

OPINION

Iowa: What a bummer

We need divided government to fix what is broken

BY ART CULLEN

Fog set thick outside while serotonin ran thin inside on this early March morning of Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) in Iowa. If I had the gumption I would go jump in the lake. It only gets worse with the legislature in session.

We try to look away and think of the Cherokee girls shooting their way to State, or Ben McCollum waving his arms like a madman at Carver Hawkeye. Audi Crooks pouring in 30 keeps our spirits at nearly an even keel in between the chemical ads that remind us of our nation-leading cancer rates.

Reality bites around the rotunda in Des Moines.

They're banning books and denying civil rights. They're hassling immigrants. Starving schools. Shifting the tax burden from the wealthy to the working stiff. Shielding chemical companies from cancer claims.

One bad idea after another.

On one foggy morning we learned that they want to eliminate public notices from newspapers, which could come close to killing us if we don't just give up and run away from home.

We could wish that they would just go home and stay there. Quit doing harm. They won't.

"If the bills coming out of the Iowa Legislature are any indication, I'm pretty sure Iowa is a shoo-in to top the next list of the Worst States for Black Americans," wrote Black Iowa News Editor Dana James.

That is saying something, neighbors. We used to be known as a leader in civil rights.

Time to get our bearings. We need some good old divided government, where we are forced to speak with each other and not past each other. One-party government has taken Iowa back light years. One-party rule cleared the way for Donald Trump to wage war by fiat, ignore Congress and thumb his nose at the courts. This is how Stalin and Mao rolled.

There is virtually no chance that Democrats could win either chamber of the Iowa legislature.

The surest first step in stopping the madness is electing a Democratic governor to counterbalance a Republican legislature that is killing us not-so-softly.

State Auditor Rob Sand could win. The Republican legislature is so afraid of it that they are trying to write laws to rein in the governor's authority pre-emptively. Sand says the two-party system is unrepresentative. He sounds a lot like James Taralico, who just won the Democratic nomination for US Senate from Texas attracting a lot of disaffected Democrats and independents. They are soliciting people who are disgusted by our dysfunctional political system.

"Our economy is broken. Our politics are broken. Even our relationships with each other feel broken," Talarico said last week. "The people at the top work so hard to keep us angry and divided because our unity is a threat to their wealth and power. So their cable news networks and their social media algorithms tear us apart."

As do political parties, Sand would argue. Sand appeals to independents who are tired of the partisanship by openly wishing he were one. A Democratic governor would break the fever that is taking Iowa backwards at light speed. Know-Nothings could not summarily assault us in our bedrooms and classrooms. A governor's veto would await them.

Sand will douse the culture wars. He will run the Iowa Department of Natural Resources as if natural resources are involved. He will defend, not defund, education.

A ray of hope that the US Senate could flip to blue and put a check on Trump's ambitions helps to keep us out of the icy drink. A strong majority of Americans hate the secret police swarming in masks on the Twin Cities. They also hate setting the Middle East on fire. The high cost of living just keeps getting higher (thanks in large part to Iowa's increasingly regressive tax system). Gasoline prices shot up 50% in a week of bombing Tehran.

Despite killing a bunch of terrorists posing as Muslims, there are plenty more where the Ayatollah came from. You can't kill them off. Buy them off. Holy wars are not our thing. We simply want their agnostic oil.

Checks and balances are the prescription. Something to hold us back from our worst impulses. We don't ask for the legislature to ram laws predicated on religious persecution, but that's what politicians are delivering in order to divide us by race and creed. In fact, voters rejected the Bible-thumping Moms for Liberty in school board races statewide. We need a Congress that serves as a check on the White House and defunds goon squads.

Somebody has to protect our food and water. They are three years late on a farm bill under GOP unified rule. Bird flu just hit BV County. Where? State secret. They laid off the USDA bird flu workers among 24,000 in the department. It's all part of the fog. Our religion says thou shalt not mess with agribusiness.

Citizens should fix their attention on the tube and the Randy Feenstra ads calling Sand a left-wing radical to know that everything is up-to-date in the Worst State in America for Blacks, Polluted Surface Water, Cancer and Declining Rural Population. Surely it can't get more dire under a two-party system.

