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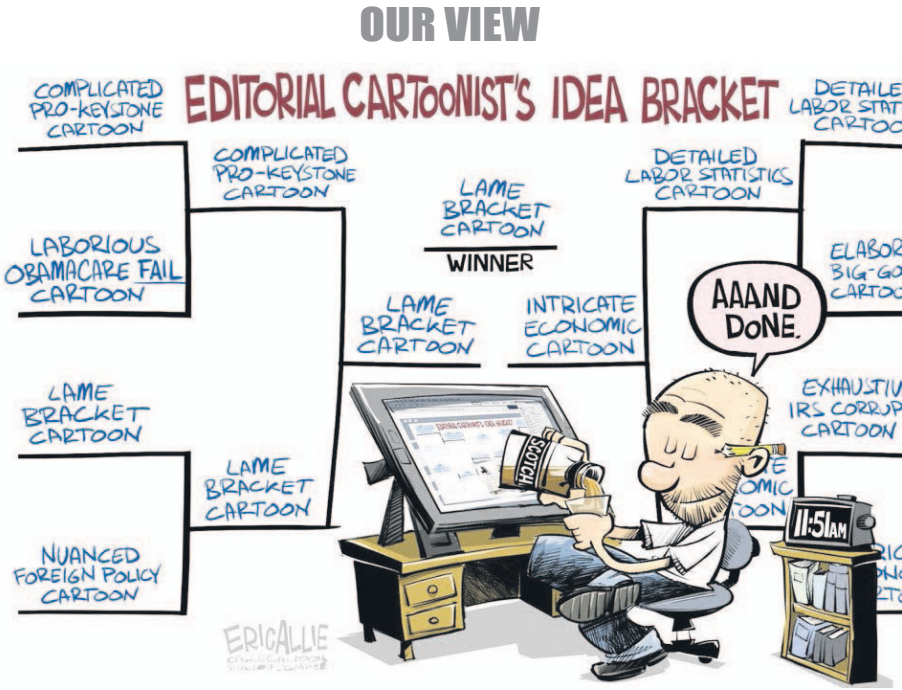
Advertising Director

DANIEL WATTENBURGER

Managing Editor

TIM TRAINOR

Opinion Page Editor



# The beauty of the bracket

March Madness is already off to an entertaining start, and the main 64-team bracket has yet to begin. Maybe you'll head over to Portland to watch the first two rounds (don't give in to the NCAA decree that they are actually rounds 2 and 3). Or maybe you don't give a hoot about sports.

But dang, everyone loves a bracket. They are visually pleasing, perfectly democratic and wonderfully dramatic — win and survive, lose and the road ends. The bracket is satisfying to both right- and left-brained people: The meticulous among us appreciate orderly lines and advancement, the anarchists see how a few early upsets can cause dominoes of trouble down the road.

Sports have long embraced tournaments to decide champions. But why are they only used to decide a national collegiate basketball title or hand out the Wimbledon trophy? Brackets have many uses for whittling priorities and revealing value.

The sports and culture website Grantland has used the bracket formula often, allowing the public to vote on the Souper Bowl (to decide the world's best soup) or Smacketology (a 32-person bracket to decide the best character on HBO's "The Wire") or "the top second banana, the search for the No. 1 Number Two." In that bracket George Costanza defeated Canada, which we're having a hard time getting our heads around. On the road to the title, George Costanza took down Art Garfunkel, mustard, Luigi and Scottie Pippen.

Earlier this year, *The Oregonian* newspaper conducted the Oddball Bill Bowl, which used two brackets to determine the strangest bill presented at this year's legislature.

So brackets are used for silly and unimportant discussions, but can be so much more. They are excellent at busting us out of stodgy, partisan views and helping us form new arguments.

Imagine a political issues bracket. Which is a more important political issue to you: immigration or Medicare? Why? And say immigration advances from that discussion, how does the argument for and against it change when it goes up against abortion or climate change or war in Syria?

