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OUR VIEW

On Presidents Day, we celebrate the good ones

Presidential biographers will tell you there are flaws in all of their subjects. But at certain moments, when the chips were down — such as the nation's birth, the Civil War, World War II — the right leader showed up to meet an enormous challenge.

While the scourge of terrorism still threatens America, the abiding enemy of a large share of Americans is change — economic and cultural — that threatens livelihoods and personal values. In the face of that, it's not always clear that current national leaders have a program of substance. Instead, they win by channeling the anger and fear of the disaffected voters.

But that is not leadership. And that is what makes this a dispiriting time.

Disappointment with current elected leaders is disappointment with our times as much as it is about the people in question.

Many years ago, on George Washington's or Abraham Lincoln's birthday, it was traditional for elementary schools to hold programs honoring those hallowed presidents. These days we have Presidents Day.

In many ways, we are more in need of some discussion of Washington and Lincoln than we were in the 1950s. And it's not the children who need to hear about the virtues of those great men. It's the adults. Especially the adults who make and administer our laws.

We need to discuss Washington and Lincoln not because they dwarf the presidents we have known in our lifetimes. We need to talk about them because they rose to their tasks at two of the most difficult moments the nation ever faced.

Looking backward, the rise of Washington and Lincoln seems inevitable. The preeminent Washington scholar, James Thomas Flexner, titled his one-volume biography "The Indispensable Man."

Oregon U.S. Sen. Mark Hatfield made a similar point about Lincoln, whose life the senator studied in some depth. "Lincoln did not feel that he chose his place in history, but rather that history had chosen him," Hatfield said. "Clearly no other individual could have brought so much good out of the seemingly infinite seas of

madness and blood with which he was forced to deal."

Washington, unique in American history for winning his two terms with unanimous votes by the Electoral College, was widely ridiculed and disliked at the end of his presidency. He faced an armed uprising in 1791. Some blamed his policies for economic disruptions in the nation's early years. Washington was a slave owner. He sided with Alexander Hamilton vs. Thomas Jefferson, a

conflict that gave rise to continuing ripples of political partisanship that still trouble us today.

Despite his imperfections, with the wisdom of time and a degree of looking backward with rose-tinted glasses, Washington is now justly celebrated for having done most things right.

As the Miller Center at the University of Virginia notes, "he tolerated dissent, vicious attacks on his reputation and name, and a divisive press — all in the interest of freedom. There is little reason to suggest that Washington, unlike so many of his successors, ever sought to use his office for personal empowerment or gain."

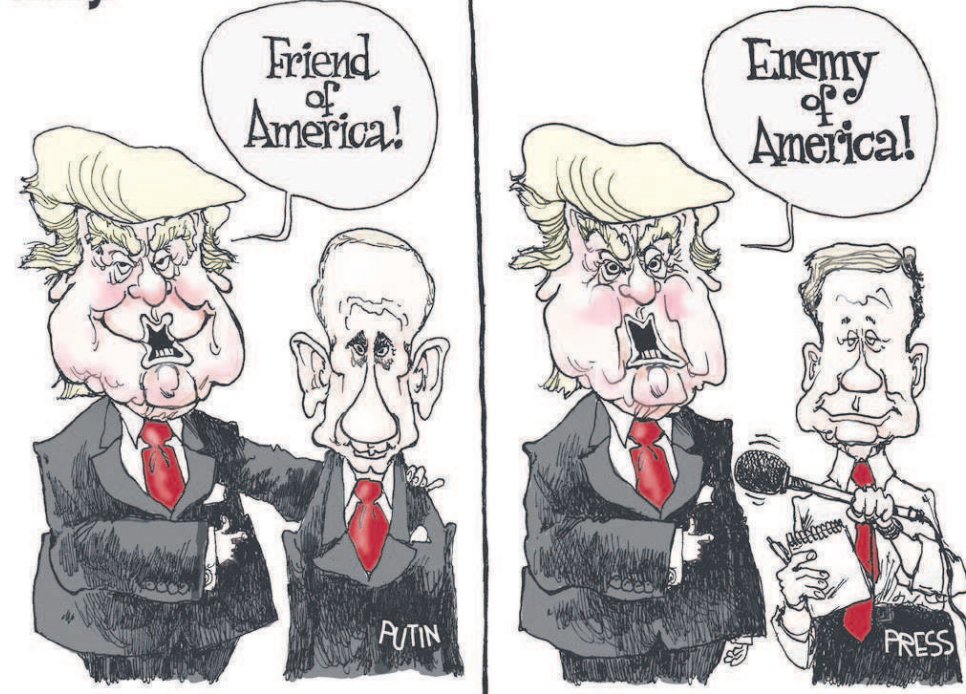
The men — including Washington — who crafted our system of government understood and explicitly dealt with concerns that presidents could become too important. It is inevitable the top elected job in a great nation becomes the focus for blame and credit. But in the U.S. system of government, the president is a public employee, not the personification of the nation, as was the case in the European monarchy we left behind. The presidency is important but our nation is infinitely more so.

