

from other pens...

Everyone’s ready for some sunshine

After a long winter, it seems everyone is in the mood for some sunshine.

It couldn’t be a better time to be celebrating National Sunshine Week, a time for the citizens — and public officials — of Kansas to recommit themselves to the ideals of open government.

National Sunshine Week is March 16 through 22.

Why should Kansans care?

Because, unfortunately, there are dozens of incidents each year where public officials fall far short of what state law — and our democracy — require.

The Kansas Press Association’s 240 member newspapers try to do their part to make sure public officials follow the law, but they need your help. Citizens who take democracy seriously can have a big impact when they attend meetings, seek records or simply observe their government officials in action.

Do your public officials give proper notice of their meetings? When they do meet, do they discuss policy issues in public, or do they seem to have their minds made up when the meeting begins? Do they resort to closed-door (executive) sessions and discuss issues that aren’t allowed under the Kansas Open Meetings Act? Do they ever vote outside the meeting room?

The Kansas Open Meetings Act and the Kansas Open Records Act say meetings and records of public bodies should be open to the public. And, in the vast majority of cases, elected and appointed officials carry out their duties conscientiously.

Yet there are some who don’t believe they owe the public anything, that they can meet when they want, where they want, without telling their constituents about it at all.

They are wrong.

While newspaper staffs would love to have the resources to cover every meeting, they cannot.

That’s where you come in.

When you attend meetings, seek public records and question those in authority about how they are conducting themselves, you help keep government open, accessible and accountable.

“Sunshine” is a perfect description of how government should operate. It means the public’s business is discussed thoroughly in public, with the public’s participation, and it means decisions are *never* made behind closed doors without the public’s knowledge or input.

“Sunshine Week” is an annual reminder that smoke-filled rooms and secret meetings are simply anti-American. They betray our heritage of self-government.

Please do what you can to make sure your government is playing by the rules.

— Doug Anstaett, executive director, the Kansas Press Association.

Letter Policy

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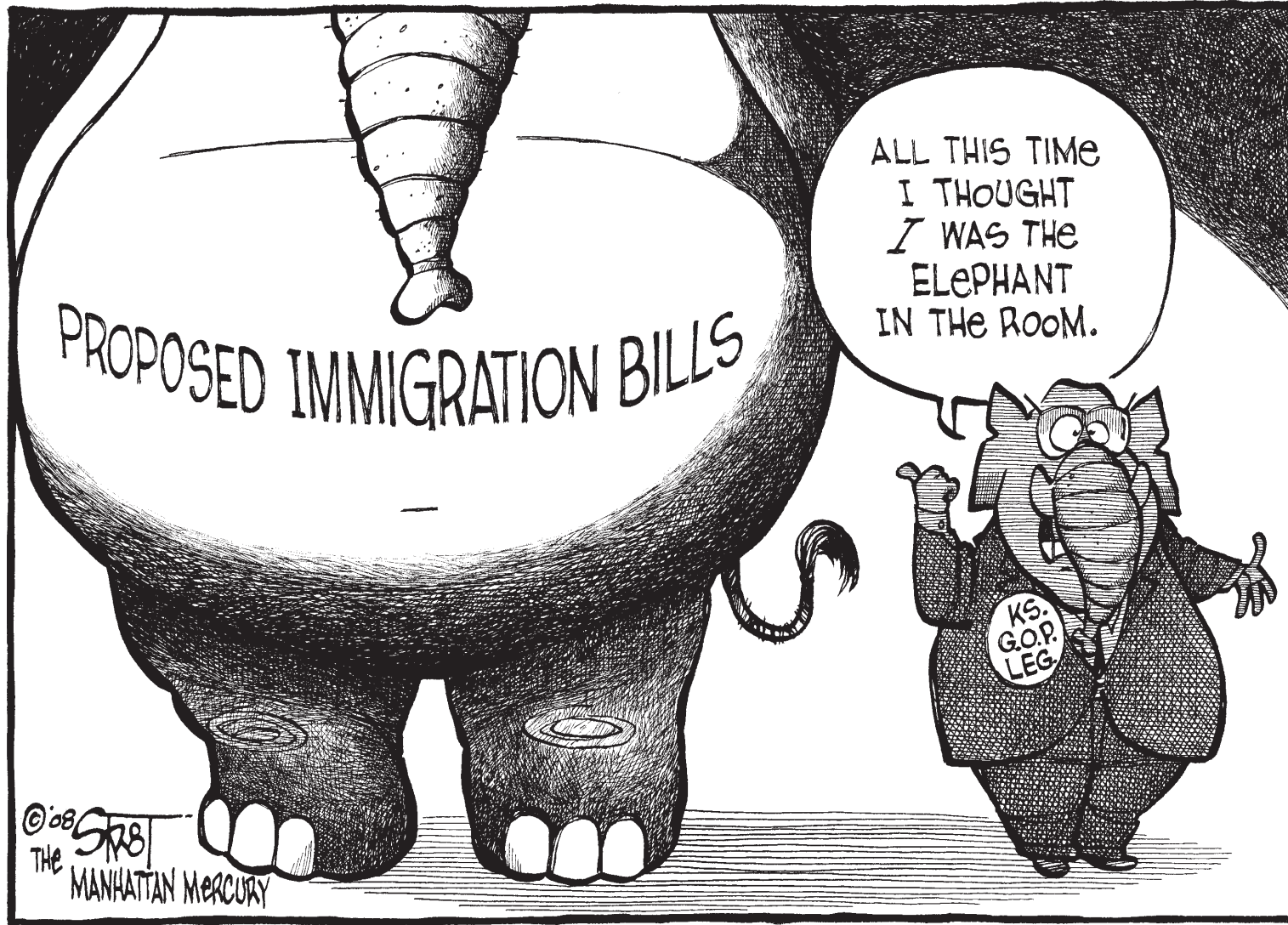
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Material kids



