

OPINION



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GUEST COLUMN

Haunted by ghosts of the past

Historians love to quote William Faulkner about how the “past is never dead. It’s not even past.” Southerners know this in their bones. Northwesterners have yet to learn it.

The ghosts of the past haunt this region in many ways, but they are particularly germane come election season. Most voters seem bewildered by people who favor



JOSEPH TAYLOR

different candidates, but of our two political tribes, it is urbanites who seem most flummoxed and least capable of explaining opponents. Nobody, however, has fully reckoned with how much the present owes to the 1980s.

Although natural resource industries constantly evolved to meet changing ecological and market conditions, they entered particularly wrenching times at the end of the 1970s. Interest rates spiked above 20%. Housing markets cratered. Oregon lost nearly half its timber jobs before the spotted owl crisis hit in 1990. Environmental regulations and industrial reorganization forced most dairies and mills to close. Similar trials plagued miners and ranchers. Fishermen entered an extremely drawn out period of ecological disruption and industrial change.

Meanwhile, urbanites consumed huge amounts of beef, cheese, fish, fruit, grains, ice cream, lamb, milk, minerals and hydroelectricity, but they gave nary a thought to rural struggles with unemployment and underemployment, depression, methamphetamine and opiate addiction, obesity and what economists now call the “deaths of despair.”

This is where the past still matters.

State governments, which increasingly reflected urban voting power, expended little energy or resources on rural problems. Efforts to restrain timber workers led to few good jobs. Century farms found no backstop when state and industry rules escalated costs. Fishermen were idled for much of the 1980s, and they have qualified for disaster relief in most years since the mid-1990s.

For all, hard work produced cruel out-



Colin Murphey/The Astorian

The urban-rural divide in Oregon has roots in the 1980s.

HISTORY, THE STORIES WE TELL ABOUT THE PAST, AND EMPATHY, THE ABILITY TO UNDERSTAND THE WORLD THROUGH OTHER PEOPLE’S EYES, CAN HELP RESOLVE THESE IMPASSES. THE QUESTION IS WHETHER ANYONE CARES ENOUGH TO LEARN, MODIFY THEIR NARRATIVES AND FIND COMMON PATHS FORWARD.

comes of falling living standards, poorer health care and no chance for home ownership or retirement. The state simply reclassified many workers as permanently disabled. Rural communities either faltered or embraced gentrification. Residents without capital had no appealing future.

The only time urbanites seemed to care about any of this was after Republican candidates won elections, and then mostly only to ask, “What is wrong with these people?”

For anyone who approaches this question as something more than a rhetorical device, the past helps explain this hyper-

partisan present. Rural and urban Oregonians once voted similarly. Everywhere was pretty bipartisan, regularly switching between the parties. This too changed in the 1980s. Statewide divides are well recognized, but even in the seemingly homogenous spaces of rural communities, places such as the Nestucca Valley, resource workers began to tilt ever more reliably for GOP candidates, while retirees, merchants and telecommuters voted even more consistently for Democrats.

Each side regarded their votes as virtue signaling. Opponents were just selfish, uncaring bigots. Both sides had merit. Urban liberals did caricature rural

resource workers to greedy environmental rapists, and they refused to admit that environmental regulations and recreational gentrification crushed smallholders. Conversely, rural conservatives rarely acknowledged their contradictory distrust of education and plural societies, nor would they admit their long history of racism and oppression toward indigenous peoples, African Americans and Asians.

Northwesterners of all stripes remained mainly focused on narrow needs and wants. Few recognized how their patterns of consumption and political choices linked them to others.

Their combined pasts continue to shape everyone’s present and future. Ruralites have not forgotten the 1980s. They live it every day, and they have not lost sight of the forces, most of which stemmed from urban settings and assumptions, that made their lives hell. Urban residents remain oblivious. They live in spaces that are simultaneously nowhere and everywhere. Almost nothing they consume is produced locally, and they usually know more about national and global issues than about what happened in the next county.

Urbanites effectively enter foreign lands the moment they leave the city. They are witless about how past actions disrupted so many places and people. Rural residents have a clearer sense of how much they depend on urban consumers, but they too are rather clueless about how their nihilistic desire to wreck everything boomerangs against them with a vengeance.

