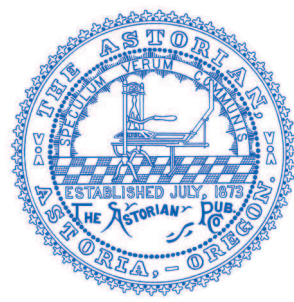


THE DAILY ASTORIAN

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OUR VIEW

Budget will show the need to end shortsightedness

How much does state governmental shortsightedness cost? Oregonians will get the answer to that question on Thursday when Gov. Kate Brown is scheduled to unveil her proposed balanced budget for the state. The budget for the next biennium comes amid a predicted \$1.4 billion deficit. While the governor hasn't publicly detailed it, she has strongly hinted the spending plan will contain deep cuts for state agencies and services to make up the gap, which has been a long time in the making.

After the last legislative session and throughout the campaign season, Brown and many of the state's legislators and leaders put all their eggs in one basket, relying on voters to pass Measure 97, the gross receipts tax on C corporations with more than \$25 million in annual revenue. They endorsed the measure as the way to overcome many of the state's well-documented money woes. The fatally flawed tax measure was backed by public employee unions and was expected to generate \$3 billion a year in annual tax revenue. Voters, however, soundly rejected it.

The unfortunate, but predictable, result of going all in on Measure 97 instead of looking for other solutions as even a backup plan is that state leaders are yet again faced with making what may be excruciating cuts with limited maneuvering ability.

One thing is certain though, the governor and Legislature must look at both sides of the ledger, to try and boost incoming revenue and lower outgoing expense. While the state does have nearly \$1 billion in reserves, those reserves are only supposed to be tapped during a recession, and the state isn't in one now. New taxes and those that trickle down will certainly be met with stiff resistance, as the defeat of Measure 97 illustrated, as will cuts that affect livelihoods and services. Legislators have to determine the state's most urgent priorities in both areas, and hard choices that they didn't want to face will have to be made.

Jump in PERS

One issue that must be addressed with vigor is the continuing growth of the unfunded liability of the Public Employees Retirement System. The program's liability is now nearly \$22 billion and is a root cause of the projected upcoming deficit. PERS costs to the state's local governments and school districts are scheduled to jump by \$885 million next year.

Legislators refrained from tackling the problem in their last session, but it is unavoidable now. Calls for reform are even coming from those associated with the system itself.

At a recent joint meeting of the Oregon Public Employees Retirement System board and the citizen panel that oversees its investments, Rukaiyah Adams, vice chair of the Oregon Investment Council, appealed to state leaders. "My call to the Legislature and to the governor is for leadership on this, and I mean right now," he said. "This is becoming a moral issue. We can't just talk about numbers anymore."

The chair of the investment council, Katy Durant, followed up, telling *The Oregonian*, "We're beyond crisis. We should have been addressing this 20 years ago and it's just been building. It's a little bit like a Ponzi scheme. Sooner or later it's going to catch up with you."

Fixing the PERS problem won't in itself solve all of the state's funding issues, but it will certainly make the other problems more manageable. As Brown's budget is expected to show, it's clear that it's time to end the shortsightedness and fix the problems, and PERS should be No. 1 on the list.

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Letters should be exclusive to *The Daily Astorian*.

Letters should be fewer than 350 words and must include the writer's name, address and phone numbers. You will be contacted to confirm authorship.

