

O EAST OREGONIAN PINION

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OTHER VIEWS

John McCain’s parting message: Our greatness is in peril

John McCain was no moderate. He won Barry Goldwater’s Arizona seat in 1986 and was, for the most part, a fitting heir to Goldwater. McCain supported a smaller federal government, a hawkish foreign policy and the typical Republican positions on abortion, guns and other issues.



DAVID LEONHARDT
Comment

But McCain pursued his conservative ends through means that are depressingly rare in today’s Republican Party. McCain believed in the American ideals of pluralistic democracy.

He despised autocracy. He was willing to accept defeat when his side lost a political battle. He pushed for an election system not dominated by the wealthy. He came to reject racism as a political strategy. And in his dying months, McCain was one of the only Republicans to oppose President Donald Trump not just with his words, but also with his vote.

In a recent New Yorker essay about Charles de Gaulle, Adam Gopnik described the French leader in ways that left me thinking about McCain’s legacy. “His life is proof that unapologetic right-wing politics do not necessarily bend toward absolutism,” Gopnik wrote. “They can also sometimes stiffen the spine of liberal democracy.”

The absolutism and radicalism of today’s Republican Party is the biggest threat to the country that McCain served and loved. It has left the United States impotent to deal with our greatest challenges — inequality, alienation, climate change and a global drift toward autocracy. Congress, as McCain said last year, is “getting nothing done.”

Meanwhile, threats to American power and interests grow.

I expect the Trump presidency to end poorly for Republicans, in some combination of disgrace, unpopularity and defeat. If it does, at least some Republicans will be looking for ways to reinvent their party. They will want an antidote to Trumpism, a set of ideas that manage to be conservative and anti-Trump.

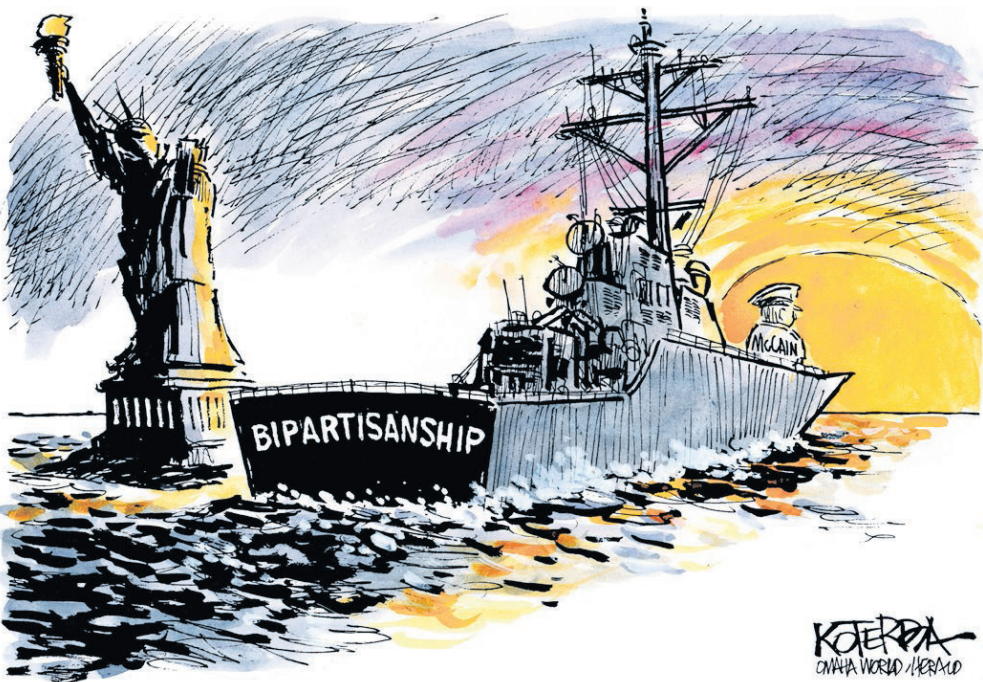
They could do a lot worse than a version of McCainism. I’m well aware that McCain could be maddeningly inconsistent and flawed. He equivocated about the Confederate battle flag in 2000. He too often acquiesced to Mitch McConnell’s torching of Senate norms. For goodness sake, McCain decided Sarah Palin should be vice president. As he himself admitted, he should have done much more to fight Republican extremism.

But the sum total of his career still represents a meaningful alternative to Trump, McConnell and the rest of today’s Republican leadership. At McCain’s best, as Barack Obama said this weekend, he displayed “a fidelity to something higher — the ideals for which generations of Americans and immigrants alike have fought, marched and sacrificed.”

What would a Republican Party more in the mold of John McCain look like?

It would, for starters, stop cowing to Trump and stand up for U.S. national security. It would investigate Russian cyberattacks and the possibility, as McCain put it, “that the president of the United States might be vulnerable to Russian extortion.” Many of McCain’s colleagues remembering him as a brave patriot are proving themselves to be neither.

Second, a more McCain-like Republican



Party would understand that racism is both immoral and, in the long term, politically ruinous. McCain had a multiracial family — the kind that is increasingly America’s future. Rather than scapegoat immigrants, he took risks to pass immigration reform. After Charlottesville, he declared, “White supremacists aren’t patriots, they’re traitors.”

