

OPINION

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WRITER'S NOTEBOOK

Our luck won't last forever

Dead outnumbered the living on the Great Plains in the terrible winter of 1846-47 as white settlers began to spill across the West, for the first time exposing many Native Americans to dreadful diseases germinated in the cramped dwellings of the East.

I wouldn't exist if my Mormon great-great-grandfather hadn't lost his wife to cholera that winter and married the woman who became my ancestor. In all, 325 Latter-day Saints died at Winter Quarters, Nebraska, of illnesses that could cut down a healthy person in a matter of 24 hours.

In terms of sheer magnitude, Indian deaths far outweighed whites. My family witnessed villages where corpses were stacked like cordwood outside tattered lodges, drifting snow only partially concealing agonizing scenes of tragedy.

Some people got sick and recovered; others somehow avoided it altogether through lucky happenstance, genes or partial immunity. Enough settlers survived so we can look back on western settlement with some complacency, our forgetfulness leading to a greater sense of inevitable triumph than is deserved. Imagine an alternative American history in which contact with Indians exposed us to new microbes instead of the other way around.

As it was, many tribes — including those here at the mouth of the Columbia River — were pounded into near extinction, blameless victims punished by biology for their long isolation from the larger human population in the Old World, which harbored deadly germs in its veins and animals and parasites.

The development of antibiotics and immunizations, coupled with better hygiene and public health care, radically altered our perception of disease. It's no longer at all normal for children



Medical workers in protective gear talk with a woman suspected of being ill with a coronavirus at a community health station in Wuhan in central China.

in developed countries to die of whooping cough, diarrhea or polio. No longer do people in the prime of life look over their shoulders in fear every time a family member comes down with an infection.

But for at least a quarter century, experts have warned our complacency is misplaced. For example, the late Seaview physician John Campiche often wrote of the danger of an impending second wave of infectious illness due to a combination of factors ranging from misuse of antibiotics to overpopulation.

It's worth noting that in the years since Campiche's death in 2005, misplaced worries about vaccinations have put a new generation at risk from measles and other easily preventable infections. Despite being one of the most brilliant physicians of his generation, Campiche didn't foresee this. But he knew all too well that some battles don't stay won.

Many scientists have long believed the next great killers will sweep out of east Asia, where vast numbers of people live in close proximity with pigs and poultry, prime reservoirs and incubators of microbes with the ability to jump to humans. The new novel coronavirus sweeping China is believed to have originated in wildlife butchered for human food — a practice believed to have also given rise to AIDS in Africa. It should be barred forever, for the sake of humanity and fast-disappearing wildlife.

Most new types of influenza first spring up in Asia, and scientists' greatest fear has been emergence of a new quick-spreading flu germ like that which killed 20 million people worldwide in 1918-19, including 675,000 Americans. Even without a new super-flu, the plain vanilla varieties kill about 20,000 a year here today.

While few of us have direct experience of epidemic illness, we still dread

it, and that's why the mysterious outbreak of novel coronavirus is getting so much attention.

In all likelihood — like the somewhat similar outbreak of SARS in 2003 — coronavirus won't become a big problem in the U.S., where health authorities are taking it very seriously and where our relatively low population density will impede its ability to spread from person to person. It's important to remember no one has died here, although at last count five U.S. residents have brought corona back from China — including a resident of western Washington state.

It could, however, be a whole different matter in China and Southeast Asia, where conditions for transmission are ideal and where officials were slow to institute an effective quarantine before Chinese New Year vacations began. Up to 5 million people may have slipped out of the city at the outbreak's epicenter before authorities clamped down. Such missteps have the potential to wreak horrible damage.

It is also already an economic disaster, with travel to Hong Kong and southern China grinding to a standstill, a grim reminder of the massive social disruptions that accompanied European plagues centuries ago. World stock markets took a comparatively big hit early this week, as investors grow concerned about disruptions to supply chains and other side effects of containment efforts.

While our health officials are acting with reassuring competence, it's hard to feel secure that national leaders, preoccupied with impeachment and bitter partisanship, are similarly engaged. The fact is that infectious diseases, old and new, will surely kill many times more Americans than terrorism ever will.

We must give this fight against potential global pandemics the resources and attention it deserves.

Matt Winters is the editor and publisher of the Chinook Observer.

GUEST COLUMN

A Democrat's town hall

One of the Oregon Senate Democrats' negotiators on climate change legislation made her position clear to constituents at a town hall meeting last week.

