

OUR VIEW

Oregon Trail becoming a two-way street

The political leadership in the West needs to take note of the growing number of farm families that are picking up stakes and moving east.

In the 1840s, white settlers from east of the Mississippi River started making the arduous journey west, pushing up the Oregon Trail to the Pacific Northwest.

Others followed the trail to Fort Hall in present-day Idaho, then turned southwest on the California Trail to reach the gold fields of the Sierra Nevada and the farmland of the Central Valley.

Land was cheap and opportunity was within relatively easy grasp. The West offered fewer restrictions than were in place in the established eastern communities.

Many longtime farm and ranch families proudly point to their pioneer heritage.

But over the last decade or so, there's been a small but growing number of farm families picking up stakes and moving east of the coastal states to escape tough business climates.

It's a reverse Oregon Trail of sorts, with modern-day emigrants moving to Idaho, Montana, the Plains and the Midwest.

While it can hardly be described as a mass exodus, people are noticing an uptick in the number of farm operations moving east.

"People have talked about moving for years and years, but now people are actually doing it," said Ryan Jacobsen, manager of the Fresno County Farm Bureau in California. "Statistically, it's still probably a blip on the radar. But it's crazy that it's actually happening."

Farmers cite several reasons for moving: seeking less crowded places; political concerns; COVID protocols; estate taxes, regulations and associated costs; opportunities for expansion; "climate migrants" fleeing drought; and farmers seeking more secure water supplies.

The common thread is that farmers and ranchers are moving to places where they believe their businesses, and families, can better thrive.

The tax and regulatory climate on the West Coast has made it increasingly difficult for family farming operations.

Carbon policies have made fuel more expensive. COVID regulations have reduced the availability of labor, and thus have reduced yield while increasing costs.

State legislatures have grown openly hostile to agriculture, proposing gross receipt tax schemes that would turn the already precarious economics of farming on its head.

They have adopted alternative energy policies that encourage converting farmland into wind and solar energy facilities. They've proposed increasing riparian buffers. They have restricted common pesticides, herbicides and fumigants.

Most farmers can't pick up and leave. But, they can sell out to bigger operations.

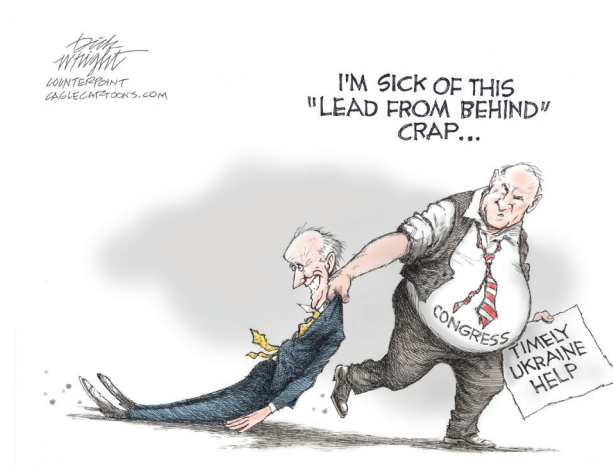
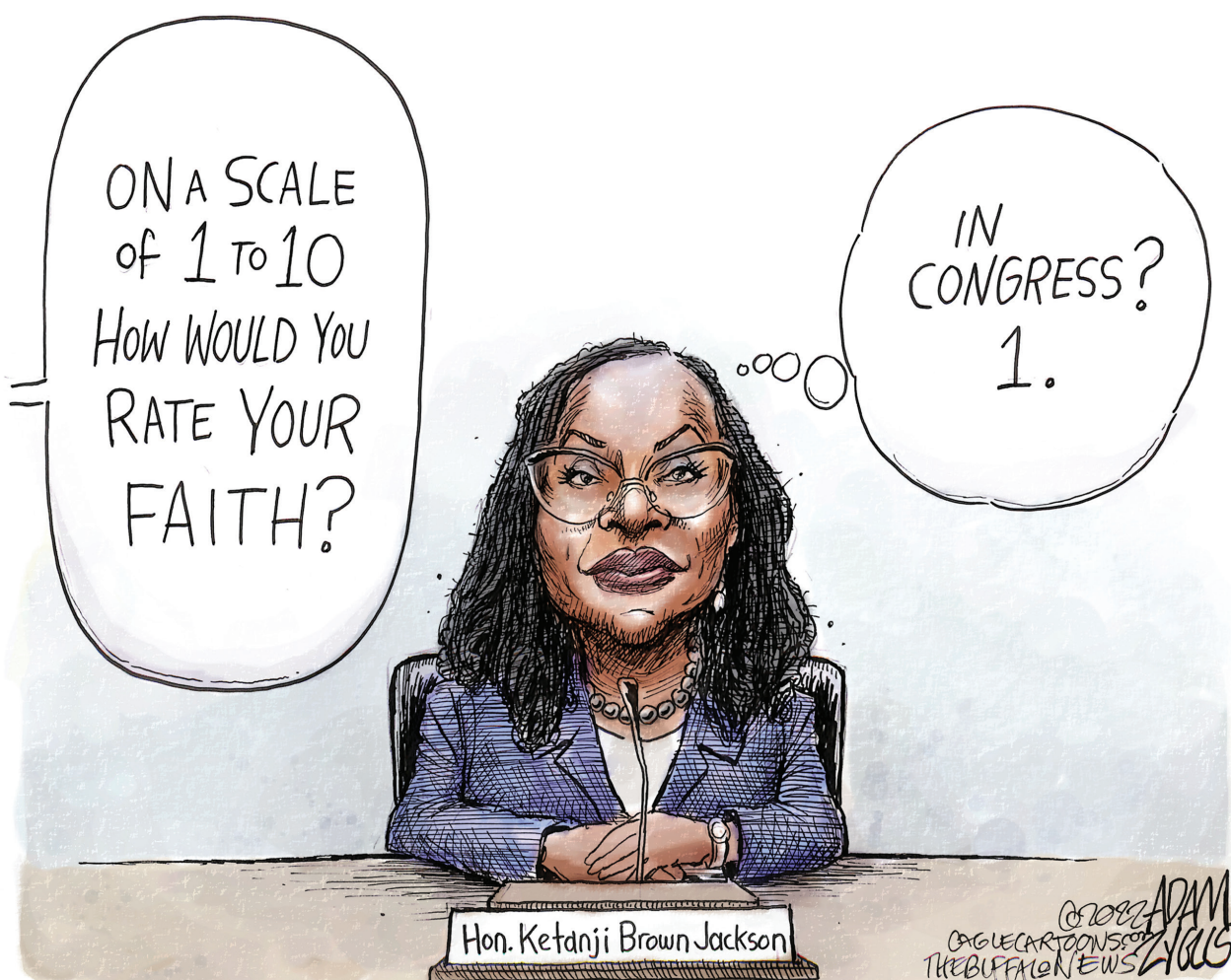
Through increased regulation and legislation, state governments will hasten the consolidation of the industry and the ruin of the rural communities that depend on a viable population to thrive.

