

Grins and groans

THE ISSUE | Grins and groans from news of the week.
OUR OPINION | Groan to political inconsistency, lack of a clear vision, questioning exceptionalism.

Groan

We should probably stop being surprised when politicians are inconsistent. Republicans' response to America's intervention in Libya has been all over the map, sometimes from the same politician.

Former Speaker of the House and GOP presidential hopeful Newt Gingrich had his own "I voted for the war before I voted against it" moment this week when it was discovered he said on March 7 that President Obama should enforce a no-fly zone over Libya immediately, only to blast the president on March 23 after Obama joined in a coalition of countries in enforcing a no-fly zone.

Gingrich is only the latest in a long line of politicians whose positions change depending on who they are talking to and which party is in charge.

Fortunately, thanks to Youtube, many of these policy flip-flops are available for all to see. Perhaps having a permanent record that is so accessible will eventually force politicians to say what they mean and mean what they say.

Groan

While the conservatives hand-wringing over America intervening in yet another Middle Eastern country is a little overwrought and nakedly opportunistic, they do have one point. President Obama has yet to make his case to the American people why invention was called for in Libya when it was one of a half dozen countries in the region teetering on the brink of civil war.

This is not to say that intervention wasn't warranted, nor that America needs to choose to either intervene in every regional conflict or none at all.

The American people, however, are war-weary and afraid of mission creep. They need to be told by the Commander-in-Chief the rationale behind America's intervention and be assured this will not turn into another quagmire.

Groan

President Obama was blasted a few weeks ago over a concept called American exceptionalism. Apparently some conservatives don't think Obama thinks our country or its people are exceptional.

Many of these same conservatives are blasting the president for intervening in Libya.

It's not our wealth or our national resources or the size of our military that makes America exceptional, however.

It's the fact that every once in a while we can use our wealth, national resources and military to prevent the slaughter of innocent people.

Every once in a while we can use our wealth, our national resources and our military to force a brutal dictator out of power and nudge a fledgling movement closer to democracy.

It's easy to be generous when peace and prosperity reign. It's a lot more difficult when there's so much pain and poverty at home.

What separates the exceptional from the ordinary is that the exceptional can look beyond their own pain to see the suffering of others.

Is intervention in Libya the right thing to do? What level of response is appropriate? Those questions are for military experts.

Should the United States step in to prevent genocide in Libya? That depends. Do we still want to be considered an exceptional nation?

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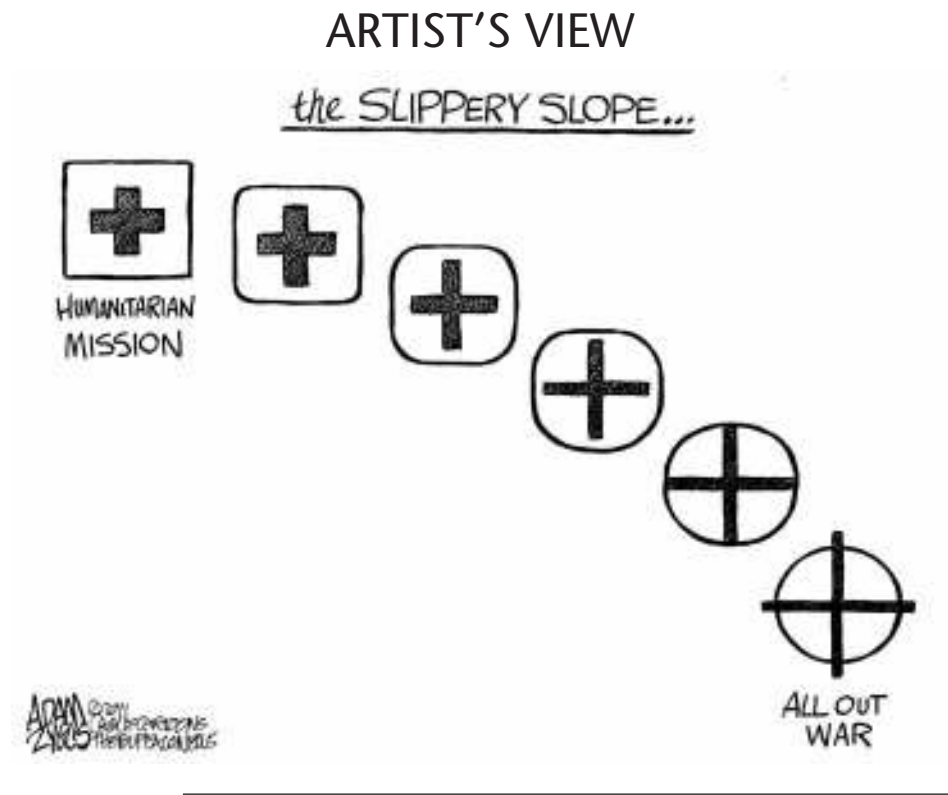
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COMMENTARY | STATE SEN. TOM O'MARA

Budget twists and turns

By the time you're putting an eye on this column, Gov. Andrew Cuomo and the Legislature may have already announced at least a preliminary, conceptual agreement on the framework of this year's final state budget. Maybe even something beyond preliminary, but we'll see.

