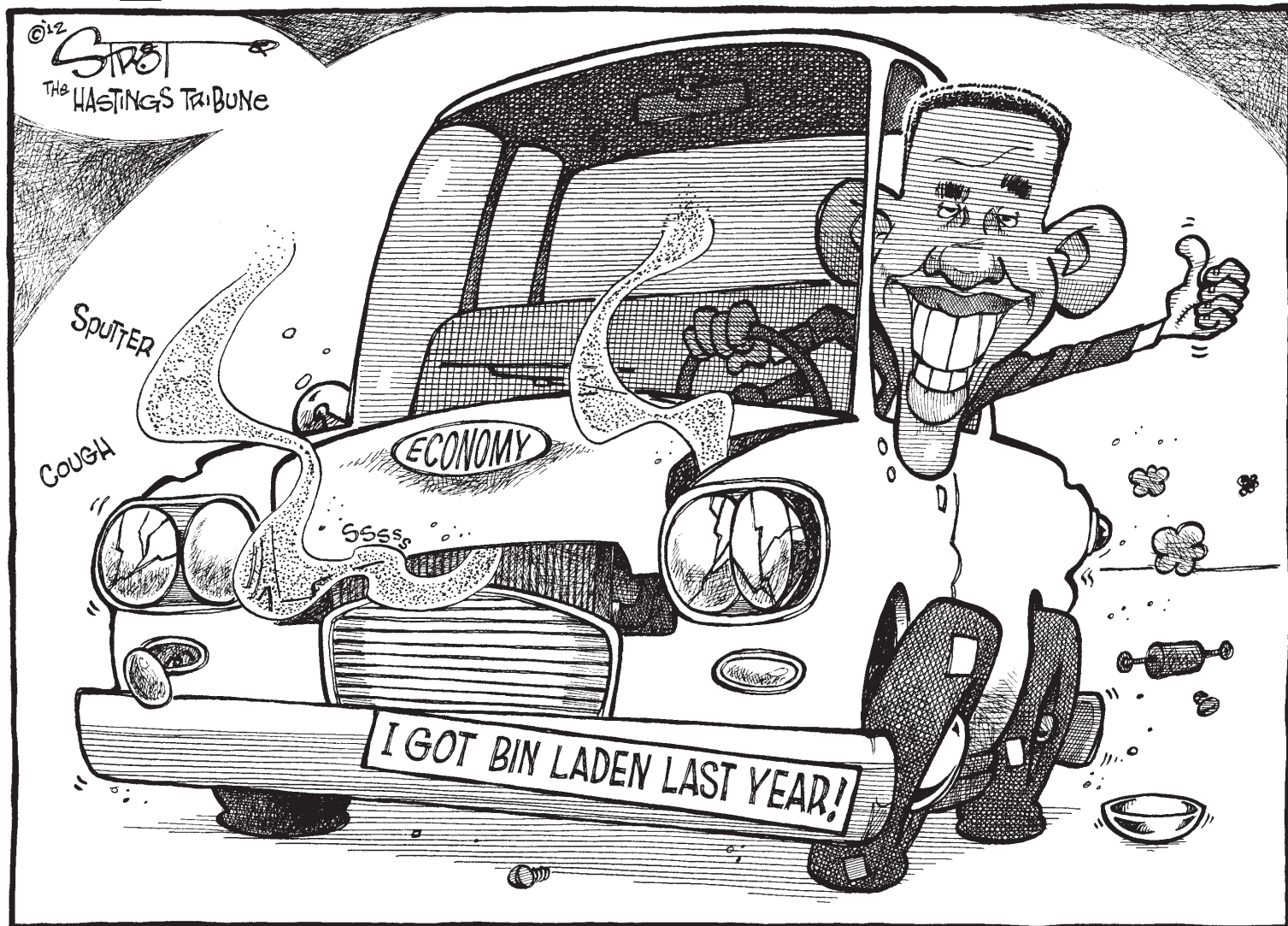
Even the war protests are long gone. In 2001, tens of thousands demonstrated in the U.S. and around the world. 2002, 75,000 people marched in Washington D.C. The next year, 150,000 people demonstrated against the war in Italy.

