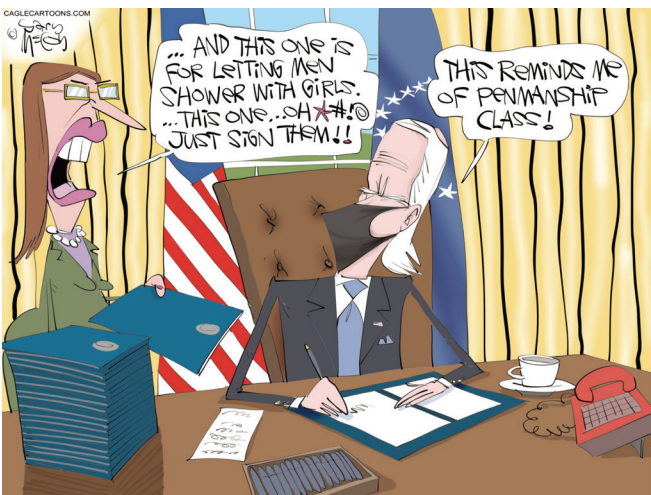


From the editor

Slicing conspiracy theories no easy task

PHIL WRIGHT
OBSERVER EDITOR

Something crashed in the New Mexico desert outside Roswell, New Mexico, in July 1947. The U.S. military-industrial complex wants you to believe the object that went down was a nuclear test surveillance balloon from Project Mogul. Ufologists have long argued to establish that what crashed was an alien spacecraft. And from that craft — or others like it we recovered — came the technology that allowed us to make advanced stealth aircraft. For all that to happen, the military, key figures in the government, private and public research agencies and more all had to conspire not to reveal the grand secret of the Roswell crash. And of course the military and U.S. government worked up plenty of public relations to push the “official” story and dismiss any efforts from truth seekers. That amounts to a conspiracy of silence and deception as far reaching as the Manhattan Project, but without a world war to qualify keeping this from the public. Weaving together those conspiratorial threads, however, takes an impressive loom and so much has to go right. One loose thread with the damning evidence and, boom, the public is going to find out. Project Mogul seems a better answer. Conspiracy theories intrigue me. Our brains are pattern-seeking machines, after all. I’m also keen on applying Occam’s razor, the problem-solving principal that the simplest explanation is usually the right one. Occam’s razor, however, is not quite that simple. Rather, when dealing with competing explanations for the same event or prediction, the razor would have us slice away those that require the most assumptions and explanations, leaving behind the more straightforward answers. That’s key to why I don’t buy into the conspiracy theory that President Joe Biden stole the election. Such a heist would have to involve county and state election officials across a majority of states under the directions of leaders of the Democratic Party and Biden’s presidential campaign who worked out details in backroom machinations. Plus troves of fraudulent voters. The mafia should take notes. Yet plenty of Americans buy into the notion while the evidence of such widespread collusion and wrongdoing remains as evasive as — well — as aliens, perhaps. And the vast cabal was so ineffective that it could not oust Republican Sen. Mitch McConnell, and while it secured Georgia for Biden, it failed to deliver Election Day wins in key senate races, forcing a runoff that ultimately resulted in wins for the two Democrat challengers. The explanation that needs less explaining is more people of the United States and its territories voted for Biden than former President Donald Trump. I’m going with Occam’s razor. And for me, who won is not about left or right politics. It’s about facts. It’s about aligning with reality. Conspiracies are real, no doubt. The assassination of President Abraham Lincoln was the result of a conspiracy. Secretary of State William H. Seward and Vice President Andrew Johnson also were to die at the hands of men looking to resurrect the Confederacy. John Wilkes Booth succeeded in killing Lincoln, but the plot otherwise failed. It was a small, ugly violent conspiracy, much like the ones I covered on occasion in crime reporting. They were never grandiose. But they often left devastation in their wakes. Conspiracies also are in the American DNA. Those guys who tossed the tea into Boston Harbor conspired in secret before taking action. Conspiracy is a theme in American literature, from Charles Brockden Brown’s “Wieland” in 1798 to Thomas Pynchon’s “The Crying of Lot 49” in 1965 and beyond. The internet and social media, of course, are ripe for proliferating conspiracy theories. Once disparate individuals and groups no longer feel alone or isolated. They have and can join up to hash out, maul over and expand their conspiratorial ideologies. Conspiracy theories can go viral, as we say. Joining such beliefs and believers also fulfills the human need for acceptance. But I think it goes further. I think it taps into egos. I think these folks do not see themselves as only believers, but as the insiders with the truth. I’m not sure how you shake someone from that perch. Developing a vaccine for conspiracy theories seems to take medicine stronger than Occam’s razor.



Our View

Brown right to change course on transparency

Gov. Kate Brown has exerted exceptional authority during the pandemic. That means there should be more government transparency, not less. Brown backed less transparency early last week. Then, a few hours after an earlier version of an EO Media Group editorial went online on Friday, Jan. 29, she reversed her decision. Brown directed the Oregon Health Authority in March to “share all COVID-19 information with the public that does not compromise patient privacy.” The Oregonian has carefully laid out what happened. The OHA began releasing basic information about each person killed by COVID-19. It included a person’s age,

county, location of death, the dates of their positive test and death and if the person had underlying health conditions. The person’s name was not released. It was essential information for the public to understand how the virus is killing people. Most importantly, it helps Oregonians understand that each death is the death of a person. Brown on Thursday backed what she said was an internal OHA decision to stop providing the detailed reports. It suddenly had become too much work for OHA. That was odd. OHA had been doing it for 10 months. What also was peculiar was it followed Brown’s decision to make it a priority to vaccinate teachers before many seniors. The change

would have made it more difficult to track how many seniors die as vaccinations they could have received went to teachers, instead. And if that did not make you curious, the OHA decision to stop releasing the details because it was too much work was coupled with an OHA decision to release other details. The OHA started releasing a breakdown of the underlying health conditions of those who have died from COVID-19. It argued in August releasing that sort of information would create “confusion.” So now Oregonians won’t be confused? Legislators challenged the OHA change. It was not just Republicans. Sen. Michael Dembrow, a Portland Democrat, asked OHA officials to recon-

sider, as The Oregonian reported. “I believe that there’s real human value in seeing these individuals that we’ve lost each day, even if we don’t know their names, or really much about them at all other than their age and location,” Dembrow wrote. “Still, they come across as individuals, as more than a statistic. I value that, particularly in the midst of this dreadful pandemic, and I know many of you do as well.” No decision Brown or OHA makes during the pandemic is going to be without tradeoffs. But who was Brown and OHA looking out for with this decision? The public’s cooperation hinges on the public trusting their government. Brown was right to reverse it.

Letter

A lesson about free speech

Nearly 60 years ago I was in university sharing an apartment with my best friend. George Lincoln Rockwell, leader of the American Nazi Party, was on our campus to give a speech. My best friend announced that he was going to hear Rockwell speak. I commented that the leader of the American Nazi Party should be run off of the campus. My friend then asked me if I

believed in free speech to which I replied in the affirmative. I was then asked how I could make such a statement and deny speech I disliked. I wrestled with my beliefs after that question. I finally came to the conclusion that I should never block speech I didn’t like. Later that night my friend returned and I asked about the speech. The answer stunned me. I was told that George Lincoln Rockwell was a great

orator but the content of the speech was despicable. My best friend was killed in Vietnam about three years later. I respected that man and loved him like a brother. I have never forgotten the lesson he taught me about free speech. Perhaps people reading this letter may reflect on their own beliefs and come to a truly rational conclusion. Rudy Candler Union

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