

POLITICS | SEN. TOM O’MARA

A great gift

The late Dr. Carl Sagan, the popular American scientist and Cornell University professor of astronomy and space sciences, once said, “One of the greatest gifts adults can give – to their offspring and to their society – is to read to children.” Dr. Sagan’s wisdom can easily be expanded to include “and to encourage children to read.” Numerous studies over decades of prominent research have made it clear: children who engage in summer reading make greater academic gains than children who do not. Many of the research findings on the so-called “summer slide” jump off the page. Consider:

- students can lose up to 25 percent of their reading level over the summer;
- a conservative estimate for lost instructional time (for children who don’t read during the summer) is approximately two months or roughly 22% of the school year; and
- by the end of 6th grade, children who lose reading skills during the summer are on average two years behind their peers.

At its most basic level, summarizing the range of research on the importance of summer reading for students can be stated as simply as this, “More access to books means more reading.” In other words, it’s about getting books into the hands of children. The underlying importance of access, of course, points directly to the critical role played by our public libraries to encourage students and their families to read, and as the gateway for making books and other reading materials and programs available throughout our communities.

The importance of summer reading can’t be understated. That’s exactly why my Senate colleagues and I are so grateful this summer to have the opportunity to team up with the New York State Library and public libraries statewide, including many I represent throughout the Southern Tier and Finger Lakes regions, to promote a new, online summer reading program we’re sponsoring called “Dream Big READ!” New York State Education Commissioner John B. King, Jr. stressed the fact that summer reading programs enable young people to maintain educational advances when not in school.

“Summer reading programs provided at public libraries throughout the state – supported by the State Library in conjunction with our partners in the State Assembly and Senate – give children great tools to stay academically sharp for school in the fall,” the commissioner said.

Additional information on the importance of summer reading can be found at: <http://www.nysl.nysed.gov/libdev/summer/research.htm>.

So throughout July and August, I’m glad to join so many local public libraries and other groups and organizations seeking to encourage summer reading. The Senate’s online summer reading program offers a convenient opportunity for students and their parents to enjoy the benefits and the rewards of summer reading together. Our region is incredibly fortunate to have such an outstanding network of public libraries providing access to books and other reading activities, materials and opportunities.

To participate in the Senate’s online program, students and parents can visit my Senate website, www.omara.nysenate.gov, and click on the “Dream Big READ!” logo in the left-hand column of the home page. Among other features, the site includes a recording journal, opportunities to share books with other family members and friends, and a series of popular summer reading lists. At the end of the program, participants will receive a formal recognition for their reading achievement.

According to New York State Library officials, last year’s summer reading program featured the participation of 1.65 million young people statewide. The State Library’s program coordinators hope that a revitalized partnership with the state Legislature and local libraries will lead to increased attention on the benefits of summer reading and result in expanded participation this year. Keep in mind that a variety of summer reading activities and events are taking place at local libraries across the region. Visit the website of the Southern Tier Library System, www.stls.org, for links to member libraries in Chemung, Schuyler, Steuben and Yates. The members of the Finger Lakes Library System, including Tompkins County, can be found online at www.flls.org.

Here’s to a summer that includes reading!

■ Sen. Tom O’Mara is a Republican from Big Flats.

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ARTIST’S VIEW



COMMENTARY | KENNETH LIEBERTHAL & MICHAEL O’HANLON

Real national security threat

Drones, kill lists, computer viruses and administration leaks are all the rage in the current political debate. They indeed merit serious scrutiny at a time when the rules of war, and technologies available for war, are changing fast. That said, these issues are not the foreign policy centerpiece of the 2012 presidential race.

Economic renewal and fiscal reform have become the pre-eminent issues, not only for domestic and economic policy but for foreign policy as well. As the former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Adm. Michael G. Mullen was fond of saying, national debt has become perhaps our top national security threat. And neither major presidential candidate is doing enough about it. This issue needs to be framed as crucial not just for our future prosperity but for international stability as well.

The United States has been running trillion-dollar deficits, resulting in a huge explosion in the country’s indebtedness. Publicly held debt now equals 70 percent of gross domestic product, a threshold many economists consider significant and highly worrisome. Making matters worse, half of our current deficit financing is being provided by foreigners. We are getting by with low interest rates and tolerable levels of domestic investment only because they find U.S. debt attractive, which may not last.

According to the non-partisan Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget, President Obama’s long-term budget plan would allow publicly held debt as a fraction of GDP to rise further, up to 75 percent, within a decade. Mitt Romney’s proposal, featuring tax cuts and defense spending increases and as-yet-unspecified (and thus less than fully credible) entitlement reform, appears

worse. It would probably drive publicly held debt to 95 percent of GDP over the same period. Put differently, though both are serious and pragmatic men, neither major party’s presidential candidate is adequately stepping up to the plate, with Romney’s plan the more troubling of the two.

