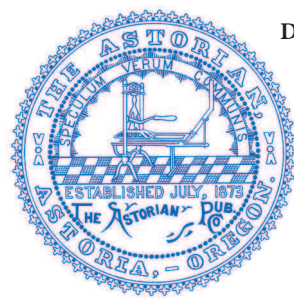


THE DAILY ASTORIAN

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OUR VIEW

GOP health care approach a model of ineptitude

For all of its flaws, the process of drafting the Affordable Care Act — also now known as Obamacare — was a paradigm of openness and transparency compared to so far failed efforts to replace or repeal it. Last week's slow-motion fiasco in the U.S. Senate was a stark illustration of how much American politics have deteriorated.

To anyone who paid attention to the 2010 drafting of the ACA, the nickname Obamacare remains somewhat jarring. If anything, President Barack Obama remained too aloof from drafting the law, instead leaving it up to the messy process of compromise and dealmaking in Congress with little proactive steering by the White House. In addition to some questionable giveaways in return for individual votes, this outcome gave the nation a cobbled-together concoction borrowed from Massachusetts, where Gov. Mitt Romney had helped craft a plan acceptable to large corporations and other powerful interests.

Attaching blame for ACA on Obama, congressional Republicans spent the past seven years promising to repeal the entire act and replace it with some unspecified improvement. Lately, the GOP narrowed its aspirations to eliminating the act's unpopular mandates that individuals get insurance and companies with 50 or more employees provide insurance. These issues, along with rising costs and decreasing policy options in the private marketplace, continue to be well-deserving of additional attention.

But the approach taken in Washington, D.C., this year has been a model of ineptitude. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, who rightly chastised Democrats for a less-than-democratic process when drafting the ACA, has taken those legislative sins and magnified them. Among other shortcomings, the legislation was drafted behind closed doors by a small subset of male GOP senators, had no public outreach, little input until the very end from Democrats, and labored under the weight of contradictory statements by the president.

In voting against a so-called "skinny repeal" of ACA last Thursday night, U.S. Sen. John McCain of Arizona made the correct and courageous stand that the Senate must return to its normal order of business. This will consist of assigning committees to hold open hearings and negotiate compromises that a working majority of Congress is willing to support.

As U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden of Oregon remarked, "It is now time to work on a bipartisan basis to improve health care for every American." U.S. Sen. Maria Cantwell of Washington said, "We need to find bipartisan solutions, particularly in the individual health insurance market, to drive down costs, increase access and innovate in the health care delivery system."

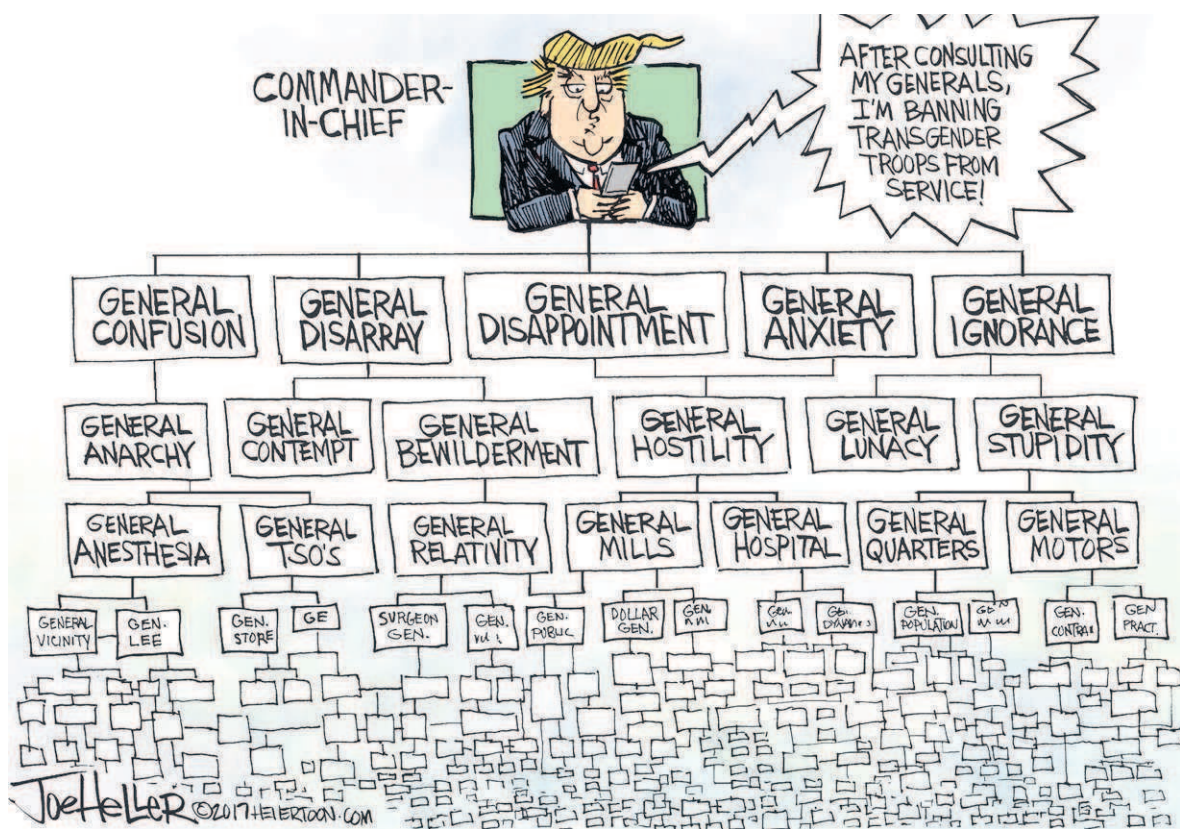
Polling shows ACA has become more popular with Americans as more have become used to its quirks and the coverage it provides. Conversely, the drastic cutbacks in Medicaid planned in future years under the GOP plan would have caused avoidable suffering and death. If anything, months of GOP efforts to curb health care costs and mandates have clarified the national consensus in favor of a fundamental level of health care.

