

OPINIONS

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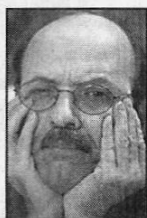
What if taxes aren't the problem?

For the seventh year in a row, Minnesota has been ranked as the "Most Livable State" by the Morgan Quitno Press, an independent research firm based in Lawrence, Kansas (www.morganquitno.com). In fact, Minnesota has made the "Top Ten" every year since 1994.

"Livability" is determined by Morgan Quitno by collecting data on everything from taxes and unemployment to education and road maintenance. Crime statistics, per-capita income, and 37 other factors are evaluated in arriving at its "Top Ten" list.

Fortunately, Wisconsin also made the "Top Ten" in 2003, but just barely. What should be a

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Curt
Snyder

cause for concern is the trend of the past 10 years: Wisconsin ranked a very respectable "second" in 1994 (even beating out Minnesota, which "only"

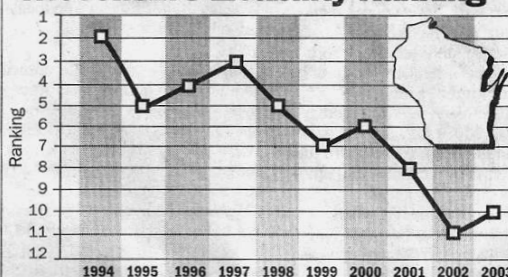
placed fourth that year), but has undergone a near-steady decline ever since.

Unimaginative politicians would probably use these statistics as further proof that Wisconsin's tax position is the problem. Unfortunately, things are not so simple. In fact, there's evidence to suggest that attacking the tax "problem" might actually make matters worse.

Of those states making the "Top 10" list, only four can be considered to be "low taxing." If taxes are the problem that many suggest, then how can six "high-taxing" states be among the 10 most livable in the country?

Apparently, Wisconsin has a long tradition of being a "high-taxing" state. In a January 1962 publication of The Municipality, it was noted that Wisconsin's income taxes were third highest in the nation. If Wisconsin has

Wisconsin's Livability Ranking



Source: Kathleen O'Leary Morgan & Scott Morgan, State Rankings 2003

Staff graphic by Kathy Nelson

Top 10 Most Livable States in 2003

State	Rank	% of years in Top 10*
Minnesota	1	100%
Iowa	2	100%
New Hampshire	3	80%
Nebraska	4	100%
Virginia	5	80%
Kansas	6	80%
Vermont	7	30%
South Dakota	8	50%
Massachusetts	9	70%
Wisconsin	10	90%

*1994-2003

Source: Kathleen O'Leary Morgan & Scott Morgan, State Rankings 2003 (2003 Morgan Quitno Press, Lawrence, Kansas)

Staff graphic by Kathy Nelson

Tax Ranking of Most Livable States

State	Rank
Wisconsin	4
Minnesota	7
Vermont	8
Nebraska	19
Iowa	23
Kansas	25
Massachusetts	31
Virginia	42
South Dakota	46
New Hampshire	50

Source: Kathleen O'Leary Morgan & Scott Morgan, State Rankings 2003

Staff graphic by Kathy Nelson

livability" in Wisconsin.

Snyder is city administrator in Rice Lake.

been high taxing for more than 40 years, but somehow is still among the "Top Ten Most Livable States," then how can taxation be a serious problem?

Maybe, how much we tax is less important than what we spend the taxes for. It would seem obvious that spending for roads and education should improve "livability" in Wisconsin. By reducing these public benefits, we would likely reduce our livability as well — for a net gain of "zero" or even less.

It seems the governor and Legislature are in a race to see who can cut spending and, thereby, taxes the most. One of them will win — with considerable help, no doubt, from the other. While they are concentrating heavily on this race, however, both may lose to "declining

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Rice Lake schools failing? It sure doesn't seem like it

"Astonished" wouldn't begin to describe my reaction to the Sept. 22 front-page story in the Rice Lake Chronotype that claimed Rice Lake schools are failing — with "failing" being defined by a relatively new Federal law known as the "No Child Left Behind Act."

