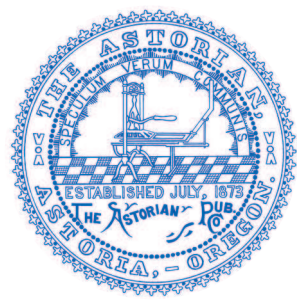


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OUR VIEW



Ted Shorack/The Daily Astorian

Dennis Richardson is the first Republican to win statewide office in more than a decade.

Richardson will help influence decision-making

Republicans dominated Oregon politics for much of our state's history. That one-party rule was not good for Oregon, and neither is the Democrats' one-party rule that persists today.

As of the new year, that domination was broken — a bit. Dennis Richardson of Central Point in southern Oregon will begin his tenure as secretary of state, the first Republican elected to statewide office since U.S. Sen. Gordon Smith won re-election in 2002.

A healthy two-party system helps ensure that a broad range of interests are represented in the Oregon Capitol. Discussion is deeper. Issues and candidates are vetted more closely, instead of being approved or denied simply because of one party's dominance.

Most Oregonians occupy the broad center of the political spectrum and care little about party labels. That is why Richardson won at the November election, although Republican voters were outnumbered by Democrats and nonaffiliated voters.

Richardson, who took the oath of office on Friday before a standing-room-only crowd in the state Senate Chamber, vowed to run the Secretary of State's Office in a nonpartisan manner. He has told fellow Republicans not to count on him to seek retribution against Democrats.

Richardson also pledged to be transparent and accountable, but his appointment of Leslie Cummings as deputy secretary of state raised eyebrows. Cummings had been forced out of the state Employment Department amid allegations of wasteful spending and nepotism.

In an interview Friday, Richardson said Cummings was a whistleblower, who brought wrongdoing to his attention when he was a legislator and who was the victim of a witch hunt at Employment.

Such appointments will set the tone for his administration. If Richardson is right about her situation, he deserves credit for giving a talented public servant another opportunity. If he is wrong, he will have undermined his legitimacy.

Richardson's conservative views and rural perspective certainly could be a welcome and influential counterbalance to years of Democratic dominance in Salem.

He will be the first Republican to serve on the State Land Board since Secretary of State Norma Paulus left office in 1985. The Land Board — comprising the governor, state treasurer and secretary of state — oversees nearly 1.6 million acres of land and related resources. They include farm and range lands in Eastern Oregon, forests in western Oregon, mineral rights and state-managed waterways. Among other things, the Land Board in 2017 will decide whether to proceed with the controversial sale of the Elliott State Forest.

Richardson also should be good for the Oregon Republican Party. He demonstrated that voters will support mainstream Republicans who are experienced and well-qualified, and Oregonians will reject Democrats who are far left of the mainstream — Richardson's opponent in this case, state Labor Commissioner Brad Avakian. It is worth remembering that Richardson won election with the support of at least two Democratic leaders — state Sen. Betsy Johnson of Scappoose and state Rep. Brad Witt of Clatskanie — and he received every newspaper endorsement.

Oregon's Republican election machinery deteriorated over the years, because there were too few viable statewide Republican candidates to keep the campaign consultants in business. In contrast, Oregon is awash with Democratic campaign consultants. Those trends contributed to Oregon's leftward swing in state politics.

Richardson's victory gives hope for a resurgence among Republicans. But the party must field experienced, well-qualified candidates who represent mainstream Oregon.

And Richardson must live up to his commitment to transparent, accountable government.



Media's failures in a year of Trump



Chinatopix via AP

A worker takes a picture of a giant rooster sculpture resembling U.S. President-elect Donald Trump on display outside a shopping mall to celebrate the upcoming Chinese Year of the Rooster in Taiyuan in north China's Shanxi province.

By NICHOLAS KRISTOF
New York Times News Service

The last year has not been the news media's finest.

Despite some outstanding coverage, overall we misled many people into thinking that Donald Trump would never win the Republican nomination, let alone the White House. Too often we followed what glittered, yapped uselessly at everything in sight and didn't dig hard enough or hold politicians accountable for lies.

