

# OPINION

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# THE DAILY ASTORIAN

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## WRITER'S NOTEBOOK

# Kellow tested boundaries of music criticism

### It is easier to be a flatterer than a critic of substance

The life of Brian Kellow, who grew up in our corner of America, was emblematic of the value of a good public education. He was a graduate of Tillamook High School, and he made it big in New York City. His accomplishments weren't in today's hot



STEVE FORRESTER

currency of technology. It was in music, magazine journalism and biography.

Kellow died on July 22 at the age of 59. Brain cancer was the cause of death. He made two public appearances in Astoria over the past 20 years, speaking to Columbia Forum.

A Catholic nun in Tillamook — a piano teacher — gave Kellow the basic equipment of musicianship. At Oregon State University a writing instructor was a particular mentor. Speaking at OSU years later, Kellow recognized that man's place in his career development.

With musical and literary skills, Kellow reached New York in the 1980s. He initially found work in the cultural hotbed of the 92nd Street Y. In 1988 he joined the editorial staff of Opera News magazine, one of classical music's most influential publications. Being a musician gave Kellow an advantage in writing music criticism.

Fred Cohn, who wrote Opera News' obituary of Kellow, described his editorial talent. "I myself once turned in a feature that led with two paragraphs of foofaraw; Brian took out his red pencil and found the exact right

opening. He would encourage his writers to burrow deep — to avoid the anodyne and provide the telling, even gritty details that would give a story interest and depth."

In the upper reaches of classical music criticism, it is easier to be a flatterer than a critic of substance. Kellow tested that boundary when he wrote a memorable column in Opera News that disparaged one of the Metropolitan Opera's biggest investments in set design — for its Ring Cycle. Kellow's larger point was that when stage gimmickry gets in the way of a work's essence, priorities are backward. The board of the Metropolitan Opera Guild — particularly one of its most prominent members — did not like Kellow's column. I was not surprised when, several months later, Brian wondered if I knew of job opportunities in his field in the Pacific Northwest. He landed at Florida Grand Opera as public relations manager.

Another startling Kellow column described his becoming a Roman Catholic. He recounted growing up in a household that was forcefully agnostic. Since Brian was openly gay, becoming Catholic was a somewhat puzzling choice.

Among Kellow's biographical subjects were the Broadway legend Ethel Merman and the film critic Pauline Kael.

The last time my wife and I saw Kellow was June 2016. He and his husband emerged from the press room at the San Francisco Opera, prior to a performance of Don Carlo. Under Kellow's arm was a laptop computer. It contained the text of the novel he'd long talked about. He wouldn't let the laptop out of his sight. That piece of fiction was set in Tillamook — a coming-of-age story, I expect. I hope one day we will see it.

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



Kurt Sneddon

Brian Kellow was a graduate of Tillamook High School who made it big in New York City.

## LETTERS WELCOME

Letters should be exclusive to The Daily Astorian.

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at hand and, rather than mentioning the writer by name, should refer to the headline and date the letter was published. Discourse should be civil and people should be referred to in a respectful manner. Letters in poor taste will not be printed.

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## GUEST COLUMN

# Democrats are moving left — don't panic

In November, several outright Nazis and white supremacists will appear on Republican ballot lines.

Arthur Jones, a founder of a neo-Nazi group called the America First Committee, managed to become the Republican nominee for Congress in the heavily Democratic 3rd District in Illinois. The Republican candidate in California's 11th District, John Fitzgerald, is running on a platform of Holocaust denial.

Russell Walker, a Republican statehouse candidate in North Carolina, has said that Jews descend from Satan and that God is a "white supremacist."

Corey Stewart, Virginia's Republican Senate nominee, is a neo-Confederate who pals around with racists, including one of the organizers of the violent Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville last year. The Rightly Iowa Republican, Rep. Steve King, has moved from standard-issue nativist crank to full-on white nationalist; he recently retweeted a neo-Nazi and then refused to delete the tweet, saying, "It's the message, not the messenger."

Clearly, the time has come for a serious national conversation. And so political insiders across the land are asking: Has the Democratic Party become too extreme?

Everywhere you look lately, centrists are panicking about the emboldened left.

Moderates, reported Alex Seitz-Wald of NBC News, "are warning that ignoring them will lead the party to disaster in the midterm elections and the 2020 presidential contest." Former Sen. Joe Lieberman wrote in The Wall Street Journal that the primary victory of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, a member of the Democratic Socialists of America, over Rep. Joe Crowley, D-N.Y., "seems likely to hurt Congress, America and the Democratic Party." James Comey, former director of the FBI, tweeted, "Democrats, please, please don't lose your minds and rush to the socialist left," arguing that "America's great middle wants sensible, balanced, ethical leadership."

