

# OPINION



# the Astorian

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## WRITER'S NOTEBOOK

# Let's relearn how to live together

It is a curse to live in an era you do not understand. It is a fair bet that many Oregonians, across the political spectrum, harbor that anxiety.

In the recent Oregon election, five Eastern Oregon counties voted in favor of joining Idaho. This is a movement that's been around for a while. Although differing from the concept of the State of Jefferson, conceived in 1941, to form a new state from counties in southern Oregon and Northern California, it flows from the same sense of marginalization.



**STEVE FORRESTER**

Oregon is not unique in how its economic and political cultures are frequently divided. Joel Garreau gave the most complete explanation

of this reality in his 1981 book, "The Nine Nations of North America." State borders are artificial lines that group together populations with discordant priorities. If we were starting from scratch, all state lines might bear little resemblance to what they are.

As with the State of Jefferson, Idaho annexing elements of Eastern Oregon is unlikely to occur. It would take agreement within the Salem and Boise statehouses, as well as in Congress. Approval of such a reconfiguration would give license to an avalanche of similar efforts around the country, setting a precedent few state and national leaders would welcome.

While I don't think the Idaho plan is good for Oregon, I understand the emotional motivation among Eastern Oregon voters. An author of the separation concept, Mike McCarter, of La Pine, has said: "Rural Oregon is in an abusive relationship with Willamette Valley." McCarter is the former president of the Oregon Agribusiness Council and the Oregon Association of Nurserymen.

Much of what chafes at rural people is Salem's and Portland's ignorance of what lies east of Hood River. That eventually comes down to natural resources management.



Some conservatives want to move parts of Oregon into Idaho.

*THE DIVISIVENESS ILLUSTRATED BY THE GREATER IDAHO IDEA IS PART OF A LARGER NOSTALGIA FOR THE DECADES IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING WORLD WAR II, WHEN OREGON VIEWED ITSELF AS OVERCOMING PETTY DIFFERENCES IN THE PURSUIT OF SENSIBLE ACCOMMODATIONS THAT GENERATED MUTUAL SUCCESS. LIKE MOST NOSTALGIA, THIS ROSY VIEW MINIMIZES THE HARD NEGOTIATIONS — AND OCCASIONAL HARD FEELINGS — THAT SET THE STAGE FOR A PROSPEROUS AND EGALITARIAN PERIOD OF PROGRESS.*

Animosity toward Salem revolves around how land uses are prioritized. In the broadest terms, Oregonians who live beyond the state's northwest urban center too often are made to feel like bumpkins for pursuing the economic opportunities at hand, which despite impressive

diversification, still often revolve around agriculture and wood products.

Conversely, the state's urban zeitgeist is to see other Oregonians as mired in an outmoded attachment to traditional extractive industries — and under the sway of Trumpist grievances.

One does not have to live in the broad dry expanse of Eastern Oregon to feel the brunt of Salem's ignorance. Here at the mouth of the Columbia River, Salem's myopia was apparent in 2012 with former Gov. John Kitzhaber's needless, scientifically baseless and boneheaded attack on gillnet fishermen. Gov. Kate Brown has lacked the guts to undo Kitzhaber's stupid policy.

Meanwhile, Portland's largest city has become a place that many of us no longer recognize. For me, the transformation began years ago when The Oregonian debased its product. Like it or not, a metropolitan area is a media center. But that is no longer the case with Portland.

The riots and vandalism have given downtown Portland, sheathed in plywood, an ugly and bereft look. The city's weak political leadership has enabled a catastrophe that has gone on about a year, perpetuating a sense of a place not in control of itself, and certainly in no position to lecture or dictate to others.

The divisiveness illustrated by the Greater Idaho idea is part of a larger nostalgia for the decades immediately following World War II, when Oregon viewed itself as overcoming petty differences in the pursuit of sensible accommodations that generated mutual success. Like most nostalgia, this rosy view minimizes the hard negotiations — and occasional hard feelings — that set the stage for a prosperous and egalitarian period of progress.

Rekindling these conditions requires a deliberate and well-executed process. Respectful discussions coupled with concrete follow through are what it will take to bridge Oregon's urban-rural divide.

While each of the 36 counties can't go its own way, or find greener political grass across the Idaho border, Oregonians can and must do a better job of listening to one another.

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

## GUEST COLUMN

# The longest of longshots

*THE PORTLAND METRO AREA DOMINATES OREGON, BUT PORTLAND AND RURAL OREGON ARE INEXTRICABLY LINKED. OR AT LEAST WE THOUGHT SO. INDEED, THE SECESSIONIST DESIRE TO FORM THE STATE OF JEFFERSON OUT OF SOUTHERN OREGON AND NORTHERN CALIFORNIA ALWAYS SEEMED MORE A STATE OF MIND THAN A POLITICAL POSSIBILITY. IT WOULD BE THE LONGEST OF LONGSHOTS FOR THE GREATER IDAHO MOVEMENT TO SUCCEED.*

longshots for the Greater Idaho movement to succeed.

Most rural residents are geographically removed from the Portland violence, but the city's well-documented problems feed the rural-urban divide.