Between my own education and that of my five children, I've experienced about a half-dozen school systems in three states. Without question, the Rice Lake School District is better than any of those I have seen thus far and, if nothing else, it is not failing.

The failure, it seems, is with the "No Child" law, itself. This law requires every student be proficient in math and reading by 2014 — and therein lies the rub.

In its apparent attempt to make sure that disadvantaged students — known as "subgroups" in bureaucratic jargon — are not "left behind," the "No Child" law requires that these students meet the same standards as students who are not disadvantaged.

So, if you are in a district that doesn't have enough students in a disadvantaged category for them to be "disaggregated" (more jargon) from the overall score, count yourself lucky: your school will probably "pass."

In writing about the Texas version of "No Child" (on which the national law was supposedly modeled), Molly Ivins — the "Michael Moore" of her state — claimed that schools in Texas would find one method or another to make sure that low-performing students never got tested and, more importantly, never even got counted.

According to Ivins, this type of game-playing allowed one Houston high school to avoid testing about half of its 10th grade. Ivins asserts "No Child" is nothing more than a back door method of channeling tax dollars away from public education and into private schools.

Discounting Ivins' assertion, it would seem the "No Child" law is based on the premise that there is very big problem with public education. So, when I learned that the law could identify as "failing" a quality school such as Rice Lake, I decided to do some research to find out if America's educational system was getting better or worse, and whether a reasonable person would describe it as failing.

Googling the Internet brought me to the U.S. Census Web site and an abundance of data. From there, I graphed the percentage of people over 25 who, since 1940, had completed at least four years of high school, as well as the percentage who had completed at least four years of college

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for the same period.

I was again astonished, but this time in a positive way. The data showed that the percentage of the population with at least a high school education had increased from about 25 percent in 1940 to nearly 85 percent by 2003. The percentage of those with at least four years of college was even more astounding: it increased from less than 5 percent in 1940 to more than 25 percent in 2003.

Of course, the "No Child" advocates would assert, "the devil is in the details," and would claim the data for "all races" masks the "fact" that public education is failing large numbers of disadvantaged students. To test this premise, I plotted the data for just blacks.

In 1940, about 15 percent of blacks had a high school education; by 2003, this had increased to 80 percent. Similarly, while only 2 percent of blacks had four years of college in 1940, more than 17 percent had this much education in 2003.

While one can rightfully argue that the percentages of blacks with high school and college educations should be as great as all other students, there would also seem to be no denying the fact that the improvement in this area has been significant: applying the trend since 1940 indicates that, by 2005, the percentage of blacks completing high school will be as great as the overall population.

While, unfortunately, the trend for completion of college by blacks is not nearly as great — it would take another 30 years for blacks to achieve the same percentage as the overall population — it's difficult to claim that a nearly continual improvement since 1940 is a "failure" — much less a failure which can be laid at the doorstep of public education.

To the extent there is a problem with ensuring the adequate education of specific "subgroups," liberals would be tempted to say something like, "Government needs to put more money into the system." I don't know if the data supports such an assertion (that's an editorial for another day). I do know, however, that the data does not support the need for a law such as "No Child" — especially not one at the federal level.

Furthermore, if the example of Ivins' Houston or Wisconsin's Rice Lake is any indicator, the law is, at best, misleading and, at worst, potentially damaging.

Snyder lives in Rice Lake.



Curt
Snyder

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COMMENTARY

9F

Sunday

April 17, 2005

If our health care is best, why aren't we living longer?

"Private retirement accounts" might be the priority for President Bush, but, in reality, Social Security is not in the "crisis" mode such presidential attention would indicate.

On March 23, the Trustees of Social Security and Medicare reported it would be the year 2040 before Social Security reserves were exhausted, but Medicare would be "broke" 20 years sooner.

This points to the real problem with taking care of the aging population: out-of-sight medical costs.

