

from our viewpoint...

Amtrak gets shorted again by Congress

Poor Amtrak. Created in 1971 to lift the burden of failing passenger trains off of then-failing railroads, the unlovely government corporation was thought of as an elephant burial ground — a place passenger trains would go to die.

The railroads were mostly relieved. Even those who still loved their passengers, and still made a little money on them, like the Santa Fe or the Union Pacific, saw they could never afford to replace their aging coaches.

A couple of mavericks stayed out of Amtrak and kept running their own trains. Eventually, they too gave in.

But on the way to the graveyard, a funny thing happened: The first energy crisis of 1974.

As gasoline prices soared past 50 cents, you couldn't buy a seat on an Amtrak train. Long strings of old coaches labored over mountain passes and whizzed across the prairie, their decrepit air conditioners wheezing and gasping, passengers either freezing or sweltering.

Amtrak was full. Amtrak was in. Amtrak was here to stay. But only, year after year, by the skin of its teeth.

Republican presidents vowed to kill it. Democrats often tried: Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton were hardest on the trains. A hair-brained scheme had the corporation charging off to find freight to balance its budget. Passengers spent hours waiting for boxcars, but the company never did make money. Chances are, it never will.

At one point, Amtrak promised to shrink its losses to nothing inside a decade. They just grew. Now, Congress is considering a bill to increase subsidies from \$1.4 billion a year to \$1.9 billion. Amtrak will have to "reform" itself again and shrink its losses.

Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta, a Democrat and a Californian President Bush held over from the Clinton administration, is fond of saying Amtrak is dying. One cartoon shows him with his hand around its throat.

For years Mineta has tried to kill Amtrak. He's failed.

Amtrak rumbles on, never with enough money to make the trains worth riding. Never quite dead. The program has a lot of support, because trains make sense in a lot of places.

The trains could be a lot better. Today, they're often run by and for the benefit of the employees, not the rider. Some airlines are like that, too. But Amtrak does a surprisingly good job with what it has.

Trains will never make money like they used to. Passenger transportation is a money loser the world over. Airlines are broke. Bus lines are cutting back. Every civilized country subsidizes its passenger network, and not just trains.

Congress passed a \$286 billion transportation bill, with subsidies for highways, trucking, airlines and mass transit. Amtrak's measly \$2 billion is hardly in the same league.

We're not going to kill it, so why not make it worth something? That makes too much sense. Congress will give Amtrak just enough to get from crisis to crisis, but never enough to run like it should. — Steve Haynes

Photo © Dan Rabinowitz

Meanwhile, ON A ROAD SOMEWHERE NEAR CRAWFORD, TEXAS, THE MOTHER of all MEDIA BATTLES RAGES ON...



Justice system isn't always fair

I've always heard people complain about how unfair our justice system is, but until I started working the court beat, I had no idea.

Three years and eight months is not enough punishment for attempted murder.

Plea agreements aside, I've seen the scars that Michael D. Whitaker put on Rustin Leiker's arm, chest and neck. I've heard him talk about the mental scarring from the night last November when Whitaker stabbed him. I know, too, that a ride in an ambulance, a mediflight to Denver and weeks in the hospital aren't cheap.

Whitaker deserved a stiffer penalty.

You can call it aggravated assault, the plea agreed upon by the county attorney, but Whitaker had no intention of just "assaulting" Leiker. He stabbed him several times in the neck. That to me is attempted murder. He wanted to kill him.

I understand the law can't really look at intentions, and since Leiker survived the crime is less than murder. No one can know exactly what the accused was thinking when he was slashing with that knife.

This case seemed pretty cut and dried to me. A problem arises when someone who didn't set out to kill a person and did gets an inflated sentence, while someone like Whitaker walks away in a few short years.

Under Kansas law, Whitaker fell into the criminal category A, with an extensive criminal history and convictions for three or more person felonies.



kathryn burke

• commentary

After stabbing Leiker, Whitaker was charged with attempted second-degree murder and aggravated assault on a law enforcement officer.

Attempted second-degree murder, a level 3 person felony, carries a sentencing range from 221 months to 247 months, about 18 1/2 years to 20 1/2 years, behind bars for his criminal category.

After the plea, he ended up sentenced for aggravated battery, getting only 44 months, just three years and eight months.

A charge of aggravated assault on a law enforcement officer, a level 6 person felony, disappeared with the plea, too. That charge alone carried a stiffer sentence at the maximum end, 46 months or three years, 10 months.

Jennifer Adams, a Colorado woman who was sentenced to 12 years in jail this summer after killing three Goodland women in a car accident on I-70, did not set out to kill anyone.

