

from our viewpoint...

Why are towns not complaining?

Criminal, that's what it is. Small towns across America are losing their polling places, even the right to hold city elections in their towns. You'd think there'd be an outcry, but hardly anyone seems to care. This outrage starts with the Helping America Vote Act, which Congress passed four years ago to remedy what were seen as flaws in state election processes after the Florida debacle six years ago. "No more hanging chads," was the battle cry. Congress being Congress, and Washington being Washington, someone slipped in a requirement for voting machines to help handicapped voters. It made little difference that no one had particularly seen that as a problem.

And no one anticipated what would happen to small-town voters. Since these machines are expensive — \$4,500 each, plus about \$3,500 a year for programming and upkeep — no one wants to buy more than they have to. The solution, blessed by state and county officials all over, has been to go to one or a few polling places in most counties.

That way, you only need one machine to comply with the law. The result is that towns like Kanorado no longer have voting in town. People will have to drive to the county seat on election day.

It's just one more nail in the coffin of rural America. And no one in Washington or Topeka — or even at the county courthouse — seems much to care.

The logic of all this is incredible. No one knows how many voters need help with a paper ballot, but we're willing to wager it's fewer than the number who will be disenfranchised by closing their local polling places.

One official pointed out that most of those who will be affected are elderly and many do not drive on the highway. They apparently do not count in Congress.

The handicapped have pressure groups in Washington, though, powerful lobbies who Congressmen cannot ignore. Small towns have few champions.

Blame? There is plenty to go around. Our representatives in Congress allowed this law to go through. State and county officials wrung their hands, seeing what would happen, but meekly offered no protest to Washington.

City officials right here ignored the debate until the machines were ordered and the primary election planned.

Some counties took the expensive route and ordered more machines, but given the expense, that's not an ideal solution.

What should have happened?

Four years ago, people should have set up a howl.

State officials, led by the governor and secretary of state, should have led the protest. The state Legislature could have jumped in.

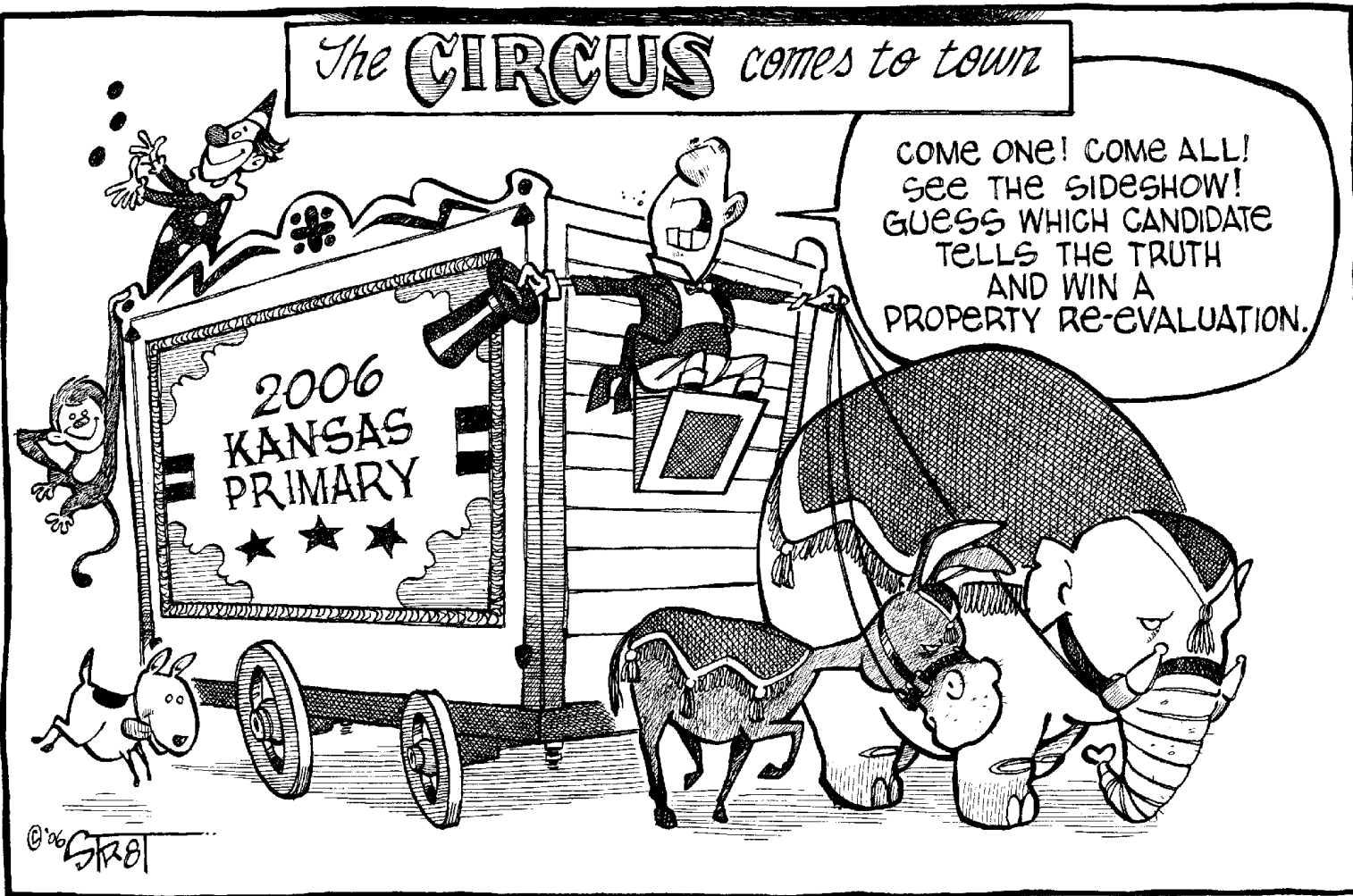
It's not that the needs of handicapped voters, whatever those are, should be ignored. But it should be enough to have one machine at one poll where they can go. Home voting by mail or early machine voting might help.

