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DAVID F. PERO, Publisher & Editor

JIM VAN NOSTRAND, Managing Editor

JEREMY FELDMAN, Circulation Manager

DEBRA BLOOM, Business Manager

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OUR VIEW

Learn the lessons of natural disasters

In Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, residents and authorities had several days to brace for a looming disaster in the form of this year's horrendous hurricanes. In hindsight, they didn't do enough. There are things we can learn from their experiences.

Thanks to modern atmospheric science, the Caribbean islands, Texas and Florida all were put on warning about giant storms while they were still far off in the Atlantic. In each case, the hurricanes' exact tracks gradually came into focus in forecasting models, with the odds of harm spiking from very little to very likely. It was like watching from a distance as a drunken driver swerved back and forth across the highway before finally crashing into a gas pump.

Until advances in geology and our understanding of Earth's plate tectonics initiated in the 1990s by professor Brian Atwater, our coast was completely ignorant about subduction-zone earthquakes and tsunamis. It is as if we were Caribbean villagers who not only didn't know about the hurricane barreling toward us from just over the horizon, but didn't even suspect such disasters were capable of happening. Atwater and his colleagues opened our eyes.

After 20 years of research, scientists believe that in the next 30 years, the Pacific Northwest has about a 10 percent chance of a magnitude 8 to 9 megathrust earthquake on the Cascadia Subduction Zone. Ten percent isn't very frightening and 30 years is more than a third of an average American lifetime. Odds are pretty good that we living here today will be long gone before this epic cataclysm occurs. On the other hand, when it was still forming in the Atlantic, the odds were remote of Hurricane Maria hammering Puerto Rico. Yet it happened.

Average people — including our elected leaders — are bad at assessing risk and understanding probabilities. On top of that weakness, there are inherent limits to how much to prepare for threats that are legitimate but which have uncertain or distant timelines. We all know we're going to need to retire someday, but how many make enough effort to save for that eventuality? It's even easier to procrastinate about disaster preparedness.

The mess in Puerto Rico informs us that even with the vast assets of federal government, getting help to where it's needed can take weeks after a worst-case disaster. It's possible the Trump administration or territorial government could be doing better, but even the most competent agencies are going to be hard pressed to deliver medical triage, potable water, rations and fuel to remote areas where highways and bridges have been destroyed.

Internalize this lesson

On this coast, we and agencies can internalize this lesson. We face an even worse challenge, in that our low-lying areas will have to be abandoned in a hurry and will be uninhabitable after a quake and tsunami, perhaps for months. Collecting supplies at homes near sea level may be a waste of time.

State and federal agencies need to systematically pre-stage drinking water, long shelf life foods and basic medical supplies in secure, strategic locations on high ground. Former Pacific County Sheriff John Didion used to envision stockpiling barrels of peanut butter in old cargo containers up in the woods, saying quake survivors might not enjoy the taste, but would appreciate that it kept them alive while waiting for air drops and naval rescue ships. He wasn't far wrong. For a small fraction of the federal funds once spent on fallout shelters, sites in the Northwest's coastal hills could be prepared to avoid deaths and alleviate suffering. Helicopter pads, airstrips, Wi-Fi hot spots and generators are among other things that could be dealt with in advance.

Other lessons

Other lessons from this year's hurricanes:

- Money spent on science saves lives. The behavior of subduction zones still isn't well understood. Perhaps research can provide reliable clues about when the Cascadia zone is about to break loose.

- Even in the worst circumstances, individual actions do make a difference. The enormity of threats can't be allowed to paralyze us into inaction. It's up to each of us to help our neighbors whenever need arises, and to take common sense precautions on our own behalf — everything from keeping bottled water on hand to signing up for first aid and Community Emergency Response Team classes.

It's noteworthy that Oregon last week received a \$354,000 grant from National Tsunami Hazard Mitigation Program to help improve the resilience of coastal communities. This is a small down payment toward the much more extensive preparations we must undertake.

For more information about tsunami preparedness, visit OregonTsunami.org.

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Guns and the soul of America

By DAVID BROOKS

New York Times News Service

The pattern is by now numbingly familiar. A lone lunatic murders a mass of innocent people in some public location. There is a heartfelt cry for tighter control on gun ownership. Then state legislatures swing into action.

They pass a series of laws loosening controls on gun ownership.