Failure of repeal efforts combined with President Donald Trump's threat to undercut the ACA means the national health care system is more wobbly than ever. It's imperative that Republicans and Democrats now work together to shore up insurance marketplaces so that American families don't face crippling premiums, curtailed services and other worries.

Beyond a need for immediate triage for the wounded ACA, a really functional Congress would start looking for ways to improve it and to get a better handle on crippling levels of spending. Republicans are not wrong to worry about the costs of Medicaid and other entitlement programs. Both political parties have, to one extent or another, viewed health care as a cash cow for private industry rather than as an essential service to be delivered as efficiently and effectively as possible.

Repairing existing problems and then trying to find sustainable ways to afford medical care will require much more intelligent politics than those on display in recent weeks. It's time to reexamine old assumptions, put away old grudges, and get on with fixing this vital part of America's economy and society.

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Smith covered Congress when it accomplished big things

By STEVE FORRESTER
The Daily Astorian

In a hallway at The Daily Astorian there is a front page from the Anchorage Daily News



which proclaims in headline type 10 inches high: "WE'RE IN!"

Beneath the headline is a story on the congressional passage

of Alaskan statehood. The story was written by A. Robert Smith, a Washington, D.C., correspondent. For some 30 years, Smith covered Capitol Hill for newspapers in Oregon, Washington state, Idaho and Alaska.

Smith was the Astorian's correspondent for some 20 years until I succeeded him in 1978. I was saddened to learn that Bob died last November. At the age of 91, he had enjoyed a full life of journalism. In 2012, he wrote his last book, "God Gave Me a Mulligan," in which he described his World War II service in the U.S. Navy at the battles for Okinawa and Iwo Jima.

In this era of gridlock and deep enmity between the polar ends of the political spectrum, it is a distant memory that it wasn't always this way. There was a time when congressional Democrats and Republicans had social relationships and reached compromise. Most of all, it's hard to remember an era when Congress accomplished big things.

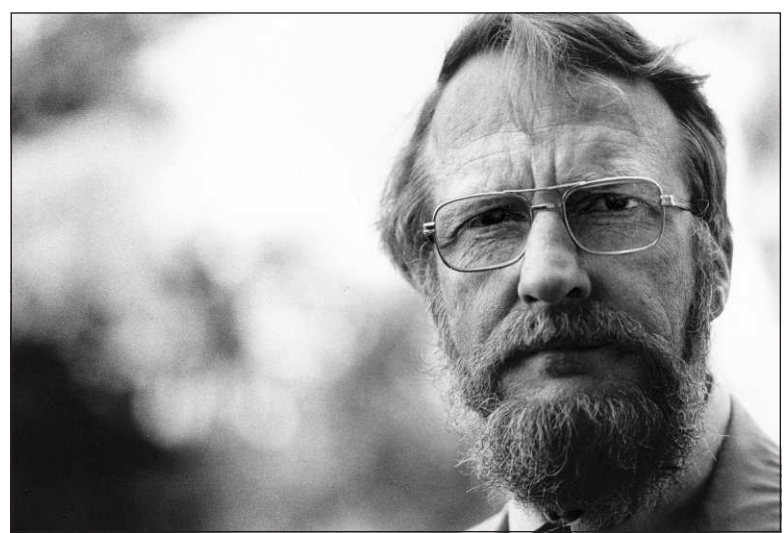
That immediate postwar era had great meaning for the Pacific Northwest. Washington state particularly enjoyed enormous clout with senators Warren Magnuson and Henry Jackson. That led to the era of dam building on the Columbia River, large reclamation projects and construction of the interstate freeways. That federal investment allowed a region that was largely agrarian to become industrial. The fruits of that were a cluster of aluminum plants, the Boeing Co. and an array of military installations. Tangentially, it began the rise of the University of Washington.

As a recently discharged Navy veteran, Smith searched for a region that was not represented in the Washington press corps. The answer to his question was the Pacific Northwest. Smith came out here and went from newspaper to newspaper, seeking clients. His early newspapers included the Register-Guard of Eugene, the Medford Mail Tribune and the East Oregonian, sister newspaper of the Astorian.

