

OUR VIEW

Checking the fact checkers

The Associated Press fact-checked President Trump's State of the Union speech the day before he gave it. The newsgathering organization, of which EO Media Group is a member, didn't have an advance copy of the president's address.

Rather, the AP was addressing topics Trump was likely to talk about when he went before Congress.

This is reasonable enough on its face — State of the Union speeches are nothing if not predictable.

And certainly Trump is the ripest of targets for fact checking. In common with most politicians, the president is prone to making statements that put his accomplishments in the best possible light. But Trump's blustering style, and his preference for simple adjectives such as "best" and "greatest," lead him to make claims that are easily disproved.

But the AP doesn't limit itself to that worthwhile endeavor.

Instead, the organization, under the guise of fact checking, seeks to diminish the president's record by nit-picking claims that are the predictable fodder of political speeches but are too general to be demonstrably false.

For instance, in the pre-speech fact check the AP notes that Trump has "held out his tax cut as a boon to the economy."

Indeed he has.

The AP's dispute with this claim begins with a curious passage: "While most economists credit (the tax cuts) with putting extra money in people's pockets and fueling more consumer spending." As if only economists — or at least "most economists" — understand that if the government takes less of workers' earnings they'll have more to spend, and likely will do just that.

The AP also contends, again referring to the tax cut law, that "its impact may already be fading."

The AP offers no facts, or indeed anything, in support of what isn't even a definitive claim — notice the hedging word "may."

Even when the AP acknowledges a boast Trump was apt to make in his speech is factual, the organization, rather than simply acknowledge its accuracy — presumably the purpose of a fact check — or better still leave it out, instead tries to downplay its significance.

The AP writes: "Trump plays a rather ordinary fact for cheers at his rallies — more Americans are working than ever before. That's mainly because there are ever more Americans. Call it people inflation."

A clever line for an editorial, perhaps.

But it's grossly misplaced in something labeled as a fact check — a piece of journalism that ought to be scrupulously objective.

And even as commentary fodder, it's flaccid.

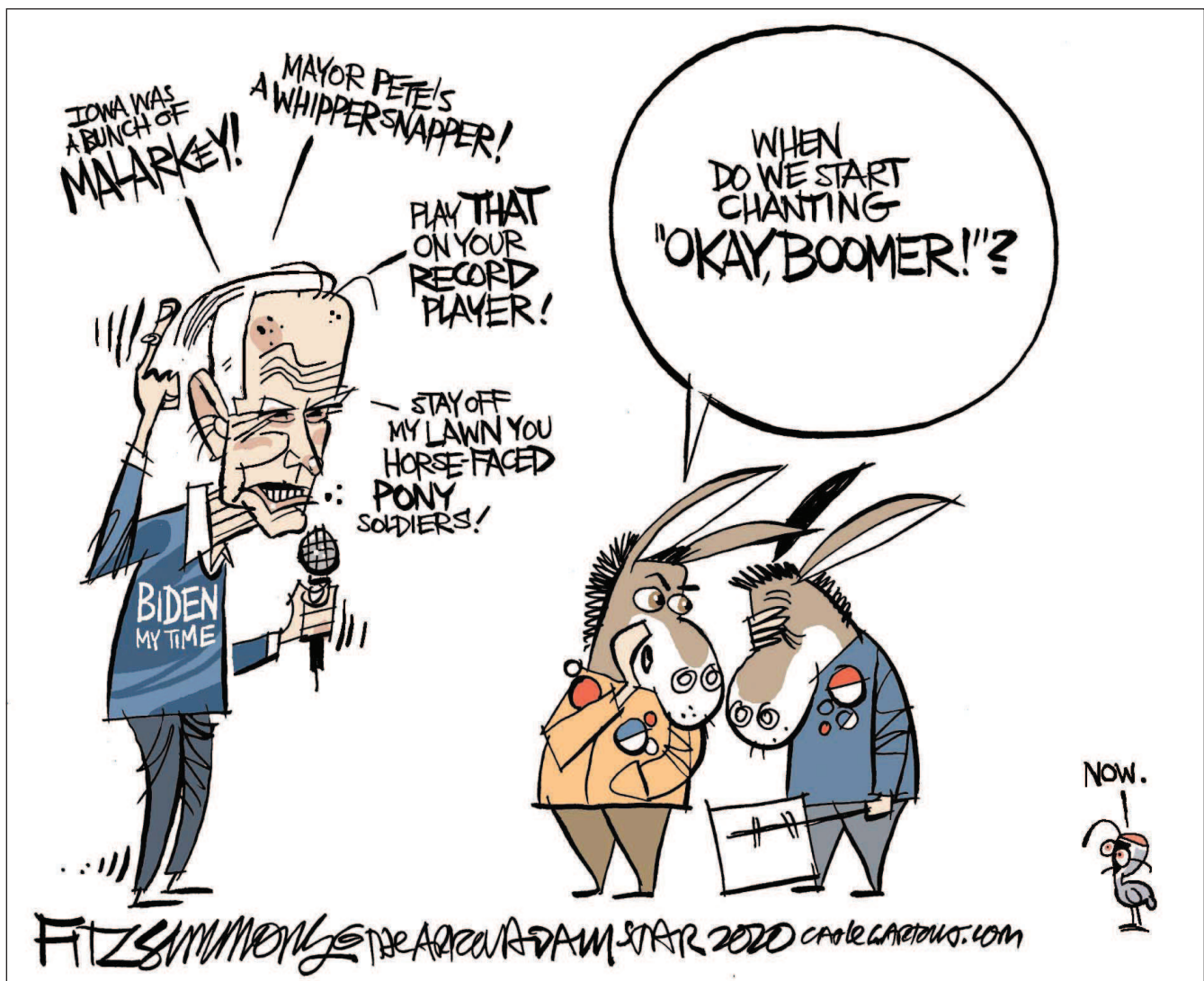
The AP proffers nothing to back its claim that the workforce growth is "mainly" due to a growing population. The implication that the number of people with jobs inevitably follows population growth is not valid — the AP need only consult employment statistics from the 2007 to 2009 recession.

