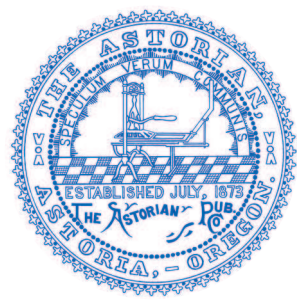


THE DAILY ASTORIAN

Founded in 1873



DAVID F. PERO, *Publisher & Editor*
 LAURA SELLERS, *Managing Editor*
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 CARL EARL, *Systems Manager*
 JOHN D. BRUIJN, *Production Manager*
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OUR VIEW

Another trauma for downtown

J.C. Penney's pending departure from downtown Astoria is an earthquake. Announced last Friday, the company plans to close some 138 locations, including five of their 14 stores in Oregon. They also include Three Rivers Mall in Longview, Washington, and downtown Portland.

If Astoria were an isolated closure, we might surmise that Penney's sees Wal-Mart coming into our market. But it is clearly part of a larger picture of a venerable retailer searching for its footing in a world increasingly moving to Amazon shopping.

If we are going to be hard-headed about this, we cannot waste much time in grief. The only question that matters now is: What's next? In other words, the prospect of a large empty space in the 1200 block of Commercial St. raises the opportunity to bring something new to downtown.

Unlike many mall locations, Penney owns its Astoria property. Some 35 years ago, Sion Wentworth of Astoria — then a retired J.C. Penney executive — told the editor of this newspaper, J.W. Forrester, that the Astoria store had one of the chain's highest sales per square feet of the store.

Many Astorians will miss our Penney's. The store featured a broad array of goods — from children's clothing to bedding and housewares — at affordable prices.

The challenge to Astoria business people is to find a successor for the space. Years ago,

Chester Trabucco tried to lure Trader Joe's to downtown Astoria. That is probably worth another try. At the same time, there is a new generation of entrepreneurs out there, looking for locations in small towns. For instance, downtown Enterprise, Oregon, is home to Wild Carrot Herbals, which occupies a large space with a manufacturing facility and a retail store that displays its line of lotions and cosmetics.

The demographics of Astoria, Clatsop County and the Long Beach Peninsula are more interesting to retailers today than they were just a decade ago.

In the parlance of death and dying, our business and civic leaders cannot spend too much time in the anger phase. The J.C. Penney closure presents an opportunity that should be pursued.

Ensure private responsibility for vessel disposals, cleanups

The sinking of the Antarctic research ship Hero at Bay Center, Washington, is a regrettable loss of a historically significant vessel. It also is the latest of many examples of how maritime fixer-uppers can morph into problems for neighbors and taxpayers.

To live in any ocean-dependent community is to become familiar with the phenomenon of orphaned, neglected and abandoned watercraft. Once someone's pride and joy — or at least a valuable tool — recreational and commercial vessels all eventually become worn out and obsolete. As in the case of the Hero, sinking has the potential of releasing diesel, lubricants and other chemicals into the water.

