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AP Photo/Timothy J. Gonzalez
 Dennis Richardson, the first Republican to win a statewide race in 14 years, pumps his fist at an election night event in Salem.

Richardson best when focused on accountability

When Oregonians elected their first Republican to a statewide office in nearly two decades, they were looking for accountability.

Frustrated by the hundreds of millions of dollars squandered on failed projects like Cover Oregon and the Columbia River Crossing, and still stinging from watching their governor resign in disgrace, they elected Dennis Richardson as secretary of state to provide a check on Democrats running the state.

As newspaper endorsements of Richardson last fall noted, Oregon's secretary of state is an administrator, not a policy-maker. The job includes overseeing elections, auditing state agencies, keeping a registry of businesses and maintaining the state's archives.

While Richardson's Democratic challenger promised to use the office to promote partisan interests like abortion protections, Richardson promised to focus on nonpartisan issues that are actually in the secretary of state's job description, like reducing waste and fraud. Those promises won over even Portland Democrats like the Willamette Week editorial board, which noted their strong disagreements with him on social issues but endorsed him as a politician "beholden to none of the special interests that rule the state."

It is important Richardson remember that mandate.

So far, news coming out of his office is in line with promises he made. An audit his office released last month, for example, found that 69 percent of state Department of Transportation construction projects from 2011 to 2015 exceeded their bid amounts. The report suggested the department could save significant money by tracking "unbalanced" line items, a strategy the audit found contractors often use to more than double the price on materials they think ODOT underestimated the need for.

That's one of the most valuable services Richardson's office can and should provide for our state — data on wasteful spending paired with suggestions to reduce that waste. As the Legislature works to fill a \$1.6 billion budget deficit this year, we would rather see them cut inefficient practices than valuable assets like the North Coast Youth Correctional Facility in Warrenton.

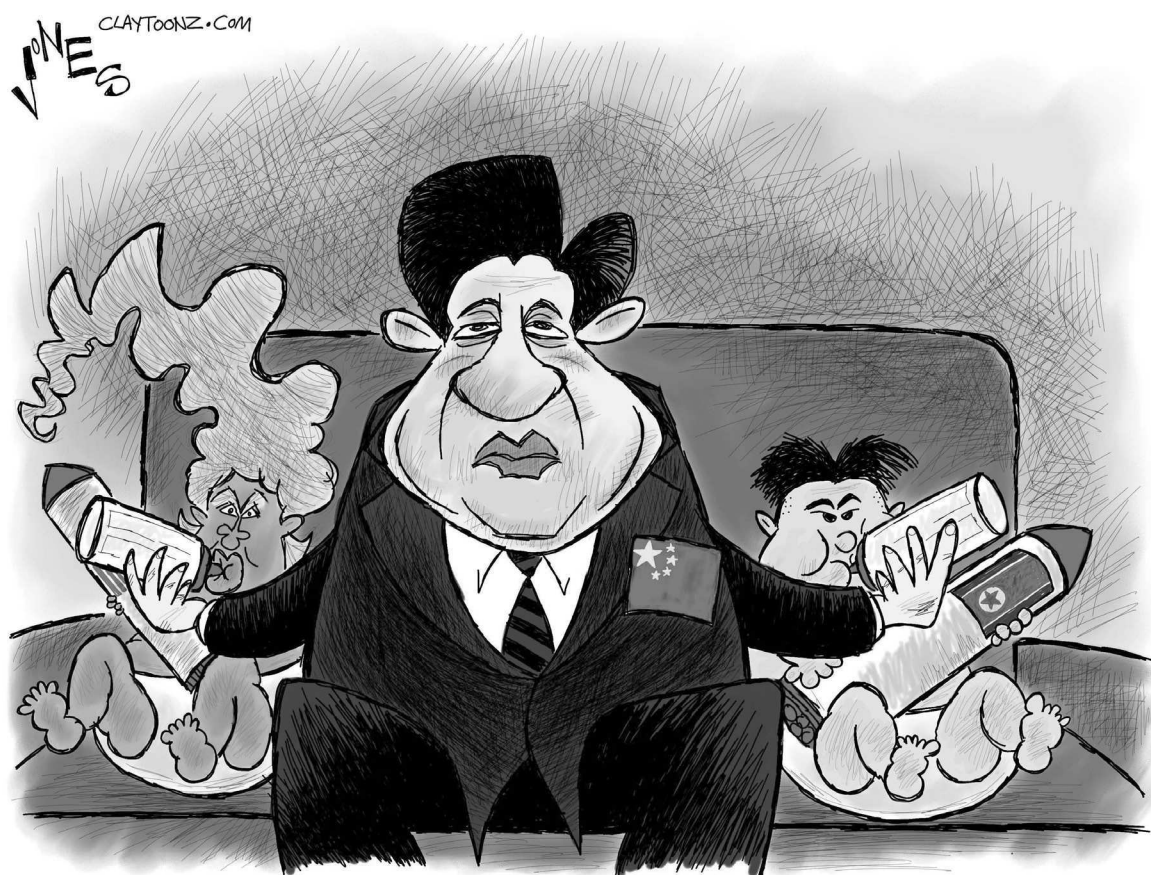
Beyond looking at budgets, Richardson must also focus on helping change poor performance by state departments. He took a much-needed step in that direction by pushing state auditors to begin an audit of the state's foster care program.

