

Opinion



Free Press Viewpoint

Rural American needs to fight

By Steve Haynes
The state office of the U.S. Farm Service Agency, after suffering a bloody nose last year with a proposal to close more than half its county offices, has come back with a plan to close 11 in some of the state's smallest counties.

In northwest Kansas, only the office in Gove, the state's smallest county seat with a population of 103, would close. It would merge with the Logan County office in Oakley. Farmers could choose to do business with the government at any office, with many expected to gravitate to nearby Hoxie, in Sheridan County.

The agency's Agriculture Department twin, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, announced that it will close offices in the same 11 counties.

Under the first plan, offices in Oberlin, St. Francis and Sharon Springs in the northwest would have closed, but for the present, all those are safe.

So, with our offices to remain open, we should go on about our business and ignore this little government reorganization?

Only if we want to be next.

Eleven offices is just a foot in the door. Given their way, eventually the bureaucrats will return for another bite. And another.

Today, Farm Service and Conservation offices typically are small, three or four workers in a county, all "co-located" in the same building.

If you want to see the future, though, look to the largest agency in the Agriculture Department, the Forest Service. Once run by district rangers stationed out in the woods, in small towns and mining camps, the service averaged three to four employees per district well into the 1950s.

In the last 25 years, though, the service closed most of its rural offices, concentrating employees at ranger stations with 20-25 employees.

Few, if any, lost their jobs, mind you. Employee numbers stayed fairly constant. But the layers of bureaucracy thickened as workers began to specialize in one area or another, grazing, timber, recreation, law enforcement. Little money was saved on payroll, but expenses for vehicles and travel soared.

The management model is a lot like the one adopted a couple of years ago by the Kansas Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services, which closed many of its county offices in favor of new regional offices serving several counties.

The result, as usual, was little or no savings, but a big disconnect between clients and those supposed to serve them.

These consolidations aren't about saving money. They're not about good management or specialization. They're about gathering the troops in one place and creating a warm nest for them.

They represent the state and federal governments abandoning towns that get too small, too dull for officials to want to work in.

In rural America, we shouldn't tolerate that, not from the Department of Agriculture, the state or any other government agency designed to serve us.

If the agency is going to have the same employees and the same expenses, why not spend some money in towns like Gove?

In Rural America, we need to fight this kind of thinking, whenever it appears. — *Steve Haynes, president of Nor'West Newspapers including the Colby Free Press*

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 jvannostrand@nwkansas.com or pdecker@nwkansas.com. Opinions do not necessarily reflect the *Free Press*.

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John Van Nostrand - Publisher
jvannostrand@nwkansas.com

NEWS

Patty Decker - Editor
pdecker@nwkansas.com

Tisha Cox - General Assignment
tcx@nwkansas.com

Jan Katz Ackerman, Area Reporter
ackermanjk@ruraltel.net

ADVERTISING

Crystal Rucker - Advertising Sales/Director
crystalr@nwkansas.com

Kristi Powell - Advertising Sales
kpowell@nwkansas.com

Emily Wederski - Advertising Sales
ewederski@nwkansas.com

BUSINESS OFFICE

Jeanette Applegate - Bookkeeping, Ad Building
japplegate@nwkansas.com

Everett Robert - Circulation, Classifieds
erobert@nwkansas.com

Evan Barnum - Systems Administrator
support@nwkansas.com

NOR'WEST PRESS

Jim Bowker - General Manager

Richard Westfahl, Lana Westfahl, Judy McKnight

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A new understanding

It looks like Scooter Libby is going to jail, at least for the foreseeable future. His attorneys have promised an appeal and, from what I could tell of the trial, there are probably grounds for at least a hearing.

A lot of folks probably know this, but you can't appeal just because you didn't like the verdict. There are different standards among the federal courts and the states, but it is generally true an appeal must have some legal merit concerning the rights of the accused.

There are also calls for a presidential pardon, but I think those are premature. If Libby did not get a fair trial, he deserves a retrial, but he only deserves a pardon if he is not guilty.

It doesn't matter if he was the so-called fall guy, for the administration or not. Nor does it matter that the thing about which he lied was not in and of itself a crime. If he lied to obstruct an investigation, he is guilty of perjury.

If he is guilty of perjury, he needs to go to jail. If it is discovered the trial was bungled, and some respected legal minds think it was, a pardon may be the only way to see justice done, but that is a drastic measure which should wait until due process is completed.

It is, however, refreshing to see the leadership of the Democratic Party sees lying for what it is. Ten years ago, they didn't, so the change in view is bracing.

You see, about 10 years ago, a president lied, under oath, about something that, although it was



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immoral and disgusting, was not a crime. When the special prosecutor pursued the investigation and the House of Representatives impeached him, however, the leadership of the Democratic Party was aghast.

They were livid that such a thing could happen. After all, there was nothing illegal about what the president had done and he had only lied to save himself the embarrassment of being hounded by scandal.