Presidents Day is good time to celebrate the good ones, who manage to govern in ways that promote peace and prosperity. But it's also an opportunity to thank even the mediocre and lackluster ones, who often sacrifice health and reputation in efforts to serve the country.

Finally, Presidents Day is a good symbol for the fact that they are only small parts of who we as a nation — we give 1/365th of 2017 to honoring them, and many of the remaining days to thinking little of them. This is as it should be.

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Bill Day



OTHER VIEWS

Beltway panic, Wall Street zen

The most grounded fears about a Donald Trump presidency have always involved incompetence rather than malevolence, the perils of a catastrophically weak presidency rather than the prospect of a near-dictatorship.

So far, many of these fears are being vindicated. Trump's policy rollouts have been botched, his appointments mismanaged, his White House is a feuding mess, his legislative agenda is lost in the fog. He's in wars with the press, the intelligence community, the bureaucracy and the courts, and he isn't obviously winning any of them.

But those of us who feared a flailing Trump administration didn't fear it for its own sake. We feared the second-order consequences — global instability, domestic unrest, constant economic jitters.

There are hints of the first in North Korea's missile test and various Russian maneuvers, signs of the second in the spasms of anti-Trump protest since Election Day.

But the third is nowhere to be seen. While political journalists and Washington hands freak out daily over the Trump presidency, the stock market keeps acting like everything is fine, or better than fine, or even (if you will) just great again.

A growing economy is compatible with creeping authoritarianism, of course, as Trump's most alarmist critics are fond of pointing out. But is it compatible with outrageous presidential incompetence, with a White House that can't hit a target with a Super Soaker from 6 inches away?

That's what we'll find out. In effect, the Trump era is pitting the wisdom of one elite crowd against the wisdom of another — the crowd of D.C. politicians against the herd of brokers and analysts and financiers just an Acela ride away. It's the crowd of experts that totally failed to predict the rise of Trump against the crowd of experts that managed to miss the biggest financial meltdown since the Great Depression.

The best case for the Wall Street perspective runs as follows: Most presidents have less power over the economy than one might assume from presidential campaigns and voter expectations. If this is true of administrations whose carefully calibrated economic programs have all the weight of wokeny behind them, why shouldn't it be true of administrations that find themselves unable to accomplish much of anything? If what matters is the fundamentals, and his White House is more likely to be balked and baffled than frenetically transformative, why not just bet those fundamentals and assume you'll win?

There is historical evidence for this



ROSS DOUTHAT
Comment

proposition, in the sense that the link between political and economic crises is more uncertain than direct. The financial crisis struck at a low ebb in George W. Bush's effectiveness, but the Great Depression hit with a popular and (at that point) famously competent Herbert Hoover at the helm. The political turmoil of the late 1960s coincided with low unemployment rates and strong GDP growth.

Watergate was rough on the stock market, but the Clinton impeachment, not so much, and markets mostly weathered the gridlock and debt-ceiling brinkmanship of the Obama years. If Trump is impotent or if he's impeached, there is precedent for the markets simply shrugging, for the economy to keep chugging right along.

However: This argument assumes that Trump's level of incompetence stays within at least hailing distance of normal bounds and/or that no crisis comes unlooked-for that the Trump White House fumbles into something much, much worse. Gridlock in Washington need not damage the economy, but a botched response to terrorism, a mismanagement of the next Ebola, or a buffoonish response to financial hiccups could be a different matter. So, too, with a Watergate-level constitutional crisis, a civilian-military conflict, and so on down a list of all-too-plausible Trump-era tests.