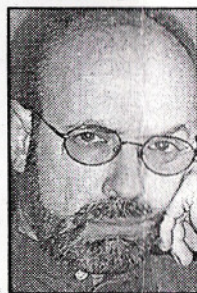
Since 1960, medical spending in the United States increased more than 45-fold. So, instead of the \$100 we spent in 1960, we're now spending \$4,500 for our health care. If medical expenditures had increased only at the rate of inflation, we would be spending less than \$700.

Of course, advances in medical technology and our aging population lead us to expect health care spending to increase by more than, say, the price of a loaf of bread or a gallon of gas, but how much more?

In 1960, spending for health care in Canada (as a percentage of GDP) slightly exceeded that of the United States and far exceeded that of Japan and (Western) Europe. During the 1970s, Canada gained control of its costs while the United States

went the opposite direction: by 2000, we were spending about 60 percent more than all of our industrialized competitors, including Canada.

To be fair, "60 percent" should only be judged in the context of the health care that Americans receive. If our health care is considerably better than that of the other industrialized nations, we should expect to pay more.

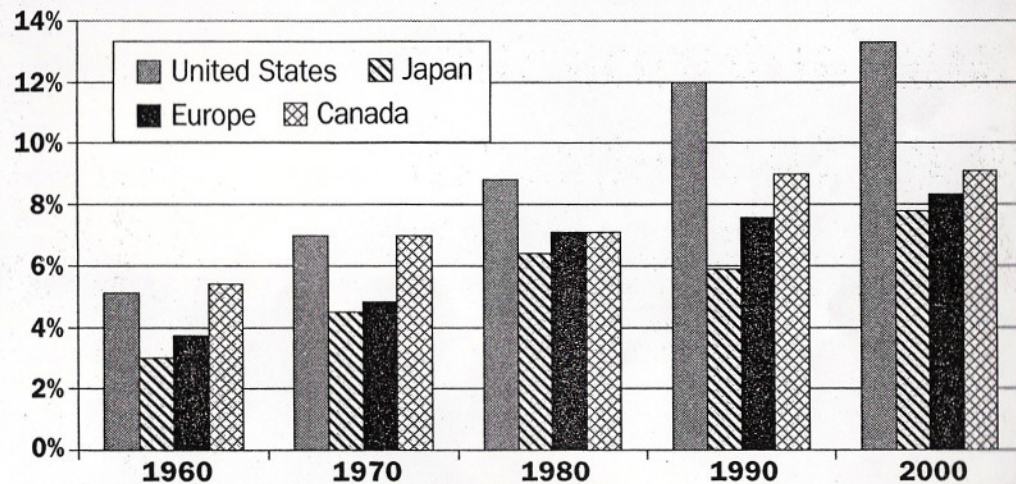


Curt Snyder

Using "life expectancy" as a measure of the quality of health care, the health care Americans receive is no better, and, possibly, a tad worse, than that of the other industrialized nations. Based on World Health Organization statistics, life expectancy in the United States was 77 years in 2000, while other industrialized nations posted 79 years or more.

This leads one to wonder what Europe, Japan, and Canada are doing differently. Well, for one thing, their governments spend more — a lot more — on health care than does the United States. On average, 75 percent of health care spending in these countries is financed by their governments. In the United States, the figure is less than 45 percent.

Health Care Expenditures as a Percentage of GDP



Source: U.S. Dept. of Health & Human Services, Health U. S. 2003

From this, it is tempting to conclude the way to control medical costs is to have government pick up a greater portion of the tab. It would be nice if it were this easy, but I fear medical care is far too complex for such a simplistic solution.

Nevertheless, it does seem obvious the medical

delivery systems of Japan, Europe, and Canada are providing a better deal for their citizens than we're getting in the United States. Figuring out how these countries are providing this better deal is where the president's attention should be.

Snyder lives in Rice Lake.

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Tuesday

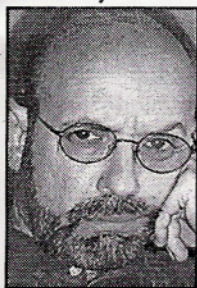
July 12, 2005

OPINIONS

We didn't prepare troops to win

Driving an Army supply truck for an hour put a drone in my ears that quickly was silenced by an explosion. As the vehicle jerked to the right, I knew we were in trouble — and panic set in.

