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OUR VIEW

PERS problem can't get deeper

One of the most pressing issues for the longterm health of this state is a signed contract to pay for the Oregon Public Employees Retirees System — better known as the four-letter word PERS.

On Nov. 20, PERS actuaries forecast for the public their idea of how much more money will have to be funneled into the system in order for it to keep up its end of the deal. The actuaries predict a steady rise of 2 percent annual rate increases, at least for the next few bienniums. While that might sound pretty reasonable, it translates to cost increases of 20 to 30 percent for municipalities, school districts, emergency responders, prisons and more, all across the state.

> For every 70 cents PERS makes with its investments, it pays out $1 of benefits.

Those kinds of increases are not sustainable. And rural Oregon — where a larger percentage of the workforce is government employees — is especially vulnerable to runaway costs.

First, a few facts. There are 200,000 public employees in Oregon, and 95 percent of them are tied into the PERS system. That system is also paying 130,000 retirees.

Each year, PERS gets less financially solvent.

The fund has $70 billion to invest, but returns from that investment bring in 70 cents for every $1 that is paid out. Losing 30 percent on every transaction puts PERS quickly into the red, and puts it deeper into that hole each and every year. Its unfunded liability is expected to soon reach $18 billion. That's a black hole that reaches all the way to China — and to a depth that could cause the whole system to collapse.

So what do we do about it?

There are some facts both sides have to deal with. A contract is a contract. Deals were signed and — as we learned from the courts — past promises cannot be renegotiated. Cost of living increases can be renegotiated moving forward, but not looking back. That limits our options, but doesn't keep us from designing a more sustainable system.

Another consideration, especially in rural Oregon where government employees make up about a quarter of our workforce, is the fact that public sector employee benefits vastly outpace private sector ones.

That's great for attracting good candidates for important, taxpayer-funded positions. But is such a wide gulf between private and public sector employees in the best interest of our country?

We would argue it is not — and closing that gulf is imperative.

It will take movement from both sides. Wage increases will soon come to this country — either as inflexible law initiated in statehouses and Congress, or incrementally by employers themselves. As wages go up, competition to secure educated, reliable employees will increase. Benefits during working years, and for retirement, will help reduce the need for a social safety net. It might even spur economic growth, meaning those PERS investments would bring in a larger dividend on every dollar.

It's a big problem with no easy solution, but action is needed before the hole becomes too big to fill.

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.

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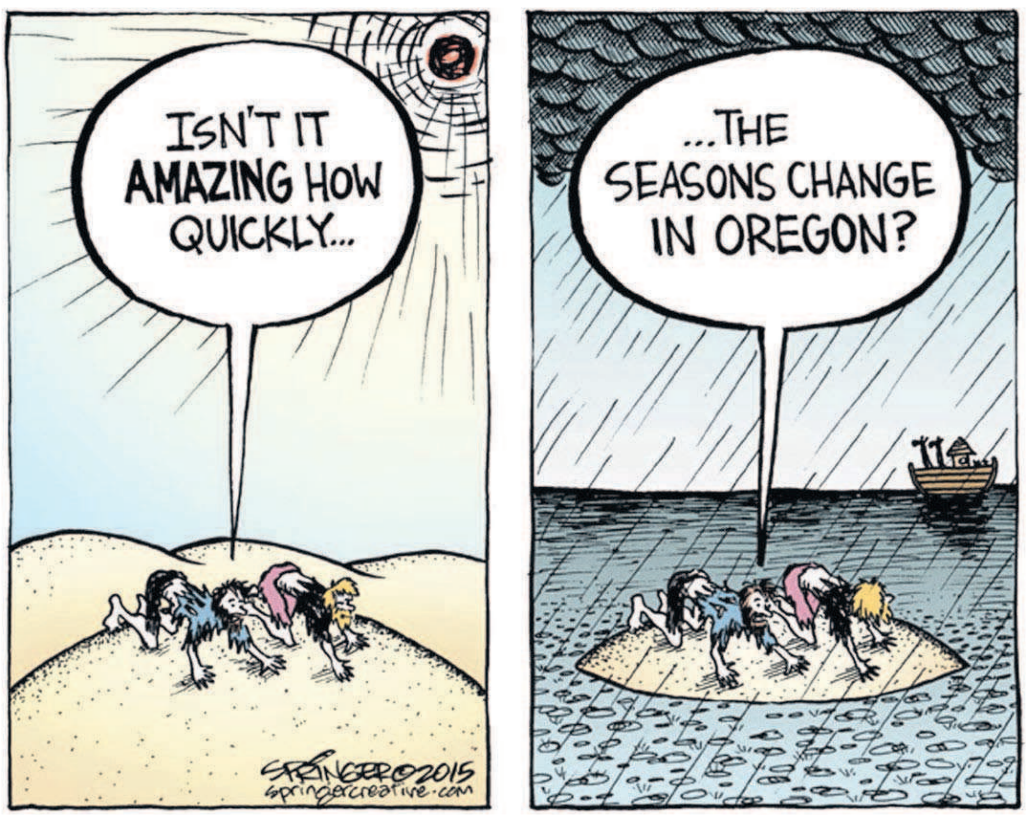

