

from our viewpoint...

Our 43rd leader could break mold

Forty-two gentlemen have served this country as its president. Ironically, our first president's first name was George and our current president's first name is also George. These 42 special people came from 20 different states, with the most (8) born in Virginia.

Ohio claims seven presidents, with Massachusetts and New York each having four. Texas, North Carolina and Vermont are birthplaces for two and all the rest one.

Research was an eye-opener. For example, I would have thought our current President, George W. Bush, was a Texan, but he wasn't, he was born in Connecticut. President Dwight D. Eisenhower, whom we Kansans claim as ours, is not, he was born in Texas.

President Gerald R. Ford, we thought was a Michigan product. He wasn't, his birthplace was Nebraska. And how about President Ronald Reagan. California, right? Wrong, he was born in Illinois. California, incidentally, has but one president by birth, and that was President Richard M. Nixon.

Here's the rundown, if we didn't mess up somewhere along the line — and these are their birthplaces:

- Virginia (8) — George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, James Monroe, William H. Harrison, John Tyler, Zachary Taylor and Woodrow Wilson

- Ohio (7) — Ulysses S. Grant, Rutherford B. Hayes, James A. Garfield, Benjamin Harrison, William H. Taft, William McKinley and Warren G. Harding

- Massachusetts (4) — John Adams, John Quincy Adams, John F. Kennedy and George H.W. Bush

- New York (4) — Martin Van Buren, Millard Fillmore, Theodore Roosevelt and Franklin D. Roosevelt

- Texas (2) — Dwight D. Eisenhower and Lyndon B. Johnson

- North Carolina (2) — James R. Polk and Andrew Johnson.

- Vermont (2) — Chester A. Arthur and Calvin Coolidge

The rest had one (1):

