

EDITORIAL

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Houston's statesman

An hour spent with James A. Baker III is a rich gift of informed opinion.

Some days it's a truly special thing to be a journalist. One of those moments came along this week when a group of Chronicle journalists had a brown-bag lunch visit with Houstonian and former Secretary of State and Treasury James A. Baker III. His audience was a group of 100 or so Chronicle editors, reporters and editorial writers (oh yes, and one publisher, one chairman and an editorial cartoonist).

Baker is an elder statesman in the highest and best sense of the term, one with a ready gift for story-telling and an endless supply of anecdotes from his decades in politics, government and diplomacy. But it doesn't end there. These aren't just engaging war stories. They make points about situations in all those arenas that are as current as tomorrow's headlines.

What's on the mind of a man who has spent much of the past four decades at or near the pinnacle of power in Washington?

National politics, of course, where the long-time insider worries about growing dysfunction that he ties to a redistricting process designed to entrench extreme partisans in both major parties while leaving centrists at the margins.

This has made camaraderie among the federal city's power-brokers a thing of the past. The warm after-hours relations once enjoyed by his boss, President Ronald Reagan, and House Speaker Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill, the quintessential Boston Democrat (burnished by good whisky and even finer Irish storytelling), are unheard of in today's Washington. Evidently, weeks can go by without a word passing between President Obama and House Speaker John Boehner, an Ohio Republican. That's a loss for all of us.

As we're seeing in Texas, the political struggle over congressional district lines may move the coming primary elections even further back on the calendar, perhaps into late May. That postponement would certainly lessen Texas' influence in the lively Republican presidential primary.

Baker is an elder statesman in the highest and best sense of the term.

But what really keeps this former Treasury secretary awake at night is what he bluntly calls "the debt bomb" — the \$15 trillion and counting federal debt that would grow to \$16 trillion-plus under President Obama's proposed budget.

You can't be strong militarily or diplomatically if you aren't strong economically, Baker told the Chronicle audience, adding that this country's unchallenged economic supremacy has driven its military and diplomatic efforts through World Wars I and II and the Cold War.

Perhaps the most memorable line of the noon-hour session was spoken on the debt/deficit topic: "If we didn't have the de facto reserve currency of the world, we'd be Greece," Baker said.

Those are sobering words, especially coming from a highly regarded former secretary of the Treasury.

His solution? Take a page from the Reagan administration's handling of the Social Security funding crisis in 1983 by removing politics from the process in a truly bipartisan way. Alas, Baker says, that will only happen after the November elections.

A conversation with this Houston native with multi-generational roots here wouldn't be complete without a word or two about energy policy, and Secretary Baker has informed opinions there, too.

"You have to recognize that we'll be relying on oil and gas for many years to come," he says. Shale gas will figure prominently, as well as oil reserves such as the Bakken formation in the upper Midwest. Obama's decision to pull back from approval of construction of the Keystone XL Pipeline that would bring heavy oil from Canada to the Texas Gulf Coast is a "disaster," in Baker's view.

"We need an 'all' policy" on energy, Baker says. "The biggest thing we could do is build more nuclear power plants."

We also could use more thinkers with James Baker's wisdom, battle-tested experience and long perspective.

of thousands are euthanized each year in this country? But some dog lovers say they are reluctant to adopt a dog of unknown history from a shelter.

Officials of the American Humane Association, which has a film and TV unit that certifies whether animals on sets are being treated decently, estimate that 80 percent of the cats and dogs that appear in movies and television shows are rescued or adopted from shelters. The legendary Rin Tin Tin — the subject of a new biography by Susan Orlean — was rescued as a puppy during World War I. He went on to become so hugely famous as an acting dog that, according to Orlean, he received the most votes for best actor in 1929 (although Academy officials deny the story, saying nothing in their records supports it).

All this fanfare should remind us that canines across the spectrum — including those languishing in shelters — are capable of becoming remarkable dogs, whether that means walking a red carpet in front of photographers or curling up on the rug at our feet.

Although their backgrounds could not have been more different, both Uggie and Malachy intend to retire after this awards season.



LETTERS

Contraception debate

No justification

Regarding Lisa Falkenberg's column "Dumping Planned Parenthood may be costly" (Page B1, Tuesday), one wonders how Perry justifies cutting at least 180,000 women from family planning services, leading to more than 20,000 births per year at a cost of more than \$200 million to Texas taxpayers. Furthermore, how can he explain that in defunding this program he has by default chosen to raise costs to taxpayers by increasing women's services used in the more expensive Medicaid program?

How will he defend reducing funds for an agency providing cancer and sexually transmitted disease screenings and contraception for women where for every \$1 Texas contributes, the federal government provides \$9? The answer is, he won't. If he does anything, he probably will get his minister coalition to fight the battle for him by falsely arguing that they are preventing abortion.

Perry is playing politics of the womb and allowing for sex discrimination in health care.

And if religious

elements get involved, religious leaders (mostly men) will be imposing religious patriarchal sexual hegemony against women.

