

Opinion



Free Press Viewpoint

Private sector better than FEMA

A telling comment the other day: In a report on how Hurricane Katrina evacuees were faring, the speaker noted that “FEMA has turned care of the refugees over to the Red Cross, and things are starting to happen.”

Imagine that.
Government falters. Private charity has to step in and make sense out of the situation.

Time after time, people are saying, “The government has let us down. The government has failed.”

Troops take days to move because governors and colonels need to sign paperwork. A Red Cross convoy is turned around because city officials are not ready to supervise them.

Michael Brown, the deposed disaster chief, trying to explain why he failed to help people at the New Orleans Convention Center: “No one told me they were there.”

The list goes on.

Of course, the response will be, “We need better leaders. We need to spend more money.”

As if doing more of the same is the answer.

Instead, maybe we need to take a look at how we handle disasters. FEMA, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, has proven it can’t manage anything, certainly not a major disaster.

The agency is run by political hacks and petty bureaucrats. It’s not capable.

That’s not saying that all government agencies are incompetent. Our military has aquatinted itself well on this mission: The Coast Guard, National Guard and the regular Army, all topnotch, despite the old saw about “military efficiency.” These units are competent and capable. They are pretty much in charge now. The Army may be bureaucratic in peace, but under fire, it’s a different story.

The Corps of Engineers warned that the levies needed work.

Listen to Mayor Ray Nagin blaming the feds for his city’s problems.

Contrast his bleeping performance with Rudy Giuliani in New York just four years ago.

Contrast his city’s feeble, unstructured response with New York’s. New Orleans, and Louisiana, may be facing their own crisis of leadership.

Since when is it the federal government’s job to get them ready for a local disaster?

When this is said and done, we need to rebuild our posture for handling the next disaster, at the hands of Mother Nature or some terrorist sect.

Maybe we ought to give the Red Cross a lot more say, and the political hacks and bureaucrats a lot less. Maybe we should scrap the FEMA bureaucracy and build lean, mobile leadership teams with good communications and decision-making ability, ready to move at a moment’s notice.

That’s not all the answer. This is not just a federal problem. Every state and every city should be ready for the next disaster — fire, mudslide, tornado, bombing, hurricane or earthquake.

Every state, every city should have trained people ready to take over and plans for how to proceed. Then it won’t matter so much if the feds are incompetent.

The real question, though, is “Why are we surprised?”

It’s the government, after all. They’re here to help.

— Steve Haynes

Comments to any opinions expressed on this page are encouraged. Mail them to the Colby Free Press, 155 W. 5th St., Colby, Kan., 67701. Or e-mail pjschief@nwkansan.com or pdecker@nwkansan.com.

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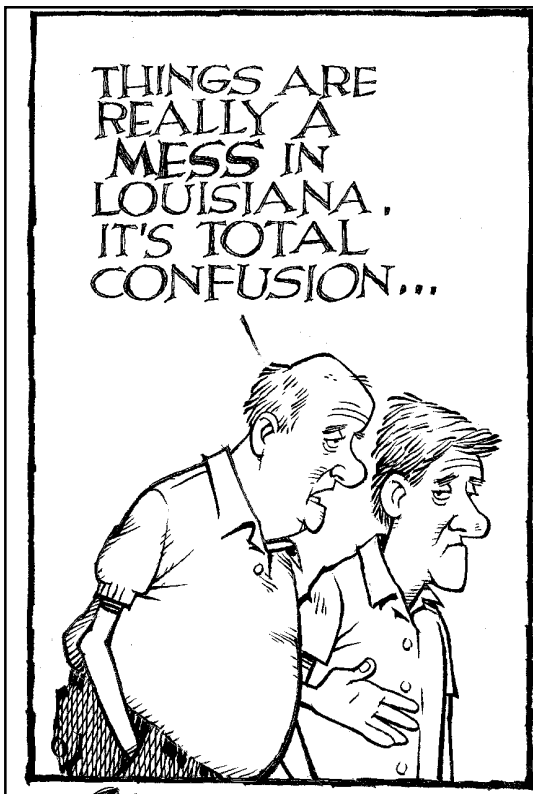
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Canine pal worth two dollars more

My dog is worth two dollars more this week than she was last week.

Knee-deep in multi-tasking, I failed to notice some cash had slipped from my desk. I discovered this when I got up from my desk and found what appeared to a single bill in shreds. After retrieving the money, I became aware it had been Katie’s morning snack. I was certain of the fact evidenced by the cold, wet slobbery feeling of the now slick bill.

Thinking I could retain some of its value, I carefully placed the two somewhat larger sections of the bill, along with the tiny chunks into a small plastic bag.

While on my daily trip to the post office, I slipped by the bank and asked if the bill could be salvaged. It was after careful inspection by one of the clerks did I find out Katie’s snack had indeed been two dollar bills.

