

O EAST OREGONIAN PINION

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Tip of the hat, kick in the pants



■ **A kick in the pants to Jeff Sessions' decision to nix the Obama rule that directed the Department of Justice to leave states alone if they decide to decriminalize and legalize marijuana.**

Oregon, of course, is one of those states. And despite a bumpy beginning, legalization has gone relatively smoothly and continues to get smoother. It is bringing in millions of tax dollars, reducing the amount we spend on incarceration, and directing funding to those who become drug-addicted. It is being used by those who just turned 21 and the elderly, for health reasons and for recreation.

Marijuana is no longer a partisan issue. According to recent polling, about 50 percent of Republicans nationally favor legalizing the drug, and the number is higher for Republicans in states that have already legalized.

Sessions' gambit (to distract from the president's legal issues?) is poor policy and poor politics.

It's also a good reminder that "states'

rights" isn't really a conservative principle. It's just something you say when you aren't in power and making the rules, and something you discard as soon as you are.

■ **A tip of the hat and a walk into the sunset for local weather forecaster Dennis Hull.**

Hull retired this week after 39 years with the National Weather Service, almost 20 of them in Pendleton. Over the decades, he's watched snow fall and dust blow, heard thunder clap and watched over and interpreted thousands of maps and graphs.

He's done it all as the technology around him has changed rapidly — from fold out papers that pattered in from far afield, to radar and digital forecasts that can measure to the microparticle.

The Pendleton office of the National Weather Service is a beacon for the area — and a boon for area farmers, travelers and residents alike. Hull's leadership and contributions to the organization are appreciated.



Staff photo by E.J. Harris
Oregon Gov. Kate Brown said in a statement that her office would "fight to continue Oregon's commitment to a safe and prosperous recreational marijuana market."

■ **A kick toward the pharmacy for everyone in the region who has yet had their flu shot.**

As reported earlier this week, influenza cases have increased dramatically in the local area. Hospitals and doctors from Hermiston to Walla Walla are inundated with patients who have contracted mild and severe cases of the virus.

But luckily, there remains a way to

reduce your chances of contracting it, and for reducing the effects of the flu if you do: A flu shot. It's a simple and affordable (sometimes free depending on your insurance or at special events). And it does increase your chances of avoiding the flu, or at least lessening it.

If you don't have a good excuse for not getting one, then do it. You'll make yourself healthier and your community healthier, too.

OTHER VIEWS

What has Mitt Romney learned?

First, some praise for Mitt Romney, who is apparently poised to run for the Senate from Utah now that Orrin Hatch has announced his retirement.

The 2012 Republican presidential nominee is a man of honor, decency and serious accomplishment. His attempt to rally Republican opposition to Donald Trump in 2016 was an exemplary act that threw the cowardice of his party's establishment into sharp relief. And his willingness to re-enter public service at a time when other Trump-skeptical Republicans are running for the exits (and when he could be enjoying a very comfortable retirement with his 1,765 grandchildren) shows an old-fashioned spiritedness that his party's hollow men conspicuously lack.

But now, some criticism. For all that he is upright and decent and loves his country, Romney was also part of #HowYouGotTrump, and what he might have to offer today depends to some extent on whether he realizes it, and whether he's learned anything from his presidential defeat and the weirdness that's engulfed his party since.

Romney's direct role in Trump's ascent was modest but telling. He didn't just accept the Trump imprimatur in his campaign against Barack Obama; he flew to Las Vegas to have the endorsement bestowed upon him, issued some flattering words about his endorser's awesome business acumen and essentially averted his eyes from the conspiracy theories about Obama's origins that Trump was then enthusiastically peddling.

Like most prominent Republicans at the time, Romney no doubt assumed that the fever swamp stuff didn't need to be attacked, that it would evaporate once the GOP won back the White House. But instead the fever swamp stuff helped hand the party to Trump himself, and the birther's grip-and-grin with Romney was a small but notable milestone on that path.

