

A front row seat to the Iowa caucus reality show

Written by Wauneta Breeze

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A Capitol Commentary

By Mary Kay Quinlan

Back in the early months of 1960, then presidential hopeful John F. Kennedy trekked to the Nebraska Secretary of State's office to file as a Democratic candidate for president in the state's primary election.

Those were the days when serious presidential contenders campaigned in Nebraska in the months leading up to the two major political parties' summer nominating conventions.

But the proliferation of caucuses and primary elections scheduled much earlier than Nebraska's May contest has long since eclipsed this state's role in presidential politics.

Instead, Nebraskans must content themselves with watching their Iowa neighbors across the Missouri River as the Republican Nomination Comedy Tour hobbles inevitably toward Jan. 3, the Big Day when caucus-goers finally vote someone off the island.

If only it were that simple.

Recent news accounts reported that fully 70 percent of the American people wish the 2012 presidential campaign was over. And it isn't even 2012 yet.

The Iowa caucuses, a quadrennial cottage industry in our otherwise sensible neighboring state,

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is an event that puts a premium on the passion-level of a candidate's supporters. And the array of contestants in this year's reality show have certainly put their supporters to the test.

For one thing, there was former Omaha pizza magnate Herman Cain, a wildly popular motivational speaker who was forced to suspend his campaign in the face of charges that he had engaged in inappropriate relationships with a number of women.

Then there's Rick Perry, the Texas governor lured into the race apparently when he wasn't quite ready for prime time. In one of the innumerable debates, Perry couldn't quite remember all of the Cabinet agencies he wanted to abolish. Oops.

And how about Ron Paul? The Republican-turned-Libertarian-turned-Republican from Texas is called the darling of the tea party folks who say they hate big government. Except please don't tamper with their Social Security and Medicare.

Paul's supporters are said to be fervent in their passion for the Texas congressman and retired physician and probably can be counted on to brave even the most challenging January weather to appear at their caucus for him.

Then there's Newt Gingrich. If Newt made it all the way to the White House, it would be the first time we had a president sharing the name of a slimy animal.

Gingrich is said to be older and wiser than he was as the firebrand GOP House leader in the 1990s. Recently, however, he raised eyebrows for calling the Palestinians an invented people, causing some to wonder about the former history professor's foreign policy credentials. Jon Huntsman, the former ambassador to China, is the only candidate with credible foreign policy experience, but Iowans don't seem to care. In three recent Iowa polls, Huntsman fared worse than "Undecided." It really makes you feel sorry for the guy.

Let's not forget Michelle Bachmann, the Iowa native who now represents a Minnesota district in Congress. She's the only woman in the race and has said she's running because God told her to.

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Mitt Romney, the former Massachusetts governor, originally pursued a strategy of laying low in Iowa until Gingrich started coming on strong. So in recent weeks, Iowans have met Romney's lovely wife of more than four decades and their five handsome sons, who no doubt have shaken hands with and smiled at more corn-fed Iowans than they ever thought existed out here in the hinterlands.

We could go on. But why? The Iowa caucuses have become public relations practitioners' World Cup of political spin control. Candidates don't have to garner the most votes to be said to win. Candidates who do worse than expected can suddenly face the prospect of defection of their lukewarm fans.

Political junkies in Iowa, and those in Nebraska who follow the follies across the river, will have to turn their attention farther afield as the reality show moves on to primaries in bigger states.

Perhaps Iowans will really give us an undisputed GOP frontrunner. Perhaps not. In which case, the 70 percent who wish the campaign were already over had better hunker down for a long spring.

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