No one will argue her crimes were not outrageous. She clearly deserved punishment, but more than someone who wanted to kill a man in a trivial argument?

Adams headed out that day on the highway with an addiction and a bottle of vodka, caus-

ing criminal negligence that killed three Goodland women.

Our president was arrested for drunk driving in 1976. He didn't hit anyone on the way home, but he committed the same crime. He made the same mistake and got a slap on the wrist.

I wonder if Whitaker's plea didn't have something to do with the victims instead of the perpetrator.

Everyone in town was screaming for Adams' head. She was painted as a horrible villain. People wanted to see her punished.

Why didn't we feel the same way about Whitaker?

If Whitaker had stabbed three prominent Goodland women, would the public have been more vocal? Would the community have banded together to influence the county attorney and district judge?

If Leiker wasn't a 22-year-old kid you didn't know, would you have stepped up and asked for justice?

Sitting in a courtroom watching the fate of someone who has committed a crime, these questions surface: What is fair, what is just?

Although I no longer see the perpetrators as criminals or low-lives, but as people themselves, I do want protection from the dangerous felons who threaten my safety.

The judge, attorneys and the county attorney are there to make sure justice is served and the public is protected. Maybe we should ask them to consider that the next time they let a criminal like Whitaker off with a light sentence.

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Our reckless chemical dependence

Telling people to wash their faces with DDT would be like telling them to "go jump off a cliff."

We all know the chemical is hazardous both to humans and wildlife.

It is said that 50 years ago, in the agronomy department of Iowa State University, some faculty argued the pesticide was indeed that safe.

In the same way, a fellow student in my plant-breeding graduate program hurled an unintended insult last fall when he said Roundup, one of the most commonly applied weed killers in the world, was safe enough for me to drink a glass daily. I was seven months pregnant at the time.

In the past few months two published studies showed the Monsanto herbicide kills some amphibians and might cause reproductive problems in humans.

Since its introduction in 1974, Roundup and its active ingredient, glyphosate, have been touted as harmless to human and ecological health. Glyphosate, under the Roundup name, is the second most commonly applied herbicide in the U.S. Nearly 113 million pounds of it is used annually on farms, in parks and around homes, reports the Environmental Protection Agency. From 1990 to 2000, use increased tenfold because of Monsanto's introduction of Roundup Ready crops: corn, soybeans and cotton genetically engineered for glyphosate resistance.

Proponents say Roundup Ready crops reduce the need for nastier herbicides. Farmers can spray their fields, kill everything but their resistant crops and not worry about causing any



prairie writers circle

• julia olmstead

harm to themselves, their children or wildlife.

Roundup might be less acutely toxic than other herbicides, but safer isn't the same thing as safe. A study published in June by Environmental Health Perspectives, a journal of the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, showed that Roundup killed human placenta cells in lab culture at one-tenth its concentration for field use. At concentrations one-hundredth of intended use, the herbicide inhibited an enzyme crucial to sex hormone regulation.

And an April paper in Ecological Applications showed that Roundup, when applied at label-recommended concentrations, was "highly lethal" to amphibians, wiping out tadpoles of two species and nearly killing off a third.

Monsanto insists the herbicide's chemical properties make it unlikely to leach from soils into groundwater or persist in surface water, a claim that might ease fears about the real-life ramifications of these papers. But several studies have detected significant concentrations of glyphosate in streams near farm fields, some up to four months after application.

Roundup's full potential to cause health problems for humans and wildlife populations is unknown. But these studies make its unbridled use and promotion as a "safe" choice

terribly reckless. We don't understand enough about the effects of pesticides on human and ecological health to claim any chemical is completely safe. Developing an agriculture that depends on large-scale chemical application, like Roundup Ready crops, means we're playing a game whose outcome we cannot predict.

Rather than seek out less harmful pesticides, we should be making an agriculture that cuts or ends our need for such chemicals. We should look to organic agriculture and to farming techniques that use more natural systems of pest control.

Crop rotations that incorporate greater diversity than just alternating between corn and soybeans are chemical-free ways to control weeds. And incorporating livestock into a farming system contributes chemical-free fertilization and can be a natural check on pests.

Our experience with DDT should have taught us the fallacy of making assumptions about the safety of any agricultural chemical. And rather than spouting glib comments that discount the potential hazards of pesticides, we — agricultural researchers, parents, consumers — need to support safe alternatives through actions like buying organic food and promoting chemical-free farming and home landscaping.

We already have enough evidence on Roundup to be concerned about its effects on human and animal health. The time to act is now, before the next round of studies comes out.

Julia Olmstead is a graduate student in plant breeding and sustainable agriculture at Iowa State University. She wrote this for the Land Institute's Prairie Writers Circle, Salina.

garfield