OTHER VIEWS

The Ted Cruz establishment


DAVID BROOKS
Comment

There are two types of Machiavellians in politics, Selfish Machiavellians and Kind Machiavellians. The Selfish ones are the ones we usually think of — the nakedly ambitious people who are always strategizing, sometimes ruthlessly, for their own personal advantage. The Kind Machiavellians realize that it's smart to get along with people, so they pick their friendships strategically, feigning affection toward those who might be useful.

In Washington and maybe in life, there are many more Kind Machiavellians than Selfish ones. But Ted Cruz has always stood out for being nakedly ambitious for himself.

He was always drawn to establishment institutions: Princeton, Harvard Law. His personal drive to gain elite posts was noted, even by the standards of such places. He learned tennis to get a clerkship with Justice William Rehnquist. According to *The Boston Globe*, a female law student who was giving him a ride was shocked when he quickly asked her about her IQ and SAT scores.

> Ted Cruz has always stood out for being nakedly ambitious for himself.

He joined the Republican establishment while young, working for George W. Bush, although he was marginalized when administration jobs were handed out, reportedly because his ambition was off-putting. Yet Cruz is intelligent, and knows that sometimes you have to switch tactics in order to climb. Over the past few years, Cruz has become a team player. In fact, he's become a central member of the conservative establishment.

A little history lesson is in order. During the 1970s conservatives self-consciously built establishment institutions to counter the liberal establishment. But with the election of Ronald Reagan, the conservative establishment split into two. There was the regular conservative establishment, filled with mainstream conservatives who wanted to use the inside levers of power that Republicans now controlled.

But there was also a conservative counter-establishment. This was populated with people like Paul Weyrich, Richard Viguerie, Brent Bozell and others who were temperamentally incapable of governance. Many of these Old Right people broke with Reagan because he wasn't ideologically pure on this or that policy matter.

Today the conservative community still has at least two establishments, or three if you want to throw in the young Reform Conservatives. The mainstream establishment tends to side with party leaders like Paul Ryan and whoever the presidential nominee is. The Old Right Counter Conservative Establishment has grown in recent years. For example, the Heritage Foundation, which used to be more or less conservative establishment, has gone more Counter Establishment.

The difference is the establishment wants to use the levers of power to practically pass reforms. The Counter Establishment believes that Washington is pervasively corrupt and is implacably hostile to the GOP leadership.

Since he came to Washington, Ted Cruz has meticulously aligned himself with the rising and rich conservative Counter Establishment. He's called his party leader a liar on the Senate floor. In another recent floor speech he accused every Republican but him and Mike Lee of selling out their principles for money. His efforts to shut down the government did enormous harm to the Republican Party and to the country, but they cemented his relationship with the members of the Counter Establishment. Crucially, those battles enabled him to amass the email lists that are a large part of his donor base.

His campaign is uniting the Counter Establishment. According to some excellent reporting in the *National Journal*, he was rapturously received by members of the Council for National Policy, an important Counter Establishment gathering. He's been endorsed by the old guard, Viguerie and Bozell.

The Counter Establishment is now nearly as financially flush and institutionally entrenched as the mainstream establishment. Cruz has been able to tap into it to raise gobs of money. In the third quarter, Cruz raised $12.2 million, about twice what rival Marco Rubio raised over the same period. His super PACs raised $31 million in the few weeks of his campaign, largely from hedge fund manager Robert Mercer. He's had fundraisers hosted by Joseph Konzelmann, a managing director at Goldman Sachs.

