

# O EAST OREGONIAN PINION

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## OUR VIEW

## Merkley in Trump Country

Jeff Merkley (D-Ore.) is one of the Senate's most vocal critics of President Donald Trump. So his weekend in Eastern Oregon, where Trump won a majority of votes in each and every county, may be a little different than his normal interactions with D.C. and Portland crowds.

Merkley spoke to the *East Oregonian* editorial board for an hour Friday, before scheduled appearances at a mill and a town hall in John Day. Other stops this weekend include the Wildhorse Pow Wow on Saturday in Mission and a Sunday town hall in Pendleton.

His discussion with our board could not come at time when we, or the country, have more pressing questions. The current makeup of the Supreme Court hangs in the balance — President Trump is expected to name his nominee on Monday at the White House. The debate over immigration and ICE roils from border to border, a trade war that will harm American agriculture and industry seems more likely, there is turnover atop the EPA and the North Korea nuclear deal shows signs of unraveling. Lots to discuss.

But Merkley has the Supreme Court seat top of mind at the moment, as does the nation. He sees it as a massive fight over women's rights, the ability of labor to organize and succeed, and the longterm legality of unlimited money in politics. (Merkley described the Citizens United decision as "incredibly

corrupting to democracy.")

But at its heart, he sees the battle for the next Supreme Court justice as a fight for the freedom and apolitical nature of the judicial branch.

He's realistic about his chances of doing anything about it. He says Democrats — outnumbered in the Senate — know they cannot stop a vote on whomever Trump picks. That in itself is something that Merrick Garland — Barack Obama's choice for an open seat in 2016 — never got. Merkley believes Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell's decision not to let the Senate vote on Garland "deeply damaged the integrity of the (Supreme) Court" and no one is quite sure if they can get that train back on its tracks.

If Garland had not won over a majority of senators, so be it. Merkley said he could live with that, and constituents would be able to hold their senators accountable for the votes they cast. But because McConnell did not allow a simple vote on the open seat until a Republican president was in place, Merkley said he now thinks of the Supreme Court as "a political organization" whose recent verdicts have been in favor of the privileged and powerful, rather than a majority of citizens.

Merkley knows that many Eastern Oregon voters he encounters, who may not like Trump's racism and immorality, voted for the man mostly



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Sen. Jeff Merkley congratulates Michael Shafer, son of recently-elected county commissioner John Shafer, at right, during a previous tour through Eastern Oregon.

because of the Supreme Court. They knew he would have one seat to fill, and now with a retirement he has a second. Trump's legacy, which so far has been beset by a revolving-door cabinet and a lack of meaningful policy, could be cemented by a conservative Supreme Court for decades or more.

But, we're all wondering, at what cost?

If the Supreme Court is just another political tool, its status among Americans will begin to decline. And our enemies around the world, who want to undermine American democracy, would love nothing more than to see Americans lose faith in another of our foundational institutions.

A research Pew study found that Americans' respect for Congress remains in the gutter. Respect for the

presidency has taken a nose dive under Trump, and our thoughts about our two political parties are abysmal and getting worse. In recent surveys, the military and the Supreme Court stood out as beacons that a majority of Americans have faith in — and very little else. It would be a shame to squander that faith to partisan bickering and backbiting.

"(Trump's nominee) is going to be voted on, and it's going to come down to where a majority of senators come out," said Merkley, rather glumly.

That's how democracy is supposed to work: a vote. But the fact that a basic vote on the merits is hailed as a return to normalcy — instead of focusing on how a range of monumental legal issues could be re-litigated, upending our society — shows just how much we've broken in recent years.



## YOUR VIEWS

### Greg Walden not doing enough to stop Trump

Representative Walden's campaign rhetoric portrays him as an active legislator working on behalf of District 2 constituents. But as chair of the Energy and Commerce Committee, he now is high in the hierarchy of the governing party and has an important leadership role to play in broad questions of governance. He appears to be ignoring the elephant in the room.

Our current chief executive is steering the ship of state toward an iceberg: a trade war simultaneously with China, Mexico, Canada and Europe, with big implications for agriculture in our district, possible destruction of our alliances (especially NATO) and cozy relationships with dictators in Russia, North Korea and Turkey. The TPP, our best shot at managing the growing economic power of China on our terms, was thrown away within days of the inauguration.

