

Viewpoints

To the Editor:

Retreats to the Cascades, far from the lowly masses in Bullard, and memberships to the elite Eagles Bluff Country Club that taxpayers can't afford. My, My, haven't we become cosmopolitan. But, according to the Tyler newspaper, a council woman has pronounced everything great, so we the uninformed don't need to concern ourselves.

With everything being so great, I am sure that the City is planning to finish the street plan that was halted four and one-half years ago. They are probably going to overlay Hickory and Timberline in Rollingwood Hills and repair Ella and other streets damaged by contractors putting in pipelines. After all, they have four and one-half years of build-up in the street fund to do it with.

With things going so great and taxpayers in such a happy frame of mind, maybe the City can open up those cages in City Hall so that we can see and get to know our City employees again. Maybe we can see a copy of the budget before the public hearing. Maybe we could even have one of those town hall meetings that were held long ago so that we can heap praise upon the City for doing so great.

In the words of John Stossel, "Give me a break!"

B. J. Langford

Bullard

David S. Broder
Washington Post

Senators are great glad-handers, not just with their constituents but with each other. Every time a vote is called, they mill around in front of the rostrum, grabbing hands and shoulders or patting each other's backs.

But, as my colleague Dana Milbank noted, it was a poignant moment last week when Ted Stevens of Alaska, newly indicted for accepting unreported favors from an oilman friend, walked over to Robert Byrd of West Virginia, who uses a wheelchair because of age and illness, in search of support and consolation.

Stevens, 84, is a Republican, and Byrd, 90, a Democrat. But their bonds are far stronger than any partisan differences. In their decades of service, they dominated the Appropriations Committee, passing the chairmanship back and forth between them, depending on which party held the majority.

Both men have become famous -- or notorious -- for using their committee posts to steer billions from the Treasury to their home states, defying their colleagues who call them "kings of pork."

They represent, if not the last,

certainly the rear guard of a generation of senators who see it as their principal responsibility to help their chronically needy citizens obtain the federal largess that can spell the difference between subsistence and a decent living.

But as the Senate contemplates another election in November that is likely to bring dramatic generational change, Stevens and Byrd are reminders of the changing culture of that body.

Veteran Republican senators are retiring this year in Virginia, New Mexico and Colorado, among other states, and all three may well be replaced by Democrats.

Stevens's reelection now is in doubt, and if you throw in New Hampshire, where young John Sununu, one of the ablest of the Republican underclassmen, is facing a stiff challenge, you can see why Democrats are talking up their prospects of markedly expanding their current shaky two-vote Senate margin.

At a briefing I attended the other day, Sen. Charles Schumer of New York, the chairman of the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, said it would be "difficult" to reach the 60 seats that would stop Republican filibusters. "But it's not out of the question,"

he said, even though it would require the Republicans to lose nine races.

As significant as the numerical potential is the changing character of the new senators who may arrive in this election. They could be welcome news for either a President Obama or a President McCain, because the likeliest winners mainly are centrists who have been tested in real-world politics and have little tolerance for ideological extremes.

Two of the top five Democratic prospects are people who have been governors of conservative states. Sununu is in a rematch with former New Hampshire governor Jeanne Shaheen, who dealt with a Republican legislature throughout her tenure in Concord and -- to the disappointment of some Democrats -- managed to avoid a new broad-based tax to finance the schools.

The other former governor is Mark Warner of Virginia, favored to succeed retiring Sen. John Warner (no relation). Mark Warner, a millionaire businessman, also shared his capital with a Republican legislature and learned in his four years a wealth of practical wisdom about negotiating compromises.

That description also fits Mark Begich, the mayor of Anchorage, who is likely to be the Democratic

nominee for Stevens's seat. Like most mayors of both parties, whatever the size of their cities, he has been held accountable by his constituents for the most basic needs.

The last two on Schumer's list of top prospects are the Udall cousins, part of a Democratic dynasty that goes back more than a half century. Tom and Mark Udall are the sons of Stewart and Morris Udall, who between them held the Tucson-area Arizona House seat for decades.

Mark and Tom serve together in the House, from Colorado and New Mexico, respectively. Mark has the more liberal district and voting record, but neither would ever be mistaken for a New York City congressman. The Republicans have put forward candidates who are more conservative than the retiring GOP senators and who are underdogs in both races.

