

Commentary...

Dying in committee: Playing politics with veterans' lives

Craig Rullman
Columnist

*"No person was ever honored for what he received. Honor has been the reward for what he gave."
— Calvin Coolidge*

No sitting governor of Oregon has ever refused to meet with a Medal of Honor recipient. Until now.

On June 8, Governor Kate Brown snubbed Master Sergeant Leroy Petry as he stood waiting — at her invitation — outside of her office in Salem.

Maybe you've heard of Master Sergeant Petry. In 2008, he and his fellow Rangers from the 2/75th Ranger Battalion were fighting in Paktia Province, Afghanistan, where, during an intense firefight with nearly 40 Taliban, he selflessly grabbed an enemy grenade and attempted to toss it away from his fellow Rangers and himself. The grenade exploded, took his hand off, and peppered him with shrapnel even as he applied his own tourniquet and continued to lead his men in the fight. This after he'd already been shot through both thighs.

For his heroism, MSG Petry was awarded the Medal of Honor by President Barack Obama.

Even more impressive has been his work afterward. MSG Petry has become a tireless advocate for improving the available treatment for veterans with physical and mental injuries.

In the words of retired Green Beret and Oregon resident Greg Walker, Pacific Northwest Ambassador of the Green Beret Foundation, who hosted MSG Petry's visit to the capitol, Petry "is an

American hero."

Strangely, Governor Kate Brown doesn't seem to think so. And she wasn't alone. Democrat State Senator James Manning, appointed to his office by Lane County Commissioners in 2016, also refused to meet with MSG Petry, sending his wife and "legislative aide" Lawanda out to deliver the news to MSG Petry.

Manning, apparently, offered to be "unavailable," despite having been notified of MSG Petry's desire to pay him a professional courtesy visit.

I'll get back to Senator Manning later.

Because Governor Brown and her office refused to answer my requests for comment, we are left to speculate as to why she would violate virtually every standard of decency and protocol MSG Petry's bonafides demand.

So I will.

Perhaps it's because of her party's opposition to Senate Bill 1054, which seeks to remedy the unconscionable absence of available psychiatric care for veterans in Oregon by easing the "Certificate of Needs" process, an archaic, cost-prohibitive stricture under the suspect Oregon Health Authority which governs the building of new hospitals and health facilities.

As State Senator Brian Boquist, himself a Special Forces veteran — and whose son, a Navy veteran, took his own life last year — wrote in a guest column for Oregonlive: "The Oregon Health Authority is holding our veterans and their families hostage collecting ransom payments from providers. The so-called 'certificate of need' is the go-ahead hospitals need from government before they

can build new facilities. The health authority's process is bureaucratic terrorism."

Senate Bill 1054 is staunchly opposed by most Democrats, who appear to be more concerned with protecting union and corporate strangleholds on potential competition than the mental and chemical dependency-related health needs of veterans.

Some 30,000 of Oregon's estimated 300,000 veterans, men and women who enlisted believing they would receive a minimum of benefits in return for their sacrifice — many of whom now live in desperate need of care, can't get any because under the Certificate of Needs process it is prohibitively expensive to build, or operate, new care and treatment facilities.

Perhaps the Governor snubbed MSG Petry because she is profoundly aware that the State of Oregon currently ranks 49th in the availability, and quality, of mental-health care available to veterans. Or maybe she doesn't know that. It's hard to say which fact would be more derelict.

Perhaps, as Senate Republican Communications Director Jonathan Lockwood told me in an interview, it's because "Kate Brown uses veterans as props while blocking their ability to get mental-health care."

Alas, only the Governor really knows why she snubbed MSG Petry. Whatever the reason, there are some additional facts to behold. In the entire state of Oregon there is only one specialty, military-focused, behavioral health program. One. To make matters worse, the Oregon National Guard ranks at the very top of the list for Guard suicide rates nationally, and has consistently ranked at the

top for the last six years.

There is so little available care for veterans in Oregon that the VA's office in Boise, Idaho, must run a satellite clinic in Burns, which covers three Eastern Oregon counties as well. And the VA, as most everyone knows, is broken.

While Governor Brown and Senator Manning hide in their offices, afraid to shake the prosthetic hand of a Medal of Honor recipient advocating for better care, Oregon veterans just keep dying, too many by their own hand.

Will Naugle was a combat medic who spent a year in Afghanistan with the National Guard. Unable to find treatment for his deep psychological wounds, Will went missing late last January. His body was later found in a ravine at Powell Butte State Park in Portland. One of the principle reasons MSG Petry was at the statehouse was to present Will's family — who have lobbied hard for SB1054 in the aftermath of Will's suicide — with visible comfort and support.

Will's sister, Julie Terry, told me in regard to SB1054: "I'm not a politician, I don't have a political affiliation. This should be about what is right. The bill won't cost the state anything. This is a choice they are making and at least they would have something started to fill the need that is so obviously there."

One would think that a Governor who can find the time for photo-ops with

troops deploying to fight our nation's conflicts (she posed at an activation ceremony only days before) — events which can now rightfully be seen as cynical and opportunistic pandering — would somehow find the time to meet with an American hero who is leading the way in the desperate fight for veteran healthcare.

But Kate Brown, apparently, can't be bothered, and James Manning went AWOL.

After learning of the Governor's behavior, I spoke to MSG Petry, who has traveled the country speaking with elected officials, including presidents of the United States, who confirmed that he had never been treated so crudely by public servants, anywhere.


"I was appalled (by their behavior)," he said. "It was rude. Having knowledge that I was going to be there, to be snubbed like that was something."

To be certain, not everyone in our statehouse was so obtuse. MSG Petry, in full dress blues and wearing his Medal of Honor, met with several officials, including Democrat Senate President Peter Courtney. MSG Petry was effusive and gracious in his thanks for those public servants who did arrange the time — and keep it — to meet with him.

There was an ugly

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