



Capitol Comments

Newsletter from your
Iowa State Representative
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State Capitol
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Remembering the Journey of This Greatest of Nations.

The Iowa legislature has reconvened in Des Moines. As I sit in the beautiful Iowa capitol this first week, I have been listening to stirring, hope-filled speeches from leaders of our Iowa legislative, executive and judicial branches. It is late and I am holding a hot cup of tea. It tastes like it came from the Boston Tea Party, but I am hoping the caffeine kicks in soon. I am looking at the front of the chamber of the Iowa House of Representatives. I see portraits of George Washington, Abraham Lincoln and the sitting U.S. president. Next week, in our nation's capitol, we will install our first African-American president. President Obama's portrait will then be centered between our first president, Washington, who was a slave owner and our civil war president, Lincoln, who led the battle to end slavery. I think of the hope and promise set out in these speeches and in the new president-elect. We all ought to sit back and reflect on the significance of this national journey.

So I sit. I listen. I look. I think. Studies show American students do not know our nation's history or understand the American founding principles. A recent National Assessment of Educational Civics test shows that the majority of eighth graders cannot explain the purpose of the Declaration of Independence or the Boston Tea Party. Only five percent of high school seniors understand the principles of checks and balances between our three branches of government. To fully appreciate our nation's journey we must know and remember our past. Our nation's diverse people are forgetting, or not learning, our rich heritage.

Now I ask you all to join me in reaffirming and renewing our commitment to American representative democracy. Let us learn and remember our founding principles and history. Pick up and read a good book about our American history. I can recommend any written by Joseph Ellis. We live under the greatest political system ever instituted among men and women. Let us celebrate. Let us not give up. Let us push on to greater things.

The Iowa Governor's Proposed Recovery Plan

Iowa's chief executive, Governor Chet Culver, has proposed his office's response to the economic challenges facing our state and the 2008 flood damage in Iowa. The center piece of this plan is an ambitious proposal to rebuild Iowa infrastructure. He wants to get folks back to work on improving roads and public buildings, rail lines, mass transit, telecommunications,

wastewater treatment facilities, energy facilities, and flood control measures to name several targeted areas of development. The Governor has proposed borrowing \$700 million dollars. This would be done through the state issuing bonds to investors and the state paying the interest from gambling revenues.

To put this in perspective our general fund budget is approximately \$6 billion. Ten percent of that is \$600 million. So the new indebtedness of \$700 million would be equal to roughly 11.5% of our general fund. The interest payments would be \$56 million per year (about 1% of our general fund spending). Adding this to our current debt payments would make our total debt payments equal to about 2% of our general fund. Some economists are concerned about investors shying away from bonds dependent on discretionary spending like entertainment & gambling in our current economic conditions. It may be a challenge to sell the bonds in this economy.

Hey Governor, please listen to our Auditor.

The Governor is right in trying to help Iowans through the tough times and we certainly need improved roads and have other building issues. However, he does miss the mark when he (and other legislative leaders) blame the Iowa economic challenges solely on Wall Street greed and inadequate federal regulatory oversight. Last spring Iowa State Auditor Dave Vaudt was sounding the alert that there were troubles in Iowa's budget. He wrote in his report, "Despite almost 10% revenue growth over a two-year period, expenditure growth outpaced revenue growth by 52%. ...While the Fiscal Year 2009 budget calls for a 4.7% increase in spending, it creates a 9.3% spending gap of \$569.3 million, which the next Legislature will have to address following the election this fall." Apparently a majority of the Iowa legislature did not read the report. Just so there is no confusion, I did read it and I did not vote for last year's record setting spending bills.

Now, here we are after the election to begin the work of building the Fiscal Year 2010 (July 1, 2009 through June 30, 2010) budget. The non-partisan state fiscal bureau is showing a \$779 million spending gap in the 2010 budget. We simply cannot continue this level of spending in Iowa. I call on our Governor (and other legislative leaders) to listen to State Auditor Vaudt. He is not intended to be a voice crying in the wilderness. It is time for the legislative branch to check and balance these unwise spending levels.

The Chief Justice's State of the Judiciary Speech

We Iowans should be proud of our Chief Justice Marsha Ternus. She is a gracious and gifted jurist and administrator of our judicial branch. She echoed my views that government cannot do everything (which it is asked to do sometimes), but there are some things which only government can do and those it should do well. Chief among those is the administration of justice in a manner that maintains public trust and confidence. She proposed new ideas for the efficient administration of justice such as summary trials, a voluntary forum with limits on costly pre-trial discovery and more relaxed rules, and new business courts. The latter would involve specialized courts to handle complex business matters efficiently. In addition, she supports the ongoing use of drug courts to help us deal more effectively with the challenges of substance abuse. Finally, in light of the challenging budget issues facing us, Justice Ternus offered ways to do more with

the judges we have through updating and expanding the use of magistrates and district associate judges.

So we remember....

From African American slavery to an African-American president, from King George's monarchical dictates to modern checks and balances, we have come a long way. Yet we still have a ways to go. We don't have the Boston Tea Party and oppressive British taxes, but I find myself drinking the tea and looking at imbalanced spending of taxes in the Iowa legislature.

This week let us remember the lessons of history. I remember, in part because I read. I only ask my colleagues in the legislature to do the same. Read the reports. Balance the budget. Do so wisely and with transparent integrity. Setting political differences aside, let us join together in celebrating the historic event of an African-American President.