These five are likely recruits for the growing band of senators who -- under McCain's leadership -- saved the Senate from blowing up over the issue of judicial filibusters. If McCain and Obama are serious about moving beyond partisan gridlock, these folks might help.

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Thrown Off the Bus

Howard Kurtz
Washington Post Staff Writer

KANSAS CITY-- While the traveling press corps was shipped off to a barbecue restaurant here, John McCain charmed his way through an interview with a local TV reporter. Surac Chinn of KCTV posed such less-than-penetrating questions as "How important is Missouri?" and "Have you chosen a running mate?" and -- addressing the candidate's wife Cindy -- "How do you make your marriage work?"

Moments later, though, the Republican candidate seemed to grow annoyed with the Kansas City Star's Steve Kraske, who pressed him on his recent comment that "nothing is off the table" when it comes to strengthening Social Security.

When Kraske said that McCain presumably wasn't ruling out a payroll tax hike, McCain interrupted: "That's presuming wrong." When the reporter rephrased the question, McCain said: "If you want to keep asking me over and over again, you're welcome to."

It was a brief moment of friction that highlighted how the captain of the Straight Talk Express is having a bumpier ride with journalists than when he ran for president eight years ago. The popular image of the campaign -- McCain bantering with national journalists in the back of his bus -- has, in practice, all but vanished. The traveling press is now routinely stifled in favor of five-minute sit-downs with local reporters.

At the same time the Arizona senator is having trouble making news, or at least news that advances his campaign's goals, and when he does it is often reacting to the media hurricane that surrounds Barack Obama.

In 2000, when top news executives were clamoring for a

chance to ride the fabled bus, McCain would spend hours talking to reporters who would write one story a day. "Now, with each bus trip, everyone's filing a blog report, every little thing is picked up and off it goes," says Slate correspondent John Dickerson. "It certainly takes him off message."

McCain adviser Steve Duprey, a former chairman of New Hampshire's Republican Party, says "he'd love to be back on the bus, driving around with eight or 10 of you, and just riffing. In New Hampshire, if he'd say something that wasn't artfully phrased, there was more of a flow -- he could revise something, or say let's talk about baseball. He'd get a pass. But in the age of blogs, there's always someone who makes a big deal out of it."

McCain is "pained" at all but ending the sessions, says spokeswoman Nicolle Wallace, a former Bush White House communications director, but "we have to find a balance. He won the primary essentially on a bus with the press. . . . He's intensely loyal to the back-and-forth with the press. It's who he is. It will always be part of our mix."

It wasn't part of the mix last week. National correspondents traveling with the candidate did not get to ask McCain a question for four days, and grew angry when a short media availability was scheduled for late afternoon Friday in Panama City, Fla. -- too late to do them much good and requiring extra flights for those who had planned to head home for the weekend.

While the front of McCain's plane was reconfigured with a couch and two captain's chairs to allow for easy conversation, journalists say he has invited them up only once, on a trip to Colombia. On the ground, his availability is sometimes limited to a quick goggle

with a small group of pool reporters.

Obama doesn't mingle much with his press corps either -- he made an exception on his recent world tour -- but that has never been a core part of his strategy.

McCain is less engaging as a scripted candidate. But his strategists are convinced that the perpetual access was eroding their ability to drive a message, forcing the candidate to play on the media's turf by responding to flap-of-the-day questions, such as top adviser Carly Fiorina's lament that many health plans cover Viagra but not birth control.

But the aides say McCain would get hammered by the press if they restricted access even further, given his repeated insistence that such a move would destroy his credibility.

While many problems are of McCain's own making, it often seems that he can't catch a break. He stood beside an oil pump in a dusty Bakersfield, Calif., field last week, trying to dramatize his support for offshore drilling while painting Obama as "the Doctor No of America's energy future."

But the clip played on ABC's "World News" and the cable networks was of McCain, who has a history of skin cancer, explaining to reporters why a mole had been removed from his face. It was the sole focus of a New York Times story on his day. And in a CNN sit-down, Larry King's opening questions were about the excised skin, which turned out to be benign.

Republican strategists not affiliated with McCain say his campaign seems to lurch from one tactic to the next and has been largely devoid of new ideas that might draw sustained coverage.