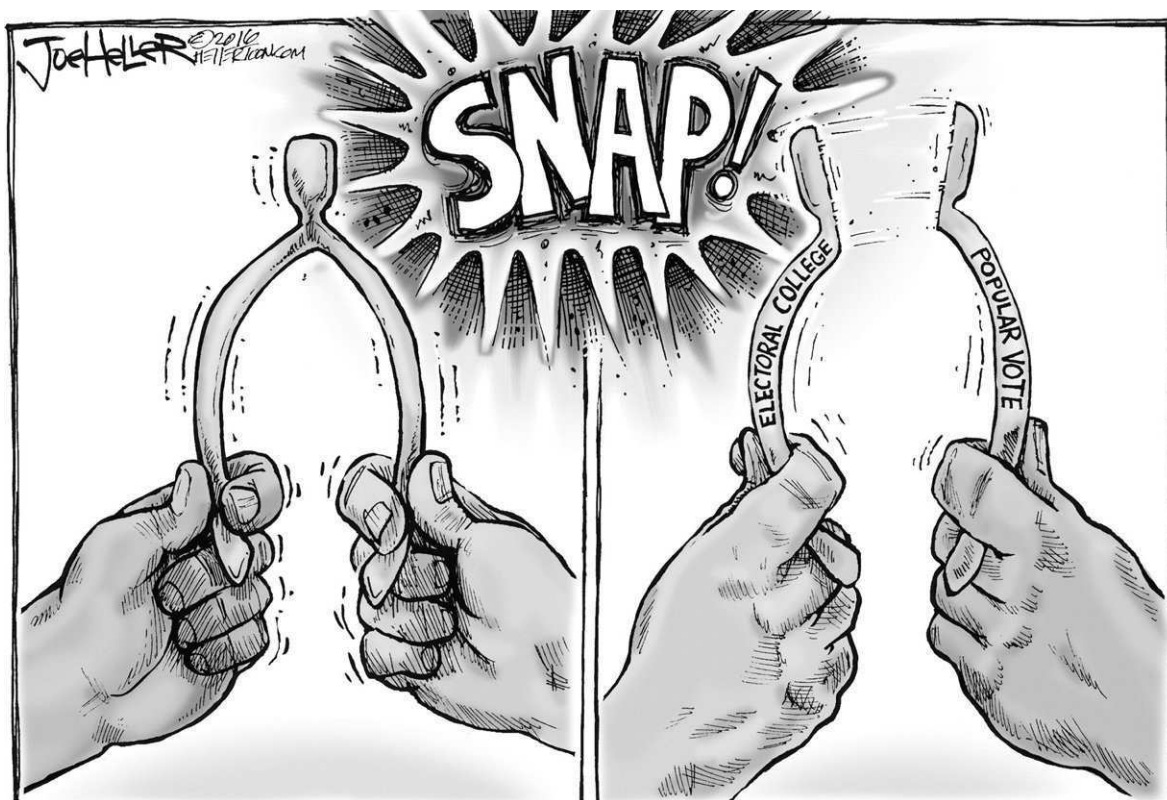
All letters are subject to editing for space, grammar and, on occasion, factual accuracy. Only two letters per writer are printed each month.

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mentioning the writer by name, should refer to the headline and date the letter was published. Discourse should be civil and people should be referred to in a respectful manner.

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Farewell to the comic in chief

By TIMOTHY EGAN
New York Times News Service

I miss him already. Miss his steady rationality, his I-got-this-mien, the eight years without a hint of personal scandal. And not to be overlooked, I miss the wit of Barack Obama. No president has had a better comic sensibility.



Let's face it: We're going to need to laugh to get through the presidency of Donald Trump and the Monster's Ball of his administration. Trump can't tell a joke, nor can he take one. He was graceless and unfunny at the Al Smith dinner last month, getting booed for his boorishness. And he was petulant and petty with his tweet after a "Saturday Night Live" skit had him asking Siri about the Islamic State.

Thankfully, jokes at the expense of the highest office in the land are fully protected by the Constitution. But jokes coming from the occupant of that office are rare, and rarely funny. Obama is the exception.

Anyone can write a joke. Few can deliver one. Obama has great timing, and a sense of self-deprecation honed over years of making fun of his name and his ears.

The highlights

Here's a highlight reel to call upon during the coming White House humor drought:

While being interviewed for a post-presidency job not long ago, an employer played by Stephen Colbert was skeptical that Obama had any useful skills. "I did win the Nobel Peace Prize," said the president. "Oh, what was that for?"

"To be honest, I don't know," Obama said.

You would think that having your legitimacy challenged would make

you Nixonian dark or Trumpian enraged. For Obama, the birther nonsense has given him some of his best material. So there he was in a video for the White House Correspondents' dinner, waiting in line at the department of motor vehicles to get a driver's license.

"You're going to need a birth certificate," says the clerk. Obama pulls one from his pocket. "It's real," he deadpans. Another video showed him getting retirement tips from former House Speaker John Boehner. Obama looked at the bright side: "I can wear those mom jeans again."

Appearing on "Between Two Ferns," the mock cable show with Zach Galifianakis, Obama was asked, "What's it like to be the last black president?" POTUS didn't blink. "What's it like for this to be the last time you'll ever talk to a president?"

Trump sends out angry tweets demanding apologies, and cyberbullying his many enemies. Obama used Twitter to comment on an unusual recipe for guacamole in *The New York Times*. "Not buying peas in the guac," he wrote, a bipartisan conclusion.

Abe Lincoln

The secret source of humor is not joy, Mark Twain said, but sorrow. And in looking back at the presidents who could tell a joke, you see people surrounded by tragedy. Obama may have found some of his inspiration from the man who held the union together at its darkest time, Abraham Lincoln.

Lincoln's best-known comic line came during a debate, when he was accused of being two-faced. "Honestly," he said, "if I were two-faced, would I be wearing this one?"

Teddy Roosevelt, who lost his wife and his mother on the same day, was a buoyant prankster and joke-teller, and probably the only presi-

dent to skinny dip in the Potomac. His progressive agenda was often stymied in the Senate. T.R. returned the fire. "When they call the roll," he said, "the senators do not know whether to announce present or not guilty."