On a smaller scale, lists (and their accompanying pros and cons) have long held sway in boardrooms and in our own brains when making decisions. But even strange and apple-and-oranges matchups (like George Costanza vs. Mustard or Medicare v. Climate Change) reveal something about all involved.

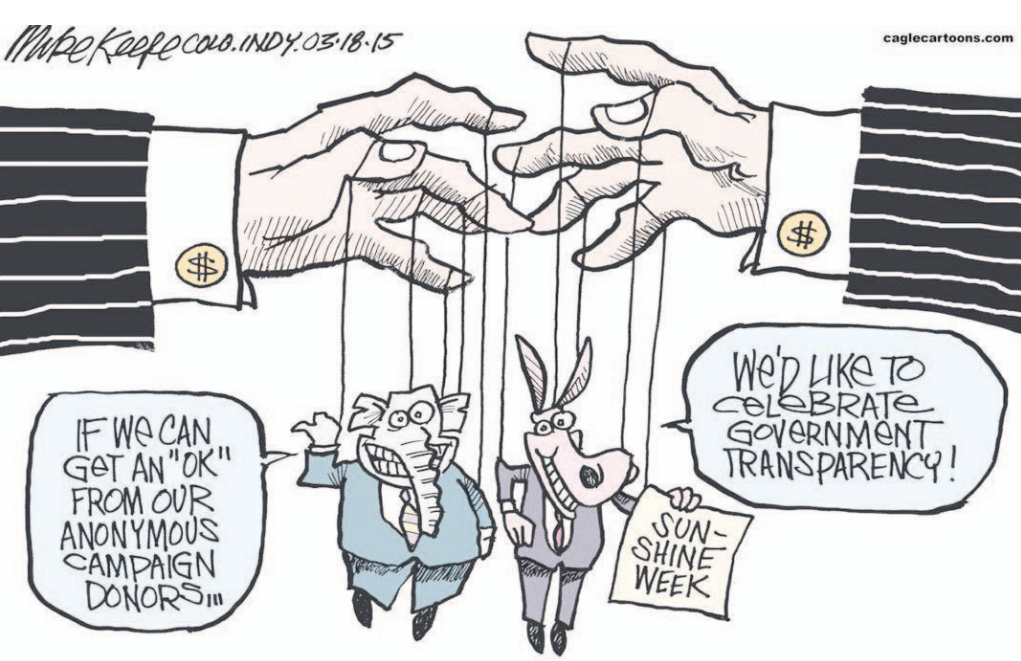
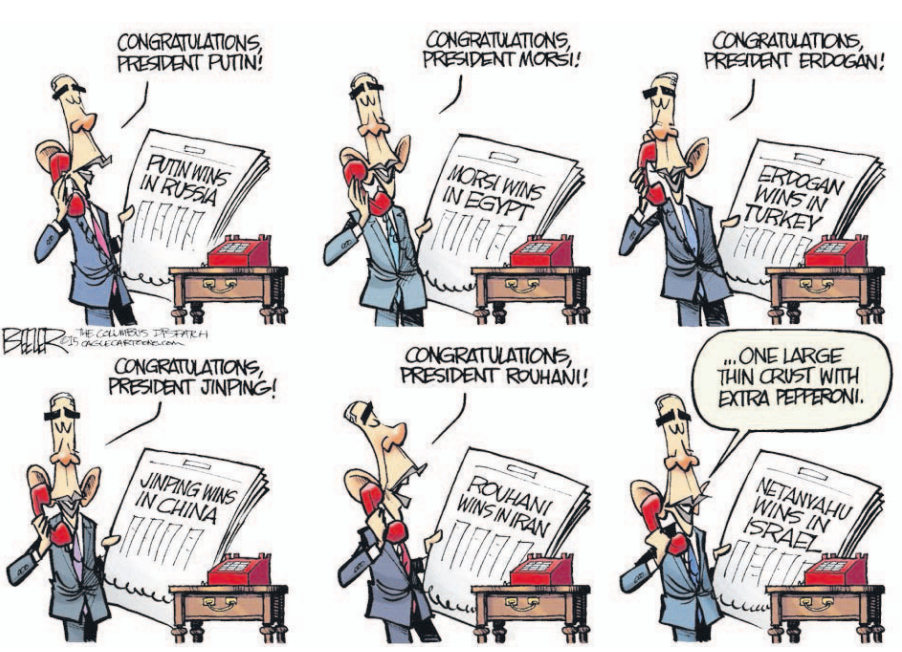
Who, for instance, wouldn't want to see a bracket-type tournament decide the Republican and Democratic nominee for president in 2016? We'd argue the system would choose a different, and maybe stronger, final candidate than the primary process. Because one person winning 20 percent of the vote more often than another winning 15 percent is not quite the same as consecutive head-to-head matchups that separate the wheat from the chaff.