State Sen. Kathleen Taylor, D-Milwaukie, was asked about the potential for Republicans senators to again walk out and thus block Senate action on a carbon cap-and-trade bill.

"I'm not interested in putting forth a watered-down bill on climate just to appease and have them come. Why would I do that?" she said to scattered applause.

Taylor said Democrats already had agreed to a number of changes sought by timber, rural and other interests.

About 50 people attended the meeting Wednesday evening in the SMILE Station, a former firehouse in southeast Portland. The audience skewed older, which seems to be the case with town halls, but younger adults also attended.

Taylor had invited Sen. Mark Hass, D-Beaverton, to talk about the Student Success Act and its corporate activity tax passed by the Legislature last year. There also were questions about the climate legislation, gun control, state agency scandals and other issues.

The town hall lasted 90 minutes, a half-hour longer than scheduled, and didn't break up until Taylor reminded people that homemade cookies were available.

"I believe climate change is the issue of our time," Taylor said.

Passing the climate bill is her top priority for this year's Legislature. The short session starts Monday and ends by March 8.

The Senate Environment and Natural Resources Committee, led by Portland Democrat Michael Dembrow, unveiled the new climate bill this month during Legislative Days. It is a reworked version of House Bill 2020, which was scuttled at the end of last year's legislative session when Republicans temporarily boycotted the Capitol.

"I don't thinking anybody saw coming what happened," Taylor said.

House Speaker Tina Kotek, D-Portland, told reporters this month that the House also has a climate bill ready but is waiting

to see what the Senate does.

Taylor said the Senate legislation, SB 1530, already is undergoing proposed changes as negotiations continue with key interest groups. She said that Senate President Peter Courtney, D-Salem, had appointed Dembrow, Lee Beyer, of Springfield, Arnie Roblan, of Coos Bay, and her as negotiators.

Republican senators have said the new version is as bad as last year's HB 2020, perhaps worse; their ideas have been rejected; and they see no value in being in the negotiating room but not part of the negotiations.

One participant at the town hall said she'd received an email urging supporters of the climate bill to contact legislators, who were being flooded with opposition messages from #TimberUnity.

A man asked whether roadblocks could be set up on Interstate 84 to arrest Republican legislators fleeing to Idaho to prevent the Legislature's having a quorum to conduct business. Taylor said it was unclear whether absent legislators can be arrested in Oregon and forced to come to the Capitol.

Right now, she said, her feeling is that the Republican senators will be at the Legislature. "If they don't come, then we will let the democratic process happen," she said. "We have a couple of Republican members who are in vulnerable seats (in this year's elections), and we will campaign against them."

Taylor said the biggest and best minds in climatology are advising on the bill. Those experts have said that leaving rural transportation fuels out of this bill, although they were included in HB 2020, would not prevent Oregon from joining California and other jurisdictions in a carbon market.

Asked why not send the bill to voters, as Republicans have sought, Taylor said businesses and other critics have an endless amount of money to campaign against it.

"We need the bill to pass," she said, adding that the nation was watching Oregon.

Hass indicated that Oregon should learn from the experience in Washington state, where voters rejected carbon proposals. "The Eagle Scout in me says let's just vote and Oregonians can have the final say," he said, but that is not plausible.

Another participant said opponents won the messaging campaign last year by



A protester in Salem last year urged lawmakers to pass a cap-and-trade bill.

spreading the narrative that "Kate Brown is coming for your guns and your trucks."

On other issues:

- Hass said he is a co-sponsor of Senate Majority Leader Ginny Burdick's bill allowing governments to ban all firearms, including those carried by people with concealed weapons permits, from government facilities. That prohibition could include schools and the Capitol. Hass and Taylor said they would vote for that bill as well as a House bill requiring safe storage of firearms.
- While applauding the grants available to school districts through the Student Success Act, a woman said the application process was so complex that her district had received an 85-page manual.
- Hass credited goodwill in working with the business community for the fact

that opponents did not refer the new corporate activity tax to voters. Had there been a statewide election on the tax, he noted, it would have taken place in January.

- With the new tax and the Legislature's other investments in education, Hass said, Oregon has nearly closed the longtime gap between actual school spending and the amounts suggested by the state's Quality Education Model.
- Both senators said they would vote for a House bill that outlaws coyote-hunting contests.
- Hass and Taylor agreed that some state agencies need better oversight.
- No one raised the issue of homelessness, a common topic of conversation at town halls.

Dick Hughes has been covering the Oregon political scene since 1976.