

Monologue

Idle Hands

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Editor In Chief

Earlier this month, the Oregon Senate debated and voted upon a very important bill. It was one which should never have been needed, and one which was victorious despite being defeated.

It was Senate bill 319, the controversial gay rights bill.

I say that such a bill should never exist because in theory the Constitutions of Oregon and the United States provide equality to all people. Of course, we know that's not the way it works in real life. The gay rights bill, like the once and future Equal Rights Amendment, is designed to fill in and smooth out the pot holes in the Bill of Rights.

And I say SB319 was victorious despite its defeat because it actually made it out of committee and onto the floor for a vote.

No other gay rights bill in Oregon has come on so strong and the thanks should go to Senate Majority Leader Jan Wyers, D-Portland.

The purpose of SB319 is simple, and I was lucky enough to talk to Wyers last weekend at Portland Community College's Sylvania campus. In the current constitution of this state, it is illegal to discriminate against anyone on the basis of race, age, religion or country of birth. SB319 would have listed "sexual orientation" to that list, thus protecting the rights of yet another minority (the kind of futuristic legislation for which Oregon is famous).

However, the bill would not have created any special rights for gays. There was no Affirmative Action or employment quotas, Wyers said. "Right now, if a gay wants to check into a hotel and they say 'No, we don't take queers here,' there's nothing that person can do," Wyers explained.

He also pointed out that a gay might be able to sue under existing case law and win, but then again maybe not. No constitutional umbrella exists in this area.

This was a very tame bill, all things considered. It did not actively endorse a homosexual lifestyle, nor did it force any viewpoint on anyone. Despite all that, the members of the Senate each received letters from someone calling him/herself "god." These letters graded each senator, giving those who voted aye on SB319 an "F." The letter also included "a veiled death threat." Wyers said.

Land of the free, etc.

SB319 failed by a vote of 13 to 17 which, when one takes the content of the bill into consideration, is a very strong showing.

Once again, Wyers helped get the bill as far as it did by rushing it through the Senate at a mad-cap pace. Wyers originated the bill in the interim judiciary committee, of which he is the chairperson. The bill was rushed through that committee, taken to public hearing that was held at night (and at which no official action was scheduled to take place, thus keeping away most of the press).

I suppose no one really expected the bill to make it all the way through, even with a savvy and high-powered senator running interference for it. Oregon is, after all, a fairly conservative place. Still, SB319 came on strong and did better than was anticipated, proving that there are elements of justice in the Senate.

A statewide gay rights bill is inevitable, as is an Equal Rights Amendment. It is only a matter of time before the people of Oregon put away their silly prejudices and realize the Constitution works equally for everyone or not at all for anyone.

Then, the Oregon Legislature will once again lead the nation, as it so often has in the past.

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Atiyeh's death penalty bill wrong answer for issue

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Question: What bill has appeared time after time in Oregon's legislature, been adopted and later declared unconstitutional, and was recently introduced to the 1983 legislature?

Answer: Thanks to Gov. Vic Atiyeh, the issue of reinstating Oregon's death penalty has surfaced once more in the state's capitol.

On April 18 Atiyeh started the ball rolling by presenting his revised bill to the House Judiciary Committee. Should it become law, Oregon's death penalty would be lethal injection for those convicted of aggravated murder.

However, Atiyeh's proposal also states that a separate hearing following a conviction would decide if the death penalty should be employed and, if it is not, the alternative would be life imprisonment.

Atiyeh is supporting the reinstatement of the death penalty because he thinks it will be a deterrent to premeditated murder. He is not alone in his support of it, either. In a recent poll conducted by a local television news station, over 70 percent of the people who participated in the poll were in favor of bringing back the death penalty.

Although the death penalty appears to be an effective way to deal with major murder cases, I am not altogether sure that it is an appropriate means of punishment.

Atiyeh's belief that potential murderers will think twice before killing may be true for some. The up-and-coming Charles Mansons of our society, however, are probably not going to give the death penalty much thought, considering how demented their minds must already be. How is it possible to expect a psychotic to control himself by thinking rationally?

It appears that death is really nothing more than an easy way out for the murderer when it comes to facing his punishment. Yet it's so easy to approve of the death of the murderer as compensation for the death of the victim. How many have watched those classic Charles Bronson movies, where he seeks revenge for the brutal murder of his wife and rape of his daughter by taking on and shooting every malicious culprit he encounters, and have, like myself, cheered him on in the process?

When it comes to seriously harming our loved ones, it appears to be human instinct to want to harm whoever is responsible in the same way. But when it comes to murder, once the killer has been executed he is no longer being punished, because he can no longer feel anything. Death becomes an easy way out for the murderer, as he no longer experiences waking up in a jail cell, facing the day-to-day reminder as to why he is there.

But since our current laws seem to protect the rights of the criminals more than the rights of the victims, sending a convicted murderer to jail right now doesn't provide adequate punishment. Many people may support the death penalty because they have no other choice in selecting a sufficient form of retribution.

Instead of reinstating the death penalty, why not make life inside our prisons tougher than it is now? Why not cut down on the amount of activities available to the hardened murderers-after all, they were placed in prison as a form of punishment, not so they could sit and watch television with their cell mates.

If prison life became more of a formidable affair to murderers rather than a temporary holding tank until they go up for parole, the citizens on the outside would not have to be forced to choose the death penalty as the only means to uphold justice.