This was a man focused on rights and rainbows

BY RANDY EVANS

The offices of the Des Moines Register's opinion staff were mostly empty when my telephone rang late one afternoon about 15 years ago.

The guard at the lobby security desk said two men were there and hoped I had time to meet with them. I said sure and invited them up to our office on the fourth floor.

Within minutes, the Rev. Jesse Jackson and his driver emerged from the elevator. They were on their way to Waterloo. But Jackson wanted to detour to the Register, just to talk about some concerns on his mind.

That conversation — it lasted about an hour — came to mind Friday as I watched the funeral for one of the nation's notable civil rights freedom fighters.

Jackson's death leaves Andrew Young as the most prominent living survivor of those tumultuous years that seared into America's memory places like Selma, Birmingham, Montgomery, Memphis and Washington, D.C.

Jackson's soaring voice, in harmony with civil rights leaders from the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. to John Lewis, from Thurgood Marshall to Rosa Parks, and from Fannie Lou Hamer to the Rev. Ralph Abernathy, amplified the concerns of Americans who felt unseen, unheard and overlooked for generations.

But on that afternoon in Des Moines, in the conference room steps from my office, where governors, presidents and presidential candidates regularly met with the newspaper's reporters and editors, Jesse Jackson's voice needed no amplification.

The cadence mirrored that we heard in news clips about his death. Even so, the imposing figure seated across the table was a softer spoken, more genteel version.

There sat the son of a poor, single mother from South Carolina talking with the son

of blue-collar parents from southern Iowa. We discussed poverty, economic disparity and the role of the United States government to ensure the have-nots, as well as the haves, receive the same treatment and opportunities.

The message my guest delivered that afternoon was vintage Jackson. He made it clear where he stood. But there also was a give-and-take. He spoke — and he listened.

There were observations about Iowa that were informed by his many trips to the state during two campaigns for president and his leadership of what became the Rainbow PUSH Coalition.

His message was clear: Americans needed to hear the voices of those without big megaphones, the men and women who constitute the "working poor" in our nation.

On the campaign trail he often told audiences: "Most poor folks are not on welfare. They work every day. They catch the early bus. They clean the streets. They cut the grass. They rake the leaves. They raise other people's children. They work in hospitals. They mop the floors and clean up the germs. The wipe the bodies of those who are sick. They clean the commodes."

At the events in Waterloo that brought him to Iowa that day 15 years ago, Jackson made the point that even amid budget concerns and the size of the national debt, leaders and citizens must not forget the price of poverty and the economic pain those who are less fortunate experience.

The United States, Jackson said, must not allow the nation's safety net to unravel — especially to bankroll tax cuts for wealthy Americans or to fight wars in foreign lands.

He told his Waterloo audience, "That is our mission now, to build a safety net beneath which America will not fall. We cannot let Social Security recipients and Medicaid and Medicare recipients

fall through that crack."

Jackson's message back then about protecting America's safety net seems especially prescient today.

Sitting in the Register's conference room that afternoon, he worried the United States was backsliding from the progress made during the 1960s' civil rights struggles. He voiced anxiety about debates over immigration, voting rights and economic opportunities. He foresaw those issues as threats that could erode the legacy of Dr. King and his generation's civil rights leaders.

As he told that Waterloo audience later, "Now we are more free, but we are less equal. The gap between the have and the have-nots is getting much wider."

That was then. Now is now. But the concerns are the same.

The Rev. Wendell Anthony told the Detroit Free Press upon learning of his friend's death on February 17 at age 84, "One thing he taught all of us was to keep hope alive, even in the midst of all this madness we have to deal with now."

As for me, I am glad I did not let that telephone call roll to voice mail on that distant afternoon. Little did I know that I would learn about the past — and the future — from a man who always saw, and always sought, a better life for all Americans.

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All chickens come home to roost

BY ALAN GUEBERT

If you grew up on a farm, you know that milk cows show up to be milked, horses return to the barn to be fed and, like clockwork, chickens return to roost every night.

