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Opinion

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Our View

We must stop this now

Since May we have watched ever more stunning and audacious acts of violence committed in our great cities under the cover of “mostly peaceful” protests.

Perhaps we became jaded after more than three months of nightly riots accentuated by vandalism, looting, and attempts to burn public buildings and immolate police officers.

The sight of an angry mob of our fellow citizens busting into the U.S. Capitol, disrupting the House and Senate sessions and making a mockery of one the highest institutions in our republic is sickening and almost beyond comprehension.

Almost. We have been building to this for a very long time.

The politics of the past 20 years have become increasingly divisive, intolerant and personal. America has



been divided on all issues into competing factions, each encouraged to believe in the infallibility of its position, to revile the position of opponents, and to doubt our foundational institutions. The rule of law be damned.

How did we reach a place where significant portions of the electorate believe either Donald Trump stole the election in 2016 or Joe Biden stole the election in 2020? When did we lose faith in each other?

Politicians, left and right, have become expert at stoking the flames, without regard to the potential damage.

Our elected officials — presidents, members of Congress, governors, mayors — have used the harshest, most inflammatory rhetoric against their opponents. They whip these mobs into a frenzy, send them out into the street and act surprised when bad actors embedded with legitimate protesters turn ugly. They deplore the violence while subtly suggesting that it was all somehow justified.

We should expect more from our elected officials, but the fault is in ourselves.

We have become all too occupied with the divisions, arranging ourselves neatly in one camp or another. We have listened only to those things that bolstered our world view. We allowed agitators and activists to use our fear and

anger as a means to their own ends.

We stopped talking with and listening to each other. We have slapped vile labels on our neighbors and turned them into irredeemable enemies. And, when times are desperate, instinct dictates we deal harshly with an enemy.

Each of us passes through history so briefly that we often don't appreciate the trials endured by previous generations. America has a fiery history. We've been here before.

Time and again our ancestors learned that there are more things that unite us than divide us; that we can respectfully disagree; that if not friends, we are not enemies; that the legitimacy of an argument is not determined by the force with which it is made; that we can restore trust in our institutions; that no mob rules.

We can pull ourselves from the brink. We must stop this now.

Our View



Essential food workers will wait longer for vaccine

Last week Oregon Gov. Kate Brown decided to push teachers and school staff to the front of the COVID vaccine line, shoving farmworkers, food processors and others in the food supply chain farther back.

Throughout the pandemic, Brown has been abundantly cautious about sending kids and teachers to school. The Oregon Education Association, the union that represents more than 44,000 teachers and school staff members, has been adamant that schools not be reopened until staff safety could be ensured.

So, a strict state matrix for school reopening made it difficult to get kids back into the classroom.

The online classes offered by school districts have largely been a disaster because both teachers and students are ill-equipped for this exercise. With the kids at home, many parents have been unable to return to their jobs, or, for those working remotely, devote necessary time to their employment.

Shortly before Christmas, Brown changed tack, allowing local school boards

to determine when it was safe to reopen.

So, to get them back in school, teachers have been given vaccination priority. They will be first of the so designated 1B “essential” workers to get the shot.

Meanwhile, a host of essential 1B workers have been on the job throughout the pandemic. Farmworkers, processors, warehouse workers, truck drivers and grocery clerks have faced the threat of the virus in their workplaces with little more than hand sanitizer and face masks.

They can wait a little longer. Teachers and staff will roll up their sleeves next, though it's unclear if they can be vaccinated in time to reopen schools before summer break.

No one can argue that the kids don't desperately need to be back in school. That the teachers' union is a large political donor with lots of clout in Salem probably doesn't have anything to do with it.

All animals are equal. Some are more equal than others.

Oregon, the most expensive place to farm

COVID-19 has brought difficult challenges for food producers. It has also brought a heightened realization by the public of how essential food production is and how important farmers and farmworkers are. What I wish more people realized is how burgeoning labor and regulatory costs are driving Oregon family farmers out of business.

Even before these challenging times, underlying economic problems have been increasing, particularly for family farms in Oregon that raise labor-intensive crops like vegetables, fruit, wine grapes, nursery stock, and dairy products. On these farms, labor can cost 60% of total farm expenses. While market forces impact producers in most states about the same, government-imposed costs have made Oregon the most expensive state in the U.S. to farm in if you have employees.

