

OUR VIEW

Let’s notice people too easy to ignore

Personal freedom, heartbreak, shame, law and order, dignity, cost to taxpayers — this is only some of what we must balance as the coast struggles with the interlocking dilemmas of homelessness and mental illness.

Americans aren’t required to have settled residences and some choose not to. We’re reminded of this by a recent police report: “A suspicious man walking down the road near Smith Creek, with a huge backpack, said he was ‘on an adventure’ when contacted.” Good for him.

Some interactions between itinerant or homeless people aren’t so lighthearted.

“Cop-to-bottom” missteps riddled two arrests in Pacific County, Washington, this summer. The circumstances vary a bit, but Washington state law was violated when a man and woman were separately picked up on minor charges, assessed as having mental health issues, and then allowed to languish in jail for two months. After unjustifiable delays, they finally were sent to Western State Hospital near Tacoma where each lost another month of freedom while staff made sure they were well enough to help defend themselves in court.

After three months’ detention, one pleaded guilty to charges; the other will likely follow suit. Already incarcerated far longer than they should have been, neither faces more jail time. They got caught up in a system specifically designed to protect mentally ill people from getting trapped as they were. Lacking local connections and unable to get out on bail, each suffered much beyond the discomfort and humiliation of invol-



The Astorian

The Astoria Warming Center is hosted by First United Methodist Church.

untary confinement. There was no legitimate compelling state interest to justify keeping such low-level offenders locked up for so long.

Everyone obviously should obey the law and the two defendants weren’t blameless. Most of the time, however, mature policing resolves such conflicts without arrest. Jailing itinerants who don’t intend to stay in a county is a waste for all involved. A sensible prosecution decision would have been to set them loose after a week or two, with a suggestion to move on. An experienced judge would have insisted on a speedy resolution.

As it turned out, taxpayers footed the bill for \$57,000 in psychiatric care, up to \$12,000 in jail expense, and untold sums for justice system salaries.

In Astoria last week, the death of a 72-year-old homeless woman with deep community ties shines a spot-

light on other aspects of this sad situation.

Still well-anchored in the community, she and her boyfriend became unmoored from conventional housing in 2018, and took to the streets. Gail Griffey had mood swings and numerous contacts with police over minor matters. She was brought up on charges after a tantrum in a convenience store. On the other hand, her normally cheerful demeanor brightened many lives.

Lack of real estate didn’t make her any less of a real and worthwhile person. She didn’t deserve to fall through the cracks.

As a mental professional told one of the Pacific County defendants, we all operate along a spectrum of sanity. Griffey’s choices after an eviction suggest that her mental processes were unconventional. But she wasn’t believed to be so incompetent that official intervention was

mandatory. Clatsop Community Action would have provided help if she had been willing to undergo an assessment.

Like the old man in “Ground-hog Day” who no amount of caring could nurture through a life-taking cold winter night, sometimes good intentions aren’t enough. Answers are hard to find, but it’s worth imagining — and perhaps acting upon — a more proactive and systematic approach to getting people off city streets and into better situations, at least during poor weather.

What should we do? Criminalizing mental illness has been rejected by most political leaders and citizens. But jails still too often become horribly inadequate sanctuaries for people in the midst of struggling with brain ailments. This is no reflection on police or jail staff, who too often find themselves in no-win situations when minor infractions attract attention.

Front-line officers have to exercise constraint and mercy. But at the same time, communities and law enforcement cannot and should not turn a blind eye to homeless camps that blight areas such as vacant land at the North Coast Business Park and behind Goodwill in Warrenton.

While awaiting state and national solutions, including a far better safety net for people in mental crises, perhaps the best available answers are the ones that always come most forcefully to mind in the holiday season. Let’s notice the people it’s too easy to ignore, help them and avoid arresting them when we can, and speak out for humane affordable housing for all our fellow Americans.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Violations

Impeachment is a part of our Constitution, which all American citizens are sworn to protect. The founders included this process to guard our republic, so we can keep it.

Before about 1854, American political parties were fluid and prone to upheaval. Since the creation of the Democratic Party in 1854, there have been 12 Democratic presidents and since 1860 there have been 19 Republican presidents; since about 1865 there has been one independent party president.

