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OUR VIEW

# Tip of the hat; kick in the pants

A kick in pants to the state-regulated public relations machine, who sure put a lovely spin on the ugly fact that Oregon's schools are among the worst in the country at graduating students on time. The state's graduation rate in 2013 was dead last — 49th of 49 states that got their results in on time. That's not something to be very proud of, unless you are the state of Oregon and you'd rather bury the bad news about the state of education and instead trumpet a bunch of fluff.

The public relations arm sure tried to by titling their press release: "Oregon announces steady growth in graduation rates." *The Oregonian* titled their graduation rate stories a little differently: "Oregon fails to improve dismal graduation rate" and "Oregon posts nation's worst graduation rate for class of 2013."

While all of the above are true, *The Oregonian* headlines accurately portray the story. That's not because they are negative — a rut some accuse the media of being too often stuck in — but because the facts in this case are so very poor. To frame them any other way would be doing a disservice to the public. That rates ticked up from rock bottom is a positive step, but it's nothing for the state to hang its hat on.

Even local school districts got into the obfuscation. A press release from Hermiston School District read: "Hermiston High School outperforms state graduation rate." Which is true, but it conveniently leaves out the bleak graduation rate at the Hermiston alternative school. So if you don't include the students most in need of help to graduate, the school district is above the dismally low state average. Congratulations?

The Intermountain Education Service District trotted out the old "Hey look over there!" approach to bad news, sending a press release touting outperforming Morrow County schools but failing to mention any school or demographic that fell below the state average — of which there were plenty to choose from.

This burying of the truth isn't helpful. A student's report card doesn't include just the classes they aced. The failing grades are on there for a reason — to force us to confront the skills we lack and make a plan for improving them.

These press releases aren't outright lying to Oregonians, but they sure aren't telling the truth. And while we all know the ethics of public relations leave plenty of wiggle room, we think that just *not lying* isn't doing your job well no matter what industry you're in.

Because the final stick in the eye when such bunk is put out by public agencies is that our tax dollars are supporting it. We're actually paying people to mislead us and hide the truth. That, again, isn't something to be proud of — but I'm sure our state PR employees would be glad to inform us that they are doing their misleading at well above the state average.

A tip of the hat to the state of Indiana, which nixed the disastrous plan of creating a state-run news source after being swamped with a deluge of complaints.

Gov. Mike Pence had planned to start a state-run, taxpayer-funded news outlet that would make pre-written news stories available to Indiana media, as well as sometimes break news about his administration, according to documents obtained by *The Indianapolis Star*.

Heads exploded across the country and the plan was quickly dubbed "Pravda on the Plains" after the Russian state news source known for its heavy bias toward the government in charge.

"At times, Just IN will break news — publishing information ahead of any other news outlet. Strategies for determining how and when to give priority to such 'exclusive' coverage remain under discussion," according to a question-and-answer sheet distributed last week to communications directors for state agencies.

After plenty of pushback from media and citizens, Pence wisely canned the plan. State news has never been a part of American culture and we sure hope it isn't anytime soon.

The failure of Just IN should be a lesson for Oregon's public agencies, whose work is reading more and more like news stories, but continues to lack the independence and honesty necessary to tell the whole truth.

Unsigned editorials are the opinion of the East Oregonian editorial board of Publisher Kathryn Brown, Managing Editor Daniel Wattenburger, and Opinion Page Editor Tim Trainor. Other columns, letters and cartoons on this page express the opinions of the authors and not necessarily that of the East Oregonian.

OUR VIEWS

## Use prescribed burns in wilderness

*The (Bend) Bulletin*

Walk into the wilderness in the summer and it can look like a tinder box. The Forest Service does fuels treatment and has had projects planned up along the Cascades Lakes Highway. It's a slim buffer, though. It's too slim to protect fire from escaping the wilderness and roaring out to endanger firefighters, life and property.

