

OPINION



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GUEST COLUMN

Democracy is difficult to sustain

On the day Oregonians chose Tina Kotek and Christine Dragan as their Democratic and Republican nominees for governor, I was supposed to be in Russia.

Instead, I was sailing the Baltic Sea toward Finland after a sobering day in Gdańsk, Poland. Russia's invasion of Ukraine had caused St. Petersburg to be dropped from our itinerary.



DICK HUGHES

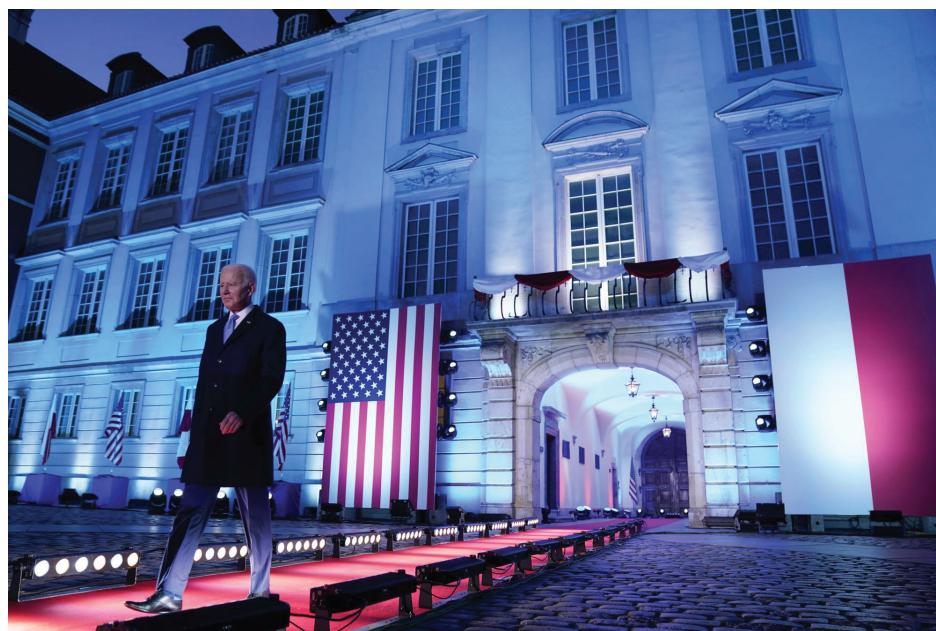
Two years ago, when friends broached the idea of a Northern European trip in May 2022, I wasn't thinking about this being a gubernatorial election year. I simply calculated that the annual legislative session would be done in time for me to go, and that my wife deserved such a once-in-a-lifetime trip as she contemplated retirement.

Gdańsk was a fitting place to contemplate democracy.

World War II in Europe began when Germany attacked a Polish garrison near the Free City of Danzig, now known by the Polish name of Gdańsk. Poles vividly remember how that outnumbered and outgunned garrison managed to hold out longer than expected, and today find unity in Ukraine's continuing resolve against Russia.

About 115 members of the Oregon National Guard are in Poland as part of the U.S. military deployed there to counter Russian expansionism.

The physical scars, and perhaps the psychological ones, from WWII remain evident in Gdańsk. Seventy-seven years later, the city still is rebuilding from the devastating Soviet bombardments as the war came to a close. Seeing the ongoing



Evan Vucci/AP Photo

President Joe Biden spoke about the Russian invasion of Ukraine during a visit to Poland in March.

reconstruction was both inspiring and haunting.

Along with the rest of Poland and Nazi-occupied territory, Gdańsk endured the horrors of the Holocaust. As antisemitism rose in the 1930s, many Jews emigrated overseas from Gdańsk. When war arrived, the remainder were sent to concentration camps, forcibly removed elsewhere or died in other ways. A Jewish community that had flourished since the 15th century disappeared.

I've been to Holocaust museums and met with survivors. But being in Gdańsk, and hearing our guide tell the city's history, brought death to life in a different way.

Our visit underscored the importance of why the Oregon Legislature in

2019 unanimously passed Senate Bill 664 requiring that public schools teach about the Holocaust and other genocides – to guard against history repeating itself. A high school freshman – Claire Sarnowski, 14, of Lake Oswego, who had developed a deep friendship with Holocaust survivor Alter Wiener – launched the legislation with the help of state Sen. Rob Wagner.