Libby's case is no different. Valerie Plame was not considered a "protected asset" and had not been for some time. Libby's lies were the panic of a man who was trying to save his political skin. They had nothing to do with national security.

Make no mistake, such behavior is reprehensible and should be punished by law. There is a reason perjury is a crime. I'm just glad the leadership of the Democratic Party sees it that way as well.

Of course, someone more cynical than myself

might see things another way. They might think the Democrats are simply taking advantage of the situation to paint themselves as the noble saviors of the Republic and further weaken the Republicans as the election looms.

Someone more cynical than me might think Rep. Henry Waxman's call for testimony from Plame, even though it has become clear that no crime was committed concerning her, and his reluctance to allow expert testimony to that fact, or to call Richard Armitage, the actual source of the so-called "outing" is simply political posturing to weaken the president.

Of course, no one of Waxman's stature would do that while we are still fighting for our survival against a determined and ruthless enemy. Such a thing would very nearly meet the constitutional definition of treason and I'm sure he wouldn't do such a thing.

Someone more cynical than me might think the Democratic attacks concerning openness are interesting considering this administration has allowed it's people to go to trial, while the last seemed to just have a lot of mysterious deaths.

I just hope this new Democratic enthrallment with integrity lasts through the next election. I'm sure it will — as long as the Republicans win.

Jay Kelley is a local writer who speaks his mind from time to time. His e-mail is jkelly@st-tel.net.

Income tax on Social Security

Only a few states tax the income on Social Security Benefits and Kansas is one of them. Our House Tax Committee passed HB 2264, which, if passed, would effectively exempt all Social Security Benefits from the Kansas Income Tax. The Department of Revenue indicates enactment of HB 2264 would reduce State General Fund receipts by the following amounts: (\$ in millions)

FY 2008 (\$18.9)
FY 2009 (\$20.8)
FY 2010 (\$22.9)
FY 2011 (\$25.2)
FY 2012 (\$27.7)

Approximately 115,000 Kansas filers had some portion of their Social Security benefits taxed last year. The amount of savings to individual taxpayers might appear to be low but we need to consider that as local property taxes, sales taxes and appraisals increase most seniors do not experience and offsetting increase in income and slowly fall behind eventually becoming unable to make ends meet. Then either the State of Kansas (Medicaid) or family members must meet the needs. In effect, another tax increase is born by selected individuals by not providing the assistance provided in HB 2264. Now, we need to cause the Federal Government to follow suit and remove the Federal tax on



Jim Morrison • Capitol Review

benefits.

Property Taxes
HB 2298 is a "live" bill but will not be debated this session as it was never worked in the House Tax Committee. The committee did hold a hearing Feb. 15. HB 2298 creates the Senior Citizen Property Tax Deferral Act, which would allow seniors to defer the real property taxes on their homestead property. To obtain details of this bill check this Internet location: www.kslegislature.org/bills/2008/2298.pdf

I have read various blogs that berate Kansas as a "senior unfriendly" place to retire. I hope this can change in the near future. Especially if the average age in Kansas continues to rise.

Credit Card Debit
Total American consumer debt first reached \$1 trillion in 1994
The number of U.S. households receiving a credit card offer each month increased to 71

percent in 2004, up from 69 percent in 2003

Total American consumer debt reached \$2.2 trillion in 2005

Total revolving debt reached \$805 billion, equating to over \$7,000 per household, in 2005

Total American household consumer debt averaged \$11,840 in 2005

Total American consumer debt increased 41 percent between 1998 and 2004

The average amount financed for new car purchases was just over \$26,000 in 2005

Average household credit card debt has increased 167 percent between 1990 and 2004

The average balance per open credit card was \$4,617 in 2004

This information is located at www.creditcards.com/statistics/statistics.php

Slowing, growth in credit card debt will be a consideration of The Kansas Legislature. The total American debt was 2.2 trillion in 2005. The growth in Medicaid is due in large part to the out-of-control debt destroying our ability to financially retire or prepare for unexpected events.

Thank you all very much for allowing me the honor of representing you in the Kansas Legislature.

I will continue to do my best to speak strongly for us on the issues.

About those letters . . .

The *Free Press* encourages and welcomes letters from readers. Letters should be typewritten, if at all possible, and should include a telephone number and an address. These are used for verification of the writer only. If, however, you want your address and telephone number to appear with your letter, please ask us to do so when you submit your letter, or include a note with your letter. Most importantly, all letters must include a signature. Unsigned letters cannot be published. We reserve the right to edit for clarity and length, and, likewise, reserve the right to reject letters deemed to be of no public interest or considered offensive or libelous. Letters to the Free Press allow readers to become engaged in public debate on topics they deem important. Please consider sharing your thoughts with the family of Colby Free Press readers. Thank you.

Mallard Fillmore

• Bruce Tinsley