**tom
purcell**

• commentary

ones did was register mileage.

No, this odometer bolted onto the handle bars. It had a real display that measured both mileage and speed. I spent hours seeing how fast I could get the bike to go (I hit 44 miles per hour one day while peddling like mad down a long hill in the county park).

And I spent hours trying to rack up mileage. That was prestige in those days -- the more miles on your odometer, the cooler you were. But my lust for mileage proved to be my undoing.

One beautiful summer day, my sister Kris asked to borrow my bike. She wanted to go for a ride in the park with her friend. Eager to record more mileage, I handed it over without a thought.

But Kris didn’t make it to the park that day. She rode to the Murphy’s Mart department store a few miles away instead. It never occurred to her that my beautiful Huffy spider bike -- with its highly coveted odometer -- might require a lock. It was long gone by the time she exited the store.

I’ve been a writer a long time and still can’t find the words to describe the pain I knew that day. I wonder how kids today might respond to

such an experience. Would they even care?

Or would they just assume that green Huffy spider bikes grow on trees -- that pestering Mom and Dad will instantly produce another?

That couldn’t happen in 1972. We couldn’t afford another new bike, but my father found one in the bargain paper. It was a Murray five-speed with dual hand brakes. The shifter handle had been snapped in half, but otherwise she was as good as new.

And though I never would have a top-of-the-line odometer again, I rode that bike many enjoyable miles. I hold fond memories of both bikes, because I was, in many ways, luckier than kids are today.

Many parents didn’t have the dough to spoil their kids with material junk. Peer pressure has always existed, but most kids in the ‘70s couldn’t use materialism as a means to express it.

No, parents used their limited means to give us only what we needed. And what every kid needs more than stuff is love and stability and a mother and father who are always there for him. Lucky for me, my parents provided an abundance of that.

And that was even more valuable than a Schwinn Orange Krate spider bike, the most coveted two-wheeled machine in the history of kid-dom.

Tom Purcell is a nationally syndicated humor columnist. Visit Tom on the web at www.TomPurcell.com or e-mail him at Purcell@caglecartoons.com.

Next president should open Bush records

By Steven Aftergood

In 2005, then-Deputy Attorney General James Comey told colleagues at the Justice Department they would be “ashamed” when a legal memorandum on forceful interrogation of prisoners eventually became public. In fact, however, disclosure of such secret Bush administration documents may be the only way to begin to overcome the palpable shame that is already felt by many Americans at the thought their government has engaged in abusive interrogations, secret renditions or unchecked surveillance.