My layman’s view of U.S. president impeachments:

- Andrew Johnson was sometimes a Republican, and sometimes a Democrat. He served as Abraham Lincoln’s vice president while a member of an independent party, the National Union. He was seldom seen as a moderate, and was impeached but acquitted by the U.S. Senate.
- Richard Nixon, a lifelong Republican, was a moderate politician. On the verge of impeachment by the U.S House, he resigned to avoid impeachment and trial by the Senate.
- Bill Clinton, also a moderate politician, was a Democrat impeached by the House, but acquitted by the Senate.
- Donald Trump is an unusual mix of moderate and hardline positions for a non-politician: Republican Party 1987, Reform Party 1999, Democratic Party 2001, then Republican again in 2009. He financially supported both Democratic and Republican party candidates and policies until 2010, and after that, exclusively Republicans. He was impeached last week and is moving to a trial in the U.S. Senate.

It appears that three out of the four presidents who have faced impeachment have been Republicans, or quasi-Republican, and those three Republican presidents were indicted for violating the U.S. Constitution. Bill Clinton, the sole Democrat, was indicted for fibbing about consensual sex.

R.D. SMITH
Gearhart

Corruption

As we move through the impeachment and trial of President Donald Trump, his defenders are trying to make the case that the president is very concerned about

corruption, that his conversations with the Ukrainian president were to ensure that American taxpayer dollars were not going to be wasted by systemic corruption.

This is hilarious. This is the man who ran a fake “university,” and had to pay out \$25 million to his defrauded students. He ran a fake “charitable foundation” that was finally shut down by court order. This is the man who routinely stiffed the contractors and workers on his building projects.

This is the man who used to kick off his campaign rallies by hawking his wines and steaks, who promotes his hotels and golf courses at every opportunity, who has put his own children to work in the White House.

His personal lawyer for the last 10 years is in prison. His former campaign manager is also in prison. His longtime friend and political adviser, Roger Stone, is awaiting sentencing; so is his first National Security Adviser Michael Flynn, who led chants of “Lock her up!” at his 2016 rallies.

His administration has been a revolving door of corruption and incompetence, with close to 80 appointees fired or resigned so far.

Donald Trump is worried about corruption? That’s a good one, a real knee-slapper.

JOSEPH STEVENSON
Astoria

Vetting

The person who cuts my hair has to have certified training and a license to practice, while none of the elected officials in Washington, D.C., do. The people who work for them have to get background checks, and be assessed for security clearances, but not their bosses.

Scientists working at Los Alamos or Livermore Laboratories undergo psychological evaluations to determine their stability for handling secret information, and yet the people who view the most sensitive material, and make decisions affecting millions of people and trillions of dollars, aren’t required to go through any vetting process whatsoever. Seriously?

We all have seen the kind of damage, turmoil, embarrassment and risk that occurs when a person with questionable morals, emotional stability, intellectual ability and knowledge or caring for government operations is elected.



It’s time for the U.S. to fully enter the 21st century and require the highest positions in government to have certifications which go beyond being 30 years of age, and being a U.S. citizen with the appropriate residence.

Any person aspiring to the highest offices in the land should have proper certification and training that reflects their ability to do the work. We expect more from drug abuse counselors.

We have seen how being elected does not necessarily mean they’re fully qualified or capable of doing the job. I think all positions in the three major branches of government should have requirements for certification and continuing education, especially in the area of ethics, before running for office.

BRENTON KAHLE
Astoria

Grave consequences

A new aspect of the impeachment inquiry has surfaced in a statement from three preeminent psychiatrists, concerned that President Donald Trump’s textbook mental illness, called narcissistic personality disorder, under the pressure of impeachment, could have grave consequences for the safety of our nation.

They stated that Trump is ramping up his conspiracy theories, and showing a great deal of cruelty and vindictiveness. These psychiatrists, with the backing of

350 other colleagues, have warned Congress that Trump’s pathology, which led him to declare his July 25th phone call to the Ukrainian president as “absolutely perfect,” is a delusion rather than a lie.

I have seen Trump at rallies invite his followers to blame groups such as immigrants, liberals, Democrats or environmentalists for their problems. His followers by believing him, join him and create a national “shared psychosis.” Shades of Germany in the late 1930s.

Senate Republicans have an out here: Defer to the mental illness diagnosis, and remove Trump from office for the survival of the nation. Then make sure that future candidates for high office are screened for mental health.

DAVID FITCH
Astoria

Humdinger

Rather than read, or watch on TV, the spin jobs put on by either Democrats or Republicans about the recent six-page letter on impeachment sent by President Donald Trump to Speaker Nancy Pelosi, I hope you will read the actual letter reproduced on NBC’s website: nbc-news.to/2r1jxYn

President Trump apparently wrote this letter for the history books. And its a humdinger!

DON HASKELL
Astoria