The Deschutes and Willamette national forests have discussed doing prescribed burns in some selected areas in the Three Sisters Wilderness and the Mt. Washington Wilderness. The burns in the Willamette may begin in the fall of 2015. They should be able to.

There's the smoke. There's the debate about whether they are necessary or even appropriate. There's the concern that sometimes even carefully planned prescribed burns get out of hand. And for some, prescribed burns conflict with the whole idea of wilderness.

The 1964 Wilderness Act and the

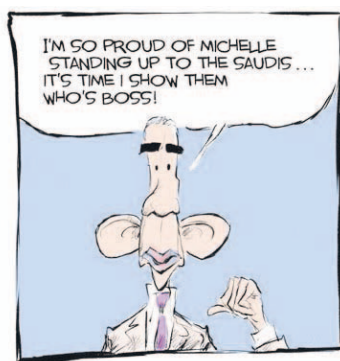
regulations that followed are about preserving the character of areas "where man is a visitor and does not remain." The areas are to be "protected and managed to allow natural ecological processes to operate freely."

Of course, a prescribed burn isn't a natural act. But wilderness designations should not be suicide pacts. If the Forest Service needs to conduct prescribed burns in wilderness areas to protect those areas it should.

The Forest Service's plan is to create breaks in the natural vegetation in the wilderness areas. It should slow the progress of fire. Those burns will supplement what is already being done or planned for areas outside the wilderness. The burns should also enable the Forest Service to allow lightning-caused fire to do more of what it would do naturally within wilderness areas.

The Forest Service's modeling shows that taking action outside the wilderness areas is not enough. It should do the burns in the wilderness.

Wilderness should not be a suicide pact.



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OTHER VIEWS

## Obama trolls with a purpose

Politically, President Obama has never been weaker, after losing both House and Senate. At the same time, he has never talked tougher. There is a connection between the two.

Obama recently told Democratic lawmakers that he's going to "play offense" in coming months. Coming from a man with a history of occasional trash talk — "I'm LeBron, baby" — it's tempting to dismiss this as just more chatter. What is Obama doing, going on offense after his party suffered such a resounding defeat in November?

Conservative writers John Podhoretz and Jonah Goldberg argue the president just can't resist trolling Republicans. Liberal Paul Waldman essentially agrees, admiring Obama's ability to "come up with a new idea every couple of weeks to drive (the GOP) up a wall."

It's true the president seems to take real pleasure in annoying his adversaries. But there's a serious strategy behind it.

With no real political clout on Capitol Hill and a job approval rating that has stayed mostly below 50 percent for a long time, Obama is trying to leverage the power he has left to force his agenda on the Republican majority. His big talk, executive actions and outlandish proposals are the best ways he has to control the debate in Washington.

"The reason he is being aggressive is that he knows he can generate a response," says a well-connected Republican strategist. "When he does an executive order, what he is trying to do is generate a response so that the entire conversation is about what he did — so that he has defined the agenda."

Likewise, when Obama, facing a newly empowered conservative Congress, uses his State of the Union speech to propose a tax plan the liberal columnist E.J. Dionne calls "genuinely redistributive," he is trying to dictate the terms of the debate with a powerful adversary. Of course Obama knows his plan is anathema to Republicans, but if they debate the president on his terms, he makes progress.

"It works if we let it work," says the Republican strategist. "When Obama says something, the question is: Is that the most important thing we should be talking about now, or should we be setting the agenda? Is it something that we have to immediately



BYRON YORK  
Comment

engage and begin talking about? Which means he has set the agenda."

Obama's tax proposals, on the whole, have less than zero chance of success on Capitol Hill. But with the State of the Union as a launch platform, with Air Force One to fly him around the country promoting the idea, with a press to take Obama's gambit seriously, the president can multiply his strengths, which right now are the core constitutional powers of the presidency and the bully pulpit.

If anyone doubts Obama's intentions, just listen to senior White House adviser Dan Pfeiffer explaining the president's economic proposals on "Meet the Press." "Some of them are going to be legislative proposals

Republicans have the mojo and the momentum. If they are united, and if they are smart, they can push Obama into a defensive crouch.