The larger, indirect role that Romney played in Trump's ascent was in the way he ran and lost in 2012. There were times when the Man From Bain Capital seemed to have some sense of the populist discontents that Trump successfully played upon four years later. Romney's rhetoric on China and immigration was a more restrained version of Trump's nationalist pitch, and here and there he tried to imitate Franklin Roosevelt's promise, updated crudely by Trump, to be a traitor to his successful class.

But not nearly often enough. Instead, the defining pitch of the Romney campaign was the tone-deaf "you built that," which valorized entrepreneurs and ignored ordinary workers; the defining policy blueprint was a tax-reform proposal that offered little or nothing to the middle class; and the defining gaffe was the famous "47 percent" line, in which Romney succumbed, before an audience of Richie Riches, to the Ayn Randian temptation to write off struggling Americans as losers.



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As a result, whether in his father's Michigan, in his running mate's Wisconsin, or in Pennsylvania where he campaigned hopefully near the end, downscale white voters who could have gone Republican either voted for Obama or stayed home. And in that failure lay the opportunity that Trump intuited — for a Republican candidate who would rhetorically reject and even run against the kind of corporation-first conservatism that Romney seemed to

embody and embrace. Since taking office, of course, Trump has mostly turned his back on his own economic populism — and lost much of his modest-to-begin-with popularity in the process. But in that time, the men who imagine themselves the party's stewards or its conscience have learned little from the way he beat them and then beat the Democrats. They are still suffering from what Pete Spiliakos, in a withering column for First Things last month, called "The Romney Disease" — a condition that combines admirable personal probity and decency with an abiding commitment to unpopular economic policies.

The best of the current Republicans (the Paul Ryans, the Ben Sasses, the Mitt Romneys) have certain common features that should be appealing to the electorate. They seem to have the home life of the family man. They have the discipline and diligence of the organization kid. They have the looks of the pretty boy. Yet the public still rejects them, because the voters find their ideas even more unpleasant than Trump's odious personality.

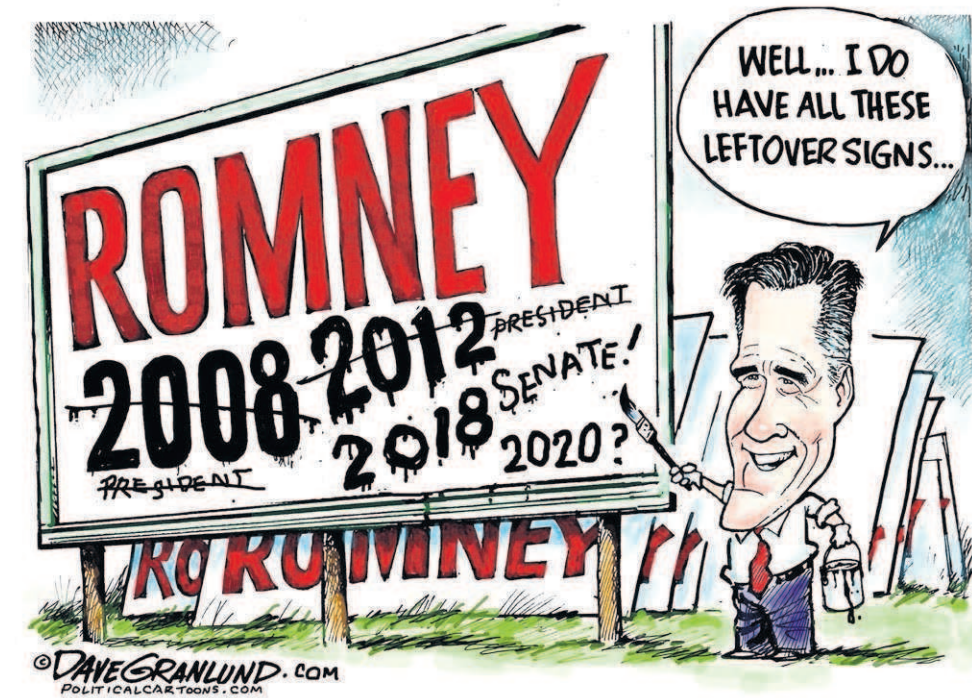
If Romney joins the Utah Senate race, and ultimately the Senate, there will be a lot of talk about the service he can perform for his country by resisting the worst of Trumpism. But he could also perform a service by showing that he has learned something from watching Trumpism succeed where his own campaign failed — which would mean steering a different and more populist course than those NeverTrump Republicans who pine for a party of the purest libertarianism, and those OkayFineTrump Republicans who are happy now that Trump has given them their corporate tax cut.

