

from our viewpoint...

Disaster brings out the best in people

The blazing prairie fires last week brought out the best the people of Oberlin and Decatur County had to offer.

Don't leave the neighbors out; many of them rushed to help, too, sending fire crews, water and more.

We get so used to tut-tutting the sins and foibles of humanity that we forget that we are, by nature and inclination, a noble breed. Sometimes it takes a disaster to remind us.

We expect volunteer firemen and emergency medical technicians to respond to the call. That's what they signed up for. Same for sheriff's deputies and other public employees.

But watching these men and women work last week, you saw what they were made of. Many were on the job for hours on end, then called back out after whatever rest they got.

The firemen were great; they got ahead of the fast-moving flames and stopped what could have been a far greater loss of property and livestock in a fairly short time. They also saved all five houses brushed by the blaze.

The work was hard, dirty and hot, but not thankless. Citizen after citizen praised their efforts.

But many, many others pitched in. People brought money, water and food to the Oberlin Dollar General, where donations were collected. Volunteers in town made sandwiches, iced water and drinks, took the bounty out to the fire lines and passed it out. Crews were fed and watered in the field and when they returned to the station.

Dozens of farmers filled tanks with water Tuesday and again Saturday and raced out to the fire lines to help supply the many fire rigs spraying the flames. Others brought tractors pulling disks to make fire lines. Area counties sent fire trucks and tankers, and both Decatur Co-op and Grafel Farms sent their biggest tanks.

The whole thing seemed like a giant machine, oiled and poised to suppress the fires. And that's what happened.

The only sour note we heard at all was the complaint, from some fire crews and from some people living near the blazes, that sightseers blocked some of the roads.

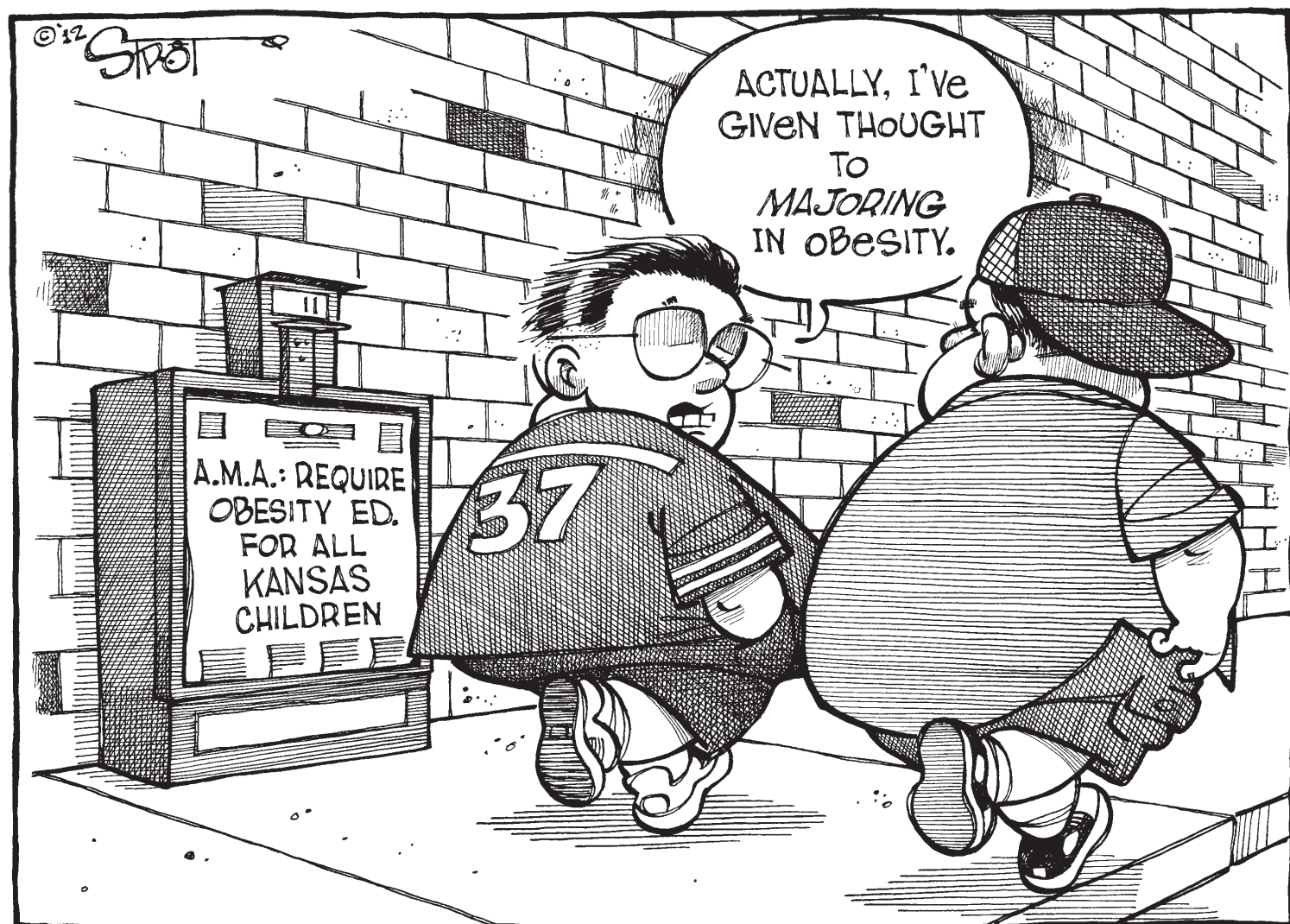
Many of these vehicles may have been driven by volunteers bringing water, but some undoubtedly were just there to see what was going on. No one had time to block off the area or screen the roads, and people do have a right to travel on public highways.