Fortunately, this wasn't Iraq in 2005 — it was West Germany in 1981 — and the explosion wasn't a roadside bomb, it was a tire blow-out. Still, one thing was the same: U.S. support of "the troops" was on a downward trend, a trend which, despite all the rhetoric to the contrary, continues today.



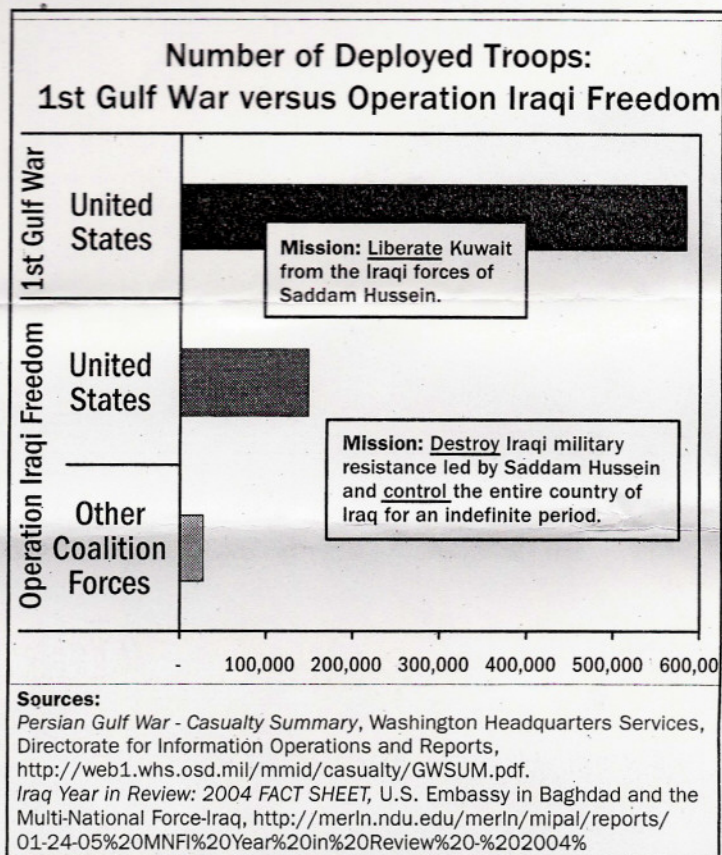
Curt Snyder

In the early '80s, the specter of Vietnam was fresh in everyone's mind and the military was the victim of a "shoot the messenger" mentality. Despite

President Reagan's oft-stated intention to "restore our military strength," the resources allocated to the U.S. Armed Forces barely reached the levels seen at the end of the Vietnam War.

The nation's desire to have an army "on the cheap" was immediately restored after President Reagan left office. The number of active duty personnel is now lower than it has been since 1950. During the same period, America's population and, presumably, its interests have roughly doubled.

Nowhere has this contradiction been more evident than in the differences between the handling of the Gulf War of 1991 and the invasion of Iraq in 2003. For the Gulf War, the military was tasked with simply



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pushing Iraqi forces out of Kuwait. For this, they were given more than 550,000 troops to accomplish the job.

For Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003, however, the military was asked to: 1. Remove the forces of Saddam Hussein, and 2. Take control of an entire country. For this mission, the U.S. frugally allocated fewer than 200,000 troops (that's even after counting the 30,000 troops provided by the other coalition forces).

Restoring stability to a war-torn country requires massive amounts of aid and a more-than-adequate security force. For America to truly support the troops, it must either: 1.

Spend enough to match its political intentions, or 2. Oppose the war and bring the troops home. Since we're not likely to take the first option — we're averse to increasing the federal deficit, and we like our tax cuts too much — we should take the second.