So how many people took to the streets last year? A few hundred in the U.S. and just over 1,000 in the United Kingdom. These days the protests are against Wall Street fat cats or abortion doctors.

However, there may be signs of an end to the conflict. The president has committed to withdrawing U.S. troops by 2014. By the end of the summer, if he sticks to his timetable, 23,000 troops will come home.

The time to end this war is now. The American people obviously feel they have bigger problems. We are all asking fundamental questions about the economy, energy independence, the role of religion in government, the role of government in our lives and the most basic question – and the most difficult – “where do we go from here?” We need to bring our troops home so we can focus all our attention on these issues.

But whether or not you believe the War in Afghanistan is still worth fighting or never was worth fighting, we should all make sure that we never sacrifice the sacrifices made by our soldiers. We should all make sure to support rehabilitation for wounded veterans and programs to help returning soldiers to get civilian jobs. We owe them that. —Kevin Bottrell



KPERS solved in 2011, broken in 2012

In 2011, the Legislature passed House Bill 2194. The bill requires the state to meet its employer contribution and modestly increases rates for current KPERS members and new employees coming into the system in exchange for modest cost-of-living-adjustments and increases in the retirement benefit formula for all future years of service. More importantly, the bill would address the KPERS unfunded liability by year 2035, while continuing to guarantee adequate retirement benefits for KPERS members.

However, a provision of the bill prohibits the legislation from going into effect until the Legislature votes on the plan developed by the KPERS Study Commission. Unless both chambers of the Legislature vote “up or down” on the Study Commission’s plan, HB 2194 will be stricken from the books. The KPERS Study Commission proposed moving KPERS to a costly defined-contribution system that failed to address the unfunded liability and scaled back benefits for KPERS members. The Senate has voted down the Study Commission plan, but the House of Representatives has refused



from other pens

• Terry Forsyth

to take any action that might trigger the provisions of HB 2194.

This is unfortunate since HB 2194 is still the most economical plan for the state. It addresses the unfunded liability, which has become a budget albatross, and costs far less than any other plan currently being discussed in the Legislature. Cost projections provided by the KPERS own actuary, Cavanaugh Macdonald Consulting, LLC, bear this out.

From year 2012 through year 2060, HB 2194 costs \$22.1 billion, again with the unfunded liability being paid off in 2035. The KPERS Study Commission Plan would cost \$33 Billion with the unfunded liability remaining unaddressed. Both the House and Senate are currently considering what is known as a Cash Balance plan, which is a hybrid defined-benefit

plan where retirees receive the dollar value of contributions they and the employer make plus a guaranteed annual interest credit rate. At retirement, the “cash balance” for each employee is converted to a lifetime annuity. However, again based on KPERS actuary cost projections, from year 2012 through 2060 this plan would cost \$8 billion more than HB 2194.

It appears the effort to move KPERS from the current defined-benefit system isn't based on any fiscal considerations, but on a philosophical desire to follow the failures of the private sector and place the retirement plans of KPERS members in the hands of Wall Street special interests.

The Legislature is currently dealing with many complicated issues, but the resolution to KPERS reform couldn't be more clear. House Bill 2194 is the only option if fiscal conservatism and common sense are going to dictate these important decisions.

Terry Forsyth is Director of Keeping the Kansas Promise Coalition.

Community newspapers are vital

People in Kansas, and across this country, depend on strong community journalism to keep them informed and connected to one another. In spite of all the inroads with social media, many of the folks who live in rural communities across Kansas still rely on home-town newspapers like the *Hoxie Sentinel* where I grew up.

Just like the local grocery, school or courthouse, inhabitants of rural Kansas consider their community newspaper vital. Some even believe if they lose their paper, they could lose their entire town.

While in southwestern Kansas a couple weeks ago a long-time cattleman friend told me he'd be lost without his weekly paper. He told me, “Just like my livestock, we need to nurture this process. Folks gotta' support their local paper (advertising and subscriptions) just like they have to support other businesses up and down Main Street.”

Community newspapers report the “real news.” What's really happening in a small town or village. You remember, the local news – the births, deaths, weddings, city council meetings, high school events, sporting events – they cover it all.