It is possible we will pass four years without such a test. (Eight is tougher, but let's not get ahead of ourselves.) And the investor class' bet, right now, is that if you combine the chances of avoiding a major test entirely, the chances of the Trump White House somehow finding its footing, and the chances that Trump semi-accidentally handles his biggest test OK, you get a probability high enough to justify betting on continued prosperity and growth instead of freaking out about the daily White House meltdowns.

Except probably it's not really that rational and calculated; it's animal spirits and all that. But then again, irrationality cuts both ways: As the economist and columnist Tyler Cowen likes to point out, if political observers were really so confident in our alarm, we would all be dumping our portfolios (or at least buying put options, or trying to set up a big Trump short).

If you're a Trump-panicked reader with a nest egg and you haven't, ask yourself why not. Because as long as you don't, your mind may be with the panicked political class, but your money is with the Zen of Wall Street.

Ross Douthat joined *The New York Times* as an Op-Ed columnist in April 2009. Previously, he was a senior editor at *The Atlantic*.

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.

Culture Corner

Video essayist Evan Puschak embraces writer Robert Heinlein's notion "specialization is for insects."

I stumbled upon Puschak's work this past weekend while seeking online analysis of Denis Villeneuve's masterful film "Arrival." Puschak creates, edits and produces the weekly web series *The Nerdwriter*.

He's been making the series since 2011, so, sure, I'm late to the party, but one nice part about the internet is playing catch-up.

Viewing Puschak's insightful piece on "Arrival" led me to take in a dozen more of his productions. He pegs the overarching failing of 2016's "Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice," and examines why dragons are a central problem in the world of HBO's *Game of Thrones*. But Puschak also discusses

science, art, and culture, from "How Nuclear Weapons Screwed Art Forgers" to "How Louis CK Tells A Joke."

Puschak also discusses politics. I suspect many *East Oregonian* readers will not agree with his take on President Donald Trump, but the 2016 analysis on how Trump answers a question reveals why his simple speech resonates with people as well as why we should be wary of his salesman tactics.

Politics aside, *The Nerdwriter* series offers intelligent, sincere commentary and critique in digestible form. Check out the series at thenerdwriter.net and www.youtube.com/user/Nerdwriter1, as well as on Facebook and Twitter. Most of the video essays are less than eight minutes.

Like a lot of fun things, you probably won't stop at just one. — *Phil Wright, reporter*



YOUR VIEWS

Electoral College needs overhaul

After reading Ken Parsons' recent letter in "Your Views" (Feb. 16) it seems only fair to raise a few other points regarding the Electoral College. The argument that the Electoral College balances the rural and urban vote sounds reasonable on its face. But let's look at the math from another angle.

Parsons uses New York City as an example of the collective amount by which Clinton won the popular vote — roughly 2 million. (CNN says 2.87 million, but we won't quibble.) Divided into the total 2010 population of New York state, those votes translate into 3 Electoral College votes.

Now let's add the populations of Wyoming, North and South Dakota, which also total about 2 million. Together those three states hold 9 Electoral College votes, so popular votes there count for three times those in NYC. It takes three votes in Brooklyn to match one vote in Cheyenne. Whether or not you care for big city folks, it's hard to see that as fair and equal.

As Americans, we have the freedom to live where we like, anywhere in the country. If you choose to move from a rural community to a large city why should your vote suddenly count for less? Conversely, why should rural red voters in blue states like Oregon watch as their votes essentially count for nothing?

Twice in the last five presidential elections the candidate who received the most votes was not elected. That may be acceptable to those the system favors, but it does not represent honest democracy.

There is a fairly simple remedy. It's called the National Popular Vote Interstate Compact. It has already been adopted in 10 states, from Washington to Vermont, and is currently working its way through the statehouse in Salem, as well as 17 other state legislatures. I urge all of our representatives, regardless of their political orientation, to support it. It does not do away with the Electoral College, but it guarantees that the candidate who takes the oath of office on January 20 every four years will be the one who truly reflects the will of the people.

Greg Alexander Pendleton

New columnists would be good people to know

One of the quality tests of a columnist is whether you would like to know them personally. With that in mind, I would say you have done very well with your choices of Saturday columnists. Both Matt Wood and J.D. Smith meet this criterion.

Don Reese Echo

LETTERS POLICY

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