In fact, chickens are so certain to return each evening that we've recast this commendable habit into a common admonition: "The chickens are coming home to roost," we say when the consequences of a past mistake show up.

Well, here come the chickens as Republicans on the House Ag Committee push their subsidy-heavy, SNAP-lite Farm Bill through Congress. Combined with other costly changes they added to last July's budget bill, the "2.0" bill now holds more chickens than your average KFC freezer.

But don't be fooled by any talk of cost savings or budget cutting. Despite huge cuts to food assistance, nothing in the bill will save money if the ag economy stays in the freezer.

The reason, as noted here last November, isn't spending; it's policy.

"If payments were the answer," as I then quoted ag policy experts Jonathan Coppel of the University of Illinois and Otto Doering of Purdue University, "then the problems should be solved by now."

But the problems have only ballooned—as have federal payments.

"Since 2018," when the cur-

rent Farm Bill was enacted (again quoting the pair), "USDA and/or Congress have paid nearly \$176 billion (real 2025) in inflation-adjusted economic assistance to farmers."

These payments, on average, consisted of about "\$6.5 billion per year from commodities subsidy programs and an astounding \$15.5 billion per year in ad hoc payments."

And there's talk of even more payments this spring.

Now stir in an unpredictable, still-widening Middle East war. Its only certainty is that the cost of the mundane to the sacred—from the price of fertilizer and fuel to that of futures and lives—will climb.

Now throw in today's destabilized ag export markets, more White House tariffs, a Department of Agriculture whose data integrity is being questioned, and the certain impact of more climate change.

That's a lot of chickens coming home to roost in 2026.

Or, as our two ag policy experts noted last year, "Ultimately, federal taxpayer-funded payments are not a match for the tough reality of lost demand or damaged markets."

Those are two elements no one saw coming when GOP Farm Bill writers in 1995-like today-sought to finish a law that would become known as Freedom to Farm, or F2F. Its key tenet, that farm program payments would be keyed to land, or "base" acres, not crops, redirected farm policy

from "supply management" to "market oriented."

It quickly became a financial flop, however. What was designed to be a seven-year, \$47 billion farm program ended up costing more than \$100 billion in just six years.

It was predicted by me and others. In the Sept. 10, 1995 Farm and Food File I wrote that the proposed changes would prove very costly to taxpayers and even more so to farmers.

I came to that conclusion through simple math: I totaled the federal farm program payments key crops like wheat, corn, and cotton had received under the previous five-year Farm Bill. The sums were eye watering.

For example, from 1991 through 1995, wheat farmers received, on average, 26 percent of the annual wheat income through federal payments. For corn, the average was 18 percent and cotton, 16 percent.

Can these farmers, I asked, give up these annual "crop receipts and survive?"

"Some can, but many cannot," I noted and—no surprise—some did but many did not. The reason, however, wasn't government spending; it was government policy.

And that chicken is headed for the roost, too.

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I went to Jared

(Moskowitz, that is)

BY JOAN ZWAGERMAN

He's a gem of a legislator but it turns out that "trial by blanket" was not Noem's undoing.

Silly me. I thought it was Jared Moskowitz who got Kristi Noem fired.

You know Jared Moskowitz, don't you? He's the Florida Democratic representative who, in February, asked Attorney General Pam Bondi what she had written about him in her "burn book." Bondi, as you may recall, appeared before a House Judiciary Committee, and in preparation, she (or more likely, staffers) wrote insults that she could hurl at committee members instead of answering questions.

From the moment that Bondi sneered and Moskowitz smiled, though, I went to Jared. This administration is a mockery of truth and justice of the first order. Moskowitz

brilliantly mocks their mockery and in so doing, reminds us how heinous they really are. He can deflate all their sound and fury which signifies nothing. He knows just how to skewer their vainglory and reveal it for the ridiculousness it is.

So, when former Secretary of Homeland Security Kristi Noem appeared before that self-same committee, I clapped to learn that Moskowitz wore a "Justice for Cricket" button to the proceedings. Cricket was Noem's dog until Noem shot Cricket for being a puppy doing puppy things.