Third, McCain believed in democracy and its vital, fragile institutions. He accepted his two haunting presidential defeats honorably. He has reportedly chosen the victors in those campaigns — Obama and George W. Bush — to deliver eulogies at his funeral. Most significantly, McCain fought for campaign-finance laws to reduce the influence of plutocrats.

Fourth, McCain understood that democracy sometimes means moving on. He voted against Obamacare — a reflection of his small-government conservatism. But he also voted, crucially, against its repeal — a reflection of his small-c conservatism. In doing so, he acted as a modern-day Eisenhower, a Republican willing to accept an expansion of the safety net for the good of the country.

Finally, McCain recognized that the military wasn’t the only way that Washington could use its awesome

power for good. When I interviewed him during the 2008 presidential campaign, he described his economic hero as Theodore Roosevelt — a “free-enterprise, capitalist, full-bore guy” who realized that prosperity depended on government agencies “that need to do their job as well.” The outlook led him to favor policies (albeit too sporadically) to fight climate change and expand community colleges.

Imagine how different our politics could be if even some Republicans — à la T.R. — occasionally took the side of the little guy against corporate behemoths. And even if you disagreed with McCain on as many issues as I did, imagine if the Republican Party ultimately came to resemble him more than Trump.

Above all, McCain believed in American greatness — as a reality, not a slogan. He knew that the United States could play a unique role in the world, as a defender of freedom and human dignity. He also knew that the role was anything but assured. It required hard work, good choices, compromise and sacrifice.

McCain’s final message for his country was a warning: Our greatness is in peril.

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OTHER VIEWS

PERS debate essential

The Eugene Register-Guard

In this fall’s gubernatorial campaign, the candidates, and Oregonians, have an ideal chance to debate in detail the hugely expensive Public Employees Retirement System that is one of the root causes of Oregon’s protracted crisis over taxes and public services.

PERS is complex and the sums of money are so large — and pose such a staggering burden to taxpayers — that they boggle the mind.

Many PERS beneficiaries are defensive. Many critics are vitriolic.

Plus, legal decisions shield current retirees in PERS from virtually all clawbacks or cuts, so any cost-paring must come at the expense of current and future government employees.

One thing is clear: Without PERS reform, public services in the state will spiral downwards, in the classrooms, on the streets, in the parks, as tax dollars continue to be channeled into PERS when they could be better spent hiring more teachers and police.

GOP gubernatorial candidate Knute Buehler has issued an ambitious PERS reform plan. Incumbent Gov. Kate Brown has pooh-poohed it. Her PERS plans amount to minor tweaks.

Buehler’s plan might prove unfair to current government employees, or might not even save much money. Brown’s campaign has said overall government-employee compensation — pay, retirement and health benefits — is reasonable and should not be cut. The important element now is to have a full public airing.

Oregon’s Democratic leadership has been maddeningly slippery about curbing the costs of the retirement system. That’s no surprise given how heavily funded Democrats are by campaign dollars from public employee unions.

Democrats have offered some modest reforms, some overturned by the courts. And with a strong hold on the governor’s office and both chambers of the Legislature, they’ve declared there’s little else to be done about PERS.

Buehler challenges that assertion. It may take a Republican to get the message across to Oregon’s Democratic establishment that public disillusion over PERS, taxes and public services is heading toward a tipping point.

Oregon state agencies, school districts and local governments — all taxpayers — are pumping an estimated \$2.9 billion into PERS in the current biennium, which ends next June 30. In the subsequent biennium, PERS will demand a total of \$4 billion. That’s \$707 per Oregon resident in the current biennium, and \$976 per resident in the next.

The crux of Buehler’s plan is to move all current state employees, and as many local government and school district employees as legally possible, into a new 401k-type system, as soon as feasible. Current government employees’ PERS pension accruals for time served would be honored. But for employment going forward, government workers would probably have only a 401k plan, with the state providing a perhaps 6 percent match, Buehler said in an interview with *The Register-Guard’s* editorial board. The exact scope and details of the transition from PERS pension to 401k remain fuzzy.

Buehler also would cap at \$100,000 the salary amount used to calculate PERS benefits. That would close the door on new retirees getting six-figure annual PERS pensions. He would also eliminate the use of accumulated vacation and sick leave to push up final salaries, which PERS uses to calculate pensions.

The departing chairman of the PERS board, Eugene financial consultant John Thomas, pointed out in a recent interview that new government employees covered by PERS under the existing program will, after 30 years of service, get an annual pension payment from the system that is equal to about 60 percent of their final salary. On top of that they get Social Security.

Is preserving of that level of PERS benefit more important than putting more teachers in classrooms and cops on the beat? This fall’s campaign should help voters answer that question.



YOUR VIEWS

Developer offers a pipe dream with airport hotel

Here we go again: Flim-Flam Sam arrives in Pendleton. Seems that the mayor and city manager believe leopards can change their spots. The city council is approached by the same developer who sold a bill of goods, i.e. data center — a great idea but no financial backing. The city, by its own account, spent \$300,000 on sewer upgrades

for a pipe dream. Now this developer wants to build a hotel at the airport. They want a 50-year lease, and what other concessions (giveaways) are we being asked for? This same developer failed to get financing for projects at the Port of Morrow.

Money people do not buy pipe dreams; why should Pendleton taxpayers? No hotel for the airport!

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