

O EAST OREGONIAN PINION

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OUR VIEW

The Neal deal

The Port of Morrow has been the primary engine driving the Morrow County economy for decades. Its impact cannot be overstated.

Part of the success has been purely logistical — a port with river, interstate and rail access, plus plenty of room to grow.

But part, and we'd argue a big part, has been Gary Neal's leadership as general manager. He's customer service oriented, always finding ways to say "yes" to new development and new ideas. The port has flourished under his guidance, and the surrounding area has been the beneficiary.

So Neal's impending retirement has been a matter of great interest. Finding someone with the combination of vision and acumen to take the helm is no easy task.

A four-month search ended with the job being offered to Gary Neal's son, Ryan Neal, who has worked under his father at the port (though not reporting directly to him) for the last four years.

Family succession is commonplace in the business world. It's only natural that someone raised in the family business would be an obvious choice to take it over.

But the Port of Morrow is no family

business. It's a public entity, funded by taxpayers and directed by five elected port commissioners. The role of general manager is comparable to a city manager. This kind of succession certainly warrants deeper scrutiny.

For starters, Ryan Neal is no slouch. His résumé, even with the last name removed, would rightfully catch the eye of a search committee. His history at large trucking companies, and his internal promotions while there, indicate that his success wasn't some ploy of his father.

But there's still the tricky issue of nepotism, or even its appearance. The timing of his arrival back in Boardman, and his quick rise to a leadership post at the port, is worthy of a raised eyebrow.

The port commission seemingly did its due diligence, expanding the search in June when it didn't feel it had enough qualified candidates and putting four finalists in front of a panel to help find the pros and cons of each.

One of those finalists was tossed, another dropped out, and the decision came down to Neal and Stephanie Seamans, a CPA and economic development director in the Tri-Cities and previously at the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation.



Ryan Neal and father, Gary Neal.

According to Rick Stokoe, a port commissioner, Seamans had plenty of qualifications but was lacking a big one — experience at a port. It's a reasonable drawback to consider.

There's no overwhelming evidence that the last name made the difference. But there's also no completely convincing answer that it didn't.

The fact that Ryan Neal grew up in the community, has personal connections to the commissioners and stakeholders and has the current general manager on speed dial (and at Thanksgiving dinner) can be seen two ways. To the commissioners, he looks like a natural fit. To onlookers, he's an



Staff photos by E.J. Harris

unfair shoo-in.

Ultimately, it's the port commission's choice to make. Their positions will come up for election, and voters will have the option to change course if they disagree.

All five believe Neal 2.0 was the best option. Don Russell, a former commissioner with the port and now for Morrow County, said he thinks Ryan's work will speak for itself and within two years we'll "forget who his father is."

For Ryan's sake — and the port's — we hope that's the case. It's an awfully large shadow to come out from under, and a job with big implications in Eastern Oregon life.

OTHER VIEWS

Melania's call to greatness

Maybe someday, when the history of Donald Trump's presidency is written, we'll pinpoint the start of this week as his pivot into complete derangement and come up with a pithy name for it. Maybe we'll call it Melania Monday.

We'll note that on Aug. 20, 2018, the first lady, again with a pussy bow, publicly chided cyberbullies at the same time that her husband ranted and raged on Twitter, likening Robert Mueller to Joseph McCarthy and demonstrating a grasp of history commensurate with his grip on civility.

We'll admire the wickedness of her announcement, just hours later, that she'd be making a solo trip — her farthest and flashiest yet as an official ambassador — to Africa, whose nations the president can't pronounce, let alone respect. She didn't choose that destination randomly, throwing a dart at a map. She chose it defiantly, throwing shade at her husband.

Surely Melania Trump is getting under his skin. Certainly she's making the effort. If she would just turn these fitful baby steps into full-length strides, she might finally undo him and set us free. Melania the Savior. A pussy-bow coup. Stranger things have happened. Less exhilarating fantasies have been born.

And is it really so far-fetched? To judge by his tweets, tantrums and apparent belief that Rudy Giuliani is an appropriate advocate, Donald Trump teeters at the precipice of incoherence and self-destruction, needing only a shove. Who best to administer it but a spouse with her own, separate bedroom in the White House and her own, separate hotel suite when they travel?

She inches ever closer to open contempt for him. She finds increasingly clever ways to show it. And it's a perfect wedding of patriotism and payback for all the humiliations that he has heaped on her.

This first-lady thing clearly flummoxed her at first. It's a ludicrous job. You're supposed to make a difference without making waves, find a passion while veiling your convictions and smile blithely through a ceaseless forensic examination of your every accessory.

It's infantilizing. It's objectifying. If a presidential administration were a sedan, the first lady would be its hood ornament. If it were a manse, she'd be the topiary bracketing the front stoop.

Usually Melania Trump was absent topiary. America had a denuded front stoop. And we made hasty assumptions.



FRANK BRUNI
Comment

When she initially announced her cyberbullying campaign in a speech in November 2016, we thought that she was out to lunch. Did she not see the contradiction?

The updated theory is that she's trolling him. I buy it. It fits in with so much else.

For the president's first State of the Union address, she wore a white pantsuit that served as a sartorial reminder of suffragists and of Hillary Clinton. This month, after he questioned LeBron James' intelligence in a tweet, her spokeswoman released a statement that asserted the first lady's admiration for James' work with at-risk children in his hometown, Akron, Ohio. Melania was possibly interested in visiting the school there that James had helped to start, the statement said.

And my colleagues Katie Rogers and Maggie Haberman recently reported that during a trip overseas last month, the president had a fit because the first lady's television on Air Force One was tuned to CNN, not his beloved Fox News. Was CNN an accident or a provocation? Well, in a public response to the incident, Melania's spokeswoman made clear that the first lady watches "any channel she wants."

I'm not sure what to make of that "I REALLY DON'T CARE, DO U?" jacket that she wore on her way to a detention center for migrant children in Texas. It's the "rosebud" of our time. But what if the message was that she didn't mind if we interpreted her behavior as a rebuke of her husband's?

Marriage as psyops — it's not virgin territory, but the stage and stakes here are epic. On Monday, as *The Washington Post's* James Hohmann noted, she used the phrase "global society" in both her spoken remarks about cyberbullying and her written remarks about the trip to Africa, which she praised for its "rich culture." Her husband, of course, treats "globalists" and "globalism" as dirty words, and some of his "shithole countries" are on that richly cultured continent. She'll be going there without him.

Other first ladies beautified highways, promoted reading, planted squash. This one could abbreviate a nightmare. She's in a situation that her predecessors weren't, on the arm of an overlord who needs undermining, and it's her invitation to greatness, or at least her prompt for an itinerary tailored to taunt.

Frank Bruni has been an Op-Ed columnist for *The New York Times* since June 2011.



YOUR VIEWS

McLeod-Skinner recognizes global warming threat

Most of us accept the scientific evidence that our world is warming. The downstream effects of warming our global environment are not good. Worldwide there will be hotter temperatures, more droughts, fires, famine, and refugees. There will be more competition for dwindling resources, potentially threatening our own national security.

One major cause of this warming is mankind's activities. Thus, we have the

theoretical ability to change this scenario. We need our lawmakers to acknowledge this and come up with science based solutions. How do we know which of our District 2 congressional candidates is paying attention and willing to do this? An easy way is to look at their website and see their stance on global warming.

Greg Walden's website doesn't mention it. Jamie McLeod-Skinner's website says global warming is the greatest threat to our environment there is. I'm voting for Jamie.

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