News about the Department of Human Services' handling of child welfare has often been dismal, including a recent internal review that found in 47 percent of cases the consultant conducting the review disagreed with the case worker's assessment that the child was safe. Changes need to happen — soon — and as a former foster parent himself, Richardson is in a good position to help Oregon's children get the protection they deserve from abusive and dangerous situations.

On the other hand, he spent time recently meeting with members of President Donald Trump's cabinet while in Washington, D.C., for a conference. While building bridges is an important part of politics, the U.S. secretary of energy does not have much to do with the Oregon secretary of state's job duties.

As the Secretary of State's Office transitions from projects started by Richardson's predecessors into projects that Richardson himself has initiated, he should prioritize actions that will hold state leaders and departments accountable, spotlight ways to reduce waste and maintain confidence in the integrity of our electoral process.

All the audits in the world will only go so far, however, if Democrats in power dismiss the findings as merely the work of a member of the opposition party and don't implement the suggestions. Richardson was elected for a reason. Both he and the state leaders he is expected to hold accountable would do well to keep that in mind going forward.



Publicity stunts aren't policy



Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Ford Williams/U.S. Navy
 The guided-missile destroyer USS Porter launches a tomahawk land attack missile in the Mediterranean Sea Friday toward Syria. The attack instantly transformed news coverage of the Trump administration.

By PAUL KRUGMAN
New York Times News Service

Does anyone still remember the Carrier deal? Back in December, President-elect Donald Trump announced, triumphantly, that he had reached a deal with the air-conditioner manufacturer to keep 1,100 jobs in America rather than moving them to Mexico. And the media spent days celebrating the achievement.

Actually, the number of jobs involved was more like 700, but who's counting? Around 75,000 U.S. workers are laid off or fired every working day, so a few hundred here or there hardly matter for the overall picture.

Whatever Trump did or didn't achieve with Carrier, the real question was whether he would take steps to make a lasting difference.

So far, he hasn't; there isn't even the vague outline of a real Trumpist jobs policy. And corporations and investors seem to have decided that the Carrier deal was all show, no substance, that for all his protectionist rhetoric Trump is a paper tiger in practice. After pausing briefly, the ongoing move of manufacturing to Mexico has resumed, while the Mexican peso, whose value is a barometer of expected U.S. trade policy, has recovered almost all its post-November losses.

In other words, showy actions that win a news cycle or two are no substitute for actual, coherent policies. Indeed, their main lasting effect can be to squander a government's credibility. Which brings us to last week's missile strike on Syria.

The attack instantly transformed news coverage of the Trump administration. Suddenly stories about infighting and dysfunction were replaced with screaming headlines about the president's toughness and footage of Tomahawk launches.

But outside its effect on the news

cycle, how much did the strike actually accomplish? A few hours after the attack, Syrian warplanes were taking off from the same airfield, and airstrikes resumed on the town where use of poison gas provoked Trump into action. No doubt the Assad forces took some real losses, but there's no reason to believe that a one-time action will have any effect on the course of Syria's civil war.

In fact, if last week's action was the end of the story, the eventual effect may well be to strengthen the Assad regime — Look, they stood up to a superpower! — and weaken American credibility. To achieve any lasting result, Trump would have to get involved on a sustained basis in Syria.

Real leadership means devising and carrying out sustained policies that make the world a better place.

Doing what, you ask? Well, that's the big question — and the lack of good answers to that question is the reason President Barack Obama decided not to start something nobody knew how to finish.

So what have we learned from the Syria attack and its aftermath?

No, we haven't learned that Trump is an effective leader. Ordering the U.S. military to fire off some missiles is easy. Doing so in a way that actually serves American interests is the hard part, and we've seen no indication whatsoever that Trump and his advisers have figured that part out.

Actually, what we know of the decision-making process is anything

ful reassuring. Just days before the strike, the Trump administration seemed to be signaling lack of interest in Syrian regime change.

What changed? The images of poison-gas victims were horrible, but Syria has been an incredible horror story for years. Is Trump making life-and-death national security decisions based on TV coverage?

One thing is certain: The media reaction to the Syria strike showed that many pundits and news organizations have learned nothing from past failures.

Trump may like to claim that the media are biased against him, but the truth is that they've bent over backward in his favor. They want to seem balanced, even when there is no balance; they have been desperate for excuses to ignore the dubious circumstances of his election and his erratic behavior in office, and start treating him as a normal president.

You may recall how, a month and a half ago, pundits eagerly declared that Trump "became the president of the United States today" because he managed to read a speech off a teleprompter without going off script. Then he started tweeting again.

One might have expected that experience to serve as a lesson. But no: The U.S. fired off some missiles, and once again Trump "became president." Aside from everything else, think about the incentives this creates. The Trump administration now knows that it can always crowd out reporting about its scandals and failures by bombing someone.

So here's a hint: Real leadership means devising and carrying out sustained policies that make the world a better place. Publicity stunts may generate a few days of favorable media coverage, but they end up making America weaker, not stronger, because they show the world that we have a government that can't follow through.

And has anyone seen a sign, any sign, that Trump is ready to provide real leadership in that sense? I haven't.

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ful manner.

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