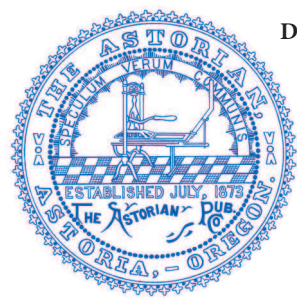


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OUR VIEW

Invest in good science to track marine toxin

When the marine toxin domoic acid was first reported in Pacific Northwest waters in 1991, it caused a flurry of public consternation and scientific excitement.

Specialist conferences were convened about this new kid on the block, joining older issues like paralytic shellfish poisoning.

The shellfish poisoning hasn't been a problem since then, but domoic acid — which causes amnesic shellfish poisoning — more than makes up for it. It's a byproduct produced by a kind of microscopic marine organism. Domoic acid first generated headlines in 1987 after mussels raised on Prince Edward Island in eastern Canada resulted in human deaths and illnesses, including loss of the ability to store short-term memories.

After it appeared here, speculation arose that it could have been around longer, perhaps not causing significant problems. But speculation is no substitute for scientific facts, and the fact is that domoic acid is first known on this coast in the past quarter-century, where outbreaks have killed seabirds and marine mammals from California to Alaska.

Perhaps due to the rich nutrients in the Columbia River plume, Clatsop County has Oregon's best razor clam populations, while the beaches in Pacific and Grays Harbor counties to the river mouth's north are the best in Washington state. Clams generate regional tourist revenue in the tens of millions in good years. Dungeness crabs, which eat razor clams and other toxin-impacted prey, can also be contaminated by the toxin during severe outbreaks, threatening the most lucrative commercial fishery in the two states. As we reported last week, domoic levels seriously impacted the 2016-17 clam and crab seasons.

Oregon and Washington state both bar recreational and commercial razor clam digging on ocean beaches when the toxin level rises to 20 parts per million in sampled clam flesh. A study last year suggested even this threshold is open to re-examination, since some harm apparently can accumulate from consumption of seafood that passes current standards.

It's vitally important to better understand exactly what causes spikes in toxin levels. Warmer ocean waters associated with El Niños and the Blob — an unusual mass of warm water in the northeast Pacific — are a strong suspect. Such conditions are virtually sure to become more common as the century continues to warm up. Will this permanently degrade important shellfish industries? It's possible that after acute recent problems, the domoic-generating algae will go away or quit generating the toxin, as it has in the past. But we can't count on good luck.

Effective monitoring of actual ocean conditions before toxins enter the near-shore food web is essential. In addition, the states must strive for more timely information about clam conditions, and more closely tailor digging times and places to take advantage of clean clams. For example, in the past year on the Long Beach Peninsula, digging would have been more-often permissible if authorities had been willing to open miles-long segments of beach where domoic levels were low.

Ultimately, it may perhaps be possible to bioengineer the offending algae so it does not produce domoic acid, or to develop other novel solutions to the problem. Economic and environmental harm from marine toxins argues for investment in good science and aggressive follow through.

Get out and vote

Tuesday is Election Day, and no matter who you would like to win any of the elections being contested, the important thing is to vote.

All ballots must be turned in by 8 p.m. If you didn't previously mail your ballot, it's too late to do so, it must be hand-delivered to any of nine locations throughout Clatsop County. The locations can be found at <https://www.co.clatsop.or.us/clerk/page/ballot-drop-site-locations>.

Heading toward Election Day, voter turnout is about even with what it was in the last off-year election in 2015. As of Friday turnout stood at 22.9 percent of registered voters, while final turnout in the 2015 election was 22.8 percent.

While off-year turnout is typically low, there are contested races for the Port of Astoria Commission, the Clatsop Community College Board, the Clatsop Care Center Health District, the Astoria, Seaside and Jewel school boards and the Sunset Empire Park and Recreation District Board. Voters are also being asked whether to approve a bond measure for the Port of Astoria to improve airport infrastructure and relocate the Life Flight Network, and in Seaside residents are being asked whether the city should approve a five-year local option tax for fire personnel and equipment.

If you haven't turned in a ballot and want a say in the outcome in any of those races, now's the time to do it. Every vote matters.