His fifth cousin, Franklin Roosevelt, loved a good joke, and not just while mixing drinks during his regular White House cocktail hour. At the depth of the Great Depression, in signing legislation that loosened the worst grip of Prohibition, he said, "this would be a good time for a beer."

Harry Truman gave us the line about how to find a friend in Washington — "Get a dog." John F. Kennedy parried concern about his wealthy father buying the election with a telegram he read for the press: "Dear Jack: don't buy a single vote more than is necessary. I'll be damned if I'm going to pay for a landslide. Love, Dad."

Ronald Reagan, who learned to glide through public life on a carpet of soft humor, had this famous quip to his wife after being shot: "Honey, I forgot to duck."

Obama's humor is droll, with a bite. He noted that Dick Cheney said he was the worst president of his lifetime. "Which is interesting, because I think Dick Cheney is the worst president of my lifetime."

The 44th president is leaving office with soaring approval ratings, or as he put it: "The last time I was this high, I was trying to decide my major."

In Greece last week, after touring the timeless monuments of an ancient civilization, Obama was pestered with questions about the fate of the planet when he hands the office over to Trump. He offered some reassuring words, echoing Yogi Berra. "I always say that the only thing that is the end of world is the end of the world."

Why corruption matters in the White House

By PAUL KRUGMAN
New York Times News Service

Remember all the news reports suggesting, without evidence, that the Clinton Foundation's fundraising created conflicts of interest? Well, now the man who benefited from all that innuendo is on his way to the White House. And he's already giving us an object lesson in what real conflicts of interest look like, as authoritarian governments around the world shower favors on his business empire.

Of course, Donald Trump could be rejecting these favors and separating himself and his family from his hotels and so on. But he isn't. In fact, he's openly using his position to drum up business. And his early appointments suggest that he won't be the only player using political power to build personal wealth. America has just entered an era of unprecedented corruption at the top.

The question you need to ask is why this matters. Hint: It's not the money, it's the incentives.

We could be talking about a lot of money — think billions, not millions, to Trump alone. But America is a rich country, whose government spends more than \$4 trillion a year, so even large-scale looting amounts to rounding error. What's important is not the money that sticks to the fingers of the inner circle, but what they do to get that money, and the bad policy that results.

Normally, policy reflects some combination of practicality — what works? — and ideology — what fits

my preconceptions? And our usual complaint is that ideology all too often overrules the evidence.

Monetizing policies

But now we're going to see a third factor powerfully at work: What policies can officials, including the man at the top, personally monetize? And the effect will be disastrous.

Let's start relatively small, with the choice of Betsy DeVos as education secretary. DeVos has some obvious affinities with Trump: Her husband is an heir to the fortune created by Amway, a company that has been accused of being a fraudulent scheme and paid \$150 million to settle a class-action suit. But what's really striking is her signature issue, school vouchers, in which parents are given money rather than having their children get a public education.

At this point there's a lot of evidence on how well school vouchers actually work, and it's basically damning. For example, Louisiana's extensive voucher plan unambiguously reduced student achievement. But voucher advocates won't take no for an answer. It's also true that vouchers might find their way to for-profit educational institutions.

And the track record of for-profit education is terrible; the Obama administration has been cracking down on the scams that infest the industry. But things will be different now: For-profit education stocks soared after the election. Two, three, many Trump Universities!

Moving on, I've already written about the Trump infrastructure plan, which for no obvious reason involves widespread privatization of public assets. No obvious reason,

that is, except the huge opportunities for cronyism and profiteering.

What's truly scary is the potential impact of corruption on foreign policy. Again, foreign governments are already trying to buy influence by adding to Trump's wealth, and he is welcoming their efforts.

In case you're wondering, yes, this is illegal, in fact unconstitutional, a clear violation of the emoluments clause. But who's going to enforce the Constitution? Republicans in Congress? Don't be silly.

Think about the tilt this de facto bribery will give to U.S. policy. What kind of regime can buy influence by enriching the president and his friends? The answer is, only a government that doesn't adhere to the rule of law.

Think about it: Could Britain or Canada curry favor with the incoming administration by waiving regulations to promote Trump golf courses? No — those nations have free presses, independent courts and rules designed to prevent exactly that kind of improper behavior. But, someplace like Vladimir Putin's Russia can easily funnel vast sums to the man at the top in return for, say, the withdrawal of security guarantees for the Baltic states.

One would like to hope that national security officials are explaining to Trump just how destructive it would be to let business considerations drive foreign policy. But reports say that Trump has barely met with those officials, refusing to get the briefings that are normal for a president-elect.

So how bad will the effects of Trump-era corruption be? The best guess is, worse than you can possibly imagine.