As David Frum points out in *The Atlantic*, the five years since the shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School "have seen one of the most intense bursts of gun legislation in U.S. history." More than two dozen states have passed new gun laws. And in almost all cases these laws have made it easier to buy or carry guns.

Wisconsin eliminated its 48-hour waiting period to buy handguns. Ohio allowed concealed-carry weapons to be brought into day care facilities and airports. Florida changed its "stand your ground" law to make it harder to prosecute gun owners.

The expansion of gun rights is directly related to the epidemic of mass shootings. A study by Michael Luca, Deepak Malhotra and Christopher Poliquin of Harvard Business School found that a single mass shooting leads to a 15 percent increase in firearm bills introduced in the same state's legislature within a year.

In Republican states, they found, a mass killing "increases the number of enacted laws that loosen gun restrictions by 75 percent." In Democratic states, mass shootings have no significant effect on laws passed.

So why are lawmakers responding to mass killings by loosening gun laws? The wrong answer is that the NRA is this maliciously powerful force that controls legislators through campaign dollars. In fact, the NRA spends a minuscule amount on campaign contributions compared with the vast oceans of dough washing through our politics.

The reality is that in some places people want these laws. It's true that individual gun control measures — like banning bump stocks — have popular support, but overall, the gun rights people are winning the hearts and minds of America. In 2000, according to a Pew survey, only 29 percent of Americans supported more gun rights and 67 percent supported more gun control. By 2016, 52 percent of Americans supported more gun rights and only 46 percent supported more control.

This gigantic shift in public opinion hasn't come about because the facts support the gun rights position. The research doesn't overwhelmingly support either side. Gun



AP Photo/Gregory Bull

Manuela Barela passes crosses set up to honor those killed during the mass shooting in Las Vegas.

control proposals don't seriously impinge freedom; on the other hand, there's not much evidence that they would prevent many attacks.

Besides, better facts tend to be counterproductive on hot-button issues like gun control. As Tali Sharot notes in her book *"The Influential Mind,"* when you present people with evidence that goes against their deeply held beliefs, the evidence doesn't sway them. Instead, they invent more reasons their prior position was actually correct. The smarter a person is, the greater his or her ability to rationalize and reinterpret discordant information, and the greater the polarizing boomerang effect is likely to be.

We need another grand synthesis ... a synthesis that is neither redneck nor hipster but draws from both worlds to create a new social vision.

The real reason the gun rights side is winning is postindustrialization. The gun issue has become an epiphenomenon of a much larger conflict over values and identity.

A century ago, the forces of industrialization swept over agricultural America, and monetary policy became the proxy fight in that larger conflict. Today, people in agricultural and industrial America legitimately feel that their way of life is being threatened by postin-

dustrial society. The members of this resistance have seized on issues like guns, immigration, the flag as places to mobilize their counterassault. Guns are a proxy for larger issues.

Four in 10 American households own guns. As Hahrie Han, a political science professor, noted in *The Times* Wednesday, there are more gun clubs and gun shops in this country than McDonald's. For many people, the gun is a way to protect against crime. But it is also an identity marker. It stands for freedom, self-reliance and the ability to control your own destiny. Gun rights are about living in a country where families are tough enough and responsible enough to stand up for themselves in a dangerous world.

The populist revolt is about halfway through taking over the Republican Party. It is winning victories on gun, immigration and trade policy. The way to fuel this populism is to feed the elites-versus-common-man narrative, as so many have self-righteously done this week.

The only way to make progress on guns control is to forge some sort of synthesis on the larger postindustrialization/populism war. Over a century ago, industrialization brought on a culture clash between agrarian populists and the genteel Victorian aristocrats. Theodore Roosevelt transcended the fight by inventing a new American nationalism. Meanwhile, the progressives cleaned up elite corruption and nurtured a square deal for those being left behind by technological change. Cultural leaders introduced new institutions and community forms, like the Boy Scouts and the Settlement House, that drew from both cultures and replaced them.

Today we need another grand synthesis that can move us beyond the current divide, a synthesis that is neither redneck nor hipster but draws from both worlds to create a new social vision. Progress on guns will be possible when the culture war subsides, but not before.

WHERE TO WRITE

- **U.S. Rep. Suzanne Bonamici (D):** 439 Cannon House Office Building, 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.