

OPINION

Opinion articles do not necessarily represent the views of the Portland Observer. We welcome reader essays, photos and story ideas. Submit to news@portlandobserver.com.

Ripped Away by Evil, Cruel Racism

A brutal slaying 30 years ago

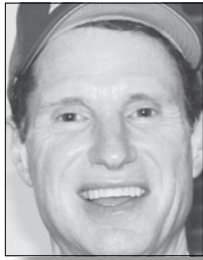
(Editor's note: U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., presenting the following testimony before Congress to mark this week's 30th anniversary of the murder of black immigrant Mulugeta Seraw by racist skinheads in Portland.)

BY U.S. SEN. RON WYDEN

Mr. President. This November, my hometown of Portland marks a somber occasion: The 30th anniversary of the murder of Mulugeta Seraw, a 28-year-old Ethiopian college student, by racist skinheads.

This horrific case galvanized the city, as well as the state of Oregon, to stand up to hate crimes and acts of violence by the neo-Nazi movement in the Pacific Northwest.

While this brutal slaying happened 30 years ago, it remains fresh in the minds of many who lived through that time and for people who still experience discrimination and hate today.



Mulugeta's path to our country mirrors those of so many others who came to America. He came to the United States seeking an education. A college student in Portland, he worked multiple jobs and remitted money to Ethiopia to support his son, Henock.

Mulugeta, like many immigrants who come to America, was simply seeking opportunity. His family and friends describe him as a kind, hard-working man. He had friends and family whom he supported and loved. All this was ripped away by evil, cruel racism.

As a result of the cruelty done to Mulugeta, community members, civil rights lawyers, judges, elected officials, and nonprofits came together and demanded justice be served. They succeeded. The case attracted national attention, and thanks in part to the great effort of the Southern Poverty Law Center, the White Aryan Resistance and its leaders who were behind this heinous crime were bankrupted and jailed.

While no prison sentence could bring

back Mulugeta, Oregonians stood and stand in solidarity with Mulugeta and his family and friends to make clear we will not let hate crimes and violence take over our communities.

We have to remain vigilant, and we have to continue the fight. We must recognize our own troubling present in Oregon, which unfortunately has an awful history as a home for white supremacists, because to not know our own history dooms us.

In the years since Mulugeta's death, there have been horrific acts of racially charged violence in Oregon.

In May of 2017, a self-proclaimed white nationalist verbally attacked two women who were riding Portland's MAX light rail. One of these two women was wearing a hijab. The perpetrator stabbed three men who defended the women against the racist and Islamophobic rant, killing two of them.

There have been horrific racist acts throughout the Nation. The march and murder in Charlottesville is another clear example of how these white supremacist ideals and concepts continue to draw breath in our country.

Like Oregonians speaking out in remembrance of Mulugeta Seraw, we must all speak out against hate. It has no place in our country, including in our White House.

This year, as we remember the 30th anniversary of the murder of Mulugeta Seraw and 50th anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination, I would like to acknowledge the many organizations in Oregon that fight for peace and justice every day on behalf of marginalized communities.

I would like to especially acknowledge members of these communities who are resilient and strong. I stand with them today and every day.

Oregonians will come together to remember and celebrate the life of Mulugeta Seraw during a 30th year commemoration conference organized by the Urban League of Portland. I am honored to add to this remembrance with this Congressional Record.

May Mulugeta and his story never be forgotten, and may we remember, learn, and change.

Democrat Ron Wyden represents Oregon in the U.S. Senate.

Ready for a New, Less Toxic Style of Politics

Changing the way Congress works

BY JILL RICHARDSON

With the election over and a new Congress ready to be sworn in this January, I'm ready for a new, less toxic style of politics.



Journalist McKay Coppins traces the toxic politics of today back to Newt Gingrich in the 1990s. Gingrich, he said, pioneered "strategic obstructionism."

Here's what that means: Let's say a bill was very popular with voters. Once upon a time, both parties might have compromised and passed the bill through Congress. Gingrich put a stop to that.

According to Gingrich's logic, the Democrats who controlled Congress in those days would get credit for any bills that passed. If Republicans helped Democrats pass those bills, voters would be satisfied with the Democratic-controlled Congress. Republicans who supported even a popular bill wouldn't get credit for it.

Under Gingrich, Republicans would

oppose popular legislation they previously might have supported. Then Republicans would point a finger at the Democratic leadership and accuse Congress of doing nothing.

They'd tell the voters that Democrats won't fix your problems so you need to elect Republicans. Never mind that Republicans caused the obstruction in the first place.

This worked. It still works.

That was Republican Senate leader

As a citizen, the poisonous rhetoric is painful to listen to. Watching the news hurts. Some politicians are openly spewing hate speech. Hypocrisy is rampant and nobody cares.

Mitch McConnell's strategy throughout the Obama presidency: Don't pass anything, then blame the lack of action on Obama.

Here's the thing: While this strategy is effective at winning elections, it's not an effective way of governing. It serves none of us when our leaders can't get anything done.

Since the 1990s, we've lived through political rhetoric that stokes fear and

anger. Fear and anger draw you in like a magnet. Fear and anger motivate people to watch more TV, click more links, and donate and volunteer more to campaigns. That doesn't make them healthy or constructive.

There are a few other theories why Congress doesn't work anymore.

One worth noting is the elimination of "earmarks." In the past, Congress could persuade members to compromise on a bill by including earmarks:

provisions in the bill allocating money to one or another member's district. In exchange for voting for a bill he or she didn't completely love, the representative would get funding to repair a bridge in his or her district or something like that.

In 2010, Congressional Republicans initiated a ban on earmarks. In 2011, Obama promised to veto any bill containing earmarks. They were decried

as a form of corruption. However, they served to grease the wheels of democracy.

As a citizen, the poisonous rhetoric is painful to listen to. Watching the news hurts. Some politicians are openly spewing hate speech. Hypocrisy is rampant and nobody cares.

I'm all for politicians taking morally principled stands on behalf of their constituents. They're supposed to do that.

What they aren't supposed to do is focus on what will get them elected or keep them in office at the expense of what they must do to govern.

If both sides could agree on a bill that would benefit the American people, especially one most Americans support, they shouldn't obstruct it just to score political points.

We'll have a new Congress taking office in a few months, and then the next presidential race will begin to heat up. As voters, we should no longer reward hate speech and obstructionism that come at the expense of good governance.

OtherWords columnist Jill Richardson is pursuing a PhD in sociology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She lives in San Diego. Distributed by OtherWords.org.