In any case, this year's budget remains on track for adoption by the end of the week. I can tell you that that's the intention of the Senate. And by most accounts, from what I'm seeing, it appears the governor and Assembly leaders share the same goal.

Most state government analysts agree that this era of state budget making is defined by one overriding fact: the governor holds the upper hand to both encourage and invite legislative leaders to fashion a cooperative agreement, or to provoke a government shutdown.

Gov. Cuomo has made it crystal clear that he's ready and willing to take either option. So, yes, there's great incentive this year to reach the compromises required of every budget. The face-offs that have delayed state budgets year after year don't appear to be in the mix this time around.

That's significant for plenty of reasons, but I'll focus on just the first few that come to mind.

First, adopting the 2011-2012 state budget by the end of this week would send one undeniable message: things are beginning to change at the Capitol. The point being that if we've been able to negotiate this hard-to-turn corner for the first time in a long time, and to do it in as difficult a budget cycle as any New York has ever faced, maybe it bodes well for other challenges that have been stuck in neutral, mired in inaction, and lost in deadlock for decades.

We'll see if this budget gridlock that's finally breaking up like an early spring ice jam on the Hudson River in Albany unlooses the current of other change that's needed. Let's hope so.

Just because this budget is signed, sealed and delivered doesn't mean that the tough turns it's setting in motion – and make no mistake, this is an enormously difficult, tough budget – are behind us. Not by any stretch. Not by a long shot.

I've been saying it, and it bears repeating here: New York is going to have to face these economic and fiscal battlegrounds for the foreseeable future. We just have to keep working through them and trying to do the best we can, as deliberately as we can.

Because one other reality that's going to come out of this new state budget – and we'll have plenty of time to dissect

the details in the weeks and months ahead – is that the governor and Legislature are going to have keep watch over this one like no other budget before it.

Our highest responsibility now will be to ensure that the changes being brought forth are doing what they're intended to do, that we're on top of every adjustment and turn of the dial that's going to be needed. We're not going to get it all right all at once and we have to stand ready to find better ways.

So there's going to be a lot to monitor moving forward. I fully expect to get an earful. I already have. That's good. There's still an incredibly challenging workload ahead – property tax relief, mandate relief for local governments, ethics reform, and state government downsizing, to name just a few. But today, I think it's important to recognize that after the past two years, when state taxes and state spending increased by unprecedented and unsustainable levels, this new state budget not only puts the brakes on runaway taxing and spending, it also pushes the turn signal toward a new direction that can be summed up, in broad strokes, this way: spending control and tax restraint. That's a good start.

■ **State Sen. Tom O'Mara, R-Big Flats, represents the 53rd Senate District.**

But air attacks by "coalition" forces at least seem to have preserved the opposition base in the eastern part of the country. This may indeed be a coalition but it is primarily the United States with small military from the British and the French.

Gadhafi's Arab neighbors backed the concept of the attacks in the United Nations, but have not rushed into combat.

This continues the possibility that the Arabs will see this as one more example of western crusaderism. That type of perception can only lead to more trouble and a bigger war.

The combat we have in Libya appears to be between tribal groups – some who support the dictator and some who oppose him.

The outcome of such a confrontation should be left to the Libyans.

The United States should get out immediately.

...

School districts throughout New York are trying to prepare budgets without knowing how much money they will get from the state.

This is nothing new in New York where this has been the situation for what seems like generations.

But this year is different. There seems to be a genuine possibility that the new Legislature will agree on a new budget by the constitutional deadline of April 1. And Gov. Andrew Cuomo has said if such a budget is not there by that date, he will simply impose the one he proposed a month ago.

As a result, school boards are wasting prodigious amounts of time trying to figure what to trim from their proposed spending.

Addison, for example, would have to increase its tax levy by \$7.4 million to make up for a 22 percent gap in revenue. To do so would present a tax hike of 21.7 percent.

That's a number the public would never accept and Addison's problem is no different from of dozens of other school districts.

It's not long until April 1, gang. Quit sharpening your pencils until you know how much you're not going to get. Because both the governor and the Legislature say more funds are coming than anyone has promised to date.

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