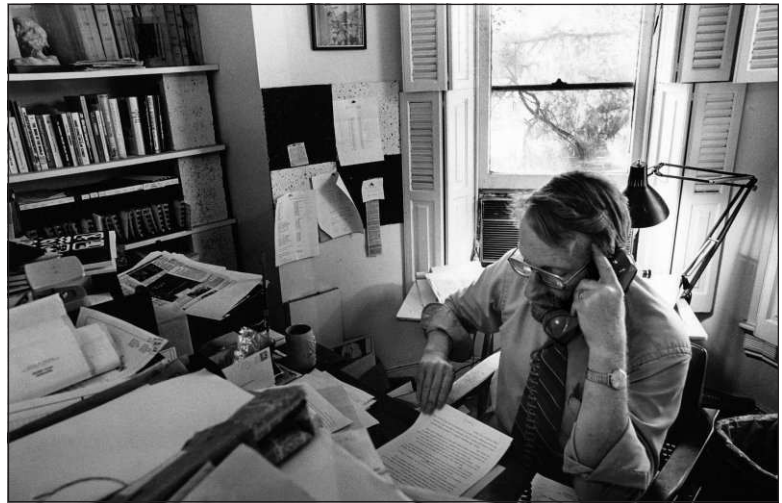
I owe Bob an enormous gratitude. He gave me the opportunity to cover congressional politics. Admittedly, I bought his business. But he could have picked another suitor to purchase that enterprise.

Bob prospered during a time when print was the dominant media on Capitol Hill. He witnessed television news' infancy. The digital revolution was about to break when he left. The great innovation of my period as correspondent (1978-1987) was the fax machine as well as a crude sort of digital transmission of news copy.

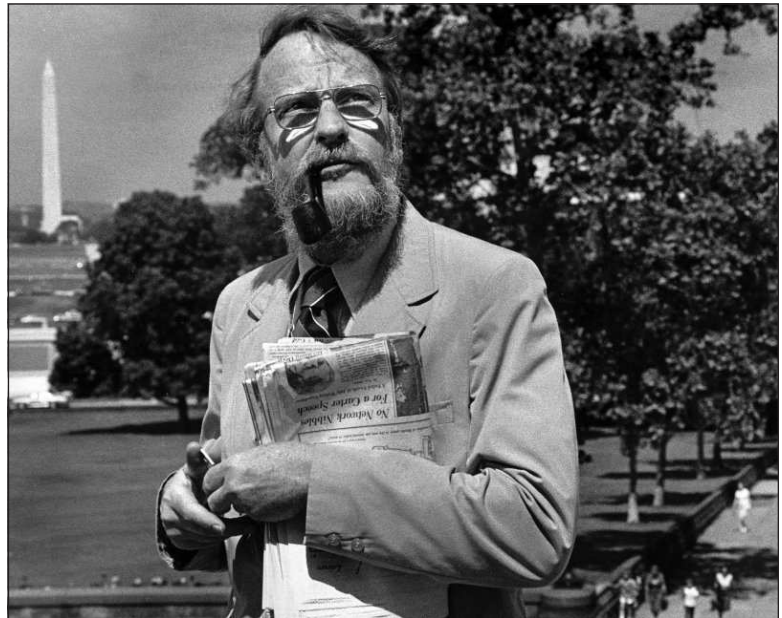
The legendary H.L. Mencken said he admired newspapermen with literary ambitions. Bob was one of those. His first book was "The Tiger in the Senate," the biography of Oregon U.S. Sen. Wayne Morse (Doubleday, 1962). Smith's book was disparaged by the Morse faithful. In fact, Morse banned Smith



Sandra Eisert/The Washington Post for The Register-Guard
A. Robert Smith was the Washington, D.C., correspondent for Pacific Northwest newspapers from 1951 to 1978.



Sandra Eisert/The Washington Post for The Register-Guard
Smith wrote books on history and politics.



Sandra Eisert/The Washington Post for The Register-Guard
During Smith's time in Washington, D.C., Democrats and Republicans often had social relationships and reached compromise.



The Daily Astorian
Smith covered the Alaskan statehood vote.

from his office.

Years later, Sen. Morse sued my father, the East Oregonian and the Christian Science Monitor. I remember my dad coming into my room, where I was doing homework. "Sen. Morse sued us today," he said. The lawsuit went nowhere. And the next time he faced Oregon voters, Morse came to Pendleton for the Round-Up. At a Round-Up party at the home of Jim Hill (father of Astoria's Tim Hill), Morse sought a private audience with my dad.

At the heart of American government is an understanding that the

Bob appreciated the human comedy, which lies at the heart of politics.

men and women we elect to office are mortals. While they eventually believe their own myths, their stories seldom sustain those myths.

Bob appreciated the human comedy, which lies at the heart of politics. He knew the senators and congressmen of this region in an era when they were not television personalities. And occasionally Smith covered a blockbuster — such as Alaskan statehood.

Steve Forrester, the former editor and publisher of The Daily Astorian, is the president and CEO of EO Media Group.