And also, how fun would an NCAA tournament-style nomination process be? The collective media head would explode with glee and over-analysis.

Sure, it may seem unsporting for undefeated top seed Kentucky to play the 17-17 Hampton Pirates on Thursday. Odds are the Wildcats will win by a wide margin. But there is nothing more democratic and natural than putting two competitors on one floor and letting the better team win. And then the better of two better teams compete and on and on until there is only one left.

That's what we want, right? Championship basketball teams and ideas. The most fun and efficient way of revealing both is the bracket.

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.



### OTHER VIEWS

## Go ahead, ruin my day

As the saying goes, "to err is human, to forgive is divine," to which I'd add: "To ignore is even more human, and the results rarely divine. None of us would be human if we didn't occasionally get so wedded to our wishes that we failed to notice — or outright ignored — the facts on the ground that make a laughingstock of our hopes. Only when the gap gets too wide to ignore does policy change.

This is where a lot of U.S. policy is heading these days in the Middle East. Mind the gaps — on Iran, Israel and Iraq. We're talking about our choices in these countries with words that strike me as about 10 years out of date. Alas, we are not dealing anymore with your grandfather's Israel, your father's Iran or the Iraq your son or daughter went off to liberate.

Let's start with Israel. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his Likud Party pretty well trounced the Labor Party leader, Isaac Herzog, in the race to form Israel's next government. Netanyahu clearly made an impressive 11th-hour surge since the pre-election polls of last week. It is hard to know what is more depressing: that Netanyahu went for the gutter in the last few days in order to salvage his campaign — renouncing his own commitment to a two-state solution with the Palestinians and race-baiting Israeli Jews to get out and vote because, he said, too many Israeli Arabs were going to the polls — or the fact that this seemed to work.

To be sure, Netanyahu could reverse himself tomorrow. As the *Yediot Ahronot* columnist Nahum Barnea wrote: Netanyahu's promises are like something "written on ice on a very hot day." But the fact is a good half of Israel identifies with the paranoid, everyone-is-against-us, and religious-nationalist tropes Netanyahu deployed in this campaign. That, along with the fact that some 350,000 settlers are now living in the West Bank, makes it hard to see how a viable two-state solution is possible anymore no matter who would have won.

It would be wrong, though, to put all of this on Netanyahu. The insane, worthless Gaza war that Hamas initiated last summer that brought rockets to the edge of Israel's main international airport and the Palestinians' spurning of two-state offers of previous Israeli prime ministers (Ehud Barak and Ehud Olmert) built Netanyahu's base as much as he did.

On Iran, there's an assumption among critics of President Barack Obama's approach to negotiating limits on Iran's nuclear program that if Obama were ready to impose more sanctions then the Iranians would fold. It's not only the history of the past 20 years that mocks that notion. It is a more simple fact: In the brutal Middle East, the only thing that gets anyone's attention is the threat of regime-toppling force. Obama has no such leverage

on Iran.