A political ax murder

By CHARLES KRAUTHAMMER
 Washington Post Writers Group

WASHINGTON — It was implausible that FBI Director James Comey was fired in May 2017 for actions committed in July 2016 — the rationale contained in the memo by Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein.

It was implausible that Comey was fired by Donald Trump for having been too tough on Hillary Clinton, as when, at that July news conference, he publicly recited her various email misdeeds despite recommending *against* prosecution.

It was implausible that Trump fired Comey for, among other things, reopening the Clinton investigation 11 days before the election, something that at the time Trump praised as a sign of Comey's "guts" that had "brought back his reputation."

It was implausible that Trump, a man notorious for being swayed by close and loyal personal advisers, fired Comey on the recommendation of a sub-Cabinet official whom Trump hardly knew and who'd been on the job all of two weeks.

It was implausible that Trump found Rosenstein's arguments so urgently persuasive that he acted immediately — so precipitously, in fact, that Comey learned of his own firing from TVs that happened to be playing behind him.

These implausibilities were obvious within seconds of Comey's firing and the administration's immediate attempt to pin it all on the Rosenstein memo. That was pure spin. So why in reality did Trump fire Comey?

Admittedly, Comey had to go. The cliché is that if you've infuriated both sides, it means you must be doing something right. Sometimes, however, it means you must be doing everything wrong.

Over the last year, Comey has been repeatedly wrong. Not, in my view, out of malice or partisanship (although his self-righteousness about his own probity does occasionally grate). He was in an unprecedented situation with unpalatable choices. Never in American presidential history had a major party nominated a candidate under official FBI investigation. (Turns out the Trump campaign was under investigation as well.) Which makes the normal injunction that FBI directors not interfere in elections facile and impossible to follow. Any course of action — disclosure or silence, commission or omission — carried unavoidable electoral consequences.



AP Photo/Evan Vucci
 President Donald Trump talks to reporters Wednesday in the Oval Office of the White House. Trump, in an apparent warning to his fired FBI director, said that James Comey had better hope there are no "tapes" of their conversations. Trump's tweet came the morning after he asserted Comey had told him three times that he wasn't under FBI investigation.

Comey had to make up the rules as he went along. He did. That was not his downfall. His downfall was making up contradictory, illogical rules, such as the July 5 nonindictment indictment of Clinton.

A series of these — and Comey became anathema to both Democrats and Republicans. Clinton blamed her loss on two people. One of them was Comey.

Whacking Comey has brought more critical attention to the Russia story than anything imaginable.

And there's the puzzle. There was ample bipartisan sentiment for letting Comey go. And there was ample time from Election Day on to do so. A simple talk, a gold watch, a friendly farewell, a Comey resignation to allow the new president to pick the new director. No fanfare, no rancor.

True, this became more difficult after March 20 when Comey revealed that the FBI was investigating the alleged Trump-Russia collusion. Difficult but not impossible. For example, just last week Comey had committed an egregious factual error about the Huma Abedin emails that the FBI had to abjectly walk

back in a written memo to the Senate Judiciary Committee.

Here was an opportunity for a graceful exit: Comey regrets the mistake and notes that some of the difficult decisions he had previously made necessarily cost him the confidence of various parties. Time for a clean slate. Add the usual boilerplate about not wanting to be a distraction at such a crucial time. Awkward perhaps, but still dignified and amicable.

Instead we got this — a political ax murder, brutal even by Washington standards. (Or even Roman standards. Where was the vein-opening knife and the warm bath?) No final meeting, no letter of resignation, no presidential thanks, no cordial parting. Instead, a blindsided Comey ends up in a live-streamed O.J. Bronco ride, bolting from Los Angeles to be flown, defrocked, back to Washington.

Why? Trump had become increasingly agitated with the Russia-election investigation and Comey's very public part in it. If Trump thought this would kill the inquiry and the story, or perhaps even just derail it somewhat, he's made the blunder of the decade. Whacking Comey has brought more critical attention to the Russia story than anything imaginable. It won't stop the FBI investigation. And the confirmation hearings for a successor will become a nationally televised forum for collusion allegations, which up till now have remained a scandal in search of a crime.

So why did he do it? Now we know: The king asked whether no one would rid him of this troublesome priest, and got so impatient he did it himself.

WHERE TO WRITE

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