

OPINION

THE HUTCHINSON
NEWS

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EDITORIAL

Same ol' same ol'

Smear tactics do little for voters as Election Day approaches

Democratic U.S. Senate candidate Jim Slattery recently unveiled seemingly edgy television commercials in an attempt to energize his slumping campaign.

Gov. Sarah Palin, GOP nominee for vice president, wrongly accused Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama of "paling around with terrorists." That accusation prompted the Obama campaign to trot out a 13-minute video about GOP presidential nominee John McCain's involvement with Charles Keating, convicted of fraud in a scandal that eventually led to the collapse of the savings-and-loan industry.

Yes, voters, we definitely are in the waning days of the 2008 political campaign season, and though the call from both parties hinges on change, some things just never change.

The Slattery TV commercials simply demonstrate desperate last-minute maneuvers in a Senate race sometimes devoid of substance and marked by personal attacks.

One commercial shows individuals conducting their daily business while wearing open-backed hospital gowns. Viewers see blurred shots of uncovered backsides and a naked man's obscured front side.

Slattery campaign officials contend the commercial highlights the problems Kansans face in obtaining health insurance. Edgy, maybe. Tasteless, most assuredly.

But the low roads taken by the Obama and McCain campaigns have proven more disappointing.

Both candidates vowed early on to discuss issues and swore off personal attacks. McCain pointedly noted

that candidates resort to smear tactics when they've run out of ideas. Obama, from the beginning, pledged to distance himself from the politics of the past. And for much of the primary campaign season Obama kept that promise. But he's been forced occasionally into some gutter politics in his battle against McCain. Much of that is because of Obama wanting to avoid what befell Democrats in 2000 and 2004 when Al Gore and John Kerry, respectively, didn't counterpunch personal jabs from George W. Bush.

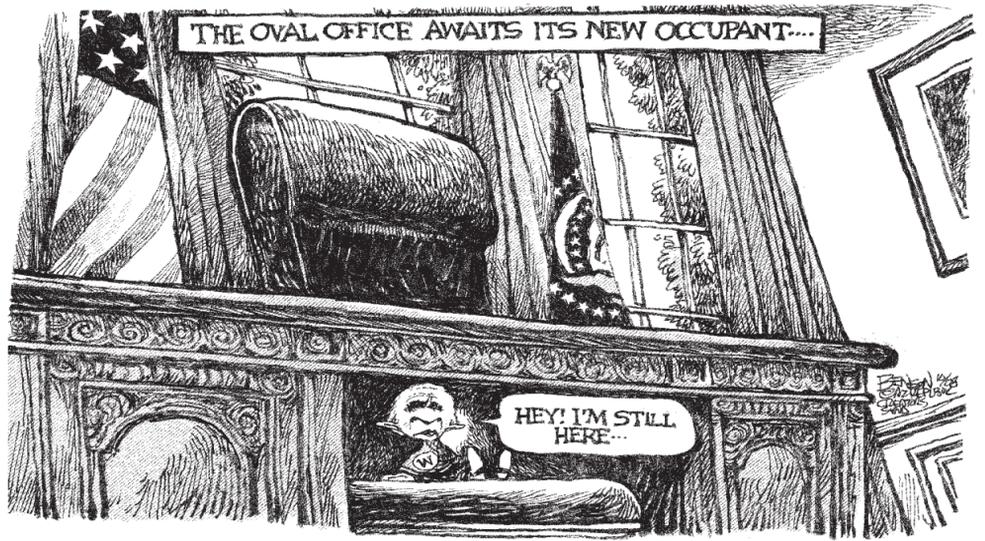
So this week, not only did the McCain and Obama campaigns take off the gloves, they also allowed their surrogates to spew venom. None of which helps voters decide on the best candidate or addresses the fears of Americans about significant issues facing this country today.

In recent weeks, Americans have seen their retirement funds shrivel significantly because of the Wall Street debacle. And most believe that unrelenting mess will force both candidates to alter considerably how they will govern in the first years of a new presidency. New programs, health care and even the Iraq war will have to be viewed with a different lens because of the \$700 billion bailout legislation.

Yet, voters so far this week were offered smear instead of solutions by both political parties.

And if national politics didn't sink low enough for Kansans, then all they had to do was turn on the TV and watch a Slattery campaign ad that seemingly portrayed a Wall Street executive relieving himself on a frustrated citizen. The commercial later reveals the liquid actually is gasoline spewing from a nozzle.

It is time to vote. Candidates have run out of gas and ideas.



COLUMNIST

It's 97 days and counting

Community columnist



Dan Deming

While many people are counting down remaining days of the George W. Bush administration, I am counting days until our local version of Cheech and Chong leave the Reno County Commission. Jan. 12, 97 days, is when majority control of our county governing board will no longer rest with Larry Sharp, defeated in the primary, and Francis "Shep" Schoepf, who wisely chose not to seek a fourth term.