Then go ahead and open the rural polls, no machines and no requirements for accessibility. It won't help a handicapped citizen to provide easy access to a polling place in the county seat if they can't get there. It certainly won't help the rest of the voters.

And then our officials need to have the courage to say, "We're tired of having Washington try to make our decisions for us. We're tired of 'one-size-fits-all' laws. We're tired of what's killing rural America."

Start a movement for common sense.

Then have our election — and let 'em sue us. — Steve Haynes



Party of no ideas vs. party of bad ideas

The Republicans are fond of accusing the Democrats of being a party without ideas.

Well, after watching the GOP trot out the trite tripe it passes off as ideas for the last couple of years, I'll tell you, no idea seems like a pretty damn good idea at this point.

Estate taxes and gay bashing and flag burning seem to be their front-burner issues. Which if you think about it is pretty cynical on their part. Bashing gays while spending most of their time down on their knees blowing the rich... kisses.

Since the beginning of the year, the best idea President Bush has come up with was a secret mission to capitalize on the death of Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi. Think of it as the less-hyped-and-budgeted, straight-to-DVD sequel to "Mission Accomplished."

A midnight run into the Green Zone startling President Nouri Al-Maliki like the honoree at a surprise 110th birthday party in a fireworks factory. All Dubyah ended up doing on this absurd surreptitious secret-agent strike was cutting the Iraqi leader's autonomy off at the knees. That and racking up about 24,000 Air Force One Frequent Flyer Miles. Which means on his next trip the President gets a free movie.

Maybe he'll finally get to see "An Inconvenient Truth."

Instead of belying fears that the new Iraqi



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government is just a collection of American puppets, Bush's trip drew marionette strings above their heads with one of those four-inch-wide black magic markers. The industrial-strength kind with the indelible ink. And with the ultimate puppet master, Karl Rove, convinced that the only way for Republicans to win the midterms in November is to focus on the war and portray Democrats as congenial cut-and-runners, we can expect to see a lot more of these cynical surgical strikes into the heart of pseudo reality. When the going gets tough, the tough arrange photo ops.

Recently, GOP congressional candidates were given a 74-page briefing book to provide ammunition for a focused attack against Democrats for the midterms. One of the main tenets is that withdrawal means thousands of troops died for nothing, conveniently laying a perpetual base for eternal occupation. This is like refusing to throw a vine to a guy halfway

stuck in quicksand because his pants are already wet.

Right now, the metabolisms of the Pro-War Boys are fluttering on high-speed alert, heartened by the spectacle of a semi-non-fierce battle raging amongst the Democrats over when to bring the troops home — now, later or subsequently. But maybe, just maybe, Mister Unindicted Co-Conspirator has gone to the well of fear one too many times. Let's face it — Democrats arguing amongst themselves is about as unusual as finding sand in the waistband of your shorts after a day at the beach.