Right now there is a small caucus in the Republican Party for a different way, for a conservatism that seeks to cure itself of Romney Disease by becoming genuinely pro-worker rather than waiting for a worse demagogue than Trump to come along. Did I say small? I meant very small: It basically consists of Marco Rubio of Florida and Mike Lee of (ahem) Utah, plus perhaps Arkansas' Tom Cotton and a few other figures trying to adapt to Trumpism rather than just surviving it.

But one high-profile square-jawed junior senator could make that caucus feel much larger.

Why shouldn't the cure for Romney Disease begin with Mitt himself?

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Ross Douthat joined The New York Times as an Op-Ed columnist in 2009.



OTHER VIEWS

Congress must fix gun database

Albany Democrat-Herald

Three large U.S. cities last week filed a federal lawsuit against the U.S. Department of Defense, alleging that many service members who are disqualified from gun ownership haven't been reported to the national background check system.

The odd thing about this particular lawsuit is that the facts really aren't in dispute: Military officials, although they can't comment directly on the lawsuit, have previously acknowledged problems with their reporting, and a Pentagon spokesman this week said a review of the policies and practices at each branch of the armed forces is continuing. Last month, the Justice Department ordered a federal review of the database. (The official name of the database is the National Instant Criminal Background Check System, but it's better known by its acronym, NICS).

All of those actions occurred in the wake of the shooting last month at a Texas church. The gunman, Devin P. Kelley, killed 26 people in the Nov. 5 shooting before taking his own life, authorities say. But Kelley, a former Air Force serviceman, shouldn't have been allowed to buy the rifle he used in the attack: He had been convicted in a 2012 court martial of assaulting family members and served 12 months' confinement. Since federal law prohibits selling a gun to a person who has been convicted of a crime involving domestic violence against a spouse or child, the conviction should have prevented Kelly from purchasing firearms. But the Air Force failed to report the conviction to the NICS database.

What's most worrisome about the lapse that let Kelley slip through the system is that it's not nearly the only one. The Pentagon's watchdog agency said this month that it had found a "troubling" number of failures even this year by the military services to alert the FBI to criminal history information.

Obviously, for the national database to do its job, it needs to have access to as much

relevant information as possible.

In the wake of the 2007 mass shooting at Virginia Tech, committed by a mentally ill man named Seung-Hui Cho, Congress passed a bill to strengthen the system with more criminal records and mental health information. And the bill did just that: Data from the Department of Justice data suggest the number of federal and state records entered into the system has increased significantly since the law was signed in January 2008.

Now, a new piece of legislation pending in Congress aims to close some of the remaining gaps in the system. The so-called "Fix NICS Act" would improve the reporting of domestic violence convictions. A Senate version of the bill would impose a financial penalty by barring bonuses for the heads of federal agencies that fail to report the convictions. The measure also would reward states that improve their reporting, and would provide funding for those efforts.

This bill is not controversial. One of the senators leading the push for the measure is John Cornyn, a Texas Republican and a strong gun-rights advocate. The measure has bipartisan support. The National Rifle Association backs the bill. This should not be a difficult burden for Congress to lift — although the House of Representatives managed to gum up the works by linking its version of the bill to partisan legislation that would allow national concealed-carry reciprocity. It's exactly this sort of legislative maneuver that too often manages to sink important works of legislation such as the Fix NICS Act.

Congress left Washington for its holiday break with a long list of unfinished business, including work on relatively uncontroversial but nevertheless important areas. (The list includes, of course, the renewal of the Children's Health Insurance Plan.) Is it too much to ask Congress to take care of these matters quickly upon its return, before it again bogs down in the gridlock that appears to be its usual state of affairs?