

The Rev. Fred Robb of Washington, Iowa, married Fern Claxton, 25 years younger, at the Presbyterian Church in Birmingham, Iowa, on April 9, 1999. The couple renewed an old friendship at the Rev. Robb's 100th birthday celebration in 1996. Among other meetings, they shared in the 100th birthday celebration of the minister's brother, Milt Robb, in January.

The Rev. Robb is one of more than 750 centenarians in Iowa. I don't know for a fact, but I'd bet many of them approach aging with the same positive spirit as the Rev. Robb.

I run into a lot of older Iowans who don't impose unnatural limits on themselves because of their age. They don't stop doing what's important to them just because the calendar reflects a certain milestone. These individuals are ageless, not due to the years they have lived but in their approach to life. One of my favorite examples of an ageless Iowan is a 92-year-old woman who was in a hurry because she said she had to deliver meals to the "old people."

During Older Americans Month, I want to congratulate Fred and Fern Robb on their ageless spirit and wish them a happy life together. By defying the conventional wisdom that newlyweds must be young, the Robbs advance the theme of Older Americans Month: "Honor the Past, Imagine the Future: Toward a Society for All Ages."

BIRDS THAT DON'T FLY

Mr. GRASSLEY. Mr. President, I would like to draw the Senate's attention to a growing embarrassment in our efforts to support counter-drug programs in Mexico. The story would be funny if it weren't so serious and had not been going on for so long.

In 1996, the Department of Defense began the process of giving 73 surplus UH-1H helicopters—Hueys—to Mexico to assist in counter-smuggling operations. The President approved this transfer in September and the helicopters began arriving in December.

The main justification at the time for this contribution was to stop major air smuggling into Mexico. The Colombian and Mexican drug cartels were flying large quantities of drugs into Mexico in private airplanes. Sometimes these were multiple flights, sometimes single ones. Usually they were twin-engine propeller-driven aircraft, but occasionally they were larger, commercial-sized cargo jets. Earlier in the 1990's, the U.S. State Department had instituted a program with Mexico's Attorney General of developing a helicopter-based interdiction force. One can only assume that DoD sought to engage Mexico's military in a similar way. Somewhere along the way, however, something went wrong.

Here's one for the books. We have a civilian State Department program

with the civilian Attorney General's office in Mexico operating an air force that works. And we have the U.S. military operating a program with the Mexican military to operate an air force that doesn't work.

It not only doesn't work, it does not have a purpose, so far as I can tell. I have asked the GAO to look at this issue twice, and they have had a problem in identifying a purpose or results.

I have asked the Defense Department and it seems to be stumped as well. The Mexican Government is puzzled. We ought to be dumbfounded.

Today, none of the 70-plus helicopters is flying. No one can tell me when they might be flying. No one seems to know how many might fly if they ever do. No one seems to know what they are to do if they do fly. It is unclear how they will be maintained. Or how much it will cost. Or who is going to pay. Since no one knows the answer to any of these questions, no one can tell me how many helicopters might be needed. Is 70 too many? No one knows. Is this any way to run an airline?

I cannot seem to get a straightforward answer from the Administration about what the plan for these helicopters is. As one U.S. embassy official noted to my staff last year, what to do with and about the helicopters is a muddle. It is a muddle all right; but it is one of our making.

When plans were first announced about putting these helicopters in Mexico, I began asking about the need for radars. Mexico lacks any sustained radar coverage of its southern approaches. If you are planning an air interdiction program, it would seem logical to include a plan for developing the eyes needed to make the program work. The response I got from both U.S. and Mexican officials to questions about radars was a deafening silence. Or vague promises. I kept asking. Finally, after about six months, the U.S. and Mexican Administrations informed me that no radars were necessary. And why? Because there was no longer a major air trafficking threat; it was mostly maritime. And when did we know there was no longer a major air threat? In 1995. And when did we give Mexico the helicopters? In 1996. So far as I can tell, we gave Mexico a capability to deal with a problem that both countries knew we no longer faced. Today the threat is mostly maritime. So why helicopters?

Well, having taken that on board, the next question is, what are we going to have the helicopters do? It turns out that the best idea is to have them ferry troops around to chop poppies or marijuana. But this is mostly in the mountains and the helos aren't very capable in the mountains. And how many helos are needed? It turns out there is no very clear answer. But before we got very far down that road, a problem was discovered that grounded all Hueys in

1998. This necessitated a worldwide assessment of the air worthiness of the equipment. Although this was eventually done, the Mexican military refused to fly the helicopters until they had more assurances that there were no air safety questions. They also wanted more resources to fly the equipment. So nothing was done and the helos sit.

As it happens, Hueys are old, Vietnam War-vintage aircraft. They are still serviceable, but they are aging and need a lot of care and feeding. It is also harder to get spare parts for them.

And being old, they are sometimes cranky. We gave Mexico 73 of these birds in the spirit of cooperation. So, today, the helos in Mexico have been on the ground becoming very expensive museum-quality memorials to the United States-Mexican partnership. While they sit, the air crews' qualifications for flying the equipment is in doubt. So even if we could get the birds up tomorrow, it is not clear that the air crews are qualified to fly them. And we still aren't sure what they are supposed to do if we did. We are not even sure at this point if the Mexicans still want the helos.

It is in this environment that I have asked the Department of Defense to provide me and Congress with a plan. Since no one in the past two to three years seems to have a clue about what we are doing, I think it is reasonable and prudent to have a plan on the record. This is not rocket science. But so far, I have not had much luck. Now, you would think that there would already be a plan.

Given the importance of our drug cooperation with Mexico it would not be unreasonable to expect one. We have bilateral agreements. We have binational strategies. We have joint measures of effectiveness. We have had "high-level contact group" meetings at great public expense to both countries. But apparently we have no plan. We have had recently several Administration visits to Mexico and more discussions. But there is no plan. The administration cannot seem to tell the difference between "talking" and a "plan."

I, for one, do not think that this is a situation we can accept any longer. After three years of asking, one has to begin to wonder just what it is we think we are doing. I have not mentioned the C-26 airplanes that we gave to Mexico and other countries for which there appears to be just as much lack of thinking. That is for another time. But there is one more piece to the helicopter story.

As of last week, a new problem has developed and all Hueys are grounded again. This doesn't affect the helicopters in Mexico since they weren't flying anyway, but it leaves us even more in doubt. The result is an embarrassment for both countries.

I yield the floor.