The next president will have the authority to declassify and disclose any and all records that reflect the activities of executive branch agencies. Although internal White House records that document the activities of the outgoing president and his personal advisers will be exempt from disclosure for a dozen years or so, every Bush administration decision that was actually translated into policy will have left a documentary trail in one or more of the agencies, and all such records could be disclosed at the discretion of the next president.

A new president may find it advantageous to quickly distinguish himself (or herself) from the current administration and its policies. By exposing what is “shameful” in our recent past the new administration could demonstrate a clean break with its predecessor, and lay the foundation for a more transparent and accountable presidency.

Most of the leading candidates from both parties have specifically criticized the secrecy of the Bush administration. In particular, those who are now serving in Congress have repeatedly been on the receiving end of White House secrecy, and may be all the more motivated to repudiate it in deed as well as in word.

“Excessive administration secrecy... feeds conspiracy theories and reduces the public’s confidence in government,” Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) has said. “I’ll turn the page on a growing empire of classified information,” said Sen. Barack Obama (D-Ill.). “We’ll protect sources and methods, but we won’t use



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sources and methods as pretexts to hide the truth.” “We need a return to transparency and a system of checks and balances, to a president who respects Congress’s role of oversight and accountability,” said Sen. Hillary Clinton (D-N.Y.).

The most troubling and the most secretive Bush administration actions are those in the realm of national security policy, and that is the first place, though not the last, where the next administration could constructively shed new light. It goes without saying that genuine national security secrets such as confidential sources and legally authorized intelligence methods should be protected from disclosure. But that leaves ample room for revelation of fundamental policy choices, and certainly of any illegal or embarrassing (“shameful”) actions that may have been improperly classified to evade accountability. For example:

1. Domestic Surveillance. The White House is seeking and Congress is poised to grant retroactive immunity for telephone companies that assisted the administration in its surveillance activities. But immunity for what? “This administration may have enjoyed completely unrestrained access to the communications of virtually every American,” said Sen. James Webb (D-Va.) earlier this month. “Do we know this to be the case? I cannot be sure. One reason I cannot be sure is that I have been denied access to review the documents that may answer these questions about the process.”

2. Interrogation and Torture. After months and years of awkward circumlocution, CIA Director Michael V. Hayden admitted on Feb. 5 that U.S. interrogators had subjected three al Qaeda prisoners to waterboarding, or simulated drowning. But the acknowledgment raised more questions than it answered.

On what authority did interrogators engage in what has long been considered a prosecutable action? If waterboarding is now deemed permissible under some circumstances, is there any interrogation technique the administration would still rule out? As a practical matter, has the U.S. government effectively legitimized torture? If there is to be accountability for the interrogation of prisoners in U.S. custody, the first step must be a forthright disclosure of what the Bush administration has done.

3. And Much More. The topics noted above became controversial due to press reports, leaks, whistleblower accounts, lawsuits and similar indications. But there is reason to wonder what other yet unknown deviations from accepted practice the Bush administration might have pursued under cover of secrecy. Of the 54 National Security Presidential Directives issued by the Bush administration to date, the titles of only about half have been publicly identified. There is descriptive material or actual text in the public domain for only about a third. In other words, there are dozens of undisclosed presidential directives that define U.S. national security policy and task government agencies, but whose substance is unknown either to the public or, as a rule, to Congress.

And so here are some questions people could usefully pose to the presidential candidates:

Q: Will you disclose the full scope of Bush administration domestic surveillance activities affecting American citizens, including all surveillance actions that were undertaken outside of the framework of law, as well as the legal opinions that were generated to justify them?

Q: Will you specify precisely what sort of coercive interrogation techniques were employed by the Bush administration, as well as their purported justifications, so that the nation may openly decide whether to embrace or to repudiate such techniques?

Aftergood directs the Project on Government Secrecy at the Federation of American Scientists and writes the Secrecy News blog. The column above originally appeared in the Feb. 7 edition of the Nieman Watchdog.