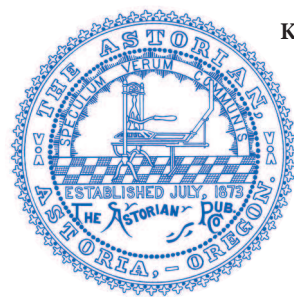


# THE DAILY ASTORIAN

Founded in 1873



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## OUR VIEW

### Trump's denigration of FBI is self-serving

The FBI is so universally familiar to Americans that it's unnecessary to spell out its name. Its initials are synonymous with a kind of stolid professionalism. Like our northern neighbor where the Royal Canadian Mounted Police famously "always gets their man," the FBI isn't glamorous, but is who you want on your side if there's a criminal to apprehend.

It isn't without fault. In the post-9/11 era, its anti-terror focus has sometimes been overzealous, generating complaints from minority communities and civil libertarians. But long gone are the days of J. Edgar Hoover, its legendary founding director, who infamously played fast and loose in pursuing personal vendettas and agendas. At least since it became known that FBI Associate Director Mark Felt served as the Washington Post's secret source in pending the corrupt Nixon administration, a large majority of Americans sees the FBI as an honest and neutral bulwark against wrongdoers of all kinds, in or out of government.

This makes it all the more astounding to hear a U.S. president denigrate the FBI. Claiming the agency's stature is in "tatters," President Trump is lashing out at an American institution with a far better reputation than he enjoys himself.

Trump's reaction to the FBI's legally sanctioned investigation of Russian involvement in the last election may be understandable from someone who regards himself as a tough street fighter. But running down the FBI at the time when it has hundreds of investigations going, some of them dangerous, is not smart for the nation's chief executive officer, who oversees the FBI and ought to have its agents' welfare and safety in mind.

The Republican Party of days gone by was a proud defender of law and order. It is sad to see the GOP's leader and his enablers turn against our most potent police agency, which has been effective at combating organized crime and blocking attacks by foreign terrorists.

It is a standard ploy to attack government during political campaigns, but quite another to sabotage it after being elected. Meanwhile, the rest of us need government to function. And we sure as hell need the FBI to continue doing its job well.

Thankfully, there is no evidence for what Trump is suggesting. Robert Mueller, the retired FBI director now directing the independent investigation of election interference, promptly relieved one agent of his duty because of a pro-Clinton email. This is a sign that the agency has a self-correcting mechanism. It still treasures objectivity, fairness and truthfulness. Trump, of course, has no use for any of these values.

Trump is simply trying to derail an investigation that is now penetrating his operation. We must make certain the FBI stays on the job.

### Important referendum coming up on Measure 101

In 2017, it seems like we never get a break from politics. And there will be no rest for the weary once we turn the calendar to 2018.

The political season will get off to a fast start next year, with Oregon voters having an important referendum in January, followed by important primaries in May and a critical election awaiting again in November.

So what's this January thing again?

It's Measure 101, a referendum on health insurance premium taxes that were approved by the state Legislature during the previous session. Opponents of the taxes gathered signatures to put pieces of that package before voters.

The whole process has been controversial since the beginning. Some argue the referendum process is a bad way to set complicated tax policy. Others say the ballot language itself is biased, arguing the semantics of "tax" against "assessment." And they argued some more over the date that the actual tax vote will place (It's January 23).

All this ... and we haven't even gotten to the meat of the issue, which has both sides taking principled and impassioned stands on how critical their victory is.