Farmworkers certainly deserve a decent living wage for the hard work they perform, and also for the incredible contributions they make to our vibrant, abundant and sustainable food supply. USDA determines the “regional weighted average hourly rate for crops and livestock” (prevailing wage) annually. It found wages paid in Oregon and Washington were the highest in the U.S. for the last three years, pushed up by our minimum wage. Oregon wages at \$15.83 for 2019 were a full \$2-per-hour more than the U.S. average for farmworkers — and even \$4-per-hour more than some states.

This prevailing wage is what the Department of Labor uses to set the wage rate or Adverse Effect Wage Rate (AEWR) for the agricultural guestworker program for the next year. From 2010 to 2020, the AEWR increased 50% in Oregon, making \$15.83 the starting wage for guestworkers and the minimum wage for any farmworkers working on a farm with an H-2A guestworker program. During the same period, wage growth was only 25% across the U.S. economy. Unfortunately for farm employers, commodity prices are not increasing to cover these enormous labor costs.

Base wages are only part of the cost of farm labor. Other Oregon-mandated programs, such as Paid Sick Leave, add additional costs to our farms and are not paid in most other states. Also because of housing shortages and the high cost of housing in Oregon, many farmers are providing housing rent free with utilities paid, which equates to an employee benefit (and employer cost) of up to \$10 per hour.

Further undermining farm profitability is the cost of regulatory compliance. Regulation is important to ensure the safety of employees, our food supply, and our environment. But the continual onslaught of new and revised

GUEST VIEW
Mike McCarthy



regulations imposes such challenges that many are leaving farming. Fifty mandated local, state, federal and international regulatory programs are required for farmers. Many of these programs are unique to farming and are not a burden on other businesses. Costs for a medium-sized farm can be between \$50,000 and \$100,000 per year for compliance materials, supplies and particularly a farmer's time, much of that unpaid. Even modest family farms now need to hire HR, tax and regulatory professionals to keep up.

This hostile regulatory environment hurts family farms in Oregon. Oregon had the greatest increase of all Western states in farm bankruptcies in the last year. Most Western states have higher on-farm income than Oregon, and Oregon's individual farm income is much less than the average for U.S. farms. USDA data shows Net Cash Income for Oregon farms was less in 2019 than in 2015. Further burdening farms, the state legislature over this same period imposed a tax on gross income in Oregon.

Farmers can seldom, if ever, push these additional costs up the “food chain.” Some farms can help profitability with direct or niche marketing, but these are small markets for only a few farmers. Most Americans buy food at supermarkets, so most farms have to sell to those chains. Just five supermarket chains buy half of the U.S. produce; this monopolistic market pushes down the prices paid to farmers.

The low prices consumers pay for food in the U.S. (just 9% of disposable income, the lowest in the world) create an imbalance for farmers between what they pay for labor, farm supplies, and regulatory compliance and what they receive for food produced.

Every elected official in Oregon says they love and support family farms. But Oregon's constantly increasing burdens of new taxes, government-imposed wage rates and labor policies, and regulatory costs are pushing family farms out of existence.

We want to keep farming, but if our state government policies continue to make us non-profitable and non-competitive, we are left with a sad choice. Leave farming or leave Oregon.

Mike McCarthy is a first-generation farmer in Hood River County, and has raised apples, pears, cherries and cattle for 40 years. He is a member of the Oregon Farm Bureau State Board and has a master's degree from Oregon State University and a Ph.D. from Michigan State University, both in agriculture.

READERS' VIEW

Governor should reopen businesses, too

I feel compelled to communicate with Gov. Kate Brown about the present situation in Oregon and a major decision she has recently made.

Yes, we all know she and I have our differences, but I am struggling to understand why she has decided to open schools and not businesses.

I have seen businesses bend over backward to install safety barriers and other measures and comply with social distancing. Businesses need to be open and

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Send letters via email to opinions@capitalpress.com. Emailed letters are preferred and require less time to process, which could result in quicker publication. Letters also may be sent to P.O. Box 2048, Salem, OR 97308.

employees need to go back to work. Most people are being, and will continue to be, very cautious as long as this epidemic lasts. Let's give businesses the same opportunity she is giving schools. I challenge her to now end

the ban before people and private businesses go bankrupt.

Most sincerely,

Liz VanLeeuwen
Linn County State Representative 1981-1999
Halsey, Ore.