

Right-wing cabal is on the right track in Congress

Some think the Freedom Caucus in the U.S. House is an evil cabal of political outlaws, while in other circles they are patriots trying to squeeze a little democracy out of the petrified old corpse of Congress.

I was leaning toward the first view, but then remembered, "Hey, my friend Cynthia's one of those nuts. Why am I making negative assumptions about her?"

This gang of 40 or so U.S. representatives is blamed for the pending retirement of House Speaker John Boehner, residual doubts about who will be able to replace him and a lingering threat of missing national debt payments or temporarily shutting down parts of the government. To most here on the West Coast, all this is a tedious and economically dangerous distraction from the job of running the country.



Matt Winters

Rep. Raúl Labrador, R-Idaho, and Rep. Cynthia Lummis, R-Wyo., are the only Northwest members of the caucus. They both were among those who attended a pitch Tuesday from a potential candidate for speaker, a position that is third in line for the presidency.

"I'm not sure that (prospective speaker) Paul Ryan could walk on water today," Lummis said after the meeting, "but give him 10 days."

After knowing her since 1983, I'm pretty sure Cynthia can't walk on water either. She was a year ahead of me in law school. We later ran an unsuccessful gubernatorial campaign for Mary Mead, mother of Wyoming's current Gov. Matt Mead. Cynthia came away with invaluable lessons on how to win a statewide campaign, while I was so disgusted by the whole process I moved to Seattle and became an independent.

Cynthia's a lovely person — bright, funny, and moderate in her personal views — though being a wealthy rancher does to some extent preordain her to being a political right-winger. I'd happily give her a hug in Cheyenne or the corridors of the Rayburn building in D.C.

A national reporter recently said much the same of the Freedom Caucus as a whole: that they are among the most friendly and intelligent people you'll meet in Congress, not hateful radicals but libertarians who don't like being pushed around. Progressive people disagree with them about many things, but we wouldn't think them mean.

An Associated Press story this week described Cynthia's thinking about the speaker standoff:

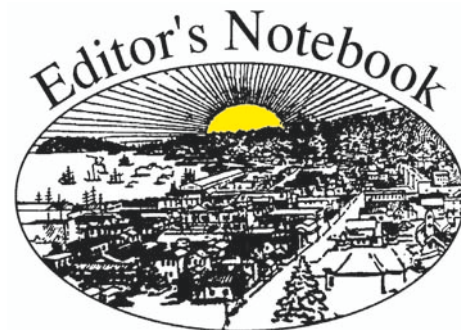
"Recent speakers, both Republicans and Democrats, have exercised their power through rewarding allies and punishing enemies among their colleagues in Congress," Lummis said Monday. "I find that system to be worthy of complete rejection."

She elaborated, "When I look for a speaker candidate, it's not going to have anything to do with whether they're conservative or moderate, or whether they're a reformer or establishment in terms of their philosophy about legislation. Rather, it's going to be their philosophy about leadership. Are they willing to turn their backs on the command and control, reward and punishment system of leadership, and return to system where committees work their will?"

Although some doubt there ever was a Golden Age when Congress actually functioned as an institution, Cynthia's views don't sound so different from those of former Washington state Rep. Brian Baird, who came to feel marginalized as a Democrat when his party controlled the House. Baird's ideas for institutional reform didn't sit well with national Democratic leaders who regard rank-and-file House members as interchangeable pawns, expected to move as a single mass in whatever direction they are instructed to go.



U.S. Rep. Cynthia Lummis, second from left, is a member of the Freedom Caucus in Congress, the group that has roiled GOP leadership in recent weeks. Above, she is shown attending a University of Wyoming event with the state's U.S. senators and two constituents.



It's all too easy to 'other-ize' anybody we disagree with.

(Like Cynthia and me, Baird also earned an advanced degree from the University of Wyoming in the mid-1980s.)

A big reason why voters tend to like their own congressional representatives, even as we loath the institution to which they belong, is that most of them are nice, smart, ambitious — the sort of people who have striven for success since high school. Being elected to Congress is, in effect, one of the top prizes in life's popularity contest. Then they get to D.C. and are expected to defer completely to agendas set by a few party leaders, big contributors, union bosses and other nearly invisible "lever-pullers."

Most still find satisfaction in subtly influencing legislation and aiding constituents in our relationships with federal agencies. Even the least consequential of congressmen and women still are well paid, fawned over and pampered. But beneath it all can be sensed a feeling of self-loathing, of having won the political Olympics only to learn the winner's medal is made of brass-colored plastic.

In modern America where we self-segregate based on political beliefs, it's all too easy to "other-ize" anybody we disagree with. If the country is going to survive in its current form, structural reforms must be forged in Congress. America doesn't need a second revolution. But Congress needs a bunch of them, across the political spectrum.

—M.S.W.

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Cliff Owen/AP Photo

House Speaker John Boehner of Ohio kisses Rep. Cynthia Lummis, R-Wyo., before administering a ceremonial re-enactment of the House oath-of-office Jan. 6, on Capitol Hill in Washington.



Mary Clare Jalonick/AP Photo

Republican Cynthia Lummis, right, campaigns in a grocery store in Lander, Wyo., in 2008. Lummis was in a close race with Democrat Gary Trauner to fill Dick Cheney's former House seat.

Open forum

Call the governor

How many meetings have you attended that start with, "We are here to listen to your input"? Oh come on now, it's OK, and won't be cheating if you contact the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) in your total.

Clearly, Oregon Gov. Kate Brown wants to hear your opinion, because there is a phone number, 503-378-4582, and a real staff person to record your comments. You are probably thinking, "What am I going to call the governor about?"

Glad you asked. How about the fact that 68 percent (no that's not a

typo, it really was nearly 7 out of 10) of Clatsop County voters said no, they did not want a liquefied natural gas (LNG) pipeline in the jaw-droppingly beautiful Lower Columbia area we call our home. Period. And that wasn't just Warrenton and Astoria voters, it was the whole county.

Now comes Oregon LNG, who wants to build an LNG terminal on the Skipanon peninsula that is so big, it will cost enough money to wear out your calculator batteries, and will release 2.6 billion tons of carbon monoxide, plus methane gas, annually into the air

we breathe. Wow. That sounds important enough to me to be a 2016 campaign election issue — cough, cough.

So how else would this terminal affect our daily lives? In all likelihood, it would hurt Warrenton financially with decreased property values and increased insurance rates for homes and businesses in the huge blast zone around the terminal.

It would also likely reduce revenue from sport and commercial fishing. It would destroy downtown Astoria with the hundreds and hundreds of trucks transporting construction material through down-

town, from Tongue Point to the Skipanon, for four years.

In addition, it would put all Lower Columbia residents at serious risk because of the earthquake/tsunami zone location. If a person doesn't care about that, they should probably check their pulse to see if their heart is still beating.

For goodness' sake, Oregon LNG doesn't even have land to build on, because the court ruled that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has an easement on that property.

Ask Gov. Brown to use her authority, the Coastal Zone Management Act and the Clean Air Act to

stop this project. No matter how hard anyone tries, you cannot mitigate a major earthquake/tsunami, global air pollution, the extinction of a salmon run or the will of the people.

So whip out those cell phones and call Gov. Brown again and again and again at 503-378-4582 — there is no limit. The benefits are limitless, and you should feel much better after you have had your say. Some people even say it's therapeutic.

So come on, folks. This is our democracy. Let's make it work the way it's supposed to.

CARL DOMINEY
Astoria



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