In speaking of Vietnam, President Reagan stated, "... Young Americans must never again be sent to fight and die unless we are prepared to let them win. ..." In light of America's habit of asking more of the military and providing it with less, the president would have been more apt had he said, "...young Americans must never again be sent to fight and die unless we prepare them to win. ..."

Snyder lives in Rice Lake.

OPINIONS

6A

Wednesday

July 26, 2006

IT SEEMS TO ME

What will be the 'Mobro' of global warming?

Environmental protection decisions shouldn't be based on fear

By July 1987, the Mobro had become the "poster child" for the belief the nation was burying itself in mountains of garbage.

Carrying 3,100 tons of trash from New York, the Mobro was a barge that was to sail some 6,000 miles down the Eastern seaboard to the Gulf of Mexico and back again looking for someone, anyone, who would take its load.

The cause of the Mobro's ill-fated journey had less to do with a lack of landfill space than it did the nation's heightened concern about hazardous waste, of which the Mobro was reputed to be carrying a small amount.

Nevertheless, whether the nation faced a crisis about what to do with its garbage no longer was subject to debate: The matter had been settled by the aimless wandering of the Mobro.

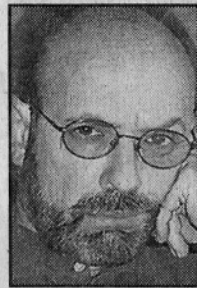
Then-governor of New York Mario Cuomo declared, "The voyage of the barge Mobro alerted the whole nation to another formidable challenge to a better future."

Apparently, the nation believed him. Recycling programs were created with near-reckless abandon. The more zealous local governments built multi-million dollar incinerators. All of this was done in the belief we would be buried in trash if action wasn't taken quickly.

Then something strange happened. Only five years after the voyage of the Mobro, gluts of landfill space were being reported. The Oct. 9, 1992, New York Times informed its readers towns on Long Island that had built 'crisis avert-ing' incinerators were not taking in enough garbage because of "... landfills outside Long

Island offering bargain-basement prices. ..."

In Wisconsin, while the number of landfills declined dramatically during this period, those that remained were able to increase the total available capacity by about 45 million cubic yards.



Curt Snyder

Now, it seems, in a way reminiscent of the flap over the Mobro, the global warming crisis is being thrust upon us. Go to the EPA's Web site and you'll read, "... The Earth's surface temperature has risen by about 1 degree Fahrenheit in the past century, with accelerated warming during the past two decades. ..." And if you wondered where the blame should be placed for this, the EPA clears it up by adding, "... New and stronger evidence (indicates) ... most of the warming over the last 50 years is attributable to human activities. ..."

Among other scary details, the EPA's Web site gives you the impression that, from about 1880 to 1900, the earth's temperature was pretty stable, and then things began to warm up. Having data that correlates with the turn of the last century is important, of course, because it implies the onset of the industrial revolution in the late-1800s was the cause.

Much the same as the garbage crisis of 20 years ago, the concern over global warming is taking less than a "big picture" look at the phe-

nomenon. Poke around on the Web for a while and you'll find some attempts at measuring the earth's temperature, which go back a little further than a measly 100 years or so. By analyzing the isotopes of stalagmites or correlating tree rings with measurements of ocean sediments, scientists have been able to reconstruct relative temperature variations going back about 2,000 years.

What this longer-view data indicates is the present warming trend has been occurring since about 1500, well before the onset of the industrial revolution.

Interestingly enough, the middle of the last millennium was one of the colder periods during the last 2,000 years. Even more interesting is temperatures today are about the same as they were 1,000 years ago. (Many are no doubt aware "warmer than average" temperatures are thought to have aided the Vikings in their sojourn to North America, and that the subsequent cooling off might have contributed the ultimate abandonment of their settlements.)

None of this is to suggest we should not support reasonable efforts to lessen what we think might be causing global warming. It does seem, however, that — as with the landfill crisis of the late 1980s — we are misstating the phenomenon.

One can only hope there will not be a "Mobro" of global warming that propels us toward extreme and counterproductive "solutions" to the perceived problem.

Snyder lives in Rice Lake.