With the dramatic increase in Portland-area shootings, rural legislators and their constituents wonder why Democrats don't focus on that violence instead of statewide gun control legislation that restricts law-abiding rural residents.

The protest-related violence in Portland also seems incomprehensible to rural Oregonians, though House Speaker Tina Kotek, D-Portland, said it has not been a major topic within the Oregon State Capitol this year. Police reform has been, following the national soul-searching and Oregon protests that stemmed from the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis a year ago.

Kotek said the Legislature is on track to pass 16 police reform bills this year, most of them with solid bipartisan support, on top of six passed during last year's special sessions.

Outside the Capitol, there is palpable concern about the destructive protests.

"I receive daily emails from southern Oregon citizens that are distressed by the ongoing civil unrest in Portland. Many citizens demand that we do something," Rep. Gary Leif, R-Roseburg, wrote in his constituent newsletter last week.

"My heart breaks for the people of Portland and I know the national news is not looking favorable on our state. But the reality is, that the state Legislature has no role in solving the problem."

Leif said that is the responsibility of local leadership.

New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof, who grew up on a farm outside

Yamhill, cites a lack of that leadership in progressive Portland, a resilient city he dearly loves.

"Last summer President Donald Trump inflamed the crisis in Portland by sending in unneeded federal troops to deal with mostly peaceful protests. That aggravated the upheaval, provoked months of rioting and empowered fringe groups, and perhaps it also obscured the need to stand resolutely against violence by local troublemakers on both left and right. There was too much deference to people sowing chaos under the banner of social justice, perhaps for fear of seeming unprogressive, and after the feds left, the city never tried hard enough to pivot to reestablish order," Kristof wrote.

Portland's inability to solve its urban problems provides a national lesson: "Grand gestures for justice are fine, but they can't substitute for quiet competence in keeping people safe, getting people housed or picking up the garbage."

**When will it end?:** The 2021 Legislature is unlikely to adjourn much before its June 27 constitutional deadline. "We're going to have to go to the very end," Speaker Kotek told journalists last week.

Conducting business online, with virtual committee hearings, takes longer. So do House floor debates and votes, because some lawmakers must be summoned from their offices due to the COVID-19 protocols. Kotek also said state budget work was affected by receiving late guidance from the federal government on allowable uses of this year's coronavirus relief money.

Key legislators and staff have weekly conversations about reopening the Capitol to the public, Kotek said, but Marion County would need to be in the lower-risk category. Marion currently is high risk.

**Disclosures:** I have longtime connections to two people I mentioned. Floyd McKay, then a commentator and news analyst at KGW-TV, was my journalism instructor and newspaper adviser at Linfield College. Nicholas Kristof, then a student at Yamhill-Carlton High School and a leader in Future Farmers of America, was a reporter at the McMinnville News-Register when I was starting my journalism career there.

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

## LETTERS WELCOME

Letters should be exclusive to The Astorian. Letters should be fewer than 250 words and must include the writer's name, address and phone number. You will be contacted to confirm authorship. All letters are subject to editing for space, grammar and factual accuracy. Only two letters per writer are allowed each month. Letters written in response

to other letter writers should address the issue at hand and should refer to the headline and date the letter was published. Discourse should be civil. Send via email to editor@dailyastorian.com, online at bit.ly/astorianletters, in person at 949 Exchange St. in Astoria or mail to Letters to the Editor, P.O. Box 210, Astoria, OR., 97103.

When Oregon made national news in late May, "it wasn't because of riots in Portland, and it wasn't because of other issues from our most populated city," said state Rep. David Brock Smith, R-Port Orford.

"It was because an overwhelming majority of constituents in five counties said, 'I don't feel represented by the urban politicians of this state, and I would like my county commissioners to look at joining Idaho.'"



**DICK HUGHES**

Union and Jefferson counties voted last year, so seven counties have now voted to pursue leaving Oregon.

A New York Times article gave this summation of the May 18 election results: "Grant, Baker, Lake, Sherman and Malheur Counties, the five currently in revolt, are huge in area but minuscule in population and thus political clout at the capital in Salem. The counties contain 63,000 people over about 26,000 square miles, an area about the same size as Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Jersey, Rhode Island and Delaware combined."

Floyd McKay, a retired journalism professor and longtime observer of Northwest politics, put the election results — and the national overreaction — in perspective.

"This is a serious voice for rural voters in Eastern Oregon, but it is far from a rebellion, let alone a likely rejiggering of the map. Approval of the legislatures in Idaho and Oregon would be required, and Congress would also need to assent," McKay wrote on Post Alley. "Don't rip up your OSU Beavers jersey in favor of an Idaho Vandals shirt, dad, ain't happening very soon."

As McKay noted previously, Washington state at least has one major city on its east side, Spokane, to provide a bit of balance with liberal Seattle. Not so, Oregon.

The Portland metro area dominates Oregon, but Portland and rural Oregon are inextricably linked. Or at least we thought so. Indeed, the secessionist desire to form the State of Jefferson out of southern Oregon and Northern California always seemed more a state of mind than a political possibility. It would be the longest of