- South Carolina — Andrew Jackson

- New Hampshire — Franklin Pierce

- Missouri — Harry S. Truman

- California — Richard M. Nixon

- Pennsylvania — James Buchanan

- Kentucky — Abraham Lincoln

- New Jersey — Grover Cleveland

- Iowa — Herbert Hoover

- Illinois — Ronald Reagan

- Georgia — Jimmy Carter

- Arkansas — Bill Clinton

- Nebraska — Gerald R. Ford

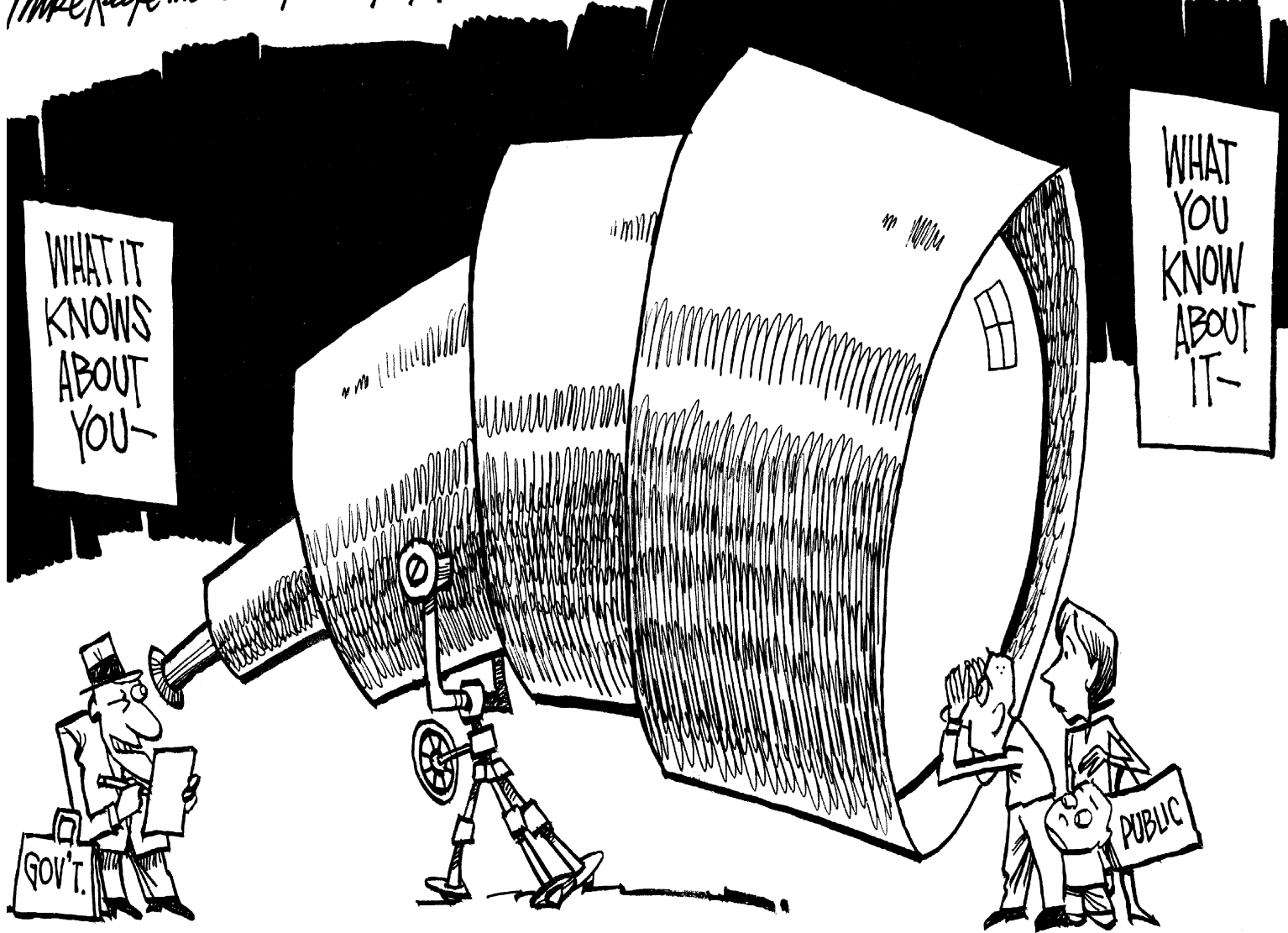
- Connecticut — George W. Bush

Our thinking today was to give you some information you might have wondered about, but never had the opportunity to research. We did that for you.

As we close this editorial down, this question comes to mind: Will this be the election that breaks the gentlemen's hold on the presidency?

— Tom Dreiling, Norton Telegram

Mike Keefe THE DENVER POST 03/07/07 www.caglecartoons.com



Time to stand up for open government

Do you get upset about open government? Don't care about openness in government? Don't get hot and bothered when public officials do public business in secret?

You should.

Open government is essential to our democracy. It's the only way that citizens can monitor the workings of their city, county, state and national officials. It brings accountability to police departments, courts, City Halls and school boards. Our very way of life demands that our democratic institutions be open.

But many citizens see this powerful cause to be little more than an excuse for media to abuse their First Amendment rights in the rush to build circulation and ratings. Or, even worse, citizens just don't care.

And, though most public officials say they embrace open government, they often don't act like it. Rather than living by the clear and overriding policy of the Kansas Open Records Act — that public records should be open to the public — many officials work to find reasons to keep them closed, and to close even more in the law.

In recent years, the Legislature has eagerly turned down a number of common-sense initiatives for openness and accountability. One striking recent example: School districts in Wichita and Topeka spend tens of millions of dollars of our tax money every year to bus our



randy brown

• sunshine week

children to and from school. Yet the school districts are not required by law to make public even the names of their bus drivers because the districts contract with a private company for school transportation. This is a blatant slap at public safety and accountability for tax dollars. It would be illegal in the case of any "official" school employee.

Lawmakers also have blocked attempts to require that executive sessions of public bodies be tape-recorded, and they have rejected efforts to fix the oppressive Kansas law that keeps secret probable cause affidavits in criminal arrests. In these cases, legislators are not just missing opportunities to make state government more open and accountable. They are missing opportunities to build public trust in an era in which citizens are increasingly suspicious of "government," as if it were some alien entity.