The AP continued its tactics with its follow-up fact check covering Trump's actual State of the Union speech.

In referencing the president's boast about the U.S. becoming the world's largest producer of oil and natural gas, the AP chastises Trump for "taking credit for a U.S. oil and gas production boom that started under Obama."

Yet the AP acknowledges the U.S. has been the top producer of crude oil only since 2018. And according to federal records, America's crude oil production actually dropped in 2016, the last year of the Obama administration, but rose in 2017, 2018 and 2019.

The AP's fact-checking efforts are valid and, during the Trump administration, more necessary than ever. But there's no reason for the organization to clog its fact-checking articles with obviously political commentary.



OTHER VIEWS

History will remember Romney, not Collins

When future historians look for the last, documented instance of Republican political courage in the Trump imperium, they'll look to one man: Sen. Mitt Romney.

In one extraordinary speech on the floor of the United States Senate on Wednesday, the Utah senator made remarks that were both utterly moving in their absolute humanity and totally damning in their vivid rebuttal of GOP capitulation to a bankrupt White House.

"I swore an oath before God to exercise impartial justice," Romney told a nearly empty chamber around 2 p.m., two hours before the Senate voted to acquit President Donald Trump.

As The Washington Post's Dana Milbank wrote, Romney, fighting back tears, paused for some 12 seconds to collect himself before continuing.

"The grave question the Constitution tasks senators to answer is whether the president committed an act so extreme and egregious that it rises to the level of a high crime and misdemeanor. Yes, he did," Romney said, as the Senate gallery filled with journalists recording his remarks for the ages.

For me, the most profound part of Romney's speech was his reminder to his GOP colleagues of the responsibilities invested in them by the Constitution, the very responsibilities they so thoroughly abdicated during the Trump's fixed trial.

Dressed in a dark blue suit, white dress shirt, and blue tie, Romney, a devout Mormon and the GOP's 2012 presidential standard-bearer, looked like a throwback to a less complicated time — when there were politicians that most Americans would recognize as textbook Republican.

That matters because the Republican Party that Romney represented just eight years ago is dead and buried, never to return. If impeachment proved anything, it proved the GOP is now a wholly owned subsidiary of the Trump Organization.

Romney's remarks were all the more striking when they're placed along the



JOHN L. MICEK

spineless surrender of fellow Republican Sens. Marco Rubio of Florida and Ted Cruz of Texas, who were both viciously lashed by Trump in 2016, but who nonetheless fell into line and voted to acquit.

Maine Sen. Susan Collins, who plays a maverick on television and who voted in favor of calling witnesses, sided with her Republican colleagues on acquittal, even as she called Trump's behavior wrong.

It was the same kind of transactional and fleeting courage pioneered by former Arizona Sen. Jeff Flake, who made late-career fame out of publicly holding up the nomination of now-Justice Brett M. Kavanaugh to the U.S. Supreme Court, but who ultimately voted to confirm a flawed candidate.

Not Romney.

"I am aware that there are people in my party and in my state who will strenuously disapprove of my decision, and in some quarters, I will be vehemently denounced," he said Wednesday. "I am sure to hear abuse from the President and his supporters. Does anyone seriously believe I would consent to these consequences other than from an inescapable conviction that my oath before God demanded it of me?"

In this space last week, I compared the current U.S. Senate to the weak-willed Roman Senate of antiquity that caved to the excesses of the most tyrannical emperors out of sheer self-interest.

History also remembers the Emperor Nero ordered Seneca, his onetime counselor, to commit suicide when he fell out of favor. Romney might well have committed political suicide. And it was equally clear that, like Seneca, there were principles more important to Romney than mere self-preservation.

"With my vote, I will tell my children and their children that I did my duty to the best of my ability, believing that my country expected it of me," he said

Write to us

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Send columns to La Grande Observer, 1406 Fifth St., La Grande, 97850, or email them to pwright@lagrandeobserver.com.

adding, "... we're all footnotes at best in the annals of history. But in the most powerful nation on earth, the nation conceived in liberty and justice, that is distinction enough for any citizen."

In this diminished time, it's more than enough.

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