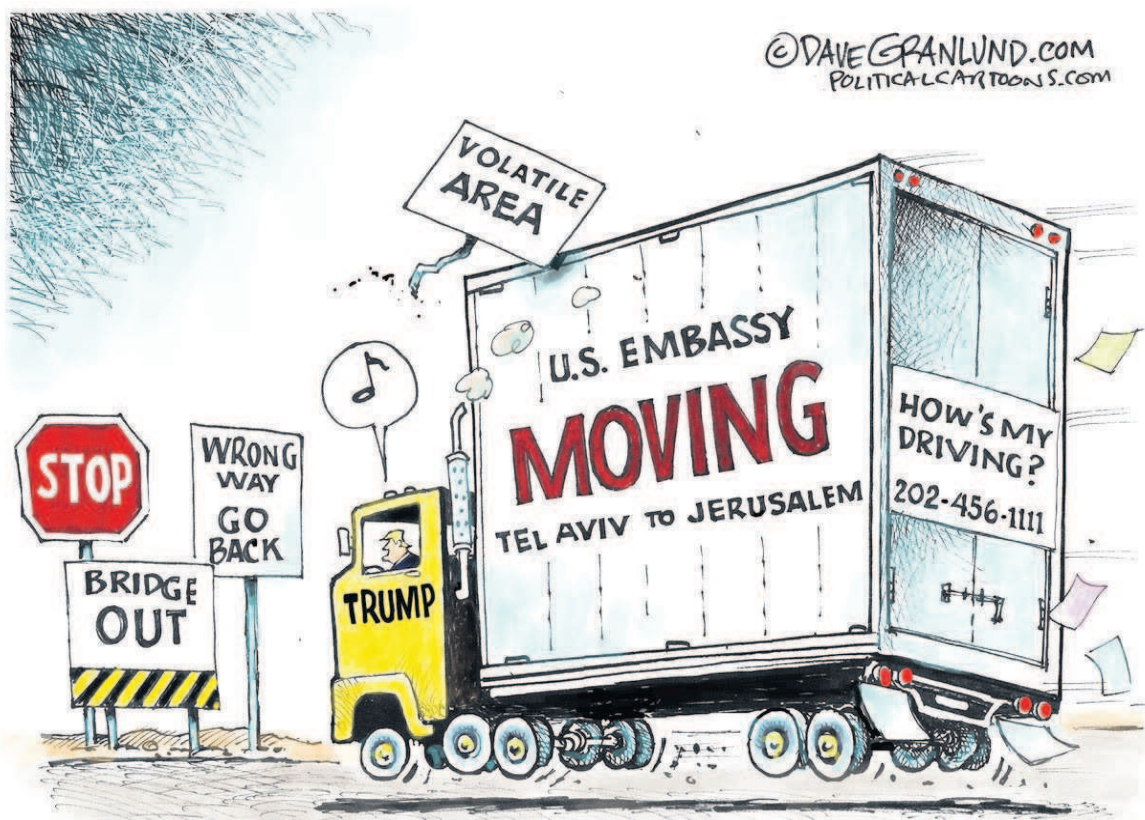
Opponents say the tax allows legislators a "back door" to suck health care into the general fund, which will eventually lead to worse health budgets and outcomes.

Proponents of the tax say this is the least-harmful way to take a step toward guaranteeing health care for more Oregonians, perhaps as many as 300,000.

We're digging deep into the issue over the next month, so look for editorials on the subject before ballots go out.

But we want to make voters aware of this issue right now, so they can look critically at their ballot guide when it arrives.

Take this seriously. You are likely to hear exaggerations from both sides, but there is no debating the fact that this is an important issue that will be decided by relatively few informed voters. Do your best to make sure you are one.



### Obsession with Iran is driving the Mideast and U.S. crazy

By THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN  
New York Times News Service

If there is a common denominator explaining so many recent events in the Middle East — actions by Saudi Arabia, the U.S., Syria, Israel and Yemen — it can be expressed in one word: Iran. Everyone has Iran's growing power and influence in the region on the mind — including Iran — and that obsession is making a lot of people crazy.

For instance, the Trump administration, like Barack Obama's, actually wants to get away from the Middle East — as much as possible — but while leaving as little Iranian influence behind as possible.

Saudi Arabia, under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, known as MBS, wants to get ahead in the Middle East and reform his economy for the 21st century — while curtailing as much Iranian influence in the region as possible.

