

Other Views

Functionally illiterate about our own democracy

We know — or think we know — why so many home-grown goons stormed the U.S. Capitol. Most notably, a defeated cult leader pumped his Kool-Aid down their throats.

But that's not the whole story. Trump was able to gin them up because they were so dumbed down. They had no idea they were doing anything wrong.

They felt justified to breach the legislative branch simply because the president decreed it. They had no clue about separation of powers, or co-equal branches of government, because they'd never learned about either. They truly believed the vice president could magically overturn the election because they'd never learned how our democracy actually works.

For this, we can blame the demise of civics education in America.

In 1838, a young Abraham Lincoln warned in a speech that unless children are taught "reverence for the Constitution and its laws," we might fall prey to "mobocratic" rule. What we suffered on Jan. 6 was a mobocrat invasion — perhaps a harbinger of the future.

In a recent new report, a group called Educating for American Democracy tells the tale: "Civics and history education has eroded in the U.S. over the past 50 years, and opportunities to learn these subjects are inequitably distributed. Dangerously low proportions of the public understand and trust our democratic institutions. Majorities are functionally illiterate on our constitutional principles and forms. The relative neglect of civic education in the past half-century — a period of wrenching change — is one important cause of our civic and political dysfunction."

Suffice it to say a demagogue's odds of success are heightened when the people he seeks to exploit have little understanding of how the system works.

If we poll all the insurrectionists, I bet we'd discover a disproportionate share would flunk a civic literacy exam. Last year, the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation reported that only one-third of native-born Americans (and only 19% of those under age 45) would be able to pass the basic test that's given to immigrants who aspire to become citizens.

Some stats for our Hall of Shame: 57% of native-born Americans don't know how many justices serve on the U.S. Supreme Court; 60% don't know what countries the U.S. fought in World War II; only 13% know when the U.S. Constitution was ratified; only 24% could name one thing that Ben Franklin was famous for (37% said he invented the light bulb).

When I was a public school kid, we had civics classes all year long (commonly called social studies), and I distinctly remember we couldn't advance to fifth grade unless we correctly named all nine members of the high court. But today, 31 states reportedly require only a half year of civics education and another 10 states require nothing.

In public education during the last half century, civics has taken a back seat to science, technology, engineering and math. Obviously, there's nothing wrong with the STEM curricula — we need people on the cutting edge of those disciplines.

But two educators, making the pitch for civics, recently warned: "Without a basic understanding of our constitutional system, the foundations of democracy and the separation of powers enshrined in it, how can Americans discern fact from fiction? Without understanding what generations have fought and died for — those core principles of putting country before leader or party, the checks on power our Founders insisted on — how can they be informed and empowered citizens that our system requires to survive?"

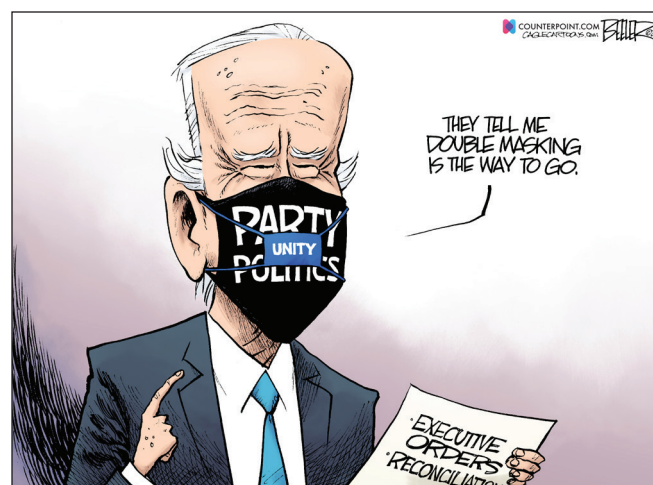
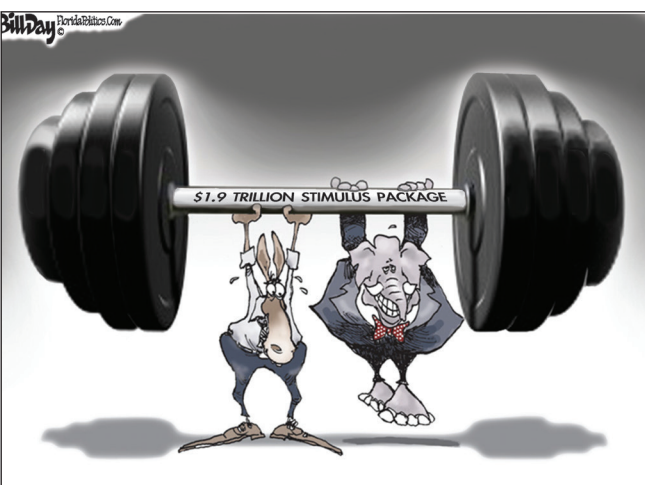
Chief Justice John Roberts agrees: "(Our constitutional) principles leave no place for mob violence. ... We have come to take democracy for granted, and civic education has fallen by the wayside. In our age, when social media can instantly spread rumor and false information on a grand scale, the public's need to understand our government, and the protections it provides, is ever more vital."