Why is this situation so serious? First, we are headed for a level of debt that within a decade could require us to spend the first trillion dollars of every year’s federal budget servicing that debt. Much less money will be left for other things. That is a prescription for a vicious cycle of underfinancing for our infrastructure, national education efforts, science research and all the other functions of government that are crucial to long-term economic growth. Robust defense spending will be unsustainable too. Once we get in this rut, getting out will be very hard.

Second, such a chronic economic decline would undercut what has been 70 years of strong national political consensus in favor of an activist and engaged American foreign policy. One reason the United States was so engaged through the Cold War and the first 20 years of the post-Cold War world was fear of threats. But the other reason was that the strategy was associated with improvements in our quality of life as well. America became even more prosperous, and all major segments of society benefited.

Alas, globalization and automation trends of the last generation have increasingly called the American dream into question for the working classes. Another decade of underinvestment in what is required to remedy this situation will make an isolationist or populist president far more likely because much of the country will question whether an international-

ist role makes sense for America – especially if it costs us well over half a trillion dollars in defense spending annually yet seems correlated with more job losses.

Last, American economic weakness undercuts U.S. leadership abroad. Other countries sense our weakness and wonder about our purported decline. If this perception becomes more widespread, and the case that we are in decline becomes more persuasive, countries will begin to take actions that reflect their skepticism about America’s future. Allies and friends will doubt our commitment and may pursue nuclear weapons for their own security, for example; adversaries will sense opportunity and be less restrained in throwing around their weight in their own neighborhoods. The crucial Persian Gulf and Western Pacific regions will likely become less stable. Major war will become more likely.

When running for president last time, Obama eloquently articulated big foreign policy visions: healing America’s breach with the Muslim world, controlling global climate change, dramatically curbing global poverty through development aid, moving toward a world free of nuclear weapons. These were, and remain, worthy if elusive goals. However, for Obama or his successor, there is now a much more urgent big-picture issue: restoring U.S. economic strength. Nothing else is really possible if that fundamental prerequisite to effective foreign policy is not re-established.

■ Kenneth Lieberthal and Michael O’Hanlon are foreign policy scholars at the Brookings Institution and co-authors with Martin Indyk of “Bending History: Barack Obama’s Foreign Policy.” They wrote this for the *Los Angeles Times*.

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OTHER VIEW | LOS ANGELES TIMES

Mitt and Bibi show

In the 20th century, American politicians with ethnically diverse constituencies were advised to visit the “three I’s” – Ireland, Italy and Israel. Mitt Romney is heading to the third of those countries this summer on a mission that he hopes will burnish his image with American supporters of the Jewish state. Fair enough, but in establishing his bona fides as a friend of Israel, the Republican candidate for president must be careful of what he says and promises in order to avoid creating problems in the future.

As far back as the Republican primaries, Romney has tried to capitalize on a perception that President Obama is insufficiently attentive to Israel’s interests. The supposed evidence of Obama’s faithlessness was his endorsement of a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict based on Israel’s 1967 borders with Jordan “with mutually agreed swaps, so that secure and recognized borders are established for both states.” Never mind that in espousing a two-state solution, Obama was echoing the policy of his Republican predecessor, George W. Bush.

Romney has also accused the president of being an unreliable ally of Israel and of “fretting” while Iran moves toward acquiring nuclear weapons. If elected, Romney says, he would “do the opposite” of Obama’s policies toward Israel. (That claim inspired an Obama spokesman to ask: “Does that mean he would reverse President Obama’s policies of sending Israel the largest security assistance packages in history?”)

Romney said at a primary debate that in his administration, “we will not have an inch of difference between ourselves and our ally Israel.” After Newt Gingrich made a remark critical of Palestinians, Romney said: “Before I made a statement of that nature, I’d get on the phone to my friend Bibi Netanyahu and say: ‘Would it help if I say this? What would you like me to do?’” Martin S. Indyk, a U.S. ambassador to Israel in the Clinton administration, told the *New York Times* that Romney’s comment implied that he would “subcontract Middle East policy to Israel.”

We don’t begrudge Romney the political benefits of affirming America’s genuine friendship with Israel. But presidents have to remain independent enough to make their own foreign policy decisions; regardless of what they thought while they were campaigning, they may find that they disagree with Israeli leaders about particular policies, such as the construction of Jewish settlements in the West Bank. In seeking to demonstrate that he is a better friend to Israel than the incumbent, Romney should be mindful of the fact that in the future, a President Romney might find that Israeli and U.S. interests are more than an inch apart. He should keep that in mind when he reconnects with “my friend Bibi.”