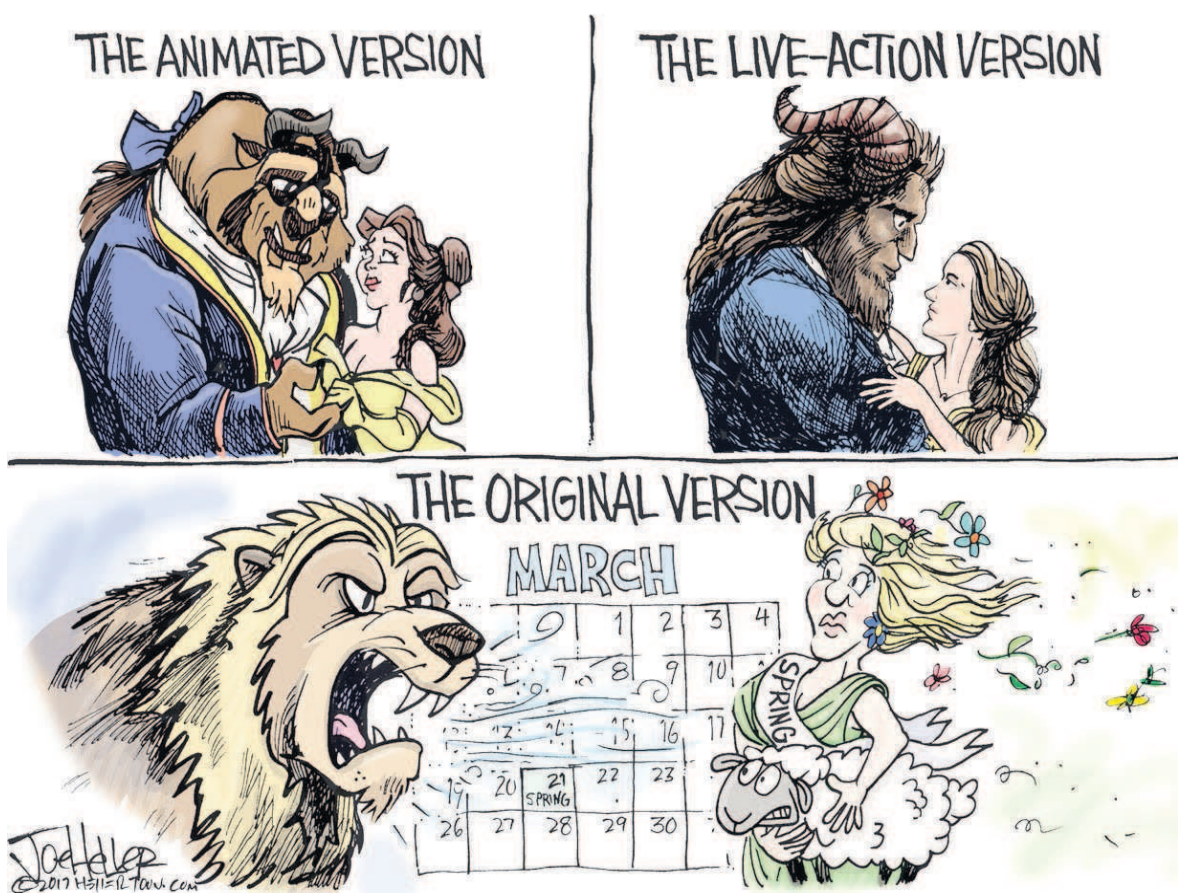
A single drop of petroleum can make 25 quarts of fresh water unfit for human consumption. Our region's important shellfish industries are especially vulnerable to this kind of pollution.

Washington and Oregon each have state programs to deal with abandoned and derelict vessels. After years of chronic underfunding, Washington's Legislature allocated \$4.5 million in the 2013-15 spending period to catch up with removing several large vessels on the verge of becoming big problems. In general, however, there is never enough money to keep up with this problem in either state.

Speaking about the issue in 2013, a state official in Washington said, "We need to find a way to keep these vessels from being abandoned in our waterways, and that means holding owners accountable. Too many people get in over their heads, and their dreams of ship renovation or making money from scrap become a nightmare for the citizens of this state and the marine environment."

Recognizing that it costs less to avoid pollution than to clean it up during the course of an emergency, our states need to do more to encourage private responsibility via voluntary vessel turn-ins, tax credits and expedited permitting for private dismantling and disposal.

"A hole in the water into which you pour money" is a famous definition of a boat. To the maximum extent possible, we must ensure taxpayers are not the ones doing the pouring.



America's epidemic of infallibility

By PAUL KRUGMAN
New York Times News Service

Two weeks after President Donald Trump claimed, bizarrely, that the Obama administration had wiretapped his campaign, his press secretary suggested that GCHQ — Britain's counterpart to the National Security Agency — had done the imaginary bugging. British officials were outraged. And soon the British press was reporting that the Trump administration had apologized.

But no: Meeting with the chancellor of Germany, another ally he's alienating, Trump insisted that there was nothing to apologize for. He said, "All we did was quote a certain very talented legal mind," a commentator on (of course) Fox News.

Was anyone surprised? This administration operates under the doctrine of Trumpal infallibility: Nothing the president says is wrong, whether it's his false claim that he won the popular vote or his assertion that the historically low murder rate is at a record high. No error is ever admitted. And there is never anything to apologize for.

OK, at this point it's not news that the commander in chief of the world's most powerful military is a man you wouldn't trust to park your car or feed your cat. Thanks, Comey. But Trump's pathological inability to accept responsibility is just the culmination of a trend. American politics — at least on one side of the aisle — is suffering from an epidemic of infallibility, of powerful people who never, ever admit to making a mistake.

More than a decade ago I wrote that the Bush administration was suffering from a "mensch gap." (A mensch is an outstanding person who takes responsibility for his actions.) Nobody in that administration ever seemed willing to accept responsibility for policy failures, whether it was the bungled occupation of Iraq or the botched response to Hurricane Katrina.

Later, in the aftermath of the financial crisis, a similar inability to admit error was on display among many economic commentators.