In 2008, the three broadcast networks, in their nightly news programs, devoted over the entire year a total of three hours and 40 minutes to issues reporting (defined as independent coverage of election issues, not arising from candidate statements or debates). In 2016, that plummeted to a grand total of just 36 minutes.

ABC and NBC had just nine minutes of issues coverage each; CBS had 18 minutes. So ABC and NBC each had less than one minute of issues coverage per month in 2016.

Those figures come from Andrew Tyndall, whose Tyndall Report monitors the news programs. By Tyndall's measures, there was zero independent coverage in 2016 on those nightly programs about poverty, climate change or drug addiction. "Journalists were confronted with the spectacle of an issues-free campaign," Tyndall told me. "They had to decide how to react: with complicity, since such tactics were easy to shoehorn into the ratings-pleasing entertainment structure of a reality TV show, or with defiance, by delving into what was at stake."

They chose the former, he says, and "treated their viewers not as citizens, but as so many pairs of eyeballs."

Granted, there were exceptions, including first-rate digging by newspapers and magazines into Trump's foundation, taxes and past. One challenge was commercial pressure as news organizations in all platforms — print, digital and TV — scrambled for a business model. Everyone knew that Trump

We should be infused with a renewed sense of mission. So, for a New Year's resolution, let's try harder to be watchdogs, not lap dogs.

was ratings gold, while a segment on poverty was ratings mud.

As Leslie Moonves, the CBS president, said in February about Trump's run: "It may not be good for America, but it's damn good for CBS."

The entire media world needs new revenue sources — including philanthropy — to finance coverage that is important but unprofitable.

Still, many of us chose journalism because we believed it to be a public good. I've seen journalists abroad risk their lives to get a story because they believed it important. If they can do that, maybe executive producers can occasionally risk ratings?

As early as March, Trump had received \$1.9 billion in free media coverage, 190 times as much as he paid for. Back then, I called around to journalists and scholars, and there was already a widespread view that television had screwed up by handing Trump the microphone and failing to fact-check him adequately.

In addition, Trump was masterfully at diverting us from substance. As Tom Rosenstiel, a veteran press critic, noted: "We need journalists to cover what is important, not bark at every car."

It didn't help that the national media isn't very diverse — not just in racial or ethnic terms, but also socioeconomic and geographically. We don't have many national journalists with working-class or evangelical roots, so our coverage of Trump voters was often shallow or condescending, and we largely missed the fury and despair that Trump rode to victory.

We'll have to figure out new ways of doing things while focusing on journalism and not stenography. Jay Rosen of New York University suggests perhaps sending interns to cover White House briefings, and the veterans to dig up real stories.

We'll have to be persistent, continuing to press for the release of taxes and for policy details. We'll have to avoid the perils of false equivalence, quoting a person on each side as if there's a genuine debate when we know there isn't. And this may sound odd for a columnist to say, but we need more reporting, less pontificating.

We should also try harder to debunk fake stories. A false story on Facebook about President Barack Obama banning the Pledge of Allegiance in schools had more than 2 million shares or other interactions, and a make-believe story about Pope Francis endorsing Trump had nearly 1 million such interactions.

When so many Americans believe false claims, we should weigh in aggressively on the side of truth.

Would it matter if the mainstream media did a better job? Or do we live in a post-truth age in which we are so distrusted that our investigations will be dismissed, if they are seen at all? I'm not sure, but we must at least try.

We will soon have as commander in chief the most evasive, ignorant and puerile national politician I've ever met, and while there are many factors behind his election, I think we in the media contributed by skimping on due diligence.

The lesson learned? As 2017 dawns, let's focus on what matters. Not celebrity, but substance: Will millions of Americans lose health insurance? What will happen to the 21 percent of U.S. children living in poverty? Will Syrians be endlessly slaughtered, and will south Sudan collapse into genocide? Will there be a trade war? A real war?

For too much of 2016, we in the news media — with many stellar exceptions — sometimes were mindless mutts that barked at everything. Partly because of that lapse, the country today needs a robust fourth estate more than ever. We should be infused with a renewed sense of mission. So, for a New Year's resolution, let's try harder to be watchdogs, not lap dogs.