"The McCain campaign's challenge in this Obama environment is to be consistent and

drive a daily message for more than two days in a row," says Scott Reed, who managed the 1996 presidential campaign of another septuagenarian senator, Bob Dole. "It's hard, it's frustrating, but it needs to get done. The surrogates are off message every day. They're all over the place. They need to echo what McCain says."

Mark McKinnon, a McCain adviser who left the campaign after the primaries, says the media are "overhyping" Obama, but that things will even out by the fall.

"I think they've done a good job of calling foul on the refs" in the press, McKinnon says. "We're seeing more critical coverage that might not have happened if the McCain campaign had not blown the whistle. I don't think the McCain camp should get hysterical and go out and try to do something different."

Asked if McCain should spend so much time responding to Obama, thus letting him set the story line, McKinnon says: "It's hard not to react when there's this blazing comet across the sky."

If that has eclipsed the Republican's campaign, the staging of McCain's events hasn't helped. When Obama was in Israel, McCain was awkwardly chatting up shoppers in the cheese aisle of a Bethlehem, Pa., supermarket, where at one point several jars of applesauce came tumbling off a shelf. When Obama was drawing a huge crowd in Berlin, McCain was visiting Schmidt's Sausage Haus in Columbus, Ohio, placing an order of chocolate cream puffs to go.

Beyond the stagecraft, there is a sameness to McCain's schedule that works against breaking into the news cycle: town hall meeting, local interviews, fundraiser.

McCain is clearly energized by the town halls, even as he

tells the same tired jokes he was using in 1999 (about how he "hasn't always won the title of Miss Congeniality" in Congress and how its approval rating is "down to paid staffers and blood relatives"). In Racine, Wis., he was asked about taxes, college aid and whether Brett Favre should leave the Green Bay Packers. McCain's answers were crisp and forceful, but he said nothing he hasn't said dozens of times -- and therefore made no news.

Such generally friendly questions are now deemed preferable to responding to reporters. After touring a tractor factory Wednesday in Aurora, Colo., McCain kept walking when Associated Press correspondent Beth Fouhy shouted a question at him about the indictment of Republican Sen. Ted Stevens. The press corps had no chance to get a comment on his controversial ad likening Obama to Paris Hilton and Britney Spears.

On Thursday in Wisconsin, the reporters were itching to ask about the campaign's accusation that Obama was "playing the race card" by suggesting that McCain was trying to marginalize him as someone who didn't look like other presidents on dollar bills. When CNN's John King was interviewing the senator for a profile to run before the Republican convention -- and raised the race-card flap at the end -- aides tried to cut him off. McCain gave a 10-second answer and ended the interview with a quick handshake as King tried to follow up. The aides later chastised King for raising a subject that was not part of the agreed-upon agenda.

On the bus ride to the airport, four Milwaukee journalists were invited on the Straight Talk, in keeping with the new policy of generally reserving such trips for local reporters. This time, Fouhy asked the

local AP scribe on that bus to question McCain about the race charge, and made sure the senator's defense of the charge hit the national wire.

During the subsequent flight to Orlando, McCain remained in the front cabin, which was cordoned off by a curtain. The only journalist ushered into his presence was a writer for Marie Claire magazine. In the old days, reporters would have had hours to chew over the latest controversy, and plenty of other subjects, with McCain. But for a campaign struggling to regain control of its message, the old days are definitely gone.

Furthermore . . .

Here are two diametrically opposite views of the battle to define Obama, the first from National Review's Rich Lowry:

"Responding to a McCain ad knocking him as a world celebrity, Barack Obama essentially accused the McCain campaign of race-baiting. It was a hair-trigger resort to the charge of racism of the sort that [Jesse] Jackson built a career on, making himself radioactive and anathema to the political center . . .

"The McCain ad had a serious point, one the Obama campaign obviously felt it couldn't ignore. Obama can be as arrogant, gassy and remote as other members of the country's aristocracy of fame. If this celebrity framework is successfully imposed on Obama, the entire repertoire of Obamania -- the mass rallies, the soaring eloquence, the picturesque cool of the candidate himself -- risks becoming a liability . . .

"Obama hopes to use the racism card to inhibit all criticism of him, with the presumed cooperation of the press. But there's a much larger downside. Obama's race is a political advantage so long as it is sold in a post-racial con