And the Iranians want to get wide — to expand their influence from Tehran to the Mediterranean — not by creating a successful and attractive development model at home that Arabs and other Muslims would want to emulate, but rather by forcing their way into Lebanon, Yemen, Syria and Iraq through local Shiite militias that have created states within these states.

This is generating a lot of anxiety in the Arab world, the U.S. and Israel without enough people stepping back and thinking: So pro-Iranian militias control a bunch of bad neighborhoods in Beirut, Sana, Damascus and Baghdad. Tell me, what is second prize? What are they really "winning"?

Iran has a richly talented population, and rich Persian culture. But instead of unleashing both and enabling Iran's youth to realize their full potential — and making the country influential that way — the ayatollahs are suppressing those talents at home and unleashing the power of Shiite mercenaries on Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen, and compelling influence that way instead.

It's actually rather pathetic. The greatest thing that the U.S. and Saudi Arabia could do is to stop working each other into a lather over this Iranian "threat" and to focus on their domestic reform agendas. That would be the best revenge on Tehran.

For starters, American, European and Arab leaders should all be encouraging MBS to keep going where no Saudi leader before him has dared to go — pursuing his stated goal of reversing the religious right turn that the kingdom took in 1979, after the takeover of the



Iranian Presidency Office  
Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, right, said in a recent television interview that Saudi Arabia's revamped enmity toward Tehran is a cover-up for the kingdom's domestic and regional failures.

Grand Mosque in Mecca by Muslim extremists. That prompted the Saudi rulers at the time to ban fun, tighten the control of the religious police over society and to much more aggressively export the most misogynist, anti-pluralistic interpretation of Islam to mosques and madrasas across the Muslim world, tilting the whole faith community to the right.

If MBS fulfills his vow to bring Saudi Islam back to "moderation," it will surely improve the status of Muslim women, the quality of education in Muslim communities and the relationship between Muslims and other faiths across the globe. We in the West have spent tremendous sums "countering Muslim extremism." We may finally have a Saudi leader ready to do that work — from the wellspring of Islam — and it would over time hugely benefit Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

### Everyone has Iran's growing power and influence in the region on the mind.

But for MBS to advance that agenda requires a strong, economically healthy Saudi Arabia. Alas, for now Saudi Arabia is far from that; its trajectory in recent years has been sharply downward. Most Saudis today are focused on jobs and education, not on Iran, and if MBS can fix those needs with his reform plan it will only propel his push to moderate Saudi Islam.

Precisely because these intertwined religious and economic reform agendas are so critical, wise friends of MBS would also be

offering him some tough love — by telling him that it's great to arrest thieving Saudi billionaires and throw them in the Ritz-Carlton, but it has to be done with transparency and within a rule of law — which would enhance his legitimacy — not in an arbitrary way that will hurt his legitimacy and frighten future investors. They also have to stress to him that to be an effective anti-corruption campaigner, he has to be open to criticism himself and live modestly. No more giant yachts.

On foreign policy, MBS' real friends would also tell him that while Iran has expanded its influence across the Arab world, the Saudis do not have the muscles to take it on head-on right now. The Iranians have spent 40 years developing their influence through underground networks and Shiite proxies.

Meanwhile, the Saudis wrote checks to Sunni militias, who never stayed bought. Or they bought big weapons systems that are useless in this age of irregular warfare — and only lead to the kind of Saudi aerial bombardments of Yemen that have led to so many civilian deaths, disease and starvation — and a costly stalemate for Riyadh. Saudi Arabia needs to end that war — now — and get out of Yemen, even if it means leaving some Iranian influence behind.

My view on Saudi Arabia today is very simple: Because it has so much deferred reform to undertake — before its oil money runs out — the biggest question is not if MBS is too brash, too brutal, too power-hungry or too imperfect. It's whether he's too late — that Saudi Arabia is now un-reformable. I think not, but that is why, with all of MBS' flaws, we need to help increase his chances for success. If he can turn Jiddah into another Dubai, where so many Iranians now love to vacation and bank, he will do more to increase his influence in the region and diminish Iran's than anything else he could do.

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