As a youngster growing up in Sheridan County I could catch up on all the events go-



Insight this week

• john schlageck

ing on in all of the small villages in my county including Seguin, Studley, Menlo and Selden. While these communities were too small to publish their own newspaper, stringers (usually a volunteer with a flair for writing within the community) submitted this local news to the *Sentinel* each week.

Each community had a handle and the vital dinner parties, who visited whom and the rainfall reports were found by reading the “Seguin Items” from my little burg of 50 people.

By the way, Vona Lee Dempewolf was a crack reporter and kept everyone in the know. Many of her sources went unnamed and some of this news was gathered by listening in on the party line. That's when six or seven families shared the same telephone line. If two people were having a conversation and a third party lifted the phone receiver, he/she could listen in on the conversation. Now that's another story in itself.

But back to local newspapers that remain the

voice of rural communities. Today's volunteer organizations should make it a point to visit with the local newspapers in their region. Cultivating first-name relationships with reporters, editors and publishers is vital to getting the word out on what your organization is doing. It's all part of the process of community. Letting people know what you're all about.

While much of today's big city and national media have a less than stellar reputation, it's different in small towns. In small towns people know their reporters and editors. One of the best ways for anyone in public life to connect with constituents is through community newspapers.

Today, avenues for delivering news continue to expand. Social media continues to explode, especially among the younger crowd. Still, 171 million people in the United States read a newspaper – in print or on line – on a weekly basis. More than 48 million read a paper daily.

Although there is no doubt print newspaper readership is slowly declining, reports about the pending death of the newspaper industry are exaggerated. Given the fragmentation of media choices, printed newspapers are holding onto their audiences relatively well. And nowhere is this more true than in rural states like Kansas.

Rule makers disconnected from rural impact

Late last Thursday, we received word that the Department of Labor would withdraw its proposed rule that would essentially end family farming as we know it. This rule, which drew the ire of nearly all of rural America, would have prohibited children from working on farms unless the operations were owned solely by their parents. If grandparents, aunts, or uncles were in the mix, the kids would be out of luck.

So, amid the demographic reality that America's farmers and ranchers are getting no younger, this rule would have the effect of destroying family operations. Without a new crop of farmers to replace today's – who had an average age of 57.1 years in 2007 – rural America would be devastated.

As anyone who has spent even a shred of time in rural America will tell you, the way our farms survive is by family teaching family. While classroom learning plays a role, there is nothing like a parent educator teaching the art and science of farming from the cab of a tractor or while walking the fields. In our family, I was the fifth generation to be the recipient of this knowledge; our hope is that my children will



tim huelskamp

• u.s. rep.

be the sixth.

While we celebrate the Department of Labor's decision to withdraw this misguided rule, there is still more that needs to be prevented or undone. The onslaught of new regulations from other agencies – including from the Environmental Protection Agency and Commodity Futures Trading Commission – presents a considerable danger to the continuity of our family farms and way of life in rural America.

The danger is that those who are writing the rules know next to nothing about what keeps us humming.

During the Landon Lecture at K-State University earlier this spring, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack shared two stories about how he has been “educating” top regulators in Washington about farm life.

First, he said that he took Agency Adminis-

trator Lisa Jackson to a farm in Iowa, and she learned that we use GPS in tractors. “Bless her heart,” he said, she had no clue farmers use technology to increase efficiency. Meanwhile, her agency is busy writing regulations that negatively influence the productivity of our farms, obviously under the presumption that we just waste our resources.

Second, Secretary Vilsack relayed a phone call he made to Labor Secretary Hilda Solis to tell her just how wrong she was about the farm labor regulation. He said: “I appreciate what you're trying to do. But, what you don't understand or appreciate is that there is a values system here that you're creating a real concern about. And that values system is the ability of families to teach children about the value of hard work.” Meanwhile, her cabinet-level agency's proposed rule would have undermined that values system.

It used to be that weather was the greatest unknown threatening a successful yield. Now it is uninformed, uneducated bureaucrats impressed by the use of GPS in tractors who threaten us.

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Member: Kansas Press Association
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e-mail: star.news@nwkansas.com

Steve Haynes, President
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Nor'west Press

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Gary Meyer, Judy McKnight



nwkansas.com

N.T. Betz, Director of Internet Services

(nt.betz@nwkansas.com)

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

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