Of course, citizens are missing opportunities, as well. Apathy doesn't work in a democracy. And until many more of us are willing to

get involved, and until we tell public officials to do public business in the daylight, we will get what we deserve: too many leaders who feel that the ideal of open government is little more than a messy and inconvenient business.

Open government is not about politicians or the media. It's about you.

It is the non-partisan issue of our time, drawing supporters across the political spectrum. Recent winners of the Sunshine Coalition's Friends of Open Government Award include such political opposites as Kansas Sens. Tim Huelskamp, R-Fowler, and Anthony Hensley, D-Topeka.

The patriots who helped create our nation knew the power of honest and open government because they faced so much venal and closed government. Thomas Jefferson said, "Whenever the people are well informed, they can be trusted with their government." Patrick Henry said liberty is never secure as long as government does business in secret.

Those are two sides of the same coin of freedom.

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Thankful we live in a wise society

This is a week of Thanksgiving.

No, it's not November. It's March 11-17. That is when we give thanks that we live in a society where the people are presumed to be wise enough to govern themselves.

It's Sunshine Week, a time to remember that the government is us — and we have not only the right but the obligation to know what we are doing.

As president of an organization of thriving community newspapers, I have the opportunity to speak with journalists and their readers from Boston to Arizona and from states as red as my home state of Texas and as blue as New Jersey, where my friends, the Parker family, are deeply committed to covering local government.

It is rewarding to know that my newspaper friends AND their readers deeply believe in open government. Sunshine on government is the Vitamin D for democracy. It makes us whole and healthy. When we know what is going on, we are better able to make wise judgments on those few things that need to be confidential for a time in order let our public servants function.

Tom Brokaw, NBC News anchor, said this about Sunshine Week:

"If we present ourselves to the world as patrons of democracy, then we must be vigilant stewards at home of the oxygen that it requires — access to what our government is doing and the right to speak freely about it. The Greatest Generation fought valiantly to preserve and



from other pens

• commentary

protect those freedoms. It is up to us to ensure during Sunshine Week and all year that their sacrifices were not for naught."

I am proud that community newspapers provide their share of oxygen. Our immediate past president, Jerry Reppert, publisher of the *Gazette-Democrat* in Anna, Ill., for example, sued for copies of employment contracts for top officials of a state university, reasoning that citizens supporting higher education had a right to know how money was spent.

The *County Courier* in Enosburg, Vt., in an editorial in advance of Sunshine Week, made the point both visually and with words by "redacting," or blacking out, portions of the text. "There's always room for more sunshine in our lives," he wrote. "When it comes to government, we just have to be willing to stand up in the darkness and demand it."

Newspapers in Kansas helped to test local governments' responses to requests for public records, and found a reasonably good response except from sheriffs. Two years later, it tried again and found remarkable progress: only four of 33 offices failed to comply with the law. The *Altoona Mirror* in Pennsylvania asked

for information at 40 agencies. A reporter was surprised by confrontations and threats he met while trying to examine the public's business. Newspapers there have banded together in "Brighter Pennsylvania," a program designed to help officials better understand open government laws.

And just recently our friends at a small daily paper in Missouri, pursuing information at city hall, reported that the mayor said, "The way you come to City Hall will determine whether you are worked with or not."

Somehow, I have the feeling that isn't what our Founding Fathers (and Mothers) had in mind. I imagine some of our Founding Mothers might have washed that mayor's mouth out with soap.

That reminds me that community groups like the League of Women Voters participated in Sunshine Week last year, as well as groups as diverse as university journalists, local attorneys and even a fire department in Los Angeles.

I have two messages for newspapers and their readers.

One is: remind public servants that we trust them the most when we know the most about what they are doing.

The other is: read the newspaper. It's the best way to enjoy the sunshine.

Jerry Tidwell of Granbury, Texas, is president of the National Newspaper Association and publisher of The Hood County News.

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