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An issue with few absolutes

ANNE MORRISON
THINKING OUT LOUD

Last year, Texas passed legislation prohibiting abortion later than six weeks after conception, even in cases of rape and incest. Twice, the United States Supreme Court has allowed the new law to remain in effect, even though the legal issues have not yet been fully presented.

For reference, women typically have monthly menstrual periods, but the timing often fluctuates. If a woman's period is a week late, it's not necessarily an indication of anything unusual. By prohibiting abortion after six weeks, Texas has effectively made abortion illegal by the time most women would be realizing that they might be pregnant — the intent is clearly to prohibit abortion altogether. The Supreme Court's decision to allow the Texas law to remain in effect before the legal issues have been argued indicates that our country may be on the precipice of a new social order.

Personally, I have always believed that life begins at conception, and that a fetus itself may be sacred and deserving of protection. I also know that being able to control whether and when to have children may be the most basic decision a woman can make regarding the direction of her own life. Because these beliefs can conflict, abortion has always been a troubling issue for me. I decided early on that I would take every precaution in my life to avoid facing the issue directly myself — to avoid becoming pregnant if I wasn't ready and willing to raise a child.

When I was 20, I was raped. The experience was devastating

and changed the direction of my life. I dropped out of school, suddenly uncertain what I wanted to do or study. For a significant time, I lost all direction in my life — and drifted. I became very cautious around men, having learned that men can represent extreme danger. The experience triggered a decades-long struggle with debilitating and sometimes suicidal depression. So any law that prohibits abortion — particularly in cases of rape or incest — forces me to think about how such a law would have affected me if I had become pregnant as the result of being raped. And for me, the consequences would have been dire.

Becoming pregnant after being raped could only have compounded the trauma. If rape at its core is the act of robbing a woman of the ability to make the most fundamental decisions about her own life and body, being forced to go forward with a pregnancy resulting from a rape would have turned the experience into a months-long assault, reinflicting the same sense of powerlessness by further robbing me of any ability to make fundamental decisions about my own life and body — with lifelong ramifications. The pregnancy itself would not even have been the primary issue — being forced to go forward unwillingly with a pregnancy, after being raped unwillingly, would have been the devastating fact.

An abortion would never have been an ideal choice for me — whatever decision I made, I would have been deeply angry about being forced into a decision that I had consciously vowed to avoid. But as depressed and suicidal as I was, I also know that there is no way that I would have survived the further trauma of a forced pregnancy. And as anyone who is staunchly opposed to abortion would have to acknowledge, if I would

not have survived, then neither would any child.

I recognize that rape and incest represent the extreme circumstances in any debate about abortion. But sometimes extreme examples make issues the most clear, and legislation like that in Texas makes clear that there are people who will never consider the circumstances of any pregnancy or respect the decisions of women or girls, not even those who have been victimized, not even those facing the most painful and difficult decisions of their lives.

Other people are entitled to their theoretical opinions about what a woman or girl who faces an unwanted pregnancy, even one caused by rape or incest, should do. Other people will have convictions about the morally correct decision — clearly the Texas Legislature has expressed its view. I only know that if I had been forced into a pregnancy under such circumstances, I would not have survived.

As someone who is generally private, I write about these matters for a reason. My own experience shows that the circumstances of pregnancy can vary widely. We often have no idea of the issues confronting a woman who is considering an abortion. Perhaps the decision of a woman who is facing such a decision is one which should be approached less with judgment, and more with humility and compassion.

The issue of abortion is often presented as black and white, as two sides in irreconcilable opposition. But many people — maybe most — understand that abortion can involve painful, difficult and morally ambiguous decisions, with few absolutes, and with many shades of gray.

Anne Morrison, a La Grande resident and retired attorney, has lived in Union County since 2000.

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