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The shape of things to come

If stupidity got us into this mess, then why can't it get us out? ~Will Rogers (1879-1935)

By Rick Killion

As if things aren't amazing enough every morning when I wake up, it's just been getting more so as the days go by.

Take November 7 as an example. I anticipated that no matter how the polls were indicating a Democratic sweep, somehow the majority of America would continue to blissfully follow our blundering administration along the path to total civil war in Iraq and total economic bankruptcy at home.

I was wrong.

Now, it's up to the Democrats to begin swinging the stupidity pendulum back in the other direction. I have high hopes for them, but the first few weeks haven't been 100 percent encouraging, with a couple well-publicized false starts. It would seem the American voters (again less than half of those eligible to vote in most states) came to their senses and began believing the facts instead of the rhetoric.

One of the most massive of blunders—among many committed by President Bush—was to accept Defense Secretary Rumsfeld's resignation AFTER the election instead of about two weeks before. I sometimes think Bush is deliberately undermining himself and his legacy in the history books ... with the continued help of strategist Karl Rove.

Who would have thunk it? After so many years of conning the American public, Rove finally tripped over himself.

As if the changing political landscape weren't enough to brighten a fellow's morning, the economic tides might also be swinging back to favor the Northern Plains.

Joel Kotkin, senior fellow at the New America Foundation, and Delore Zimmerman, president of CEO Praxis, released a 34-page white paper on November 9 at the NDSU Research & Technology Park in Fargo. Kotkin is one of those national figures on TV and other influential media outlets who have embraced the Plains states and rural America. Zimmerman heads up a company he founded in Grand Forks, ND.

The two men have observed in 'Rebuilding America's Productive Economy—Heartland Development Strategy' that the United States is headed from 300 million to 400 million citizens in the next four decades. They examine the trends of advancing development in 'micropolitan' areas of the nation, with many of them near 'growth nodes' that include Fargo, Sioux Falls, Rapid City, Des Moines, Bozeman, and Boise.

As pointed out to me by one of our astute staff members at *Prairie Business*, micropolitan areas are rapidly becoming the brightest star in the development constellation. Identified as an urban cluster of 10,000-50,000 people, micro counties now account for three-fifths of the total non-metro population and about one in 10 Americans now live in micropolitan areas, according to Wendell Cox, a demographer cited in the study. There are about 22 micropolitans in the area served by our magazine.

Of the 393 fastest-growing areas in the country, according to *Inc.* magazine, 15 micropolitan centers are in the top 20. Only Las Vegas ranked in the top 20 among all major metropolitan centers, according to the study.

Looking at agriculture for food and energy, Kotkin and Zimmerman run out a positive projection for the Northern Plains and many farm states. In fact, I've been to several meetings in recent weeks—and have read numerous releases and news stories—that highlight the growing demand for more workers all across the Northern Plains. And, the pay scale and benefits packages for these career options are becoming closer and closer to the national average, which is critical when one considers how much more housing a dollar will purchase on the prairies compared to the coasts.

With a Congress controlled by Democrats, will North Dakota Senator Byron Dorgan's New Homestead Act get a chance for consideration in the next Congress? It seems much more likely, with the support of Republican Senator Chuck Hagel of Nebraska also promoting the concept of tax breaks and venture capital for those who choose to settle in areas that have suffered from out-migration the last 50 years.

Underlying all of this momentum and the plans for a new high-speed Internet network linking the northern tier of higher education facilities, is the proposal for a \$10 billion development bank modeled after the Inter-American Development Bank or the California Infrastructure and Economic Development Bank. The bank would invest heavily in the infrastructure of the Heartland, and probably show a nice rate of return for those who invest.

According to the study, the Macquarie Bank of Australia has shown an average rate of return of 19 percent on infrastructure investments over the last 11 years.

In the final analysis, I am hopeful that our 'stupid' period in the United States is on the wane. My hope is that fiscal conservatives will rein in the federal debt and foreign trade deficit while helping to re-build the middle class which has been slowly decimated in recent years (to be honest, beginning before the current Bush administration).

Our collective stupidity could be hung on the president in recent years, but that doesn't mean the Democrats get a free ride; in fact, just the opposite is true. It will be up to the

new Democratic power structure to lead with fairness and prudence and an invigorated sense of understanding and fair play.

With our own senators and congresspersons stepping into critical positions of power in this 110th Congress, I (for one) am expecting a return to diplomacy on all fronts and a return to civility and intelligent discourse.

If the trend line doesn't begin to move forward, then my political predispositions will once again waver to the right ... not that such a distinction will cause any great concern to anyone, but I refuse to endorse stupid politics and the consequences they have on a great nation that still has realistic goals of sustained international grandeur.

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