

OUR VIEW

## Democracy is a two-way street

Filling the role of a local politician isn't easy. Let's face it, the people we elect to city council positions or mayoral slots are not doing it for the money. They don't go home from city council or county commission meetings with the promise of a sack full of cash waiting.

No, the work of local elected leaders can be thankless, but we need area residents who care about their communities to step up and get involved.

On the other side of the coin, though, those same local politicians have an obligation to listen to concerns from all voters. Even if that input appears to be, at first glance, distasteful or the elected leader disagrees with the sentiments of a voter.

Democracy is a two-way street. While admittedly it can be messy, its proper function depends upon a civil discourse between those who are elected and those who voted. Area politicians owe taxpayers — voters and constituents — the freedom to speak freely. That doesn't mean voters have a blank check to use profanity or scream and yell at a local politician or make unfounded accusations. What it does mean is voters should be able to feel comfortable to address their elected leaders on mundane subjects or controversial issues.

Whether it is La Grande or Elgin, anyone who steps forward with a public comment needs to be heard.

Public officials already have the luxury of multiple platforms to get their message out. Voters do not. Politicians are quoted in news stories on radio and websites, across social media and in public forums. In a sense, on this issue at least, the playing field is slightly tilted in their favor.

Voters, though, typically get two opportunities to voice their concerns — during an election or at a public meeting during public comment periods.

We applaud local towns that hold public meetings or public comment periods. Realistically, they don't have to do that. But when area politicians take the time to listen to their constituents, it shows not only concern but a genuine interest in the body politic.

Ridiculing a voter — no matter who he or she is or what they do — is a wrong answer for a locally elected leader.

When such incidents occur, it quickly illustrates a broken link between voters and those elected to represent them.

Courtesy really is a big deal in a democracy and it is sadly missing in a lot of places across our great nation.



MY VOICE

## Veterans are crucial part of history

I love to study our nation's history through the lens of our military veterans.

Who could fail to be inspired by the brash courage of the United States Marines during the Battle of Belleau Wood in World War I? Or by the words of Marine Capt. Lloyd W. Williams, who, after being repeatedly urged to turn back by retreating French forces, famously said, "Retreat? Hell, we just got here."

Legend has it that it was at this battle that Marines earned the German nickname "Teufelshunde": Devil Dogs.

What about the story of Pfc. Dirk J. Vlugg, serving in the Philippines during World War II, who refused to back down despite being outnumbered five-to-one. No, it wasn't one against five enemy soldiers. It was one soldier against five, heavily armed Japanese tanks. Reacting on instinct, Pfc. Vlugg grabbed a bazooka and six rounds of ammunition and managed to destroy all five tanks single-handedly.

I still get goose bumps when I read the words of Lt. Gen. Lewis "Chesty" Puller, the most decorated Marine in American history, when he and his men were surrounded by enemy forces at the Battle of Chosin Reservoir: "They're on our left, they're on our right, they're in front of us, they're behind us. We got them right where we want them. They can't get away this time."

Or the story of Master Sgt. Roy Benavidez, who jumped from a helicopter armed only with a knife, determined to help a Special Forces patrol trapped in North Vietnam. Over the course of a six-hour ordeal, Benavidez was wounded by bullets, bayonets and shrapnel a total of 37 times.

When he was awarded the Medal of Honor, President Reagan said that if his story were a movie script, audiences wouldn't believe it. His heroic actions saved the lives of eight men.

In Iraq, Sgt. Leigh Ann Hester became the first woman awarded the Silver Star since World War II. A retail store manager from Kentucky, Hester

About the author

Kelly Fitzpatrick is the director of the Oregon Department of Veterans' Affairs and Gov. Kate Brown's policy adviser on veterans' issues. My Voice columns should be 500-



700 words. Submissions should include a portrait-type photograph of the author. Authors also should include their full name, age, occupation and relevant organizational memberships. We edit submissions for brevity, grammar, taste and legal reasons. We reject those published elsewhere. Send columns to La Grande Observer, 1406 5th St., La Grande 97850, fax them to 541-963-7804 or email them to news@lagrandeobserver.com.

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led the counterassault against 50 insurgents who attacked her convoy, braving heavy mortar and machine-gun fire to engage the enemy on foot.

These stories of courage, selflessness and sacrifice are so much more than just stories to tell on Veterans Day. They are a crucial part of our nation's history, and the foundation upon which its legacy has been built.

Countless millions of American lives — with more to come — have been lived in the freedoms secured by the blood and service of our veterans.

Despite this rich history of military service that continues to this day, our country has not drafted a single soldier in more than 45 years. Since the draft ended in 1973, no person has been compelled to serve their country. And yet, each year, an estimated 180,000 young Americans voluntarily enlist in the United States Armed Forces.

One of the many things that makes this country so great is that its people have the will to serve. They have the

will to lay down their own freedoms, and even their own lives, to defend those of others.

Our veterans didn't have to be told to serve or to sacrifice. It was already there, in our DNA.

This is why I believe it is so important to honor, remember and celebrate our veterans, not just on Veterans Day but every day. And it's not only because they have earned it — though they have.

It's also because in honoring and remembering our veterans, we reveal the values that matter to us as a nation: Courage. Sacrifice. Selflessness. Dedication. The willingness to give up one's own life so that others might live and be free, which we call "heroism."

We reveal ourselves and our values in what we remember and in what we give our time to. This Veterans Day, I encourage you to spend your time in a meaningful way. Say, "Thank you," to a veteran, yes, but also take some time to hear their story. I guarantee you: It's a story you won't hear anywhere else.

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# THE OBSERVER

An independent newspaper founded in 1896

(USPS 299-260)

The Observer reserves the right to adjust subscription rates by giving prepaid and mail subscribers 30 days notice. Periodicals postage paid at La Grande, Oregon 97850. Published Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays (except Dec. 25) by EO Media Group, 1406 Fifth St., La Grande, OR 97850 (USPS 299-260)

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POSTMASTER  
Send address changes to:  
The Observer, 1406 Fifth St., La Grande, OR 97850  
Periodicals postage paid at La Grande, Oregon 97850

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