As Germany was defeated, the Soviets took over Poland, turning it into a communist state that lasted for decades. Protests and dissent were put down violently. The towering Three Crosses Monument – also known as the The Memorial to the Fallen Shipyard Workers – honors more than 40 individuals killed during 1970 protests that began at the Lenin Shipyard in Gdańsk.

In 1980, uprisings at that same shipyard created the Solidarity movement, the first independent trade union in the Soviet bloc. That in turn led to the collapse of communism in Poland's government and the election of Gdańsk's Lech Walesa as president. The Soviet Union dissolved two years later.

But this is not an all-rosy tale. Poland has struggled. Democracy is difficult to achieve and even more difficult to sustain. The solidarity against communism fractured. Gdańsk is a civic beacon of democracy and citizen assembly, whereas the Civil Liberties Union for Europe this year warned that such former communist states as Poland and Hungary are increasingly authoritarian.

Democracy in Oregon: Turnout for the May election can be characterized as wonderful or wimpy, depending on one's perspective. As of Friday afternoon, the Secretary of State's Office reported 1,095,859 ballots had been cast, a record for a nonpresidential primary. But the overall turnout was merely 37% of registered voters.

A swath of Eastern Oregon counties led the way. Gilliam, Wheeler, Grant and Harney all recorded turnout between 49% and 52%.

Unaffiliated voters, who outnumber Democrats or Republicans, couldn't vote in party primary races for Congress, governor, Legislature or some county offices. Neither could voters registered with so-called minor parties.

But everyone could vote for the important local and state nonpartisan positions on the ballot. My wife and I voted by absentee ballot in Polk County before our trip, doing our small part toward the county's 39.9% turnout.

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

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Clear

It's been clear for a number of years that Betsy Johnson was a "DINO" (Democrat In Name Only), and though she now claims to be an "independent" (but backed by Big Timber bucks!), her response to the recent gun violence was typically Republican.

SHERRIE HAMMOND
Hammond

Stepping in it

In just 24 hours, Betsy Johnson reversed her staunch anti-gun control stance after she figuratively "stepped in it" in a public forum over Memorial Day weekend.

Following the talking points of the National Rifle Association, Texas Gov. Greg Abbott and former President Donald Trump, she inferred that a "shitty" mental health system was where reform needs to take place in order to prevent future shootings.

As if that weren't enough she also said that, "the style of the gun doesn't dictate the lethality." She wants us to believe that grandpa's double-barreled 20 gauge shotgun can do the same damage as an 18-year-old with an AR-15 and a 120-round clip.

The immediate blowback from her comments must have sent her campaign into a frenzy. Over 70% of Oregonians support tougher gun control.

What to do but the old flip-flop. Johnson's spokesperson announced a day later that she is now willing to support stronger background checks and a change to 21 years of age for gun purchase.

The flip-flop on her perennial gun control stance will surely not sit well with some of her Second Amendment supporters. How can she be trusted now to "get things done" as she says in her slick TV ads?

By the way, she never says what she's done beside being an obstructionist on every issue important to her party, from gun control to climate change.

