

# EAST OREGONIAN

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**KATHRYN B. BROWN**  
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## OUR VIEW

# Obama's ode

You can debate whether Barack Obama is a great president, but he is undoubtedly one of the greatest people this country has ever produced. And as we send him off this week into the annals of history, we should take a moment to appreciate his numerous achievements.

We all know his back story by now: Born in Hawaii to a black father and white mother. He grew up abroad in Indonesia, on the wide plains of rural Kansas and later among the skyscrapers of Chicago.

He was always fatherless. He was a troubled teen, made plenty of mistakes and struggled with his identity. Yet he endured, and then found strength and ambition. He graduated from the finest schools this country has to offer. He fell in love. He became a state senator and rocketed up the rungs of political power with unmatched speed.

He became president at a time when the country was mired in two terrible wars, the economy was in utter free fall, and international terrorism was a growing enemy.

Yet he pulled the country through. Certainly, his eight years as the most powerful person in the world was nowhere near perfect. His actions often fell short of his soaring rhetoric.

His speech at Hiroshima was masterful, yet he did nothing to reduce this country's cache of nuclear weapons. He allowed Syria to descend into a hellscape, which precipitated a worldwide crisis. His decision to overthrow Muammar Gaddafi in Libya caused unnecessary suffering and death and made America less safe. His drone policies have resulted in the death of Americans and the bombings of hospitals and noncombatants.

Here within our borders, many

Americans were left behind in his chugging economy. His health care law — though an improvement from nothing — was too imperfect to survive. Like most presidents, the mistakes and regrets are numerous.

Still, in everything, Obama acted

with dignity and diplomacy. His two terms have come and gone without the whiff of personal scandal. His family and marriage are an aspiration and a sense of pride for many Americans. He has somehow held onto the uncanny ability to joke and cry, talk about sports and music and his own failings — like a real person among a sea of cardboard-cutout politicians. No president has ever been as cool, in the most American sense of the word.

He was always opposed, often viciously and sometimes blindly. Yet Obama kept his head and held his tongue, often to his own disadvantage.

You can count on one hand his ineloquent words and insults leveled at others.

President Obama has always seemed like a man before his time. That has never been more clear than now, as he prepares to leave office. Much of his work will be swept away by the opposition, and the country has elected a man to succeed him who is his polar opposite — a man endorsed by the Ku Klux Klan just to hammer the point home.

But if Obama's legislation doesn't last, his words and actions will, as will the narrative of his life. He will inspire and be admired throughout his remaining days and likely long after. Monuments will be built in his honor.

That's because no American has started with so little and achieved so much. Barack Obama is the personification of the American Dream and this country was great enough to let him live it.



AP Photo/Charlie Neibergall  
**President Barack Obama and first lady Michelle Obama dance together at the Obama Home States Inaugural Ball in Washington, Jan. 20, 2009.**



AP Photo/Pablo Martinez Monsivais  
**President Barack Obama waves on stage with first lady Michelle Obama Tuesday after the presidential farewell address at McCormick Place in Chicago.**

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

# Do markets work in health care?

Believe it or not, we're not really going to have to spend the next four years wading through wonky drudgery of Russian spy dossiers and hotel sex cameras. At some point we're going to have a thrilling debate over the most scintillating question in health care policy.

The Republicans are going to try to replace Obamacare. They're probably going to agree to cover everybody Obama covered, thus essentially granting the Democratic point that health care is a right. But they are going to try to do it using more market-friendly mechanisms.

As you know, the American health care system is not like a normal market. When you make most health care decisions you don't get much information on comparative cost and quality; the personal bill you get is only vaguely related to the services; the expense is often determined by how many procedures are done, not whether the problem is fixed.

You wouldn't buy a phone this way.

The Republicans are going to try to introduce more normal market incentives into the process. They are probably going to rely on refundable tax credits and health savings accounts so everybody can afford to shop for their own insurance and care.

This would still be nothing like a free-market system — it would still be a highly regulated, largely public benefit — but it would rely more on consumer incentives.

The crucial question is: Do market incentives work in health care?

This is really two questions. The economic one: Would market mechanisms improve quality and reduce costs? The psychological one: Do people want the extra cognitive burden of shopping for health care, or would they rather offload those decisions to someone else?

Most progressives say markets don't work. They point back to a famous essay the economist Kenneth Arrow wrote in 1963, which is the same year the Beach Boys had a huge hit with "Surfer Girl."

Arrow argued that there are several features that make health care unlike normal markets. People's needs for health care are unpredictable, unlike food and clothing. The doctor-patient relationship is unique and demands a high level of trust, empathy and care. Providers know much more about medicine than patients do, so the information is hopelessly asymmetric. Patients on a gurney can't really make normal choices, and payment comes after care, not before.

These are all solid points, especially the doctor-patient one. But health care has become less exceptional over time. The internet and other mechanisms help customers acquire a lot more information. Sophisticated modeling helps with unpredictability in a bunch of fields.

We put our lives in the hands of for-profit

companies all the time. I spent part of my week learning from an aviation mechanic how hard manufacturers work to prevent pieces of metal from shredding through the cabin if an engine explodes. Airplanes are ridiculously safe.