History, the stories we tell about the past, and empathy, the ability to understand the world through other people’s eyes, can help resolve these impasses. The question is whether anyone cares enough to learn, modify their narratives and find common paths forward.

Joseph E. Taylor III teaches history and geography at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia. He wrote “Making Salmon: An Environmental History of the Northwest Fisheries Crisis.” His new book, “Persistent Callings: Seasons of Work and Identity on the Oregon Coast,” comes out this month from Oregon State University Press.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Deeply moved

We visited Astoria in September, and loved the Columbia River Maritime Museum. In particular, I was deeply moved by the Obon Society exhibit, and resolved to see how I could help their mission of returning good luck flags or “yosegaki hinomaru” to the families of the Japanese soldiers who carried them.

These flags were given by friends and family to young men as they went off to World War II, many never to return. They were often taken as battlefield souvenirs. My research shows them routinely for sale on eBay for about \$250.

As I write this, and over my week-old objections, eBay has one for sale on its platform that features “soldier’s dried blood,” presumptively that of its former owner. This flag is for sale for \$2,000, well over the market value, undoubtedly because of the ghoulish attraction of a young man’s death. I have asked eBay to remove the listing.

I’m grateful to the museum and to the Obon Society for reminding me of the grief that families on all sides of World War II felt at the loss of their sons and daughters.

I don’t fault American GIs who took these flags, but it would be hard for anyone to watch the videos on the Obon website and not feel that the real mission of these flags is to advance peace and mutual forgiveness when they finally make it home.

I hope that this particular flag (and the blood) will be treated with the respect they deserve.

WILLIAM SCOTT
Madison, New Hampshire

A natural solution

Before the Corps of Discovery, the rivers ran free. Salmon were plentiful. No cities, highways, farms, ranches, commerce, just unproductive sagebrush steppes, forests and nothing along the river as the spring runoff flooded and washed everything away.

Today all the above exist, but the rivers are now controlled from flooding, and the salmon have all but disappeared. Salmon loss can be attributed to dams, but in 2016 even the free-flowing rivers on the West Coast — for example, in British Columbia, the Fraser and Skeena — are being closed

to salmon fishing for lack of salmon.

Organizations making money off salmon recovery have not solved the \$1 billion (plus or minus) a year. There is a natural solution to allow salmon access to all historic ranges. Recreate the rivers through and around the dams. A canal-like structure with continuous flowing water with removable gillnets at reentry to the river for predatory fish eating the smolts.

This could be accomplished on the four lower dams with one year of present remediation, and the same flow of water needed could be utilized to circumvent every dam on the Columbia and Snake rivers, ending the blockage. Idaho’s allocation for spillage alone for salmon recovery is enough water for the entire Columbia watershed.

It would end the \$1 billion yearly largess of conservationists, but it won’t return the historical runs — that problem is in the ocean. It will protect the livelihoods of agriculture, barging, recreation, sport fishing and provide flood prevention.

RONALD M. HARRIMAN
Nampa, Idaho

Dangerous changes

We cannot ignore the climate crisis. In order to secure a healthy, sustainable planet, we need to face the dangerous changes occurring around us. In late September, more than 7 million people around the world demonstrated, demanding climate action.