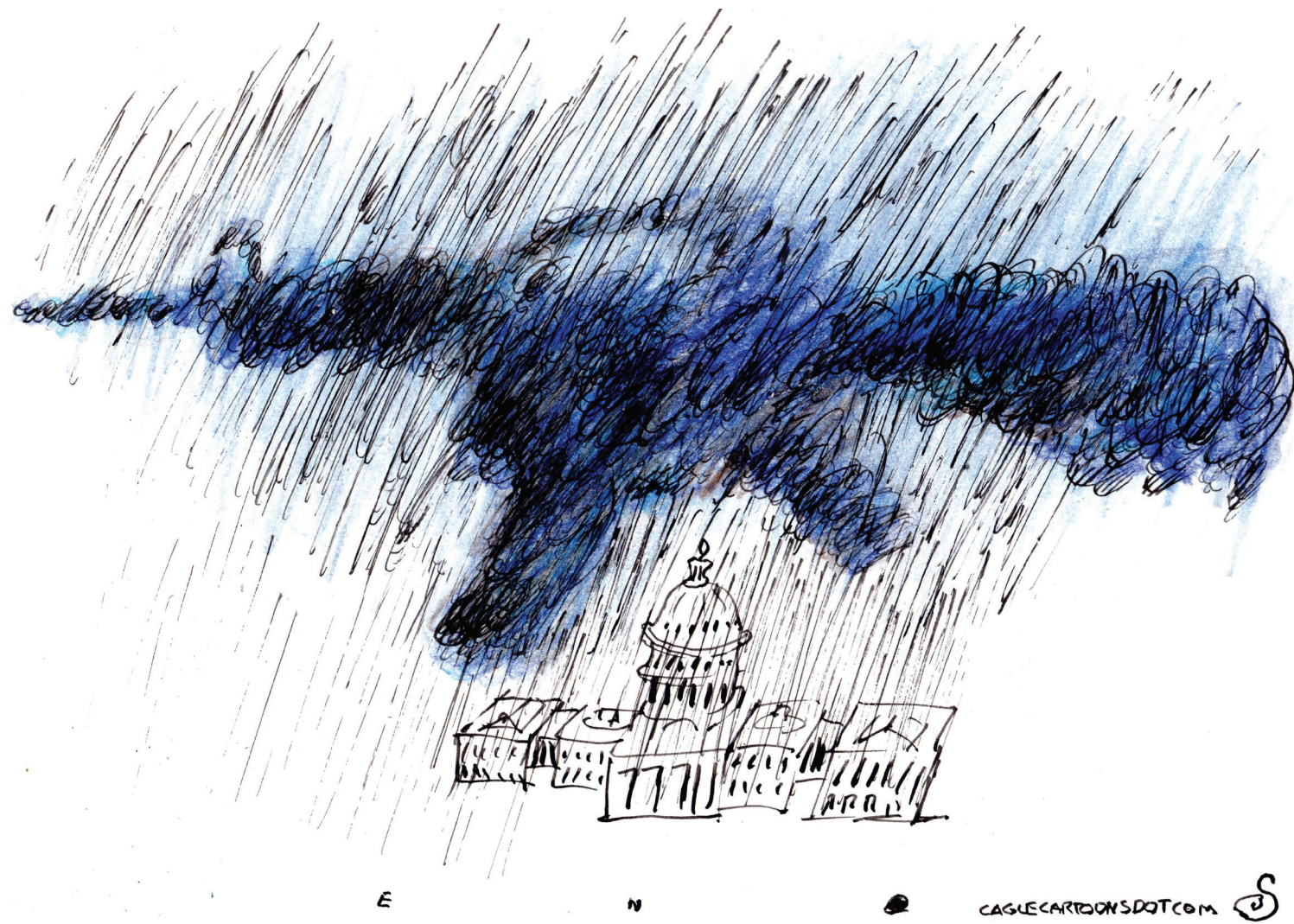
Betsy Johnson, not ready for political prime time.

ROGER DORBAND
Astoria

My apologies

As a father of two daughters, a grandfather to two beautiful girls, and having two sisters, with each having their own daughters, I apologize from the bottom of my soul. Your whole lives, I've been preaching to you all that in the greatest country in the world, you can be and do anything you set your mind to.

As a staff sergeant in the U.S. Army for over 20 years, I apologize to the hun-



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

dreds of soldiers I served with. I never knew that while we shared a foxhole under attack, that you were not seen as an equal American citizen in the eyes of our justice system.

I apologize to all for being so naive as to believe that the U.S. Constitution was for all Americans, and that our government would keep the church and state matters separated. Which, by the way, is what and why the Constitution was written in the first place.

I wonder if this whole control or having power over another disease could be solved as simply as changing a word? If, in the Constitution, where the word "man" was written, it was changed to "person," will that help understand why our form of

democracy is worth dying for? The rest of the world thinks so!

TROY HASKELL
Astoria

Bewildered or blessed

The other evening, after watching the news, the lyrics of an old song captured my mind. I'm "bewitched, bothered and bewildered," and I thought to myself, "get over it!"

My mind shifted, and I thought, "We live in a nation that is beautiful, bountiful, and how blessed we are to live in the United States of America!"

JIM BERNARD
Warrenton

Noticing

Living in Knappa the entirety of my life has given me many things to be proud of, and watching our area, as well as our community develop has been an absolute pleasure.

I'm very grateful for the many lessons and relationships I will take away from this experience, although I do have some concerns that I think would benefit future generations before I continue from this chapter of my life.

As I got older and began things like driving and high school jobs, I started noticing little things to be more common than I had originally perceived. One of those things would be the road conditions throughout the Knappa, Astoria and Warrenton area.

Living in Knappa has forced me, as well as many of my peers, to travel up to 45 minutes away for work, and many days I notice huge potholes, as well as uneven or outdated roads.

I haven't said that I've done enough research to come up with a solution, but I do believe that it is a necessary and basic problem to fix for future students to have a better and safer experience.

DEVYN McCALL
Astoria