Both deserve thanks for their willingness to serve and on occasion have made decisions that will leave the county in better shape than when they entered office. Both are honest and sincere in their beliefs they were trying to do the right thing.

For the most part, however, the past dozen years under Shep and Sharp have featured botched decisions, an unwillingness to tackle tough problems like a huge overspending for ambulance service, failure to rein in RCAT costs, stubborn refusal to hire a professional administrator on a contention they could do the job themselves, no resolution of county jail problems, crisis rather than competent management of personnel problems, and a head-in-the-sand attitude about consolidation and cooperation with the city where significant taxpayer savings are possible. In short, all three county commissioners have been weak and not up to the job since they assumed office. They have lacked the vision to lead, been unwilling to turn over daily operations to a qualified manager, and have not shown an ability to make difficult decisions without vacillation and posturing.

The latest example was extreme reluctance by Sharp and Shep to honor a signed contract with the city dividing costs of paving Halstead Street from Fourth to 11th, which is half in the city, half the county. While costs have escalated on the scale of out-of-control Wall Street banking and the city has dragged

its feet on an engineering and construction timetable, Shep and Sharp were on the verge of walking away from their written and verbal commitment until finally being pushed by city officials into doing the right thing.

In late 2007, when the joint undertaking could have been abandoned, county commissioners gave their supposedly final go-ahead. Then, after costs again escalated by about \$400,000 for a variety of reasons, and the city already had spent \$150,000 for engineering, our two county "leaders" were ready to pull the plug, offering far fewer dollars than originally agreed and ready to kiss \$950,000 in matching state funds goodbye. In essence, Sharp and Shep were ready to dump all extra expenses on city taxpayers.

Rather than being the "guardians" of taxpayer dollars that Shep and Sharp like to portray themselves, they chose to resolve the dispute by simply issuing another \$400,000 and possibly \$700,000 in long-term debt (bonds) to cover Halstead overruns and build a bicycle path to nowhere that Sharp has convinced himself is needed for his county legacy. The Halstead project could have been handled by using money from a previous \$1.1 million dollar bond issue for roads leading to the overly enthusiastic Cottonwood Hills development. Instead, fully knowing about the Halstead shortfall, commissioners chose to divert Cottonwood money to other road sealing projects that could have been cancelled without a

need for any additional bonds. After claiming the county didn't have Halstead funds when it clearly did, Shep's and Sharp's answer was to issue more bonds that trigger higher future property taxes.

The Halstead debacle is typical of how outgoing Reno County commissioners have conducted far too many business transactions during the past 12 years.

There is good news, as relief is on its way. With Brad Dillon expected to be elected this November in Sharp's district and either Ken Jorns or James Schlickau coming on board in Shep's territory, there is considerable hope of a more businesslike, reasoned approach to county government.

Job No. 1 should be searching for and hiring a county administrator and being willing to turn over day-to-day operations to her or him, with the commission in only one or two days weekly for policy (not nit-picking) decisions.

That includes commissioners sharply lowering their pay to help pay for the new administrator; a reduction I hope will be in the neighborhood of not more than \$500 per month rather than \$34,000 per year. After the administrator gains the respect and trust of elected and appointed county officials along with the public, a professional, in-depth approach at developing the county's next budget should be job No. 2. Then, coming to grips with jail and law enforcement center problems, probably through a small, sunset sales tax increase.

Difficult and complex problems lie ahead, but we are on the verge of having greatly improved and more cohesive leadership.

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COLUMNIST

Singling out the poor

In the storm over who's to blame for Wall Street's financial meltdown, guess who's getting the biggest bum rap? Poor folks.

In a desperate attempt to deflect blame away from deregulation and other policy ideas they favor, conservatives are pointing their guns at a 1977 law that hardly anyone outside housing and banking circles cared about.

It's called the Community Reinvestment Act. It requires banks that receive federal insurance to lend within their own geographic communities.

Before laws like CRA came along, banks "redlined" entire neighborhoods, denying prospective homebuyers, most of them minorities, conventional home loans. Thanks to CRA, thousands of renters have become homebuyers. Neighborhoods have been saved. Tax revenue has increased. Urban life has improved.

But now the CRA has become a convenient scapegoat for commentators, Internet bloggers and YouTube propagandists. They want to deflect blame for the credit crash away from the more obvious culprits, like excess deregulation, lax oversight and reckless cowboy capitalism.

Ann Coulter blamed "affirmative action lending policies" that loaded banks up with mortgages that eventually defaulted and brought the nation's financial system to its knees.

George Will on ABC's "This Week" blamed "regulation, in effect, with legislation, which would criminalize as racism and discrimination if you didn't lend to unproductive borrowers," because "the market would not have put people into homes they could not afford."

And there's Rep. Michele Bachmann, a conservative Minnesota Republican, who caused a stir in Congress by quoting an Investor's Business Daily article that accused CRA and President Bill Clinton of forcing banks to give out loans "on the basis of race and often little else."