Take, for example, the open letter a who's who of conservatives sent to Ben Bernanke in 2010, warning that his policies could lead to "currency debasement and inflation." They didn't. But four years later, when Bloomberg News contacted many of the letter's signatories, not one was willing to admit having been wrong.

By the way, press reports say that one of those signatories, Kevin



AP Photo/Manuel Balce Ceneta
FBI Director James Comey and National Security Agency Director Michael Rogers, right, prepare to testify on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C., Monday before the House Intelligence Committee hearing on allegations of Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

Hassett — co-author of the 1999 book "Dow 36,000" — will be nominated as chairman of Trump's Council of Economic Advisers. Another, David Malpass — the former chief economist at Bear Stearns, who declared on the eve of the financial crisis that "the economy is sturdy" — has been nominated as undersecretary of the Treasury for international affairs. They should fit right in.

Nothing the president says is wrong, whether it's his false claim that he won the popular vote or his assertion that the historically low murder rate is at a record high.

Just to be clear: Everyone makes mistakes. Some of these mistakes are in the "nobody could have known" category. But there's also the temptation to engage in motivated reasoning, to let our emotions get the better of our critical faculties — and almost everyone succumbs to that temptation now and then (as I myself did on election night.)

No nobody is perfect. The point, however, is to try to do better — which means owning up to your mistakes and learning from them.

Yet that is something that the people now ruling America never, ever do.

What happened to us? Some of it surely has to do with ideology: When you're committed to a fundamentally false narrative about government and the economy, as almost the whole Republican Party now is, facing up to facts becomes an act of political disloyalty. By contrast, members of the Obama administration, from the president on down, were in general far more willing to accept responsibility than their Bush-era predecessors.

But what's going on with Trump and his inner circle seems to have less to do with ideology than with fragile egos. To admit having been wrong about anything, they seem to imagine, would brand them as losers and make them look small.

In reality, of course, inability to engage in reflection and self-criticism is the mark of a tiny, shriveled soul — but they're not big enough to see that.

But why did so many Americans vote for Trump, whose character flaws should have been obvious long before the election?

Catastrophic media failure and FBI malfeasance played crucial roles. But my sense is that there's also something going on in our society: Many Americans no longer seem to understand what a leader is supposed to sound like, mistaking bombast and belligerence for real toughness.

Why? Is it celebrity culture? Is it working-class despair, channeled into a desire for people who spout easy slogans?

The truth is that I don't know. But we can at least hope that watching Trump in action will be a learning experience — not for him, because he never learns anything, but for the body politic. And maybe, just maybe, we'll eventually put a responsible adult back in the White House.

WHERE TO WRITE

- **U.S. Rep. Suzanne Bonamici (D):** 2338 Rayburn HOB, Washington, D.C., 20515. Phone: 202-225-0855. Fax 202-225-9497. District office: 12725 SW Millikan Way, Suite 220, Beaverton, OR 97005. Phone: 503-469-6010. Fax 503-326-5066. Web: bonamici.house.gov/
- **U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley (D):** 313 Hart Senate Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20510. Phone: 202-224-3753. Web: www.merkley.senate.gov
- **U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden (D):** 221 Dirksen Senate Office Building, Washington, D.C., 20510. Phone: 202-224-5244. Web: www.wyden.senate.gov

- **State Rep. Brad Witt (D):** State Capitol, 900 Court Street N.E., H-373, Salem, OR 97301. Phone: 503-986-1431. Web: www.leg.state.or.us/witt/ Email: rep.bradwitt@state.or.us
- **State Rep. Deborah Boone (D):** 900 Court St. N.E., H-481, Salem, OR 97301. Phone: 503-986-1432. Email: rep.deborah_boone@state.or.us District office: P.O. Box 928, Cannon Beach, OR 97110. Phone: 503-986-1432. Web: www.leg.state.or.us/boone/
- **State Sen. Betsy Johnson (D):**

State Capitol, 900 Court St. N.E., S-314, Salem, OR 97301. Telephone: 503-986-1716. Email: sen.betsyjohnson@state.or.us Web: www.betsyjohnson.com District Office: P.O. Box R, Scappoose, OR 97056. Phone: 503-543-4046. Fax: 503-543-5296. Astoria office phone: 503-338-1280.

- **Port of Astoria:** Executive Director, 10 Pier 1 Suite 308, Astoria, OR 97103. Phone: 503-741-3300. Email: admin@portofastoria.com
- **Clatsop County Board of Commissioners:** c/o County Manager, 800 Exchange St., Suite 410, Astoria, OR 97103. Phone: 503-325-1000.