He wrote that 13 months before the Capitol was stormed. If we continue to ignore these warnings about our education system, too many Americans will remain putty in the paws of demagogues. As the current cult leader exclaimed on the stump five years ago, "I love the poorly educated!"

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DICK POLMAN
POLITICAL COLUMNIST



My Voice

River Democracy Act should become law



BILL ANEY
FORESTER & WILDLIFE BIOLOGIST

Years ago, in search of my first career job as a biologist, I interviewed with a private firm in Portland. The interviewer asked me a hypothetical question about how I would help to manage a piece of ground. My reply was a simple question: "What are your objectives?"

He nodded, smiled slightly and made a note. I felt this was an impressive start to my interview and, while I didn't get the job, I did learn an important lesson: Good management starts with good objectives.

This concept is key to the River Democracy Act of 2021 recently introduced by Sen. Ron Wyden and Sen. Jeff Merkley. The senators started in October 2019 by asking Oregonians what wild and scenic streams deserved protection, and the resulting public nomination process yielded thousands of responses and nominations from people across the state.

After vetting these nominations, the Oregon senators are now proposing adding about 4,700 miles to the list of Wild and Scenic Rivers in Oregon, all on public lands.

Protecting a stream under federal law gives federal land managers their marching orders for managing these areas: protect water quality and cultural foods and resources while working with thinning and prescribed burning to reduce the risk of damaging wildfire. Here we see the value of establishing objectives for management of the public's land.

The new proposal adds about 700 miles of local streams to the wild and scenic river system, including the South Fork of the Umatilla and Walla Walla, the Upper and Lower Grande Ronde, Imnaha and John

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Day rivers. Maybe you are as surprised as me to find these streams are not already listed as wild and scenic.

The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1968 law is imperfect. My experience implementing this law is that federal land managers often avoid proposing any projects in the identified river corridors. This might be good if you believe preservation is the best way to manage public lands, but it is not a good long-term strategy in dry, fire-prone forests.

The 2021 law makes it clear that a wild and scenic river designation does not set aside these areas as reserves. The law instructs managers to purposefully evaluate the risk of severe wildfire and work with local and tribal governments to develop a plan that deals with these risks, and then do something about it.

Reducing the risk of high-intensity fire does not mean high-intensity commercial logging. Since almost all water in Oregon originates on national forests, maintaining the quality, quantity and timing of runoff is one of the most important purposes of the public's land. Through the careful use of tree thinning and prescribed fire we can maintain healthy forests and water quality.

There are plenty of bad examples of commercial logging on private lands that have devastated stream courses. Oregon's somewhat anemic, or perhaps poorly enforced, Forest Practices Act fails to protect these values. I can take anyone up on Mount Emily to see firsthand what bad man-

agement of private industrial forest lands means to headwater streams.

To be clear, the law does not affect private property or any existing water rights. The law does withdraw federal stream corridors from mineral entry, meaning that no new mining claims can be made in these areas. This is a good development, as mining and water quality go together like oil and water. We should also anticipate some opposition to management of these areas from the preservationist camp, such as the opinions expressed regularly by George Wuerthner, who asserts all federal forest lands should be off-limits to logging. This ignores the fact these lands are part of the public estate specifically because they can provide resources.

Open spaces, clean water, wildlife habitat and, yes, wood products and forage are all legitimate products of federal lands when managed properly. That's why we have national forests.

Much of the outdoor recreation we enjoy in Northeast Oregon is focused around good water for camping, fishing, hiking and boating. For this reason alone, protection and sound management of these areas should appeal to us all.

Yes, this law is a big and bold step forward for conservation. Good management starts with solid objectives, and the River Democracy Act provides those objectives and deserves to become law.

Bill Aney is a forester and wildlife biologist living in Pendleton and loving the Blue Mountains.

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