He's won over the Counter Establishment and even some of the regular establishment by being tactical in his policy positions, shifting his views most notoriously on trade promotion authority and foreign policy generally. He savages Republicans habitually but initially refused to criticize Donald Trump. As Eliana Johnson of *National Review* put it, the paradox of Cruz is that "The man who boasts of his ideological purity is perhaps the most obviously tactical candidate."

Cruz is riding the shift in the conservative activist establishment, the way groups like the Club for Growth now provide a power base for someone who wants to run against the GOP leadership.

A friend once joked that the journalist has the ultimate power: The power to choose who he wants to be co-opted by. Ted Cruz is surging as the figurehead of the rich and interlocked Counter Establishment. And he gets to do it while pretending that he is anti-establishment. That's a nice trick. Even a Machiavellian one.

■

David Brooks became a New York Times Op-Ed columnist in September 2003.

YOUR VIEWS

Support politicians that support the Second Amendment

Don't allow your "public servants" to breach their oath of office to the Second Amendment.

Please, folks, when it's time to vote, know who's in favor of gun control, and know which ones support our Second Amendment right to protect ourselves, our family and, if need be, our community and country.

Don't be fooled by progressive socialist/communistic thinking. Vote for candidates that believe in our Constitution. Our forefathers had it right.

Mitch Kelty
Weston

America a power because of its armed citizenry

This is in reply to Mr. Delaney's views published on Dec. 4. You should be thanking the National Rifle Association, not radicalizing their efforts to secure one of the freedoms we now have. No the NRA is not perfect, any more than you.

Personally I own a 1914 30.06 that I have enjoyed for 65 years with no intent to hurt anyone, only to resist anyone that would hurt my family. Guns are only implements used by mentally disturbed people for one reason or another.

My dad was a soldier in World War I in 1918. This was not being won until the U.S.A. entered, same with World War II. It's called national guts.

I read in an article on history that Germany and Japan were thinking of invading the U.S. in World War II but discarded the idea as a bad thought to engage every person in America. There was a statement by Admiral Tojo of Japan that we have now awakened the sleeping giant. I feel that we are that giant now.

Ed M. Tucker
Pendleton

Clash of Civilizations becoming reality

The late academic Samuel P. Huntington wrote and spoke extensively about what he called "The Clash of Civilizations," and in doing so he raised the notion that the predominantly Christian West and the world's Muslims were fated to battle each other.

His was a horrifyingly discouraging scenario, and for his professorial troubles Huntington was much criticized by believers in the fundamental brotherhood of humanity. But current events make it extremely difficult to believe that western Christendom and Middle Eastern Islam will evolve soon into bosom friends on the global scene. Exactly the opposite appears to be the fate of their interaction.

At least since the days immediately after 9/11, and continuing right up to the present, Washington, D.C.'s movers and shakers have habitually been very careful — painfully careful, actually — to absolve "the vast majority of Muslims" from the rap of being supporters of terrorism.

President George W. Bush preached this comforting line late in 2001 and early in 2002, and Barak Obama is repeating his version of it now. Political prattle about "the vast majority of peaceful Muslims," of course, has done absolutely nothing to stop our globe's periodic terrorist attacks. Zealous jihadis have been so successful in both recruiting tens of thousands of followers and in arming them that it hardly matters whether or not "the vast majority" of our world's Muslim billions are supportive. Both Bush and Obama therefore indulge in pathetic excuse-making.

Finally, to the massive discomfort of America and its allies, there is the incontestable fact that they must rely heavily on the political cover provided by the likes of Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and the Gulf Emirates. It is always a hugely problematic thing when several of one's supposed partners are in truth very nearly as dangerous to one's vital interests as declared enemies. It is plain that both the Saudis and the Pakistanis entertain little but contempt for the values of their erstwhile patrons in Washington, D.C., London and Paris. "Peaceful Muslims" they are in the politically correct sense, but only because they are far more selective in the targets they choose for their ire than the headline-generating jihadis.

A "clash of civilizations" there certainly is, despite our political class' denials, and for proof we need only to follow the terrible reports that regularly come over our news stream.

Frank W. Goheen
Camas, Wash.

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.