Proponents of market-based health care rely less on theory and more on data. The most fair-minded review of the evidence I've read comes from a McKinsey report written by Penelope Dash and David Meredith. They noted that sometimes market forces lead to worse outcomes, but "we have been most struck by health systems in which provider competition, managed effectively, has improved outcomes and patient choice significantly, while at the same time reducing system costs."

There's much research to suggest that people are able to behave like intelligent health care consumers. Work by Amitabh Chandra of Harvard and others found higher-performing hospitals do gain greater market share over time. People know quality and flock to it.

Furthermore, health care providers work hard to keep up with the competitors.

When one provider becomes more productive, the neighboring ones tend to as well.

There are plenty of examples where market competition has improved health care delivery. The Medicare Part D program, passed under President George W. Bush, created competition around drug benefits. The program has provided coverage for millions while coming in at 57 percent under the cost of what the Congressional Budget Office initially projected. A study of Indiana's health savings accounts found the state's expenses were reduced 11 percent.

Laser eye surgery produces more patient satisfaction than any other surgery. But it's generally not covered by insurance, so it's a free market. Twenty years ago it cost about \$2,200 per eye. Now I see ads starting at \$250 an eye.

There's a big chunk of evidence that market incentives would work in health care, especially in non-acute care. The harder problem for Republicans may be political. This is a harried society. People may not want the added burdens of making health care decisions on top of all the others. This is a distrustful society. People may not trust themselves or others to make decisions. This is an insecure society. People may not want what they perceive as another risk factor in their lives.

The policy case for the Republican plans is solid. Will they persuade in this psychological environment? I doubt it.

David Brooks became a New York Times Op-Ed columnist in September 2003. He has been a senior editor at The Weekly Standard, a contributing editor at Newsweek and the Atlantic Monthly, and is currently a commentator on PBS.



DAVID BROOKS  
Comment

## The policy case for the Republican plans is strong.

## YOUR VIEWS

### Politics is everywhere, and it will get nasty

It's the truth — politics is everywhere and we cannot escape it. If you feel caught between two worlds as the present administration takes over, I like to think the world represented by the Obama-Clinton coalition is still the country we are becoming and a Trump victory can only delay it. Obama remains not only a popular president, but a symbol of, and a spokesman for, diversity, civility and tolerance threatened by the forthcoming administration.

As we enter the early months of 2017, I keep trying to be optimistic. Our nation will survive, but it's going to be fundamentally changed. The Republicans have control of all three branches of the government and will promote their own agenda. I worry about the Supreme Court.

Our nation is healthy but it's going to take a lot of work to keep it that way. Our complacency

must end and we must seize opportunities without prejudice. In a nation as complex as ours, there are inevitable problems. The crisis of the Republican Party spoke for itself and new forces are emerging on the populist right: i.e., immigration.

Whether the new politics of national identity and belonging control its less appealing aspects is a difficult question, but if it doesn't, the radical activists will prevail.

We must do something about this endless war. We are not really surviving George W. Bush's anti-intellectual, cavalier right-wing policies, which brought this nation and the world to a new kind of disaster, terrorism: it continues.

President-elect Trump's proposed threats to our rights and to the health of the planet must be met with peaceful means to oppose and expose his betrayal, not only to the working man but to our nation and worldwide.

The election of Donald Trump

speaks volumes about modern inequality and insecurity of the working class, whose economic complaints show their loss of identity and belonging, particularly their opposition to immigration, for many immigrants are more highly skilled and are a threat to the labor market.

This became apparent when the corporation Carrier planned to outsource abroad, leaving thousands of workers with a completely different reality.

As automation takes hold, change is inevitable, and an element of our population is losing its traditional political core.

Progressive politics needs more working class people who understand that meaningful politics is not the point of modern capitalism. Ironically, the American Dream is no longer possible for most. Traditional work as we once knew it is fading. In this new age of automation we need to increase the centrality of work and the worker.

If we the people hope to overturn the Trump reign in 2020, we are going to have to work together with the potential power of the diversity that distinguishes our nation.

The skirmish has just begun.  
Dorothy Grover  
Pendleton

### How to trust a president that lacks integrity?

Integrity is the quality of being honest and fair. Most of us would probably like to be thought of as displaying integrity since we generally value integrity in others. When someone, politician, businessman, neighbor or family member, shows us dishonesty or deception, their integrity is lost. Like virginity, integrity is an attribute that, once lost, can never be recovered.

In science, integrity is critical. If one's opinion is challenged by the evidence, integrity demands questioning the opinion and

rejection if it's falsified by the evidence.

We must hold science and scientists to the bar of integrity. Apparently, no such expectation exists for politicians.

We have just completed an election cycle where the candidate guilty of more transparent lies — probably than every prior presidential candidate through our nation's history combined — managed to secure enough votes in critical states to achieve the presidency.

We'll soon have a president totally lacking in integrity who will serve as a model to our kids and the world, demonstrating that dishonesty, deception and blatant lies are rewarded in this country.

And what are the missile launchers expected to do if they receive an order to launch our nuclear weapons? Wonder if it's a joke?

Trisha Vigil  
Talant