Though Comey's judgment about things that affect political campaigns is not good, I think he's sincere in wanting Democrats to win in November. But his worry is misplaced. Partly, this is because Democrats are not, in fact, rushing to the socialist left in great numbers.

"Overall, it's not really true that the insurgent leftist candidates, like the candidates who are affiliated with the DSA or Bernie Sanders' group, are doing all that well," said Alan Abramowitz, a political scientist at Emory University who specializes in partisan polarization.

With many of this year's primary races completed, Crowley is the only Democratic congressional incumbent so far to lose to a challenger from his left. Ocasio-Cortez is a bright, exciting new figure in the Democratic

Party, but she doesn't define it.

And even people like Comey — center-right figures who are momentarily allied with Democrats because they abhor President Donald Trump — should be cheered by the energy that Ocasio-Cortez and others like her are creating. In the midterms, passion is likely to matter more than appeals to an ever-shrinking pool of swing voters, who at any rate tend to be idiosyncratic economic populists rather than the judicious centrists of Beltway imagination.

I'm not wholly unsympathetic to people of good faith who want Democrats to win in November, but who fear that the United States is more conservative than left-wing activists like to believe. I grew up at a time when Democrats were deeply afraid of liberal overreach. For many of the people who taught me about politics, the debacle of George McGovern's 1972 rout was formative. Its lessons were reinforced by the overwhelming defeat of Michael Dukakis, who was painted as soft on crime and mocked by George H.W. Bush for being a "card-carrying member of the ACLU," as if concern for civil liberties was shameful. I wasn't old enough to vote when Bill Clinton was first elected, but I remember what a relief it was when he broke the Republicans' 12-year stranglehold on the White House, and how necessary and worthwhile his compromises seemed.

Now, however, Hillary Clinton's defeat has overshadowed McGovern's as the Democratic

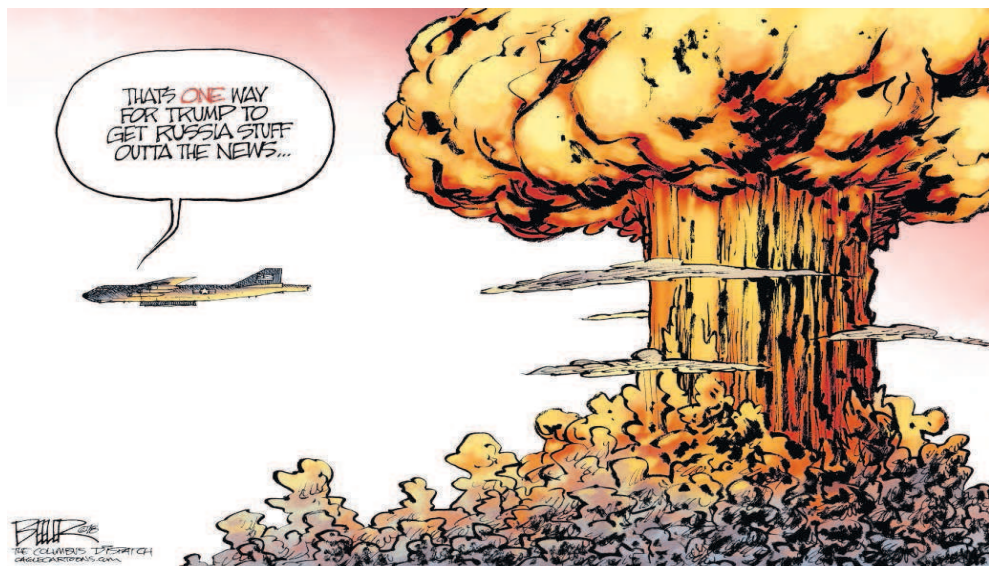
Party's paradigmatic trauma. There are several lessons you can draw from her loss, some of them conflicting — some voters saw her as too corporate, others as too liberal. But it's clear that in a polarized electorate, grassroots fervor and a candidate's charisma matter a lot, and an agenda that seems too modest can be as risky as one that appears overly ambitious.

After all, the economic demands that animate the left are generally quite popular. Though "Medicare For All" means different things to different people, a Kaiser Family Foundation poll from 2017 found that 62 percent of Americans view it positively. A recent Rasmussen poll found 46 percent of likely voters support a federal jobs guarantee, a more radical proposal that was barely present in U.S. politics a couple of years ago.

Centrists might not think these are good ideas, but they are not wild fantasies; they represent efforts to grapple with the chronic economic insecurity that is the enemy of political stability.

Democrats will not defeat Trump and his increasingly fanatical, revanchist party by promising the restoration of what came before him; the country is desperate for a vision of something better. Whether or not you share that vision, if you truly believe that Trump is a threat to democracy, you should welcome politics that inspire people to come to democracy's rescue.

*Michelle Goldberg is a syndicated columnist for the New York Times News Service.*



BILL BIZAR