And speaking of sand, one thing you can say now, is there is a line drawn in the hot Iraqi Weapons-of-Mass-Destruction-free sand for the voters. If you're looking for a party whose big bad idea is to call anyone who disagrees with them sending our boys to die for nothing cowards, who you going to call? The Republicans. But if you just want to be entertained by people who have no idea of how to stop fighting with each other, it's those wacky peace-loving Democrats you want.

Comic, writer, actor, radio talk show host, air conditioning aficionado Will Durst foolishly believes melting should not be part of the human condition. He is a radio talk show host on KQKE, San Francisco.

Tennessee may give Dems sixth senator

For months I have wondered which would be the sixth seat the Democrats could win to capture the Senate.

Because Vice President Dick Cheney would, of course, break any 50-50 tie in favor of the GOP, the Democrats, down 55-45 now, have to gain six seats in the 2006 election to get control.

Five prime Democratic targets have been obvious for some time. According to the latest Rasmussen polls, Sen. Rick Santorum (R-Pa.) belongs on the endangered-species list, trailing Bob Casey Jr., his Democratic challenger, by 56-33. Also behind, although by lesser margins, are Sens. Mike DeWine (R-Ohio), who trails Rep. Sherrod Brown by 44-41, and Conrad Burns (R-Mont.), losing to Jon Tester by 48-44.

Burns, handicapped by his association with Jack Abramoff, may be headed to defeat. DeWine, a former client of mine, has manifest campaign skills and could come back, but it doesn't look good.

Ahead of their Democratic challengers but well below 50 percent are Sens. Jim Talent (R-Mo.), who holds a narrow 43-40 lead over Claire McCaskill, and Lincoln Chafee (R-R.I.), who leads Sheldon Whitehouse by 44-42. Talent is a great candidate and could come back but would probably be defeated in a Democratic trend. Chafee, a prime RINO (Republican in name only), never really has captured the hearts of his state after succeeding his father and could also be a casualty of a GOP loss in one of the country's most Democratic states.

If all five lose, a fair bet right now, who would



dick morris

● commentary

be the sixth seat without which the Republicans would remain in charge of the Senate?

Now the Zogby poll indicates that Harold Ford, the Democratic candidate to succeed Majority Leader Bill Frist (R) in Tennessee, is running a surprisingly strong race against his three possible Republican opponents.

That could be the sixth seat.

Zogby has Ford tied with former Rep. Ed Bryant, with each winning 42 percent of the vote, and trailing by a small margin, 43-41, against former Rep. Van Hilleary. A third possible candidate, Chattanooga Mayor Bob Corker, leads Ford by 46-42.

Ford, one of a new generation of African-American politicians with considerable appeal across party lines, has two defects as he runs for the open seat: He is black in a state with the lowest African-American population in the old Confederacy, and his uncle is facing serious corruption charges. But both of these drawbacks are quite obvious to the voters of Tennessee. If they are insufficient to doom his candidacy, this man may be a winner.

Ford himself is a Southern version of Sen. Barack Obama (D-Ill.), a moderate who has the capacity to attract independent votes. Ford rejects the extreme liberal ideology of many other black Democratic congressmen. He has

also, one hopes, absorbed the lessons his ethnically challenged family has to teach him about keeping his nose clean. Harold Ford is exactly the kind of black Democrat whom moderates would love to love.

There are other possible problems on the Democratic horizon. The most serious is in New Jersey, where the open seat of former Sen. Jon Corzine (D), now the governor, is contested by Corzine's anointed heir, Democrat Bob Menendez, and Republican Tom Kean Jr., the son of the former governor.

Rasmussen's polling has Kean holding a narrow 40-37 lead. Since Kean is obviously a statewide name and Menendez has been little-known outside of his district, the congressman would seem to have the edge. New Jersey, once a toss-up state, has become a true blue enclave largely because of Hispanic in-migration, a vote that will turn out in droves for Menendez.

Rasmussen also reports that Sen. Maria Cantwell (D-Wash.) has been falling of late in his polling, so that might be another Republican target. But neither Washington state nor New Jersey can be counted on for the Republican Party.

All of this is to show that President Bush had better shake himself up and address the gas-price and energy issues that he has so far failed to speak out about, except for one mention in his long-ago State of the Union address. It is only by an ongoing relevance to this nation's key problem that Bush can hope to avert the disaster looming on the horizon.

Dick Morris was an adviser to Bill Clinton for 20 years. E-mail for Dick Morris is dmredding@aol.com.

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e-mail: star-news@nwkansas.com

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nwkansas.com

N.T. Betz, Director of Internet Services
(ntbetz@nwkansas.com)
Evan Barnum, Systems Admin. (support@nwkansas.com)

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