However, we'd suggest that anyone who isn't working a fire or other incident should stay well away. Follow the example of a dozen or so people who, during the big fire Saturday night, parked on U.S. 36, several miles away, and watched the flames and the fire trucks from a safe distance.

No one should drive into a fire zone, or a bad thunderstorm, for that matter. Anyone who does might lose more than respect. You could lose your car, or even your life. You might cause a wreck, or impede emergency operations.

That said, we thought most people behaved marvelously all week. We're proud of our town, our volunteers and our public servants.

Hats off, ladies and gentlemen. Hats off! — Steve Haynes



Long, strange trip for Native American doll

He's not really an old Indian. He just looks that way.

He's a kachina, a doll that Pueblo Indians use in ritual dances.

However today, most kachinas are made for the tourist trade.

It was about 11 p.m. the last night of the annual National Newspaper Association convention in Albuquerque last fall when we got the call.

Could we take a kachina home for a friend?

Our friends live in New Jersey, and their son bought the kachina that night, figuring he could somehow get an almost three-foot-high wooden Indian into his suitcase.

That wasn't happening, the family discovered, so maybe their friends from Kansas, who were taking the train home, could help.

Of course we could. We love kachinas.

Our friends planned to drive from New Jersey to Jackson Hole, Wyo., for Christmas and would stop by and pick up the doll. (Yes, they are kinda crazy, but they have the cutest Jersey accents.)

Unfortunately, I realized that I had overbought myself — what with the chili ristras, the books, the big Indian rug, the piñon incense.



cynthia haynes

• open season

I could take the kachina home, but it would really put a strain on our luggage. Still, we had promised, and the kachina had to get back east somehow.

Then I realized that a set of friends from Colorado hadn't left yet. They were driving. They could take the wooden Indian home with them, and we could meet them later in the fall and pick him up.

This seemed to be the perfect solution, so our wooden friend left his home in New Mexico and headed for Colorado, where he stayed for the next two months.

In the late fall, we were able to get out to Colorado and meet our friends at a restaurant we all like. The transfer was made and the Indian headed for Kansas.

Now we just had to wait for Thanksgiving and hand him over.

At Thanksgiving, however, our friends

realized that they would have four teenagers at their home over the holidays. They decided they should probably just stay in New Jersey and guard the silver and the alcohol.

So, sometime after Christmas I decided maybe I should ship the Indian east.

The cost was more than our young friend had paid to start out with, and finding a box to fit a three-foot wooden Indian was tough.

Then, as we were about to head for Washington in March, it hit me. We could stuff him in a large suitcase and take him as checked baggage. Our friends would be in Washington, driving from Jersey, and we could turn our wandering Indian over to them.

This strategy worked. We rode coach and the Indian rode baggage. In D.C., we turned him over to his rightful owner, who took him home to New Jersey on the train still in his suitcase.

We got a photo of our well-traveled wooden friend as he rode with his owner back to college in New York. He was buckled into his own seat belt and looking as if he was having a fine time. And why not? He'd enjoyed traveling across the country by car, plane and train.

He's seen more of the country than a lot of my friends.

Dispelling myths about health care law

With comments flying thick and fast about the Supreme Court decision to uphold the Affordable Care Act, it's good to take a close look at claims about the law to see if they hold water.