Moskowitz later brought up the incident where Noem fired a pilot for forgetting her special blanket on an airplane. In honor of that traumatic incident, Moskowitz gave Noem a parting gift: "I got you a new Coast Guard blankie, the one you lost. So this is for you, you don't leave

empty-handed..."

Insert chef's kiss. See what I mean about mocking and skewering?

Although, I sort of get the furor over the lost blanket. If you're a child (or uber-childish), a lost blanket is cause for concern. When I tried to get one of my grandsons to take a nap, he kept demanding the "Mickey binkit," and he would not settle down without it.

I understood. I used to have a special "binkit" too. I called it my "Dee-Dee," and I hauled it everywhere, but sadly, it got left behind in a Colorado hotel on family vacation.

So, wasn't it nice of Representative Moskowitz to secure Noem a new blanket? I never got a new "Dee-Dee." Four-year-old me had to carry on without it, miles from home.

Of course, for Noem, a grown woman, being given a

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A different definition of school choice

BY RICK MORAIN

Kathy and I attended a Greene County High School performance last Saturday evening of Anastasia the Musical. It's based on the animated film Anastasia, about the Romanov princess who, according to myth, might supposedly have survived the 1917 Bolshevik assassination of Russian Tsar Nicholas II's royal family.

The production highlighted our week. We were impressed by the musicianship and the dramatic performances from the cast, the professional sound from the orchestra, the attention-getting sets, and the dramatic electronic visual backdrops made possible through the school theater's new short-throw video projector. The school secured the projector through a pair of generous grants and some funds from the school district itself.

During the intermission, activities director David Wright introduced the five school alumni who had been inducted that afternoon into the school's Fine Arts Hall of Fame: Dr. Douglas Miller, Kate Cuddy, Marty Aldrich, Peter Thompson, and Michael Kennedy. At the induction Wright described the career accomplishments of each of the five.

All five inductees had been honored as outstanding musicians in their high school years, and they have received significant honors in their subsequent music education, instruction, and/or performance careers.

Doug Miller and I were Jefferson classmates, with Doug's father Don Miller serving as high school principal for several years up through 1957-58. We were able to spend most of the weekend together, and he and I reminisced about the "olden days," giggling about various episodes we could remember. We shared recollections of our years in the Jefferson High bands and choral groups, and our experiences in Scouting, including pushing burros over the mountains at Philmont Scout Ranch in New Mexico.

Doug went on to nine years of intensive music study at Drake University and Indiana University, earning bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees. He served for 32 years on the faculty of Penn State University, including 15 years as director of orchestral studies and 20 as director of choral studies.

So he had spent his entire impressive career coaching college students in musical performance. He is more than qualified to judge the caliber of a musical stage performance.

The reason I'm highlighting Doug's expertise: he was stunned at the musical and dramatic quality of Saturday night's performance, especially given the relatively modest size of Greene County High School's student body. And of course the impressive theater venue at the school commanded his admiration as well.

That all brings me to the reason for this column: It's su-

remely important that Iowa schools have the resources to offer a variety of strong extracurricular programs. And that students can explore those options wherever their interests steer them: music, athletics, drama, speech, student government, whatever the paths.

Greene County High School continues to encourage students to follow their inclinations in many areas, just as Doug and I were able to do back in the 1950s. For example, in addition to participating in band and choral music, sports, and student government, I was chosen to sing the role of The Mikado in a production of the Gilbert and Sullivan musical of that name. (I wore a hairless skull cap, foreshadowing what was to come.) Hollywood and Broadway didn't ring up my home phone afterward, but it was sure fun.

Kids today deserve the opportunities that high schools can offer them in activities as well as academics. If the Legislature and the Governor shortchange schools with their appropriations decisions, or shift resources away from them, or cut state or local taxes to the extent that there's not enough money for expansive curricular and extracurricular offerings, they're shortchanging young people as well, and eventually Iowa's vibrant future.

Iowa's students deserve education opportunities as least as engaging as those that their parents and grandparents had. It's a different, and valid, definition of "school choice."