Carolyn Bardin, Seabrook

Father's support

Regardless of how one feels about contraception, sonograms or abortion, I find it atrocious that there has never been a mention of the responsibility of the sperm donor.

Do people not realize that it takes two, male and female, to create a human? Yet so far in this contentious debate on these issues, the onus has always been on the women to deliver and raise the child or to abort. It seems the men responsible for impregnating the very women who need support and services are missing from this whole agenda.

Members of state and federal government should write responsible legislation covering all in need but also expecting supportive action from the men involved.

Child support benefits are a given in divorce cases, and since many believe human life begins at conception, support

should be automatic from the father involved.

Cecily M. Ryan, Kingwood

Check science

Lisa Falkenberg claims contraception reduces unintended pregnancies, and she is wrong. Study after study has shown this.

Studies have shown that contraception increases sexual activity, and more contraception means more sex. One study, based on Centers for Disease Control data, established clear links between birth control and increases in sexually transmitted diseases.

STD increases are a reliable indicator of increased sexual activity and show that contraception is wrongly perceived as low-cost insurance, a perception that motivates increased sexual activity.

And more sex means more pregnancies because contraception is far from 100 percent effective.

Science often takes a backseat to ideology when contraception is being discussed. Real-world studies show that contraception has not reduced but has instead increased unintended pregnancies.

Keith Riler, Houston

Integrity pending outcome

Regarding "DA says she asked state to investigate" (Page B1, Wednesday), we applaud District Attorney Pat Lykos' decision to request an objective investigation of her office by the Texas Rangers. This is the type of transparency that should finally put to rest allegations of impropriety by the DA's Office.

Most disturbing are what appeared to be improper disclosures of a pending grand jury investigation, as the process is supposed to be statutorily cloaked in confidentiality to protect witness identity, while making more effective the administration of justice. But this matter suggests that the rule of grand jury confidentiality was intentionally compromised by a person or persons with an agenda.

The Rangers' investigation will be a sure way to restore integrity to the grand jury process, and should the Rangers find knowing and improper disclosures of grand jury matters ("leaks"), then let the chips fall where they may.

Ronald G. Woods and Lawrence D. Finder, attorneys at law, Houston

On-the-mark ruling

Regarding "Court tosses gay marriage ban" (Page A3, Feb. 8), most of the negative response to this decision has come from those who think the court has overstepped its bounds and that passage of Proposition 8 should have been upheld.

The problem with that logic is that it ignores the fact that civil rights or human rights should never be put to a referendum. Gay people in California already had the right to marry, and thousands of gay couples already were. Proposition 8 attempted to strip that right away.

In 1967, it was still illegal in many states for white people to marry anyone of a different race. The Supreme Court ruled these laws were unconstitutional and said there was patently "no legitimate purpose" independent of discrimination for these laws. Polls at the time showed 70 percent of the people thought the court was wrong and the laws

should stay in place forbidding interracial marriage.

In the California ruling by the 9th Circuit Court, Judge Reinhardt said, although the Constitution allows communities to enact laws they believe to be desirable, it requires a "legitimate reason" for a law that treats different classes of people differently. There is no such reason for Proposition 8 to be enacted. It serves no purpose and has no effect other than to lessen the status and human dignity of gay men and lesbians.

Ours is a democracy that can only work when we have a Constitution that protects us all from the popular opinion of a majority who might be willing to take rights away from others.

Willard Hall, Houston

Dogjacking

Regarding "Thief wants wallet, settles for pooch" (Page B2, Thursday), as a native Houstonian now living in a town of 3,000, I cannot imagine what my hometown is coming to when a man's dog is taken during an afternoon walk.

What in the world is our nation coming to? To rob a man of his precious pet is just beyond belief. Our police department and mayor continue their excellent policy to protect citizens and pets, and I pray that the person who did this despicable crime is caught.

M. Jordan, Columbus

LETTERS POLICY

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BIBLE VERSE

Neither shalt thou steal.

DEUTERONOMY 5:19

ANOTHER VOICE *Los Angeles Times*

The dogs' tale

A Pekingese with a pear-shaped body — apparently the sought-after Peke physique — and gray mane worthy of a Shetland pony won the coveted Best in Show title on Tuesday at the Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show, the Oscars of the canine world. Just a day before, Uggie, the Jack Russell terrier that was the breakout star of the movie "The Artist," fetched the prize for best film dog at the Golden Collars Awards presentation and is rumored to be appearing at the Oscars show. He was the toast of the Golden Globes stage last month.

The award-winning Pekingese is a show dog with a storied pedigree and dozens of awards to his name, which is Malachy.

Uggie, on the other hand, was a wayward puppy who went through two different owners and was slated to go to a shelter before a film industry animal trainer adopted him, discovered his potential and launched him on a career in commercials and movies.

Animal welfare advocates have often been critics of dog breeders, particularly those who oppose mandatory spay/neuter ordinances. Why breed more dogs, advocates ask, when so many end up in municipal shelters and hundreds