It was used up in Afghanistan and Iraq, wars that have left our military and country so exhausted that former Defense Secretary Robert Gates said that any future defense secretary who advises the president to again send a big U.S. land army into the Middle East "should have his head examined." Had those wars succeeded, the public today might feel differently. But they didn't. Geopolitics is all about leverage, and we are negotiating with Iran without the leverage of a credible threat of force. The ayatollahs know it. Under those circumstances, I am sure the Obama team will try to get the best deal it can. But a really good deal isn't on the menu.

Have I ruined your morning yet? No? Give me a couple more paragraphs.

OK, so we learn to live with Iran on the edge of a bomb, but shouldn't we at least bomb the Islamic State to smithereens and help destroy this head-chopping menace? Now I despise ISIS as much as anyone, but let me just toss out a different question: Should we be arming ISIS? Or let me ask that differently: Why are we, for the third time since 9/11, fighting a war on behalf of Iran?

In 2002, we destroyed Iran's main Sunni foe in Afghanistan (the Taliban regime). In 2003, we destroyed Iran's main Sunni foe in the Arab world (Saddam Hussein). But because we failed to erect a self-sustaining pluralistic order, which could have been a durable counterbalance to Iran, we created a vacuum in both Iraq and the wider Sunni Arab world. That is why Tehran's proxies now indirectly dominate four Arab capitals: Beirut, Damascus, Sanaa and Baghdad.

ISIS, with all its awfulness, emerged as the homegrown Sunni Arab response to this crushing defeat of Sunni Arabism — mixing old pro-Saddam Baathists with medieval Sunni religious fanatics with a collection of ideologies, misfits and adventure-seekers from around the Sunni Muslim world. Obviously, I abhor ISIS and don't want to see it spread or take over Iraq. I simply raise this question rhetorically because no one else is: Why is it in our interest to destroy the last Sunni bulwark to a total Iranian takeover of Iraq? Because the Shiite militias now leading the fight against ISIS will rule better? Really?

If it seems as though we have only bad choices in the Middle East today and nothing seems to work, there is a reason: Because past is prologue, and the past has carved so much scar tissue into that landscape that it's hard to see anything healthy or beautiful growing out of it anytime soon. Sorry to be so grim.

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Thomas L. Friedman won the 2002 Pulitzer Prize for commentary, his third Pulitzer for *The New York Times*. He became the paper's foreign-affairs Op-Ed columnist in 1995.

### YOUR VIEWS

#### Beneful dog food dangerous, should be off store shelves

Several weeks ago I read several articles describing the thousands of dogs across the country who became sick or died after eating Beneful dog food. In fact, I brought with me a copy of one of the articles to support my case when I returned my cans and sack of Beneful to Walmart for a refund. I didn't need it. Both ladies at the customer service counter were very much aware of this poisonous dog food and agreed with me that they could not understand why Walmart hadn't pulled it off their shelves. I went back recently to buy some other brand of dog food and — sure enough — lots of small Beneful packages and large sacks were readily available.

Lawsuits have been filed against Purina, the maker of Beneful, and they have the testimony from some 3,000 customers who have had problems with this food. Of course, the stories are really sad and tragic. Of course,

you should also remember that Purina is owned by giant Nestlé Foods, who has been in trouble a number of times over the years for questionable practices and products. You might remember the fiasco over their baby formula, years ago, that made many infants sick.

A quick check on the computer reveals this problem has not gone away either. It seems Nestlé chooses to include propylene glycol in Beneful, which is in automobile antifreeze. I just watched a forensic show (an actual forensic show with genuine cases) where a wife gradually poisoned her husband with propylene glycol. Apparently there are some other toxins included as well.

Regardless of the outcome, Walmart should take the high ground and remove this product immediately. If they really cared about their customers they would err on the side of safety and health until a decision is made in court.

David Burns Pendleton

### LETTERS POLICY

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