Well that's exactly what fact-checking organizations are doing. Fact-checking is something that has sprung up into a major part of the journalism industry in the last three or four years. They take a claim, usually by a politician, but sometimes from direct mail campaigns, TV ads and sometimes even Facebook posts, and then try to find out how truthful the claim is. My favorite by far is PolitiFact.com, because they take a very fair view, ruthlessly checking claims by all sides, Democrat and Republican. In fact the person who seems to show up most often with a half-truth or false next to his name is Vice President Joe Biden.

They look at what sources people are using to back up their claims, then look at independent sources and talk to experts. Not surprisingly, a lot of their recent efforts have been dedicated to checking claims about the health care law. So let's look at a few of those.

We'll start with the big one: is the Affordable Care Act a government takeover of health care? So many people have said it, it's difficult to point out all of them. One of the latest was Virginia Senate candidate George Allen, who said it in a radio commercial and a speech in Washington D.C. in June.

The law is absolutely a package of increased regulation on the health care industry, especially insurance companies, but it falls short of a takeover for several reasons. The federal government has not taken control of hospitals, private clinics, etc. Doctors didn't suddenly become federal employees when the law passed two years ago. Private insurance continues to be the primary form of insurance in America. The so-called "public option" was stripped from the bill proposals long before one passed. It is not a single-payer system, where medical payments are taken from a pool controlled by the government.

This claim of a takeover never seems to die. The Associated Press, the Washington Post, FactCheck.org and the Kaiser Family Foundation have all checked into it exhaustively and concluded that this law by itself is not a takeover of health care. PolitiFact even rated this their Lie of the Year for 2011.

Could it lead to a takeover down the road?



kevin bottrell

• simple tricks and nonsense

That's a tricky question. We could get into a situation where more regulations are piled on over decades and in 30 years we wake up and find that the government controls our health care. However, that may not happen, it isn't something anyone could predict with any accuracy, and you should beware anyone who tries to tell you its a certainty. The slippery slope argument is considered a fallacy after all.

So how about the economics of the health care law? Well presidential candidate Mitt Romney says it will add trillions to the deficit and the national debt. The Congressional Budget Office — a non-partisan agency that looks at how proposed laws will affect the federal budget — estimated in 2010 that the health care law would lower the deficit by \$124 billion over 10 years. The CBO looked at the Republican law to repeal the Affordable Care Act in 2011 and estimated it would increase the deficit by \$210 billion. The CBO isn't always right, but either scenario is a far cry from adding trillions.

Many, including Rush Limbaugh, have called the Affordable Care Act the biggest tax increase in history. Yeah, not so much. It doesn't even make the top five tax increases in American history. It's taxes, which are heavily weighted toward the insurance industry rather than ordinary citizens, amount to about .5 percent of the gross national product. The largest increase in American history was the Revenue Act of 1942, which raised taxes by about 5 percent of the gross national product.

Let's you think these are one-sided, even the president has been caught in a half-truth about his law. President Obama has said loudly and often that if you like your current plan, you'll be able to keep it. In his statement after the June 28 Supreme Court decision, he said, "If you're one of the more than 250 million Americans who already have health insurance, you will keep your health insurance."

Not so fast, Mr. President. Millions of Americans — 3 to 5 million according to the Congressional Budget Office and or 1 mil-

lion according to other independent studies — already lose their health insurance each year, even without the Affordable Care Act. Sometimes it's voluntary, like when we change jobs, and sometimes we have no control over it, like when a company unilaterally changes its plan. While the health care law does take pains to keep current plans in place, keeping your insurance is by no means guaranteed.

Romney said up to 20 million Americans "will lose the insurance they currently have." Where did he get that? Well it's one of four estimates that the CBO put in the same study that gave us the 3 to 5 million number. This is an estimate of the number of people who will lose employer-based insurance because of the health care law. One estimate says there will be 3 million more, the others say 10, 12 and 20 million fewer. So he took the worst case scenario.

But even 20 million is only 7 percent of non-elderly people who have insurance. And like the president, he seems to ignore the fact that people lose or change their insurance every year anyway.

Like it, love it, or hate it, there's obviously a lot of half-truths, innuendoes and bald-faced lies floating around out there about the health care law.

Personally, I've always thought the law was too broad and the process was too secret. Laws are supposed to be specifically targeted, they're supposed to be smart-bombs, not mile-wide artillery strikes. I think if Congress and the president had gotten together to fix very specific problems with the health care system one at a time and in public, they would have come up with something far more palatable to the American people.

So yes, I don't care for the Affordable Care Act, but I care even less for people mis-characterizing it for political gain, so I think we owe it to ourselves not to just accept what a talking head says on TV, but rather to go out and try to find what's really true.

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