Without addressing the big issues of the day, Mr. Walden's various legislative efforts on our behalf are a bit like moving District 2 out of a berth in steerage and into a first class cabin on the ship of state. We could be better off by some measures, but still headed for the iceberg. Mr.

Walden, please add your voice in Congress to those exhorting the administration to change course on trade and treaties.

David Harris  
Maupin

### Pendleton city council has no role as bankers

As a taxpayer in our community, I am dismayed at the necessity of Pendleton Development Commission. I do not understand the necessity of the city council members to also be the makeup of the PDC.

The council feels that they are a banking operation. The loaning of money for interior remodeling should left to the banking community. The PDC is setting a precedent to help undermine private banking.

Al Plute should go to the bank, not his past fellow councilors, as he is not a true steward of his properties, which I have pointed out to Mr. Plute as far back as his tenure on the council. He just blows it off with feeble excuses.

If the mayor wants to invest in the Bowman project, let him invest his own money.

Larry Platek  
Pendleton

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## OTHER VIEWS

## Down and out on \$117,000

It's beyond laughable that a one-bedroom apartment can sell for \$1.5 million in San Francisco — and get multiple offers within a day. Or that dumpsters sport satirical "for rent" signs. Or that the asking price for a side order of Brussels sprouts at many restaurants is \$16.

Beyond laughable because such stories pass like a Bay Area breeze in the city named for a pauper from medieval Assisi. But the latest assessment of the out-of-reach quality of one of the world's great places to live came as a real jolt:

A family of four earning \$117,000 is now classified as low income in the San Francisco area. This threshold, used to determine eligibility for federal housing assistance, is the highest in the nation — and no surprise.

Once upon a time in the American West, the most exclusive places — Sun Valley, Aspen, Lake Tahoe, the San Juan Islands in Washington state — were known as "Golden Ghettos," an imperfect term used by trendy demographers.

But now the entire West Coast, from San Diego to Vancouver, British Columbia, is a string of gilded megalopolises. These are the tomorrow cities, the tech cities, the cities of the young and educated. And each is struggling with a prosperity crisis that threatens the very nature of living there.

A New Yorker would say, so what, get used to paying through the nose to live in a tiny space on limited land. But people on the West Coast, perhaps naively, are not ready to say, "Fuhgeddaboutit." Not yet. With varying degrees of success, they are fighting for the soul of their cities.

Residents of San Francisco are troubled by the same things that we are in my hometown, Seattle — the homeless and the high cost of living. The issues are linked, but not entirely.

"Walking the streets of San Francisco can be a frightening, demoralizing, even unhealthy experience for residents and tourists alike." This comment came from the woman just elected mayor of San Francisco, London Breed.

Raised in poverty, and the first African-American chosen to lead the city, Breed has vowed to remove homeless encampments within a year. There

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is nothing compassionate or financially sound in spending \$250 million a year on homeless services that still leaves thousands sleeping outside.

In order to do the other thing that Breed wants to do, build more housing of all kinds, she has to secure the social contract. That is: Can people accept more crowded neighborhoods, in a city that is already the second most densely

populated in the nation, if they feel that elected leaders do not have a decent plan — or a clue?

In Seattle, the nation's fastest-growing city for this decade, the social contract is nearly broken. The city used to be run by creative problem solvers. Now, an ideologically driven city council dreams up new things to anger residents while seeming to let the homeless have the run of the place. The latest backward move was a tax on jobs — quickly repealed after a citizens' revolt. While the council was trying to target Amazon, the city's biggest private employer, the tax would have also hurt grocery stores and family-run businesses, as if they caused the homeless crisis and spike in real estate.

An unholy alliance of socialists and developers threatens to destroy the city's single-family neighborhoods with a major upzoning — further disrupting trust between residents and politicians. If the intent is to make Seattle more affordable, this approach has failed. The city has built more new units of housing over the last five years than in the prior half-century. And yet Seattle continues to lead the nation in home price increases.

No matter what you hear anecdotally, people will continue to move to the West Coast. The city of St. Francis has seen far worse than the present crisis. More than half the population was homeless after the 1906 earthquake. But by midcentury, it was the American city, birthplace of the United Nations.

We need a new urbanism. For all the grumping about how great the cities facing the Pacific used to be, they can be greater still if the bright minds now trying to "disrupt" a grilled cheese sandwich can focus on the biggest challenge of this generation.

— Timothy Egan, *New York Times*

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