The Rev. Fred Robb of Washington, Iowa, married Fern Claxton, 25 years younger, at the Presbyterian Church in Birmingham, Alabama, 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 ages, 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 the U.S. groove, 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 trying to fly 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 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 are to be paid for this work.

So 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 worth the work. But 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 got them without the 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 helicopters aren’t very capable in the mountains. And how many helicopters 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 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.

All of this has happened, no one can tell us 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, for one, do not think that this is a situation we can accept any longer. We have bilateral agreements. We have binational strategies. We have joint measurements 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 Administrations visit to Mexico and more discussions. But there is no plan. The administration cannot seem to tell the difference between “talking” and a “plan.”

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As of last week, a new problem has developed and all Hueys are grounded again. This doesn’t affect the helicopter story 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.