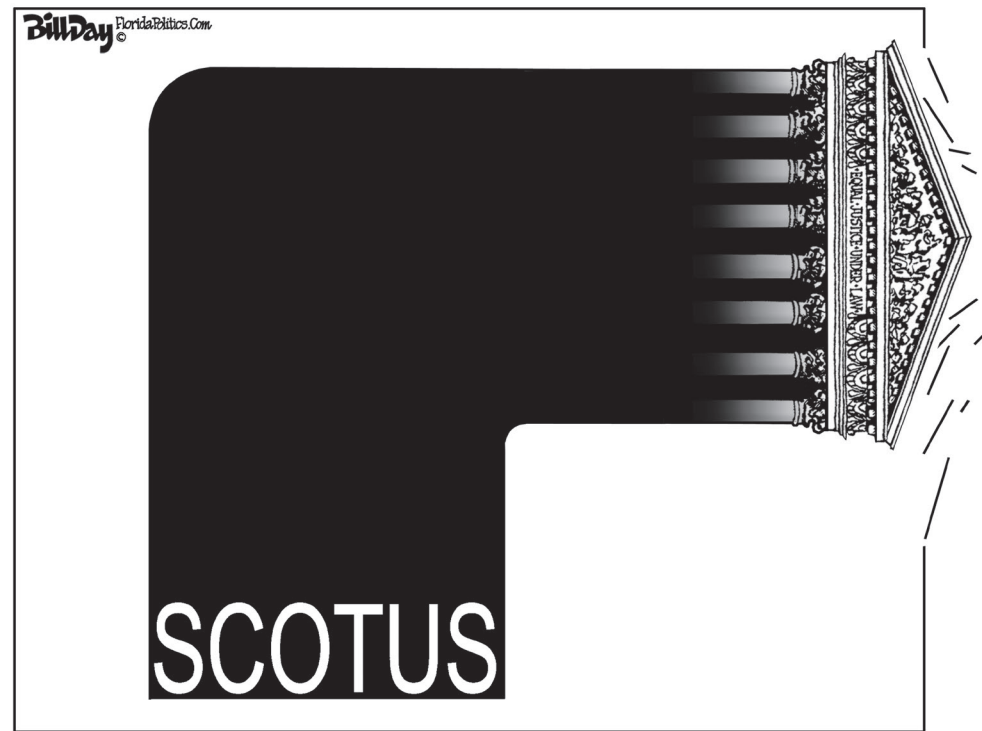
Here in Astoria, as elsewhere, it is perilous to pretend we are safe. For the benefit of our future, and that of our children, we must demand the timber industry limit clearcutting, and stop all clearcutting and toxic spraying near our rivers and sea.

If we ignore this emergency, we will reap the suffering that folks in nearby Rockaway Beach, and other areas, are encountering right now — and it will only get worse for all of us.

We cannot fall for the propaganda that clearcutting is safe, and must continue to prevent loggers from losing their jobs. Many such jobs have already been eliminated, because these days machines often do the work that loggers have done in the past.

Climate scientists do not lie. We have everything to lose, and nothing to gain by ignoring this looming crisis.

Together, we can help create new jobs for loggers, and others, that will improve



all our lives by eliminating fossil fuel pollution and clear cutting that benefits only the wealthy, and concentrating our energies on rebuilding our failing infrastructures, and improving our chances to survive and thrive.

RENEE ROWE
Astoria

Boycott you-know-who

Consider this modest proposal: Let’s boycott you-know-who, whose everyday obsession is to be noticed and loved. Because you-know-who so dominates the media, some of us yearn for some much-needed respite.

You-know-who yearns for constant media attention, while crucial matters like climate crisis and massive corruption don’t receive the focused attention they merit.

We need a day off to indulge in some beneficial stoic behavior, like celebrating the great achievements of our past, looking forward to a more enriching future and, above all, grasping the present fittingly.

Think about it. You-know-who is a narcissist who’d get caught holding his own hand in a lovers’ lane.

Every day in America, we celebrate something special — or not so special. For instance, Sept. 26 was National Lobster Day, National Dumping Day and Johnny Appleseed Day. Come to think of it, Johnny Appleseed was famous for planting seeds.

Maybe we should plant the seed of silence — avoiding any mention of you-know-who. That’s challenging, since it would mean avoiding television, radio, the internet, tweeting and people wearing MAGA hats.

But I think it’s worth the candle. For at least one day, I could exclaim: You-know-who: I’ve had enough of you.

ROBERT BRAKE
Ocean Park, Washington

No clearcut

We do not favor the proposed clearcut near Arcadia Beach, first because clearcuts contribute to global warming. It is really no better to flatten mature forests in Oregon than it is to burn mature forests in Brazil and Indonesia.

Cycles of clearcutting eventually exhaust the soil and result in permanent deforestation. And the suggestion that immature trees somehow sequester more carbon than mature trees is not borne out by the facts.

Additionally, a mature forest deserves protection for the same reason that Oregon’s Barry Lopez argues for the defense of wilderness — “because it is so beautiful.”

Why is beauty important? Because it is a gift from our creator — a blessing, a forgiveness and an encouragement to hope.

ROBERT and KERSTIN ADAMS
Astoria