First, CRA applies only to banks and thrifts that get federal insurance. It does not even apply to three-fourths of the institutions that have made subprime loans, the high-interest loans at the heart of Wall Street's credit collapse.

Also, nothing in the CRA requires banks to give subprime loans, interest-only loans, no-money-down loans or any of the other gimmicks that inflated the now-fizzling housing bubble. Quite the opposite, the law calls on lenders to meet the credit needs of the communities in which they are chartered, "consistent with the safe and sound operation" of those lenders.

Contrary to the myths, studies

show most CRA borrowers pay their bills on time and become successful homeowners. That's why the law has worked well for three decades, long before the recent Wall Street mess.

No, it makes more sense to blame the explosion of unregulated mortgage originators, an industry that grew in the housing boom, partly financed by the giant government-sponsored enterprises Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, that the government recently took over.

Pressured by the Clinton administration, Fannie Mae and other lenders began in 1999 to relax the credit requirements for minorities and others whose incomes, credit ratings and savings were too low to qualify for conventional loans.

But that pressure did not come in response to CRA. Fannie Mae, its sister Freddie Mac, and independent mortgage brokers had no CRA obligation or much federal regulatory oversight. Yet they account for most of the subprime lending boom that began to explode in the late 1990s.

One study by Compliance Technologies, a consultant to lenders, found this summer that more than half of subprime loans that originated at the height of the lending frenzy two years ago went to non-Hispanic whites – and about 40 percent went to borrowers whose annual income was at least 120 percent of their local area's median. "Fannie and Freddie didn't have to be led to the water to drink," as Judith A. Kennedy, president of the National Association of Affordable Housing Lenders, recently wrote; "They ran."

Yet, CRA makes a convenient target for conservatives. It was created under pressure from "community organizers," a group ridiculed at the Republican National Convention without ever saying what's so bad about helping communities to organize.

CRA is a punching bag for the right along with ACORN, a left-progressive organization that has been pushing for deregulation and once was represented in a voting rights case by a young lawyer named Barack Obama. That's politics. But neither the CRA nor ACORN caused the housing market's crash. In fact, they tried to prevent it.



Clarence Page

Say no to elite

How long are we going to allow the political elite of Reno County to select who we vote for?

In the heartland of the greatest democracy on earth, we have allowed an oligarchy to control who is on the ballot.

Instead of the vibrant exchange of ideas and competing views of a true democracy, we have passively allowed the same career politicians to occupy the government offices of Reno County.

Isn't it time we insist on a choice at election time instead of accepting the same unopposed candidates?

Let us send a message to the powers that be in Reno County. We are not going to tolerate unopposed leadership taking up residency in our valued government offices.

When I go to the polls this November, no matter what party affiliation, I will "write in" rather than vote for an unopposed candidate.

It is time for the bright light of competitive Democracy to return to our community.

GREGORY H. BONTRAGER
Hutchinson

Governance tops ruling

The important choice to be made by "we the people" on Nov. 4 is not between two candidates. Ultimately, we will choose between governing styles. We will choose whether to be "ruled" or "governed."

WESTERN FRONT

Leadership that rules demands unquestioning loyalty. Its prime purpose is to maintain its rule. To that primary end, it employs whatever means necessary. It carries power groups and special interests for support. To rule is to believe in absolute right; therefore, what is good for the rule is good for all. Rule eschews negotiations or compromise. It pronounces and expects total acquiescence. Secrecy and silence are its modus operandi. Legalities that inhibit the rule are subverted or ignored. Rule is personified in the ruler. Total submission is demanded; no criticism is allowed.

Leadership that governs, however, welcomes discussion and debate. To govern is to seek consensus between differing interests through negotiation and compromise. Governance will employ the best strengths from all resources. One who governs is the servant of all people striving to improve the lot of the least, while respecting the achievements of those with the most. One who governs will be open, exposed and accountable. Governing power is personified in the people. Governance is what the Constitution established.

On Nov. 4, America will choose between another ruler or one who governs. The Republicans have nominated two rulers. The military must establish and maintain rule. Officers cannot pause for consensus. The commander decides, and all subordinates obey. A military man rules. And a powerful mother always rules ("because I say so, that's why"). The Republican candidates are rulers.

The Democratic nominees will govern. They welcome debate, discussion and compromise. They both have worked for consensus. The Democratic candidates will govern as the Constitution demands.

On Nov. 4, let us return to governance. We have been ruled long enough.

BOB LAYNE
McPherson

Name not everything

Anyone who has had the unfortunate experience to have themselves or a loved one need emergency care will most likely not care what the name of the medical facility is.

I happen to think the new name Promise Regional Medical Center is great. The hospital serves patients from many communities. In addition, it is one of the largest employers in the city.

I think it's silly to attack Linda Harrison personally. She may be the head of the hospital, but she did not and could not make this decision alone.

However, I know that when you need emergency health care, the employees of Promise Regional Medical Center will do their best to see that you receive the best care possible. They promise. And your family would not want it any other way.

LORIE TAYLOR
Raymond

Doonesbury