Republicans may not love, but we'll push them on them," Pfeiffer said. "Some of them will be executive actions." In any event, Pfeiffer pledged the White House will use "every lever we can" to get what Obama wants.

Republicans should take such a strategy very seriously. In the 2006 midterm elections, the lame duck George W. Bush lost the House and Senate. If there was any message from the election, it was that Americans were sick and tired of the Iraq war, which was going very badly. And yet somehow Bush shaped the political conversation

in early 2007 to focus on how big a surge of troops was needed in Iraq. Bush leveraged his fundamental constitutional powers as commander in chief and his White House megaphone to frustrate the new Democratic majority.

That doesn't have to happen this time. Republicans have the mojo and the momentum. They just got elected, have fresh faces in their new majority, and have several ready-to-go agenda items that had been bottled up in the Senate under now-former Majority Leader Harry Reid. If they are united, and if they are smart, Republicans can push Obama into a defensive crouch.

But the GOP should always beware the president. Even a weak, lame duck chief executive has the power to make things happen in Washington. Obama appears ready to use his to the fullest.

Byron York is chief political correspondent for *The Washington Examiner*.

YOUR VIEWS

### Maybe Portland Zoo could care for fallen black bear

I call your attention to the story and photo of the fallen female black bear discovered upside down in a blackberry bush environment.

The story and color photo came out on Friday, Jan. 16 — that very afternoon that my marvelous caregiver, Rita, of the Porter House, treated me to the movie of my choice, "Paddington" at the Hermiston Cinema 8. And what a terrific movie it was. I cannot wait to see it again with my sweetheart Cassius.

May I recommend the Portland Zoo for our little undernourished bear? I think, if she's anything like Paddington bear, she'll thrive on marmalade!

Janet M. Miller  
Hermiston

### Far-right attack ads shooting Republicans in the foot

I've been away and only recently become aware of the Bill Hansell fracas.

Bill Hansell is a native son of Eastern Oregon, firmly rooted in the culture of this area; a member of a family with a deep history of civic service; a personal history of thoughtful consideration of issues that impact our economy and lives; and a voting record as our senator that clearly demonstrates commitment not to a rigid ideology but rather to a pragmatic, problem-solving, well-considered approach to making our area of

Eastern Oregon and our state in general work well and make progress.

Of course that means working with others who are not Republicans, and coming to consensus. Of course that means cooperating across the gulf of political petty-partytiness. Of course that means giving and taking. Of course that requires working for the best for all of us, regardless of who we are and/or the origins of the ideas.

I am a lifelong Democrat and I have consistently split tickets and voted for the Republican candidates over the past several decades (Dave Nelson and now Bill Hansell) because they have demonstrated their abilities to represent the concerns of Eastern Oregon. They are lifelong residents, they understand our issues, they do their work well.

Bill is a man of integrity, clear thought — and wide ranging concern for our productive capabilities, the health of our economy, fair and equitable treatment of us-the-people, and husbandry of our natural resources.

So for you all on the far right with your all-or-nothing-we-take-it-all-leave-no-prisoners-we-and-only-we-have-truth-and-righteousness-on-our-side... forget it! Put away your flame throwers. You are shooting yourselves in the foot — once again. You can't win this way.

Please get on board with some problem-solving cooperation and we'll all be "The Winners."

And Bill Hansell will be right there working with us.

Andrew A. Clark  
Pendleton

LETTERS POLICY

The East Oregonian welcomes original letters of 400 words or less on public issues and public policies for publication in the newspaper and on our website. The newspaper reserves the right to withhold letters that address concerns about individual services and products or letters that infringe on the rights of private citizens. Submitted letters must be signed by the author and include the city of residence and a daytime phone number. The phone number will not be published. Unsigned letters will not be published. Send letters to Managing Editor Daniel Wattenburger, 211 S.E. Byers Ave. Pendleton, OR 97801 or email editor@eastoregonian.com.