Parts of two different serial numbers led the clerk to make this observation. However the clerk obviously did not hear me say I thought the bills had been munched on by my dog. I knew this by her comment that if I happened to find the remainder of the bills I could return to the bank and for a second time attempt to salvage their value.

Two clerks who had been standing in close proximity of the teller waiting on me made it quite clear they had heard me say Katie was the suspect of the damage. I knew this by their laughter when they heard my reply the first clerk’s comment about bringing in any more of the bills I might find.

“Do you even want them after they go through a complete recycling process?” I asked. “I’m sure everything will come out in the end.”



Jan Katz Ackerman

• From Where I stand

Speaking of Katie, she’s ruined my life. Well, maybe that’s too harsh, but she’s at least complicated my life.

I’ve raised Katie as a kennel pup, the process of having a dog in a kennel for transportation purposes and night-time housing ones. All goes well in that aspect of the lifestyle, but it’s the separation anxiety we both go through at the thought of being apart.

For instance, Katie goes everywhere I go. Unless it’s unbearably hot, she’s trained to travel with me on interviews for work, shopping for necessities, or simply traveling with my husband.

Other than my husband, Katie’s become my best friend. And she knows it. So here’s the part of why she’s ruined my life – no, I must keep telling myself complicated. Hubby and I want to attend the Kansas State Fair one day during its running, and you can’t take pets onto the fairgrounds.

Okay, since Katie’s a house dog, not an outdoor one, I plan for a pet-sitter, right? Indeed.

I arrange for a friend to come to the house and make sure Katie has water throughout the day.

Kathleen Sebelius

• Governor of Kansas

Over the next two months, S&P will closely analyze four specific school districts, which should give us an even better idea of how to make the most of our tax dollars.

Although the S&P analysis is important on its own, it also demonstrates how Kansas government, on my watch, has emphasized and reemphasized the need for accountability in every department and agency. This attention to accountability and efficiency has already saved taxpayers almost \$1 billion.

As President Harry Truman famously observed, “The buck stops here.” That’s what accountability is all about: taking clear responsibility

And to make sure she gets lunch and dinner while we are gone. All the while in my mind I do realize Katie’s only a dog, and I sure wouldn’t want to wrack up thousands of dollars (minus \$2 she ate) for heroic measures to save her in the event of a catastrophic event, so I even go so far as to leave a “Do Not Resuscitate Order” with my friend in case Katie gets away and has an accident calling for a rush to a nearby veterinary clinic.

But then I begin to think that the fair trip day would mean some 12 to 14 hours of Katie being outside all alone.

She’d feel abandoned.

I couldn’t bear the thought.

Then, into my mind pops the thought that a high school classmate married a veterinarian. Yes, Katie was rescued (or was it me who was rescued) from separation anxiety.

A quick phone call to the classmate’s mother who still lives in our hometown, and low and behold I was on the trail of a vet clinic to board Katie for the fair trip excursion.

Another quick phone call and we were set. Three hours drive time to Hutchinson, a brief stop by the clinic, and off to the state fair we go. Whew, what relief. And since Katie’s a fantastic traveler, I’m once again sure everything will come out okay in the end.

On a serious note, please keep America’s soldiers, government officials, and evacuees in your thoughts and prayers. And, picking up on my former boss’ input, don’t forget to include the “C” word in your life this weekend.

God Bless America!

Kansans get look at how money spent

This week, Kansans are getting a first glimpse of how much bang for the buck they receive for the money they invest to support their local schools. It’s about time.

For all the talk about funding education in Kansas, we’ve never assessed how well our school districts spend our money. So I posed a simple question: What kind of return do Kansas taxpayers get on their large and growing investment in our public schools?

To provide an answer, in 2004 I asked the Legislature to finance an independent assessment of education spending across the state. When the lawmakers refused, I contacted Kansas City’s Kauffman Foundation, and it has funded a Standard and Poor’s review of how well Kansas school districts use the money provided by state and local taxpayers.

The initial S&P report, out this week, identifies 16 Kansas school districts as “highly resource effective” – that is, they get the best results for the money they invest. This represents an important first step in understanding what works best and where every Kansas school can improve.

bility for our actions as public figures.

When the accountability results for all Kansas districts are released later this year, some superintendents may well be upset. But even good schools can improve, and all schools – every one of them – can operate more efficiently.

As Topeka Capital-Journal put it this week, in an editorial praising pay raises for teachers, “Now the accountability ball will bounce into the schools’ court. Kansans have a right to expect better student academic achievement in return for the extra dollars flowing into school district coffers.”

That’s right. We need to set our expectations high – not only for improving student achievement, but also in making sure all schools use our money wisely. Holding school districts accountable ensures all Kansas students will have the best possible opportunity to succeed in the classroom and throughout their lives.

And nothing can be more important than that.

The preceding column was written by Kansas Gov. Kathleen Sebelius.

About those letters . . .

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Doonesbury

• Gary Trudeau

